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We have just begun the first week of Lent. Traditionally, Christians all over the world have used the disciplines of Prayer, Penance and Almsgiving as pathways of Lenten Spirituality. They still are wonderful and life-giving disciplines. This week, let us focus on praying more attentively, devoutly, and faithfully! Prayer is a hunger and a thirst for God and God's ways. This hunger is a longing, an impelling desire to seek his presence and to dwell in the awareness of his living and loving reality. The hunger for God is itself God's gift to us.

The late Cardinal Suenens said that, for him, prayer meant opening the soul to God while closing self to 'atmospheric disturbances.' Hence deeper prayer implies a need for silence and openness. To pray is to open ourselves to the Father so that our entire life - from the seeking of daily bread to the transformation of the world - is filled with love. To pray means to expose our self to the love of the Father so as to be enabled to live even better as his child. St. Catherine of Siena reminds us that our holy desire for prayer itself is a continual prayer. St. Augustine tells us that prayerfulness, left alone, cannot last forever. Our desire for prayer needs to be often re-energized through new acts of prayer. So, we use various types of prayer to attain and maintain this union with our Triune God, to capture and maintain a personal and intimate encounter with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

"Prayer is one of the ways that God chose to share his infinite power with us", said Blaise Pascal, the French Mathematician. Just as God shares his power with us by making us "thinking persons", He shares His power with us by making us "praying persons". Not everyone can impact human affairs by thought. But everyone, even someone with a low I.Q. can do so by prayer. God has created us to be more than mere spectators of His creative power. He has created us to share in His creative power by creating us in His "image and likeness."

Jesus taught his disciples to begin prayer by giving honor, glory, and praise to the name of God and desiring His will. Reverence to God must be first and all other things will then fall in their proper places. Prayer should not be our attempt to bend God's will to our desires - but must be a surrender of our will to God's will - bringing our will into harmony with God's will.

During this first week of Lent, let us choose to be more attentive, devout, and faithful in prayer. If you have already a habit of praying, let it become more devout, meditative, reflective, and contemplative. If you have not been praying, it is a good time to begin. May God bless you and keep you faithful on your Lenten journey.

Fr. Gus Tharappel, msfs

First Week of Lent

February 19-24, 2024

**Be a sign of the living Christ, do not be afraid of what the Lord asks of you.
Open yourselves to Christ, listen to Him in the silence of prayer.
Accompany those who are most fragile, take charge of those who are alone.
Be the seed of a more fraternal world! Be families with big hearts!
Be the welcoming face of the Church! And please pray, always pray!**
(Pope Francis)

February 19 – Monday, First Week of Lent

Those who practice forbearance keep themselves in control.

Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18

Moses calls the people to be holy because the Lord is holy. Such holiness requires not only reverence for God but also deep respect for self and others, even other's property. Moses spells out the details of the Covenant with God. Deep reverence for God must reflect: Deep reverence for people; Deep reverence for self; Deep reverence for creation. **Reflect on your sense of reverence for God and for all that is God's!**

Psalm 19

**May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart,
Find favor before you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.**

Mathew 25:31-46

The final judgment is not about how you kept the rules and how many prayers you said. It is about how you treated those in need and why you treated them the way you did. The good that is done for others is not because others needed your "good" or because there was a reward for doing good but because you couldn't help but do the good. Being good and doing good, being generous and doing the generous thing, being compassionate and doing the compassionate thing...etc. is your nature, your character, your quality. **It just reflects who you are!**

There can be no holiness without concern for others, especially the needy, the disadvantaged, the poor...We cannot love God without loving others in truth. Loving in truth is to love as God loves, to reflect God's love. This means that **we must love those who can not**

love in return and those who cannot love the way we have learned to love. To be holy is to love - this love is unconditional, non-judgmental and accepting. Jesus says love is beyond piety and good deeds. Our love must cross the boundaries and break barriers.

We minister to the Lord when we minister to each other and to all in need, without even realizing that we are ministering to the Lord.

