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Day of Recollection on Thinking with the Church
Tuesday of the 32nd Week in Ordinary Time, Year I
Memorial of St. Leo the Great
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Wis 2:23-3:9, Ps 34, Lk 17:7-10

ST. LEO THE GREAT AND PREPARATION FOR A LIFETIME OF SERVICE

During my first year as a priest, completing graduate studies out of the North American College, I had the occasion to celebrate Mass about a half-dozen times in an entirely empty Basilica of St. Peter. It was during the Jubilee Year and almost every Sunday there was a Mass outside in the Square. As a result, the Cathedral was closed. Because I was a guide for the Vatican Excavations Office to St. Peter's tomb and was known to the Swiss Guards, I was always able to pass through the gate of the Holy Office and enter the Basilica through the sacristy. On Sundays, most of the priests who worked for the Curia were out in various pastoral assignments and none of the typical priests visiting Rome could get in. I was the only priest there to celebrate Mass. In the sacristy, besides me there would be the priest sacristan and, sometimes, an employee of the Basilica who would occasionally serve as a security official. I would leave the sacristy and head out into the entirely empty Basilica, which meant I could celebrate Mass on any altar in the Basilica besides the reserved papal high altar. I could go to the altar over the remains of St. Pius X, where I would normally celebrate Mass on crowded days. I could celebrate on the altar of St. Gregory the Great. I could celebrate basically anywhere. But I found myself, each time, drawn to the altar of the saint we celebrate today, St. Leo the Great.

I have always loved St. Leo for his eloquence. During my pre-theology years I had read a few of his sermons on Christ's incarnation and they moved me so much that I ended up gradually reading all 96 of his extant homilies and 143 letters. I also loved him for his courage, the bravery that led him to confront Attila the Hun in 452 and divert Attila from his plans to pillage Rome the same way he and his armies had despoiled so many other cities in northern Italy. I loved the passion with which he defended the faith and sought the unity for which Christ prayed during the Last Supper. He fought against the heresies of Arianism, Pelagianism, Manichaeism, Priscillianism, Nestorianism and Eutychism precisely because he was fighting for Church unity. And I loved the way his faith influenced his worship of God, seen in his poetry at the Lateran baptistery he rebuilt as Archdeacon for Pope St. Sixtus III, the imagery of the triumphal arch of St. Paul's outside the walls, or the salvation history focused on Joshua found in the mosaics he had commissioned for the Basilica of St. Mary Major after the Council of Ephesus.

When given a choice to celebrate over the tomb of other great saints, I nevertheless chose him, every single time. It's always a joy for people to take pilgrims to a tomb. And it's a great joy each year to celebrate his feast day.

One aspect of his life that I pondered a lot during my time as a seminarian was a mystical experience he had that can provide a powerful introduction to today's readings. At some point early in his papacy, as he thought about the weight of the office, he began to become somewhat frightened about all of his mistakes, failings, and sins. He prayed for 40 days to the Lord at the tomb of his predecessor St. Peter begging the Lord for mercy. At the end of the lengthy novena, St. Peter appeared to him in a vision and said that the Lord would be very merciful to him, except those sins "committed by you in conferring holy orders: of these you still remain charged to give a rigorous account." The experience deeply affected Leo and always left him with a sense of his duties to assure the worthiness of any priest or bishop on whom he would lay hands. He would even lay down a rule for the primitive canon law of the time "not to lay hands upon any one suddenly, according to the precept of the apostle, [and] not to raise to the honor of the priesthood any who have not been thoroughly tried, or before a mature age, a competent time of trial, the merit of labor in the service of the church, and sufficient proofs given of their obedience to rule, their love of discipline and zeal for its observance."

I pondered this episode a lot because it's clear from this story how seriously the Lord Jesus takes the Sacrament of Holy Orders, how seriously he wanted Leo to take it and how seriously, I believe, he wants us to take it. This is a

lesson for Popes, for bishops, for rectors and seminary faculties, for candidates to the priesthood and for the whole Church. It takes generations of hard working priests to build up the faith of the Church, but it can take just one to destroy it. In some places during our age, certain segments of the Church lost this clarity. Men were ordained who should have never been ordained. Some weren't mature enough for the priesthood. Others were never intending zealously to become diligent laborers bringing in the Lord's white and ripe harvest of souls. Others were just trying to please their mothers. Others were using the priesthood to stay in the closet. Others, sad to say, were already living double lives. But the hands came down on them anyway.

