

Lenten Reflection for the Order of Malta

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Daily Prayer of the Order of Malta

We cannot ignore the fact that many mistakes have been made in the course of history by those who claimed to be disciples of Jesus. Very often, when having to address grave problems, they have thought that they should first improve this world and only afterwards turn their minds to the next. The temptation was to believe that, in the face of urgent needs, the first imperative was to change external structures. The consequence, for some, was that Christianity became a kind of moralism, 'believing' was replaced with 'doing'. As St. John Paul II observed: "The temptation today is to reduce Christianity to merely human wisdom, a pseudo-science of well-being. In our heavily secularized world, a 'gradual secularization of salvation' has taken place, so that people strive for the good of man, but man who is truncated...We know, however, that Jesus came to bring integral salvation" (Redemptoris Missio, 11).

Because of the sins of members of the church, clergy and laity, queen and king, great human suffering has occurred alongside the grace filled mission and charity of the saints and individual faithful living out their Christianity with Christlike faithfulness. We all encounter, family, friends and critics of the Church who emphasise the sins in Church history. The Lenten Season guides the faithful to seek forgiveness and offer penance for our sins.

My favorite author, G.K. Chesterton, the great British Catholic convert and defender of the faith offers us a great insight into this duality of grace and sin, death and resurrection of the Church.

G.K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man* (1925), specifically from the chapter "The Five Deaths of the Faith." Chesterton writes:

"Christendom has had a series of revolutions and in each one of them Christianity has died. Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave."

This passage reflects Chesterton's view that Christianity has not simply endured through the centuries — it has been reborn repeatedly. In each major crisis — from the Arian heresy and Albigensian Crusade, through the rise of

humanism, Voltaire's skepticism, and Darwin's theory of evolution — the Church appeared to be on the brink of extinction. Yet, in each case, it "died" in the sense of being marginalized or seemingly defeated, and then "rose again" as a renewed faith, often attracting new converts, especially among younger generations.

Chesterton contrasts this with the idea of "survival," insisting that the Faith is not a relic clinging to the past, but a living tradition that renews itself. He calls it "a strangely immortal sort of widow" — widowed in each crisis, yet always able to give birth anew.

The metaphor of "knew the way out of the grave" points to the belief in resurrection and eternal life, which Chesterton sees as the core reason for Christianity's resilience. Even when the Church seems to have "gone to the dogs," it is the dog (the old, stagnant form) that dies, not the living faith.

In short, Chesterton's words are both a historical reflection and a theological affirmation: Christianity's strength lies in its capacity to die and be reborn, guided by a God who promises life beyond death to the glory of the resurrection.

It is this integral salvation that Lent puts before us, pointing towards the victory of Christ over every evil that oppresses us. In turning to the Divine Master, in being converted to Him, in experiencing His mercy through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we will discover a "gaze" that searches us profoundly and gives new life to the crowds and to each one of us. It restores trust to those who do not succumb to scepticism, opening up before them the perspective of eternal beatitude. Throughout history, even when hate seems to prevail, the luminous testimony of His love is never lacking.

The readings of this Wednesday of the Second Week of Lent, Mt 20:17-28 says:

As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way He said to them, 18 "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, 19 and deliver Him to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and He will be raised on the third day."

◇20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to Him, with her sons, and kneeling before Him she asked Him for something. 21 And He said to her, "What do you want?" She said to Him, "Command that these two sons of mine may sit,

one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” ◇22 But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to Him, “We are able.”

◇23 He said to them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” 24 And when the ten heard it they were indignant at the two brothers.

◇25 But Jesus called them to Him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant. 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; 28 even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

It is hard to surpass the obtuse request of the mother of James and John, that her sons may be afforded places of honor when Jesus comes into His kingdom. The two disciples seem to have focused purely on glory, not love for Jesus. But, are they truly prepared to drink from the cup from which Jesus will drink ... the cup that even Jesus prays might pass Him by? This Gospel message calls us to....