Saint of the Day, February 19 - Saint Conrad of Piacenza and 10 other saints are remembered this day.

St, Conrad was born Corrado Confalonieri, a member of one of the noblest families of Piacenza in Northern Italy. The date of his birth is uncertain. He married an aristocratic young woman named Ephrosyne when he was quite young. One day while hunting he ordered attendants to set fire to some brush in order to flush out the game. The fire spread to nearby fields and to a large forest. Conrad fled. An innocent peasant was imprisoned, tortured to confess, and condemned to death. As the man was being led to execution, a remorseful Conrad publicly admitted his guilt. As punishment and reparation for the damages he had caused, the city seized all his assets, only sparing his life due to his noble status.

Soon after this event, Conrad and his wife agreed to separate - she to a Poor Clare monastery and he to a group of hermits following the Third Order Rule. His reputation for holiness, however, spread quickly. Since his many visitors destroyed his solitude, Conrad went to a more remote spot in Sicily where he lived 36 years as a hermit, praying for himself and for the rest of the world. Conrad died kneeling before a crucifix on February 19, 1351. He was canonized in 1625.

February 20 - Tuesday, First Week of Lent

Those who practice forbearance develop strong will power.

Isaiah 55:10-11

Chapter 55 of Isaiah invites us to come to God, to listen to God's wisdom, to be fed and nourished on God's word of wisdom, to renounce the way of foolishness and wickedness and to turn to God and God's ways. The prophet says, God's ways are not our ways. So seek the Lord and his ways!

God's word is alive, active and dynamic. God's word is faithful word and the word will become fruitful and life-giving. **Nourish and strengthen yourselves with God's word.**

Psalm 34

**Glorify the Lord with me,
Let us together extol his name.
I sought the Lord and he answered me,
And delivered me from all my fears.**

Mathew 6:7-15

This is how Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Begin prayer by addressing God "Father". Come into the presence of someone who need not be forced to give, but to a Father who simply gives. Reverence to God must be first, before all else.

The first "three" petitions are about reverence for God - holy be your name; your kingdom come; your will be done. God first. All other things will then fall in their proper places.

Prayer should not be our attempt to bend God's will to our desires - but must be a surrender of our will to God's will - bringing our will into harmony with God's will.

The second "three" petitions are about our needs, and they cover all life: praying for the essential needs (daily bread) for the day; forgiveness for sin of the past; help for meeting the testing times in the future.

Bring the whole of life – your present, past and future - before God.

Saint of the Day, February 20 – St. Jacinta & Francisco Marto and 20 other saints are remembered this day.

Saint Francisco de Jesus Marto (June 11, 1908 – April 4, 1919), his sister Saint Jacinta de Jesus Marto (March 11, 1910 – February 20, 1920) and their cousin Lúcia dos Santos (1907–2005) were children from Aljustrel, a small hamlet near Fátima, Portugal, who witnessed three apparitions of the Angel of Peace in 1916 and several apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Cova da Iria in 1917. At that time, Europe was involved in an extremely bloody war. Portugal itself was in political turmoil, having overthrown its monarchy in 1910; the government disbanded religious organizations soon after.

At the first appearance, Mary asked the children to return to that spot on the thirteenth of each month for the next six months. She also asked them to learn to read and write and to pray the rosary “to obtain peace for the world and the end of the war.” They were to pray for sinners and for the conversion of Russia, which had recently overthrown Czar Nicholas II and was soon to fall under communism. Up to 90,000 people gathered for Mary’s final apparition on October 13, 1917. The title Our Lady of Fátima was given to the Virgin Mary as a result, and the Sanctuary of Fátima became a major center of world Christian pilgrimage.

Less than two years later, Francisco died of influenza in his family home. He was buried in the parish cemetery and then re-buried in the Fátima basilica in 1952. Jacinta died of influenza in Lisbon in 1920, offering her suffering for the conversion of sinners, peace in the world, and the Holy Father. She was re-buried in the Fátima basilica in 1951. Their cousin Lúcia dos Santos, became a Carmelite nun and was still living when Jacinta and Francisco were beatified in 2000; she died five years later. Pope Francis canonized the younger children on his visit to Fátima to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the first apparition, May 13, 2017.

