

Passion Sunday

28 March 2004

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The apostle Saint John, whose Gospel constitutes the framework of the story of the last days of Our Lord, shows us the increasing opposition between Our Lord Jesus and His people, especially the Jewish authorities. It is a constant theme in Saint John to contrast God with the wicked; the children of light with children of darkness; those who keep the word of God with those who reject it. Throughout his Gospel and Apocalypse, Saint John depicts the antagonism that reaches its climax in the Passion of Christ. To this day, the opposition continues between those who would do the will of God and those who choose to do their own. But this opposition is not a form of manicheism, where two *equal* principles are said to confront each other. God has already won the battle, even before the battle has even begun. For His Word is all-powerful and endures forever. Those who are of God, that is to say, those who hear God's word benefit from His victory. And what, exactly, is His victory? More precisely, how do we share in His victory? The Scriptures tell us: *and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.*

In the beginning of his rule, Saint Benedict gives this advice to us: *Listen, O my son, to the precepts of thy master, and incline the ear of thy heart, and cheerfully receive and faithfully execute the admonitions of thy loving Father, that by the toil of obedience thou mayest return to Him from whom by the sloth of disobedience thou hast gone away.* According to Saint Benedict and the whole spiritual tradition of the Church, we must incline the ear of our heart to be able to go to God. We must listen to his words and open *our eyes to the Life-giving light—the deifying light—* to receive the Spirit of God. All the subsequent chapters of the Rule merely explain this prologue. And according to Bossuet, *the rule of St. Benedict is an epitome of Christianity, a learned and mysterious summary of all the doctrines of the Gospel, all the institutions of the Fathers, and all the counsels of perfection.* In the course of some 15 centuries, the Rule of St. Benedict has generated legions of saints and continues today to offer to our world oases of peace, places of silence, and schools of sanctity. Each monastery where the Rule of Saint Benedict is faithfully kept is like a finger pointing towards heaven, indicating to us that there is a God, a God who speaks to us. Indeed, the creation of Christendom itself would not have been possible had it not been for the abiding influence of the monks. They were the leaven of Europe: they presented to the world the essence of the Christian life, and by their continuous prayers, helped bring down upon the world the graces of Almighty God. To be a Christian means to be of God and to hear the word of God and keep it. To be of God, however, and to hear the word of God and keep it, requires a very important virtue: the virtue of humility.

It is very common today to hear some people say that they would believe in God only if He gave them a sign. Such people fail to recognize, refuse to recognize that God has already given us plenty of signs. To ask for more is to tempt God. And it would be useless, as we learn from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus: *They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.* Then Abraham adds: *If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.* And when Our Lord was on the Cross, some Jews said to him: *If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him.* But it is not for God to obey the will of men. On the contrary, men have to incline their will, their very being, to the will of God. This inclination is the work of humility, without which it would be impossible to be of God, to hear the word of God, and keep it.

The Rule of Saint Benedict is composed of 73 chapters. Some of them deal with very practical matters, like those which pertain to the organization of the community. They have their importance for the common good, and for that reason for the spiritual good of everyone. Others are more directly spiritual. The most important chapter of the Rule, at least by its length, is the chapter about humility. This is the essence of monastic life *par excellence*. But it is also true for every Christian who has to follow Our Lord. Though a complete study of this chapter exceeds the scope of a single sermon, we can benefit from a brief overview of some of the pearls of wisdom found in this chapter.

Saint Benedict begins with those words of Our Lord: *Every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.* Though humility is not the greatest virtue, it is nevertheless the foundation of the spiritual life. So, if we want to ascend to God in heaven, we have no choice but to humble ourselves here on earth. To us, this should be an obvious truth. What may be less obvious is the extent to which we suffer from pride. Humility is a virtue that we quickly lose if we do not exercise it often; if we become lax in our striving to acquire more of this virtue. As soon as we think we are humble enough, pride begins to find its way back into our souls and corrupts the purity of our intentions. You could fast every day during Lent, but apart from humility such exercises are useless, even harmful. For if they are not done with humility, they will serve only to increase pride.

Saint Benedict distinguishes 12 degrees of humility. I will mention only the first, which is this: *that a man always has the fear of God before his eyes.* When we were baptized we became children of God. On a natural level, a child fears his parents. This filial fear, which includes love, is good. It helps children to avoid doing harmful things. On a supernatural level, the fear of God accomplishes the same thing. A real fear of God, which includes love of God, keeps us from committing sin. Of course, there is more to being a good child than simply avoiding what is harmful. Likewise, there is more to following Christ than simply avoiding sin. In the words of St. Benedict, following Christ well—hearing the word of God and keeping it—consists in running *the way of God's commandments with expanded hearts and unspeakable sweetness of love.*

May Our Lady, who heard and kept God's words, pondering them in her heart, help us to hear His words and keep them! May she help us to climb the degrees of humility eagerly, that we may reach the purpose of our existence, which is nothing less than eternal life to all those who do God's will. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.