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Archdiocese of St. Louis Advent Day of Prayer and Reflection

“Waking Up the World! Pope Francis and the Joy-Filled Missionary Transformation of Religious Life”

Cardinal Rigali Center, St. Vincent de Paul Chapel

December 13, 2014

Let us see your face!

- “Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face, and we shall be saved!” These words of our Responsorial Psalm today frame not just the other readings and the liturgical feast of St. Lucy but in a sense bring us back to the essence of the consecrated life.
- They point out the essential work of Elijah about whom we heard in the first reading who battled against the worship of sex in the cult of Ba’al, who battled, in King Ahab and Jezebel, against the worship of self and the corruption of freedom to do evil rather than to love, and who battled against the materialism of living off of material bread in the great fast of 40 days on his journey to Horeb and in the great miracle done for the widow of Zarephath and her son. He was one who himself God had turned to him. He was one to whom God had revealed his face. And he sought to reveal that face of God to others so that they, too, might turn to God with faith and be saved. He was one whose words, Sirach tells us, were like a “flaming furnace,” and whose “awesome” deeds turned multitudes around to God, turning back, we’re told, the “hearts of fathers toward their sons,” so that they might pass on the faith as God had commanded them through Moses not just to the next generation but through the next generation to many generations to come. He became a living commentary on the words of the Psalm, someone whose very presence provoked conversion, helped people see God and moved them to respond to the path of salvation. Sirach would eulogize him saying, “Blessed is he who shall have seen you and who falls asleep in your friendship,” better translated, in your “loving friendship.” To have turned to and seen Elijah was to have turned to and seen a reflection of God, something that invited them to enter into a spiritual friendship of love with him that would lead them, like Elijah, to salvation. Pope Francis is asking consecrated men and women to wake up the world in a similar way, through their loving friendship with the poor, chaste and obedient Christ, to help people turn to him, to see enfolded the smiling face of the Beatitudes, so that they, too, might live and fall asleep in Christ’s friendship so that they may be awakened in eternal life.
- Jesus in the Gospel says that Elijah’s work culminated in the work of St. John the Baptist. Through the prophet Malachi, God had foretold, “Behold, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes” (Mal 4:5) and Jesus in today’s Gospel says that “Elijah will indeed come and restore all things,” he’ll restore the tribes of Israel, he’ll restore the hearts of parents to raise their children firmly in faith, who will restore passion for God and for living his Covenant. Jesus adds, however, “But I tell you that Elijah has already come and they didn’t recognize him but did to him whatever they pleased,” and the disciples “understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist,” who through his suffering was revealing an image of Christ’s “sacred head so wounded.” John’s father Zechariah had prophesied that John would go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to turn people to the tender mercy of God, to guide their feet from crooked ways to the path of peace, so that those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death might be saved and rescued from the hands of their enemies and worship God without fear in holiness and righteousness all the days of their life. That’s a mission John fulfills at the Jordan every Advent as a voice of One crying out in the desert to make straight the Lord’s way, of one helping us all to turn back to God, to seek and see his face and enter on the path of salvation. The converted life of consecrated men and women, the radiance of his face reflecting off ours in our religious habits and moral habits, allows the world to taste and see the Lord’s goodness and the gift of what it means to have been saved.
- We celebrate today with St. Lucy the feast of someone who turned to the Lord early in life, who sought his face, who saw him looking on her with love, and who wanted to give her whole life seeking to please the Lord and make him smile. She offered her virginity to God young in life, but her mother Eutychia had made plans to marry her off to a rich pagan. After her spurned suitor grasped that her vow of virginity likely meant that she was a Christian and turned her over to Diocletian’s persecutorial administration, she was

condemned to death in Syracuse, Sicily. What St. Ambrose said of St. Agnes' virginity we could likewise say of St. Lucy's: "Virginity is not praiseworthy because it is found in martyrs, but because it itself makes martyrs." The type of love that leads one to consecrate herself totally to God in response to his love, to turn to him and to seek his face above all, is what makes a person strong in loving him to the end, loving him despite suffering, torture and even execution. When virginity, when consecrated celibate chastity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, is assumed and lived to the full, it leads to loving fidelity in little and big things, it leads to a daily martyrdom, a witness, of the love we've first received and can't help but radiate. The fact that Lucy — probably because of her name, which derives from the word *Lux*, *Lucis* for light — has become the patron saint of those with eye maladies is a reminder for us of the importance of seeing all things by the light of faith, to overcome the sins that blind us, to look for God and having found him not to take our eyes off of him who can't take his eyes off of us. Through the choices consecrated men and women make for God — the choices that every consecrated baptized Christian ought to be making — we show the world to how to seek and see the real, real world in all its hidden splendor. We show them how not to be dazzled even by all the kingdoms of the world but to seek first the kingdom of God and his holiness so that we might obtain everything else as well. St. Lucy's total dedication to the Lord is something that today can help us to renew our own, so that we may contagiously seek the Lord's face and help others to learn to contemplate the divine beauty alongside of us.