February 21 – Wednesday, First Week of Lent

Those who practice forbearance can rise above their failures.

Jonah 3:1-10

The people of Nineveh, king, and common folks, repented, changed their ways and turned to God at the preaching of Jonah. God had compassion on the Ninevites.

The season of Lent calls us to conversion, to a change of heart. Reflect on the need for your own personal conversion!

Psalm 51

**Have mercy on me, God, in your goodness;
In your abundant compassion, blot out my offense.
Wash away all my guilt; from my sin, cleanse me.**

What offense, in your life, needs cleansing, healing and transformation?

Luke 11:29-32

They (Scribes and Pharisees) looked for God in the abnormal - in the extraordinary. Jesus constantly called people to recognize God and God's presence in the ordinary everyday experiences...in little children, in the widow's mite, in the lilies in the field, in the birds of the air.....

Jesus refused to give extraordinary signs and called the scribes and Pharisees and all his followers to find God in the ordinary things of everyday life.

Jesus presented himself, not what he did, as the sign, God's sign. Jesus is God's sign for us just as Jonah was God's sign for the Nineties and Solomon God's sign for the Queen of Sheba.

The disciple must now become a sign of the Master.....perhaps imperfect, but still a sign that carries the message of the master..... The world must meet the Master in the disciple.

Saint of the Day, February 21 - St. Peter Damien and 34 other saints are remembered this day.

Peter was born in Ravenna around 988, the youngest of a large noble, but poor family. Orphaned early, he was at first adopted by an elder brother, who ill-treated and under-fed him while employing him as a swine herd. After some years, another brother, Damianus, who was archpriest at Ravenna, had pity on him and took him away to be educated. Adding his brother's name to his own, Peter made such rapid progress in his studies of theology and canon law, first at Ravenna, then at Faenza, and finally at the University of Parma, that, around the age of 25, he was already a famous professor at Parma and Ravenna universities.

Maybe because he was orphaned and had been treated shabbily by one of his brothers, Peter Damian was very good to the poor. It was the ordinary thing for him to have a poor person or two with him at table and he liked to minister personally to their needs.

Peter was very strict with himself. He wore a hair shirt under his clothes, fasted rigorously and spent many hours in prayer. Soon, he decided to leave his teaching profession and give himself completely to prayer with the Benedictines of the reform of Saint Romuald at Fonte Avellana. Both as novice and as monk, his fervor was remarkable but led him to such extremes of self-mortification in penance that his health was affected, and he developed severe insomnia. On his recovery, he was appointed to lecture to his fellow monks and then monks of neighboring monasteries.

The abbot commanded that when he died Peter should succeed him. Abbot Peter founded five other hermitages. He encouraged his brothers to live a life of prayer and solitude and wanted nothing more for himself. The Holy See periodically called on him, however, to be a

peacemaker between two abbeys in dispute or a cleric or government official in some disagreement with Rome.

Finally, Pope Stephen IX made Peter the cardinal-bishop of Ostia. He worked hard to wipe out simony (the buying of church offices) and encouraged his priests to observe celibacy and urged even the diocesan clergy to live together and maintain scheduled prayer and religious observance. He wished to restore primitive discipline among religious and priests, warning against needless travel, violations of poverty, and too comfortable living. He asked often to be allowed to retire as cardinal-bishop of Ostia, and finally Pope Alexander II consented.

Peter was happy to become once again just a monk, but he was still called to serve as a papal legate. When returning from such an assignment in Ravenna, he was overcome by a fever. With the monks gathered around him saying the Divine Office, he died on February 22, 1072. In 1828, he was declared a Doctor of the Church

February 22 – The Chair of St. Peter the Apostle

Those who practice forbearance are able to forgive others.

