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Eph 6:1-9, Ps 145, Lk 13:22-30

AGONIZING TO FOLLOW CHRIST ALONG THE NARROW WAY

- One of the classic considerations of any retreat is on the last things. Throughout the *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius often encourages the retreatant to ponder “as if I were at the point of death,” and famously seeks to have us choose between the two standards, or banner of Christ and Lucifer. Thomas à Kempis in his *Imitation of Christ* counsels us to consider our death and then approach every day as if it were the last day we’ll ever have, assuring us that that’s the way we will truly live each day to the full as a gift. St. Alphonsus Ligouri and the Redemptorists he founded and St. Paul of the Cross and the Passionists he founded always gave powerful meditations on death, judgment, heaven and hell as part of the spiritual exercises they preached. It’s important for us on this retreat on the Missionary Metamorphosis of the Church to ponder the last things because, as we’ll hear Pope Francis mention to us this afternoon, the preaching of the kingdom must always be eschatological.
- Today in the Gospel Jesus has arranged for us to focus on the last things. “Lord, will only a few be saved?” someone from the crowd asked Jesus today. The response that a typical Jew at the time would have expected is “Yes!” because most Jews believed that only Jews — and Jews who faithfully kept God’s covenant — would make it. Jesus didn’t reply attempting to satisfy the person’s curiosity, because he hadn’t come from heaven to earth to answer the interrogatives of inquiring minds. He had come from heaven to earth to save us, and so he responded not by saying *how many* are saved by *how* any is saved.
- “Strive to enter through the narrow gate,” he said. The word translated as “strive” is from the Greek word to “agonize” and it’s used in a tense that means “keep on agonizing.” To get to Heaven, in other words, we need continuously to agonize, like Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane, to conform our will to the Father’s. We need to go into agony, to make the greatest, possibly most painful exertion of our life, to fit through a gate that is “narrow.” We need to work harder than an undrafted free agent gives everything he’s got in Saints’ training camp to make the cut, harder than gymnast works to make the Olympics and win the gold, harder than an immigrant father of large family works to ensure his family’s survival. To be a faithful Christian means to “agonize” to follow Christ always. There is no point that we can stop fighting to follow him and “live off the interest” of previous years of good discipleship. We are called to struggle until the day we die. As Archbishop Sheen used to say, “If we’re not going uphill, we’re sliding downhill.” If we’re not swimming against the current of the world toward Jesus, we’ll be floating down stream over the falls. “Unless you pick up your cross each day and follow me,” he tells us, “you cannot be my disciple” (Lk 9:27,14:27). The width of the narrow door to Heaven is the span of a needle’s eye, the girth of the cross, something that is anything but easy to pass through. We can imagine slivering through the slimmest aperture to escape from a life-threatening situation in which we’ve been trapped, like we’ve seen some people have to do to escape from rubble after earthquakes or building implosions. We need to agonize that way to fit through the narrow gate as if our whole life depended on it — because, in fact, Jesus says it does. In the midst of a culture that is consistently trying to water down our commitment to God, Christians who want to be faithful need to strive even harder to pick up the Cross God gives them each day and unite themselves to Christ on the Cross. Christ, himself, is the “gate to the sheepfold” (Jn 10:7,9). The reason why the gate is narrow is because it is the width of the Cross.
- With shocking words, Jesus declares, “For the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” Few people, in other words, make the effort required to enter into life. Few agonize to enter through the narrow gate. Over the last few decades, people have gotten the notion that the Christian life is exactly the opposite of what Jesus describes today, that salvation is cheap and the Christian life smooth and easy. Most have been led to believe that they can “float” effortlessly downstream to heaven

because everyone ends up there — except perhaps those who don't like us, serial killers, public smokers and those who gulp soft drinks larger than 16 ounces in Manhattan. We might all need minor “course corrections” in life, but no major changes. *Such an attitude is a diabolical ambush.* This lie from the father of lies is the opposite of what Jesus the incarnate Truth taught us. It's also a very dangerous heresy — universalism or *apocatastasis* — that carries with it potentially the most serious of eschatological consequences. The One who is the Gate to the sheepfold tells us that we need continuously to agonize to enter into him. Jesus said these words as he was on the road to Jerusalem, and we know what happened when he got to Jerusalem. He entered into his agony, the agony that led to our salvation and opened up the narrow door. But we need to be willing to follow him along that path of sacrificial love — and to admit that it's not a much-traveled path. We can ask ourselves: Which is more popular today, the path of spiritual poverty announced by Jesus or the one of materialist wealth? The path of purity or pornography? The path of peace-making or score-settling? The path of mourning or partying? The path of turning the other cheek or slapping back? The path of keeping the commandments or breaking them? Jesus' path is not an easy one and he never pretended that it was. Loving according to his standards can be crucifying. But he's telling us today that it's eternally worth it.

