



Homily Notes/Meditation to observe 2009 *Pro Orantibus Day*

“A Matter of Firm Believing” By Rev. Brian Mullady, O.P.

Feast: Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Readings: Rev 3:1-6; 14-22; Lk 19:1-10

Purpose and Outline:

(a) Tradition tells us that Our Lady spent her youth in the Temple among the virgins in a kind of cloister, growing constantly in her understanding of the mysteries of God; (b) The virtue of faith is necessary for any Christian vocation, but it is especially necessary for, and shines in the life of, the enclosure characteristic of the cloistered and monastic life; (c) Cloistered religious are not only models of faith and how the knowledge of God can change the world for others, but they must be passionate to understand it themselves; (d) Assiduous study of Sacred Truth is not inimical to the spiritual life because the more one understands about Christ, the more one can love Him.

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“Blessed are you, O Virgin Mary, for your firm believing; all that the Lord promised you will come to pass through you.” Today we celebrate the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin in the Temple. She jumped up the steps and did not look back because she was so attracted by the Lord even at a young age. Tradition tells us that she spent her youth in the Temple among the virgins in a kind of cloister, growing constantly in her understanding of the mysteries of God. This preparation was completed when by an act of faith in response to the words of the angel, she conceived the Word in her body.

Mary’s time spent in the Temple was a fit preparation for her spiritual marriage with the persons of the Trinity. Her enclosed life is a fit model for the enclosed life of cloistered religious. “The monastic life of women has therefore a special capacity to embody the nuptial relationship with Christ and be a living sign of it: was it not in a woman, the Virgin Mary, that the heavenly mystery of the Church was accomplished?”¹ Her experience being among the virgins, listening in silence and faith to the Word of God, was a wonderful seedbed for the final catechesis she would hear from the lips of the angel announcing the incarnation of the Messiah. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will over

shadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God” (Lk 1:35). As she was raised in faith and increased in faith, she conceives in faith and her whole life is lived as the fruit of this faith. “In this light, nuns relive and perpetuate in the Church the presence and the work of Mary. Welcoming the Word in faith and adoring silence, they put themselves at the service of the mystery of the Incarnation, and united to Christ Jesus in His offering of Himself to the Father, they become co-workers in the mystery of Redemption.”²

The virtue of faith is necessary for any Christian vocation but it is especially necessary and shines in the life of the enclosure characteristic of the cloistered and monastic life. Since “the cloister is especially well suited to life wholly directed to contemplation,”³ faith is the foundation of the contemplative life. Though it is certainly true that contemplation is completed in love for the Beloved, it is impossible to love what one does not know. Or if one has a mistaken idea of the person one loves, one loves a creation of one’s own imagination and not someone who is real. Such love would be false love.

The virtue of supernatural faith involves conclusions of the intellect. It is like science because it entails assent to propositions that are firmly held and increase the knower’s experience of the world. It is unlike science because, since it is about God, He who cannot be contained or limited by any human thought or definition, so also it demands an action of the will by which the believer trusts in the revealer’s word. Faith, then, also demands grace. “Faith is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by Him” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 153). Though faith is a grace and demands interior aid by God on a daily basis to be lived, “believing is an authentically human act” (*CCC*, no. 154). St. Thomas Aquinas and the First Vatican Council with him, thus define faith as “an act of the intellect assenting to divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace.”⁴

Today it is popular to play off the contribution of the intellect and will against each other as though they were at war. To think too much diminishes love and to love means that one abandons thought. Not only is this contrary to the whole idea of faith it does not reflect ordinary spousal love in marriage. Is the bridegroom or bride less loving when they want to know all they can about their spouse? Are they not in denial or living a fool’s love if they create a false image of their spouse? Is love based on such denial real?

Vatican II teaches that Christ is the “Mediator and fullness of all revelation.”⁵ Knowing Him is the culmination of all wonder, which led the philosophers to search for the truth and the Jews to see the glory of God in the completion of the law. His human nature is a tool by which we arrive at divinity and prepare ourselves for the final knowledge which is the vision of God. “Faith makes us taste in advance the light of the beatific vision, the goal of our journey here below ... so faith is already the beginning of eternal life.” (*CCC*, no. 163) The knowledge of faith allows one to adopt the perspective of Christ and to see time through eternity and not eternity through time. This is the proper way of knowing because it is God’s way of knowing and He is the author of all truth.

The enclosure is often thought of as merely excluding evil influences of the world on the contemplative religious, as a place to hide from life. Though it is true that the enclosure is meant to reduce distractions from contemplation, nothing could be further than the truth. The difference between the world outside the monastic cloister and the enclosed world within is not the difference between good and evil. It is rather the difference between the everyday world of reason which unfolds according to calendar year and the eternal world of God which underlies all that is in that world and gives it meaning. Fascination with this world must permeate all the contemplative is and does. This is centered on fascination with Christ.

Cloistered religious therefore are not only models of faith and how the knowledge of God can change the world for others, but they must be passionate to understand it themselves. Faith is not just a series of propositions that one learns. Otherwise, people who get an “A” on a theology test would be believers. Nevertheless, understanding and assent to the propositions of the articles of the Creed are essential to have a right understanding of the Beloved. Given the nature of each religious institute a basic knowledge of catechesis and theology is essential to be a good lover. Assiduous study of Sacred Truth is not inimical to the spiritual life because the more one understands about Christ, the more one can love Him. St. Teresa of Avila preferred accuracy to piety in her confessors.

In her treatise on woman’s education, St. Edith Stein (a Jewish convert to Catholicism who later entered a Carmelite monastery and was eventually martyred at Auschwitz) is clear that by only being open to grace can the soul of woman be finally freed from the preoccupation with self which limits her full experience as a person. All of woman’s, and I would say man’s, positive tendencies can be spoiled because of the weakness of Original Sin. Only concentration on Christ and the high-mindedness which it engenders can cure this. “Thus, everything points to this conclusion: woman can become what she should be in conformity with her primary vocation only when formation through grace accompanies the natural inner formation. Because of this, religious education must be the core of all woman’s education.”⁶

“And Mary kept all these things in her heart” (Lk 2:51).

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¹ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life, *Verbi Sponsa*, no.4; ² Ibid; ³ *VS*, no. 5; ⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 2, 9; *Dei Filius*, 3: DS 3010; ⁵ *Dei Verbum*, no. 2; ⁶ Edith Stein, *Woman*, ICS Publications: Washington, DC, p. 120.



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