1 Peter 5:1-4

Peter advised the elders and the presbyters to be good shepherds like Jesus, their master. Real honor lies in serving those entrusted to our pastoral care and “watching over” them as God would have us do.

Psalm 23

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
In verdant pastures he gives me repose;
Beside restful waters he leads me;
He refreshes my soul.**

Mathew 16:13-19

Jesus changes the name of Simon to Peter. Change of name implies radical change, change of character and lifestyle.... becoming a new person.

Jesus asked Peter, “Who do you say I am?” This is a question of relationship - not information. The question was about who Jesus had become for Peter and the other disciples. It is a question that all of us must continue to answer.....

“You are the Messiah!” “You are the rock!” These are responses of commitment, of covenant, of lasting, enduring, eternal relationships.....Jesus and Peter defined each other and affirmed each other in lasting relationship.

Jesus affirms that this confession and commitment are not born of reason or logic but of Grace..... “flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my heavenly father....” Peter’s confession is affirmed and proclaimed as a gift of Grace. As St. Augustine would say, even our longing for God is God’s gift.

Jesus also points out that those of us who confess and commit ourselves to him must learn to live in conflict and tension.... that the Father will gift us with the power to live out our commitment... “...the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail...”

Saint of the day, February 22 - The Chair of St. Peter the Apostle and 21 other saints are remembered this day.

In ancient Rome, this day was observed as “Ancestors’ Day”. People remembered the dead, especially their parents. The Christians of Rome began to celebrate this day in memory of Peter, their founding father and their first Bishop and so their true ancestor.

Why is today’s feast called the “chair of St. Peter”? Every Bishop has a chair from which he presides, preaches, and teaches officially. In Rome, in the Basilica of St. Peter, an ancient wooden chair is preserved, which is believed to be that of St. Peter. Today’s feast honors this “chair”, this seat, this office...which means, it honors this unity of teaching and preaching authority.....it honors the unity of the universal Church. The chair is the symbol of Peter’s role and that of the popes as pastors of the whole Church. It is therefore a celebration of unity and a celebration of trust in the teaching authority of the Church. Let us pray for harmony and unity in the Church.

February 23 - Friday, First Week of Lent

Cultivate forbearance till you mature in strength of character.

Ezekiel 18:21-28

The prophet says, repent and all will be well! Virtue means strength and life. Absence of virtue means weakness and eventual death. Ezekiel says, the Lord remembers virtuous life and forgets crimes of the past. You are called to live virtuous lives!

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord,
Lord, hear my voice;
Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication!

Mathew 5:20-26

In this excerpt, Mathew offers us very challenging messages of Jesus:

- Your holiness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees! You are called to live higher standards of life. You are called to live virtuous lives!
- All forms of prayer and worship call forth reconciliation. Sacrifice and worship assume genuine confession of sin, true penitence and forgiveness from the heart. Be reconciled with others! Be reconciled now!
- Be aware of the words you speak. Be sensitive and speak affirming, encouraging, healing, supporting, empowering words!
- Be aware of words that may insult or hurt others. Words could alienate you from the community - they break down relationship. Speak words that bring life and not death.
- Make peace in time and make it now! Now is the time for reconciliation and peace!

Genuine Forgiveness is Unconditional. Learn to forgive from the heart!

Saint of the Day, February 23 – St. Polycarp and 89 other saints are remembered this day.

St. Polycarp was born around 69 C.E. but we know little else of his childhood and youth. He was a member of that small band of “Apostolic Fathers”, the immediate followers of the Apostles. He was a disciple of St. John, the “Beloved Disciple” of Jesus. A letter from Saint John to Polycarp has survived. Soon after the death of St. John, Polycarp was named the Bishop of Smyrna (now Turkey).