- But, we can ask, what if we don't love the Lord that much? What if we really don't make an heroic effort? We might not get an A-plus on our discipleship and priestly life and ministry, but we'll still make the cut, won't we? There has to be some type of loophole, right? Jesus implies today that there's no short-cut out of the effort he is calling us to. In today's Gospel, there were many who thought they had an “in,” only to be profoundly mistaken. They remained on the outside, knocking, trying to get in to no avail. “We ate and drank with you!,” they cried. It wasn't enough. “We heard you teaching in our streets.” That wasn't sufficient either. To both, Jesus said, “I do not know where you come from.” In St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives even more stunning examples. “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?” (Mt 7:22). Jesus says even to these he will declare, “I never knew you” (Mt 7:23). Jesus was saying to these people that a mere external relationship with him is not enough. It's not enough to have heard Him speak. It's not sufficient to have eaten and drunk with Him, even the Holy Eucharist as do each day. It's not adequate to proclaim the Gospel in His name, to do exorcisms and house blessings or even work miracles like we do every day at the altar, or in the confessional or at bedsides. After all, Judas Iscariot did all of these things, but he never really knew Who Jesus was. He followed Jesus on the outside but, as much as Jesus wanted it, he never became his intimate friend, a real member of his family, valuing Jesus ultimately less than 30 pieces of silver. His fall teaches us that not everyone living around Christ is really a Christian, not everyone coming to Church is a disciple, and not everyone in a Roman collar is really an *alter Christus*. We have to do more than listen to Jesus — we have to put his words into action, even difficult words like we find in today's Gospel. We have to do more than eat and drink with him — we need to become whom we eat. We need to do more than announce his name and do some good deeds — we need to live by his name (Christian) and allow Him to work through us. We need to enter into intimate friendship and communion with Him. And we need to agonize to let go of everything in our life that's not ordered to God, that's not compatible with the life of faith, to squeeze into deeper conformity of heart, mind, soul and strength with Jesus and live in that full-time loving union with him, so that we will know Jesus, so that he will know us, and say to us at the end of our days, “Come, O you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you since the beginning of time.”
- To ponder and preach the four last things is a very important part of the New Evangelization and the missionary metamorphosis of the Church. People have got to know that life matters, that love matters, that our choices matter, that God loves us but that we need to use our freedom to receive that love, reciprocate that love, and share that love. People have got to know that Jesus has come into the world with radiant light, but that we've got to leave the darkness behind and walk as children of the light. Pope Benedict back in 2000 in a tremendous address on the New Evangelization said that one of the most important aspects of this re-proposal of the Christian faith is to remind the world that “man will be judged. He must account for things. This certitude is of value both for the powerful as well as the simple ones.... If we seriously consider the judgment and the seriousness of the responsibility for us that emerges from this, we will be able to understand full well the other aspect of this proclamation, that is redemption, the fact that Jesus, in the cross, takes on our sins; God Himself, in the passion of the Son, becomes the advocate for us sinners, and thus making penance possible, the hope for the repentant sinner, [and] ... open up our hearts, our life to divine

mercy. ... It isn't true that faith in eternal life makes earthly life insignificant. To the contrary: only if the measure of our life is eternity, then also this life of ours on earth is great and its value immense." The missionary transformation of the Church involves a focus on these ultimate realities. It's not meant to "scare the hell of people" as perhaps once was done in certain places, but it is to announce the Kingdom of God and extend the invitation for people to leave their own earthly fiefdoms and enter well-dressed into the banquet of love that will know no end.