- ☆The greatness of serving
- ☆Service as a call from God
- ☆Unite us to his Passion

Every mother wants what is best for her children. Therefore we can understand why the mother of James and John approached Jesus to ask Him for a place of honor for them: “Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom” (Mt 20:21). These words might surprise us, since they reflect practically the opposite of what the Messiah had taught the apostles right from the beginning. No wonder the other ten were angry with the two Zebedee brothers. But deep in their own hearts, perhaps they too wanted the same thing.

As on other occasions, the Teacher takes advantage of this situation to form the hearts of his apostles. Who is the most important? Our Lord’s response is simple and, at the same time, demanding: whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave (Mt 20:26-27). With divine patience, Jesus corrects their excessively human ambitions, overturning their scale of values: the first becomes last and the last is now first.

When we live in accord with these new values, we are imitating our Lord himself. “Christ took the lowest place in the world – the Cross – and by this radical humility he redeemed us and constantly comes to our aid.”[1] His eagerness to serve even reaches the point of giving Himself to us: “This is my body,” “this is my blood” (cf. Mt 26:26-27). “Whoever wishes to be great must serve others, not seek to be served by them. This is the great paradox of Jesus. The disciples were arguing about who would have the highest place, who would be chosen for privileges . . . Jesus upsets their ‘logic,’ their mindset, by telling them that life is lived authentically in a concrete commitment to our neighbor. That is, by serving.”

In the Gospel, service is linked to a mission from God. We see this in Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mt 20:28). He washes the apostles’ feet and makes his Father’s plan his own, even to the point of dying on the Cross. “How can one not read in the story of the ‘servant Jesus’ the story of every vocation: the story that the Creator has planned for every human being, the story that inevitably passes through the call to serve.”

Service is what characterizes anyone who tries to walk close beside our Lord. “While the great people of the earth build themselves ‘thrones’ for their own power, God chooses an uncomfortable throne, the Cross, from which to reign by giving his life.” Experiencing the “power” of serving leads us to embody the lifestyle of Jesus. This is not something humiliating, but rather the noblest thing we can do in life. Service is an art practiced by those who realize they have received the love of Christ crucified, and have seen their heart expanded by his Love. “To serve is a marvelous thing,” Saint Josemaría wrote. “The greatest joy in my life is to be a servant of the whole world. I want to serve God and, out of love for God, to serve with love all the creatures on earth.” Discovering this reality makes us sensitive to the needs of others, especially those most in need. “In a world which demands of Christians a renewed witness of love and fidelity to the Lord, may all of us feel the urgent need to ‘outdo’ one another in charity, service and good works (cf. Heb 6:10). This appeal is particularly pressing in this holy season of preparation for Easter”

After hearing their mother’s request, Jesus says to James and John: “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” He said to them, “You will drink my cup” (Mt 20:22-23). This conversation takes place as they are going up to Jerusalem. Jesus knows what is about to happen in the Holy City. A few moments before, He had told his apostles that the Son of man will be betrayed: they will condemn

him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day (Mt 20:18-19).

It is the third and final announcement of the Passion. The disciples are frightened and worried; they don't understand or perhaps don't want to understand too much about opposition and difficulties. It doesn't fit into their heads that the kingdom the Master is speaking about must be reached by defeat. Today too we are in need of a conversion in order to understand God's paths. Lent is a new opportunity to transform our way of understanding Jesus, our way of viewing the world and the values that govern relationships, in order to see the world with his redeeming eyes.

The image of the cup points to the pain and death that is Christ's lot. "To drink my cup" is to share in his redemptive Passion for the salvation of the world. Is there any other way to reach the highest places in his Kingdom? In the Eucharist we are strengthened on the path that leads to the heights of God's love and to serving those around us. We consume Christ, the Bread that is broken, who has shed his blood for all men and women. Mary traveled the path to the Cross close beside her son Jesus. During this Lent, she accompanies us as a good mother who only wants what is best for her children.

Closing Prayer

Quotes from:

Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 35.
G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*
Francis, Homily, 20 September 2015.
Saint John Paul II, Message, 11 May 2003.
Francis, Angelus, 21 October 2018.
Saint Josemaría, Letters 36, no. 5.
Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2012.