But then Rudy Kos happened, a priest in Dallas, who had a \$117 million judgment against him for abuse and the whole Church woke up anew to the importance of scrutinizing men. If one solitary priest could bankrupt a whole diocese, then everything had to change and standards now necessarily needed to be higher. It opened the whole Church anew to the fact that scandalous priests can cause enormous damage — damage far worse than 9-figure court decisions.

Any retreat day — or, as the *Imitation of Christ* encourages, any and every day — it's important to think like Leo did about the last things and ask for mercy. For those of us in holy orders or preparing for holy orders, it's important for us to ponder as well how we're living in accordance with this gift and supreme spiritual task of the Holy Orders that configure us to Christ and whose priestly life ours is meant to radiate.

Today's readings help us to do so this important work of a retreat.

The first reading, taken from the Book of Wisdom, is by far the most common Old Testament passage used for funeral Masses and it helps us to look at death and beyond in the light of faith.

Referring to those who have died, Wisdom says, "They seemed in the view of the foolish to be dead; their passing away was thought an affliction; their going forth from us, utter destruction." The worst insult that a Jew could hurl was to call someone a "fool," because this meant someone who did not look at things the way God sees them, the way through his revelation he has helped those with faith see them. To those who do not look at things from God's perspective, it teaches us, the dead are simply dead. They're gone. They're decomposing. Their sufferings were just worthless afflictions leading to annihilation.

There are still many who look at suffering, dying and death in this same "foolish" way. They believe there's no meaning to human suffering and once someone is diagnosed with a terminal illness or is experiencing chronic pain, they believe that the only compassionate and humane response is to treat them the way we do our pets, to "put them out of their misery" through doctor-assisted suicide or euthanasia. They often treat their mortal remains as anything but sacred, incinerating them like we burn garbage, grinding the bones, and scattering them like chaff that the wind blows away.

That all begins with the way the foolish "view" things.

Those who look with the eyes of faith see something altogether different. They perceive, according to the Book of Wisdom, that "the souls of the *just* are in the hand of God and no torment shall touch them." They see further that even if they suffer, "their hope full of immortality." They grasp that their chastisements become blessings in which God tests them "as gold in the furnace," burning off the dross and impurities so that at the "time of their visitation they shall shine."

Those who look with Christian faith, a faith like St. Leo's, see all of these realities and more as their view death from the prism of Christ's own sufferings, his own chastisements, his own death and resurrection. They recognize that Good Friday precedes Easter Sunday, that to experience the resurrection we first must endure the passion, and that in our suffering, dying, death and resurrection, Christ seeks to unite us to his own.

The passage finishes by reminding us, "Those who trust in [God] shall understand truth and the faithful shall abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are with his holy ones and his care is with his elect." To be filled with

God's grace and mercy we need to trust in him and seek to abide in him who wants to abide in us, provided his word abides in us and we keep his commandments (Jn 14).

The whole reading leads us to ask whether we're looking and living foolishly or wisely; whether we're living justly, in right relationship with God and others, or again foolishly. God will give us all the help we need to live wisely, as he did Leo, but we need to choose to receive and respond to those graces.

We can also view today's Gospel with regard to the type of priests we're aspiring to be and the type of men Christ would want us to be before and after the imposition of hands.

We live now in an affirmation culture, in which we are constantly trying to give everyone ribbons and awards and recognition not principally for merit but just for showing up. This cultural shift is not altogether bad and in some ways it's a helpful corrective to a highly competitive culture of yesteryear when there was one winner and everyone else was considered losers. But to the members of this culture of Stuart Smalleys — the former star in Al Franken's Saturday Live "Daily Affirmation" skit who used to repeat, "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggonit, people like me!" — Jesus' words in the Gospel almost seem cruel. It seems to be the exact opposite of this a culture of affirmation, and we believe that if anyone is going to affirm us, it's going to be God.

But we need to look at what Jesus is saying with the light of faith. Jesus gives us an image of a hard working servant who has just come in from plowing the field by hand and tending sheep. We can imagine the person's exhaustion. Jesus asks whether the person's boss would typically say to him, "Come here immediately and take your place at table," and then proceed to wait on him. The obvious answer is no. Rather, Jesus says, he would say to him, "Prepare something for me to eat. Put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink. You may eat and drink when I am finished."