- And the proclamation of this *Gospel* is one of great stakes. Jesus says there are "few" who have found the narrow, uphill, way of the Cross that leads to life and "many" who are on the wide, easy, congested "highway to hell." This is not necessarily a picture of the way everything ends up — because the whole mission of the Church is to try to rescue people from the latter to the former — but it is a striking image, given to us by Jesus himself, about the way the vast majority of people are trending.
- But in order to preach that Gospel effectively, we have to understand where the false idea that our choices don't really matter much comes from, how the devil has been able to get people to take their eternal life for granted. It comes from a misunderstanding of God's mercy and how hell can be compatible with it. People ask how can Jesus — who desires all to be saved and died on the cross to make salvation possible — ever flunk someone on the final exam of life? Theoretically, of course, we can fathom that Judas, Hitler, Osama Bin Laden, serial killers, and all the people who don't like us might end up in hell; but we can't envisage ourselves, any of those we care about, or a sizable chunk of ordinary people ever ending up in Gehenna. How could a God Who is full of compassion, slow to anger, and rich in kindness ever set up an eternal, infernal dungeon in which He mercilessly punishes people for disobedience? If St. Paul tells all Christian fathers in today's first reading not to provoke their children to anger, what type of dad would God the Father be if he were to allow his sons and daughters to remain in a state of unending wrath? How could God Who is love ever establish an everlasting Abu Ghraib for anyone, not to mention His beloved children? And if it's the case that only those with post-doctoral degrees in Satanic wickedness are candidates for the eternal hall of shame, then, at a practical level, we can all just calm down, because very little now matters to our or others' eternal destiny. It doesn't matter if we spread the faith, because everyone gets to Heaven whether or not they know Jesus Christ. The Sacraments don't matter. The Word of God doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if we pray or play, if we keep or break promises, if we steal or sacrifice, if we come to Mass or sleep in, if we're faithful to our spouse or cheat, if we provide for or neglect our family, if we forgive or settle scores, if we love or abuse the poor, if we teach the truth or just tell people what they want to hear, or if we welcome or abort the littlest of Jesus' brethren. None of this matters — or at least none of it matters much. Since almost everyone in the class is going to make the eternal honor roll no matter what they do, while we may still admire those who study hard, the really wise ones are those who eat, drink and be merry and still get their easy A.
- But this way of believing and behaving is not Christian. Contrary to the idea that the final judgment is a cake walk and that everyone is with Led Zeppelin on the "Stairway to Heaven," Jesus teaches us today that "many" are on the wide, easy road leading to destruction and relatively "few" are entering through the narrow door leading to life (Mt 7:13-14). Jesus came from Heaven to show us the way to Heaven and indicated quite emphatically that not all roads lead there. To get to Heaven, we need to follow Him. If we tragically refuse to follow Him on that path, that choice has consequences.
- Just as much as Jesus discoursed on the beauty of Heaven, he spoke about the reality of hell. He compared hell to a blazing furnace, an unquenchable fire, a worm that doesn't die. We can make choices, He said, that cause us to lose body and soul in hell, that exclude us from the banquet of the Kingdom, that lead God to say to us, "I never knew you." Those who end up in this state, Jesus said, may be shocked because they had dined with Him and heard him speak but they never really recognized him. Those to whom Jesus will say, "Depart from Me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels," will be startled to recognize that every time they neglected to nourish, dress, welcome and care for others — every time they failed to love their neighbor — they were failing to love Jesus Himself in disguise. And those choices matter. In talking about hell, Jesus was not an ancient Stephen King entertaining the multitudes with fictional horror stories. He was communicating that hell is a real possibility of human freedom. Hell is not part of the Gospel Jesus proclaimed — hell is not "Good News" — but it is a reality for those who freely decide not to believe and live the Gospel.

- But the question remains: How is hell consistent with Divine love? If God calls us to forgive 70 times seven times, doesn't hell mean that there's a limit to His mercy? Hell was not part of God's original plans, for everything He created was good. He formed us in His image and likeness in order to share His life and love, but He took a tremendous risk in creating us free: He made it possible for us to misuse our freedom against Him, others, and ourselves. Sin, suffering, death and hell are all the creation, we can say, not of God but of those who refuse Him, the consequences of a disordered self-love so strong that it excludes the love of God. Jesus said that He had come into the world not to condemn the world but to save it, but He added, "The one who rejects Me and does not receive My word has a judge, and on the last day the Word that I have spoken will serve as judge" (Jn 12:47). Those who reject Jesus' words of eternal life, who prefer to walk in the darkness instead of the light, become their own judges by the way they respond to the truth God has revealed. "There are only two kinds of people in the end," C.S. Lewis once famously wrote. "Those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in hell choose it." Hell exists not *despite* God's love but precisely *because of* it, in order to honor the desires of those who don't want to live in loving communion with Him and others. It is the state, as the "Catechism" calls it, of "definitive *self-exclusion* from communion with God and the blessed." It is the tragic possibility of human freedom for those who, in voluntarily choosing sin, separate themselves from God and others. Jesus on the cross paid the price not so that we could sin as much as we want and presumptuously still think we'll get to Heaven, but so that we, moved by the horror of sin and by the immensity of His love, might choose to live in His light, lovingly unite our whole lives with Him, follow Him home to Heaven, and help others to join us on the narrow path to His eternal right side. It's the choice between life and death, light and darkness, Heaven and hell. Jesus did everything necessary to enable us to choose well. But we have to choose Him lovingly in return, in each moral decision.
- The Lord wills us all to be saved. Jesus tells us at the end of the Gospel that not only will Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the prophets be in the kingdom but also those from the east and the west, the north and the south, all of whom, like the patriarchs and prophets, agonized to follow God in faith as he revealed themselves to him. God will give us all the help he knows we need, just like he helped them, to squeeze through the narrow gate of life, but we need to use our freedom to heed what Jesus says to us today, to agonize to follow him through the narrow gate to life, and to spend our life trying to attract people from perdition boulevard to the Way of the Cross that leads to the heavenly Jerusalem. Today as Jesus teaches us, as he feeds us, as he works the greatest miracle of all, he reminds us that it is not enough for salvation to receive all of this externally, but that he wants us, nourished by this celestial help, to become his true friends, to know him intimately, to enter fully into him who is the Resurrection and the Life and to agonize with him for the salvation of all those on the east, west, north and south so that together with them we may celebrate joyfully and forever the banquet of which this Mass is a foretaste. Strive to enter through the narrow gate!