Tradition tells us that Polycarp actually kissed the chains of the great St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch as the latter passed by Smyrna en route to martyrdom. St. Ignatius also wrote a letter to Polycarp which is still extant. Polycarp instructed St. Irenaeus (famous for his work Against Heresies) and Papias of Hierapolis, the important early Scripture scholar. He traveled all the way to Rome to meet with Pope Saint Anicetus to work out when, exactly, Easter should be observed each year.

Polycarp was an unrelenting defender of the orthodox faith especially against the heresies known as Valentinianism and Marcionism, both of which were types of Gnosticism. He was an “Apostolic Father,” a disciple of St. John, a defender of orthodoxy, the bishop of Smyrna, the friend of Ignatius of Antioch and Pope Anicetus, teacher and letter-writer and a sort of bridge between the Eastern and Western Churches.

In the sixth year of Marcus Aurelius, a violent persecution broke out in Asia in which the faithful gave heroic proof of their courage. When the chief of police, Herod, sent horsemen by night to surround his lodging, Polycarp was upstairs in bed, but refused to make his escape saying, ‘God’s Will be done.’ He went down, met them at the door, ordered them supper, and desired only some time in prayer before he went with them.

At 86, Polycarp was led into the crowded Smyrna stadium to be burned alive. The flames did not harm him and he was finally killed by a dagger. The centurion ordered the saint’s body burned. He died in 155.

February 24 – Saturday, First Week of Lent

Those who practice forbearance will reap a harvest of peace and joy.

Deuteronomy 26:16-19

Obedying God’s law is what makes us the “People of God”. Moses tells his people that they are a people of the covenant, that they have an “agreement” with God and that God has an “agreement with them. Therefore they must learn to “listen” to God’s voice and remain faithful just as God is faithful. **Learn to walk in God’s ways! You are a people sacred to the Lord.**

Psalm 119

**Happy the person whose way is blameless,
who walks in the law of the Lord.
Happy are they, who observe his decrees,
who seek him with all their heart.**

Mathew 5:43-48

Mathew continues to bring us very high ideals that Jesus placed before his disciples. Your spirituality must rise above that of the scribes and Pharisees. Your life must be more virtuous than the pagans and do more than the pagans do.

Learn to lead noble and virtuous lives. Let your character reflect virtue.

Your love will prove that you are “sons of the heavenly Father”. The heavenly Father is impartial to those who love him and to those who do not love him.

Let your love embrace all people – even those who do not love you!

Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect! To be perfect is to be what God made you to be, do what God wants you to do and fulfill the plan, “the will” God has for you.

Listen and keep searching for God’s will for you! Be and become discerning people!

Saint of the Day, February 24 – Blessed Luke Belludi and 8 other saints are remembered this day.

In 1220, Saint Anthony was preaching conversion to the inhabitants of Padua when a young nobleman, Luke Belludi, came up to him and humbly asked to receive the habit of the followers of Saint Francis. At the age of twenty, he was received into the Order of Friars Minor, the Franciscans, by Saint Francis himself. A few years later, Friar Luke met for the first time Saint Anthony of Padua. Thereafter Luke served as an assistant to the great Franciscan preacher on his missions across northern Italy. In 1231, he had the privilege of assisting Anthony at his death.

Friar Luke was appointed guardian of the Friars Minor in the city of Padua. In 1239, the city fell into the hands of its enemies. Nobles were put to death, the mayor and council were banished, the great university of Padua gradually closed, and the church dedicated to Saint Anthony was left unfinished. Luke himself was expelled from the city but secretly returned.

As the crisis in Padua continued, Luke would go to pray at the tomb of Saint Anthony following the recitation of the night office. While doing this one night, Luke and another Franciscan with him heard a voice from the tomb assuring them that their prayers for Padua were soon to be answered. The city was liberated not long afterward. It was Friar Luke who supervised the construction of the Padua basilica that now enshrines Saint Anthony's body. He died on February 17, 1286

Fr. Gus Tharappel, msfs

**To pray is to open ourselves to the Father
so that our entire life from the seeking of daily bread
to the transformation of the world, is filled with God’s will and purpose.**