- To seek the face of God is really a summary of the consecrated life. *Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram* (Ps 27:8) is the way the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life summarize what the consecrated life is. "Your face, O Lord, I seek." "Consecrated life," it wrote in a 2008 instruction the Service of Authority and Obedience," which is "called to make the characteristic traits of the virginal, poor and obedient Jesus visible, flourishes in the ambience of this search for the face of the Lord and the ways that lead to him (cf. *Jn* 14:4-6). A search that leads to the experience of peace — 'in his will is our peace' — and which underlies each day's struggle, because God is God, and His ways and thoughts are not always our ways and thoughts (cf. *Is* 55:8). The consecrated person, therefore, gives witness to the task, at once joyful and laborious, of the diligent search for the divine will, and for this chooses to use every means available that helps one to know it and sustain it while bringing it to fulfillment."
- St. John Paul II in *Vita Consecrata* compares the consecrated life as a whole to contemplating Christ's transfigured face. "The vocation of consecrated persons to seek first the Kingdom of God is first and foremost a call to complete conversion, in self-renunciation, in order to live fully for the Lord, so that God may be all in all," he wrote. "Called to contemplate and bear witness to the transfigured face of Christ, consecrated men and women are also called to a 'transfigured' existence." This transformative seeking and contemplation of Christ's face spurs the flourishing of love in the consecrated. "The fact that consecrated persons fix their gaze on the Lord's countenance does not diminish their commitment on behalf of humanity; on the contrary, it strengthens this commitment, enabling it to have an impact on history, in order to free history from all that disfigures it. The quest for divine beauty impels consecrated persons to care for the deformed image of God on the faces of their brothers and sisters, faces disfigured by hunger, faces disillusioned by political promises, faces humiliated by seeing their culture despised, faces frightened by constant and indiscriminate violence, the anguished faces of minors, the hurt and humiliated faces of women, the tired faces of migrants who are not given a warm welcome, the faces of the elderly who are without even the minimum conditions for a dignified life."
- Pope Benedict would stress in his powerful address to representatives of the world of culture at the College des Bernardins in 2008 that this service of consecrated men and women seeking God's face helps everyone rediscover the proper coordinates of life. He said that the essential goal of consecrated life, the way of life that inspired the first monks, was *quaerere Deum*, seeking God. "Amid the confusion of the times, in which nothing seemed permanent, they wanted to do the essential – to make an effort to find what was perennially valid and lasting, life itself. They were searching for God. They wanted to go from the inessential to the essential, to the only truly important and reliable thing there is. It is sometimes said that they were 'eschatologically' oriented. But this is not to be understood in a temporal sense, as if they were looking ahead to the end of the world or to their own death, but in an existential sense: they were seeking the definitive behind the provisional. *Quaerere Deum*: because they were Christians, this was not an expedition

into a trackless wilderness, a search leading them into total darkness. God himself had provided signposts, indeed he had marked out a path which was theirs to find and to follow.”

- And having found it, and pondered it through a deep study of God’s word that became the “mirror” for their lives, they couldn’t keep it to themselves. Pope Benedict continued, “Within the monks’ seeking there is already contained, in some respects, a finding. Therefore, if such seeking is to be possible at all, there has to be an initial spur, which not only arouses the will to seek, but also makes it possible to believe that the way is concealed within this word, or rather: that in this word, God himself has set out towards men, and hence men can come to God through it. To put it another way: there must be proclamation, which speaks to man and so creates conviction, which in turn can become life. If a way is to be opened up into the heart of the biblical word as God’s word, this word must first of all be proclaimed outwardly. The classic formulation of the Christian faith’s intrinsic need to make itself communicable to others, is a phrase from the First Letter of Peter...: ‘Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason (the *logos*) for the hope that you all have’ (3:15). ... Christians of the nascent Church did not regard their missionary proclamation as propaganda, designed to enlarge their particular group, but as an inner necessity, consequent upon the nature of their faith: the God in whom they believed was the God of all people, the one, true God, who had revealed himself in the history of Israel and ultimately in his Son, thereby supplying the answer which was of concern to everyone and for which all people, in their innermost hearts, are waiting. The universality of God, and of reason open towards him, is what gave them the motivation—indeed, the obligation—to proclaim the message. The fundamental structure of Christian proclamation “outwards” – towards searching and questioning mankind – is seen in Saint Paul’s address at the Areopagus. ... Paul is not proclaiming unknown gods. He is proclaiming him whom men do not know and yet do know – the unknown-known; the one they are seeking, whom ultimately they know already, and who yet remains the unknown and unrecognizable. ... The novelty of Christian proclamation is that it can now say to all peoples: he has revealed himself. He personally. And now the way to him is open. The novelty of Christian proclamation does not consist in a thought, but in a deed: God has revealed himself.”
- Benedict concluded, “Our cities are no longer filled with altars and with images of multiple deities. God has truly become for many the great unknown. But just as in the past, when behind the many images of God the question concerning the unknown God was hidden and present, so too the present absence of God is silently besieged by the question concerning him. *Quaerere Deum* – to seek God and to let oneself be found by him, that is today no less necessary than in former times.”
- “Lord, make us turn to you. Let us see your face and we shall be saved.” Today during this Advent day of prayer and recollection, we turn toward God whose coming in history, mystery and majesty we mark every Advent. We seek his face in his incarnation in Bethlehem, under sacramental signs, and in the beatific vision. We recognize that our salvation and others’ hinges on heeding St. John the Baptist’s call to behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. As we prepare to behold him with love at Mass today, we ask God through the intercession of St. Lucy, to help us and others keep our eyes fixed on him always so that we may be saved and come to experience eternal joy in that kingdom where we hope to see him transfigured and looking on us with love forever.