To the culture of the time and to the culture of our time in many businesses, this type of treatment of employees — not to mention slaves — is standard. Jesus even seems to be affirming it. But he ups the ante with the moral he draws from the story. He asks, "Is he grateful to that servant because he did what was commanded?," implying that the answer is a definitive "no." Then he adds, "So should it be with you. When you have done all you have been commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what we were obliged to do.'"

Unprofitable servants. The same phrase can be translated as "useless." To our modern ears it seems that Jesus is basically engaging in verbal abuse, saying that no matter how hard we work for him, no matter how hard we try, no matter how much we succeed, at the end of the day we're just useless. He implies that he isn't "grateful" for anything we've done, but that all we've done is what we were obliged to do and should expect no thanks.

I remember once being in a parish where the pastor refused to give thanks or recognition to people no matter how hard they worked. He cancelled the parish's annual thank you dinner for volunteers. He stopped sending in a name to the bishop's office for the annual Marian Medals, given each year to one dedicated parishioner per parish in a beautiful ceremony at the Cathedral. When the Diocese instituted a St. Pius X Award to recognize the dedicated sacrifices of young people working in the parish, the pastor again refused to send anything in, memorably telling me, "The kids don't need encouragement. They need to remember that at the end of the day, they're just useless servants." He had interpreted Jesus' words literalistically, but missed their literal and true meaning.

The point Jesus was making in the Gospel is not that God isn't grateful for efforts and that we likewise should not be grateful for others' efforts. He was trying to change our motivations in doing our work for the Gospel, so that we're not doing it for recognition *but doing it out of love for God and others*. During the Sermon on the Mount, with words we hear every Ash Wednesday, Jesus told us not to pray, fast or give alms "so that others may see them," because if that were our motivation, we would already have received our reward. He told us, rather, to do them with purity of intention, to do them for God, to do them out of love, promising us that "The Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward" us.

Jesus is not encouraging us to do good things just to receive this reward from the Father; rather, he's encouraging us

to do good things out of love for God and others, merely reminding us that the Father is never blind to our actions and motivations and will in fact remember and reward us for all that we do with the proper motivations.

He's also encouraging us toward humility and gratitude. The Christian life is about serving, rather than being served, and Jesus is calling us to seek to continue to serve, even after a long day's work, something exemplified by many hard working mothers who continue to care for their families after long days of work. And the Christian serves with the life, the talents, and the energy God has given, and so the first response of the Christian ought to be to thank God for these gifts and the trust he has placed in us by giving us a share in his salvific work. Yes, in one sense, we're "useless servants." But he has given us all the help he knows we need so that we can prove to be "good and faithful servants," who are "no longer called servants but friends" and who will inherit as a reward the kingdom prepared since the foundation of the world.

One application of this lesson is with regard to the end of our priestly life. When I was a transitional deacon, I received a questionnaire from my vicar general asking me to write out funeral plans and the rest so that they could have it on file. Among the questions was what I was planning to when I retired. I had honestly never thought about the question and I found it quite strange even to be asked even before ordination. I put on the form, "I have no retirement plans, but ask me again in 50 years." Some priests live for retirement. Despite the fact that there's a need for a new evangelization, many retire at 70 or even earlier. It's not just that they give up some of the duties of being a pastor so that they can, as a senior priest, preach, or teach, or confess more or have more time to visit the sick and not carry some of the weight; it's that they really want to do beach or gold course ministry full-time in Florida. They come in and, like many in the world, basically think they've earned a time to sit down at table and have someone else bring them a gin and tonic and a gourmet meal. They look at the priesthood as a job that they can more or less retire from, without losing a priestly identity, after years in the vineyard. But such an attitude, which I can't ever imagine any apostle having, is not in line with the Gospel. And it can impact a priest's spirituality, when the highlight of his week is not Sunday, but his day off, or days off. I remember one bishop asking me about how another was doing and I told him, "He retired last year," and this other bishop, a St. Louis native, told me, "Some say he retired the day he was ordained." Are we prepared to work in a way that will make our ordaining prelate proud, our rector and seminary faculty members proud, God proud, or are we preparing to live out the priesthood as something other than life-long service, giving all we've got as long as we've got?

St. Leo's words, which we read every Christmas morning, are very powerful. "Christian, remember your dignity," he says, reminding us of how Christ came into the world and gave his life to set us free and to make it possible for us to live his own life. I think we can even strengthen his appeal by saying, "O Priest, remember your dignity!" and our dignity is being ordained in the person of Christ the Bridegroom who laid down his life for his bride, in the person of Christ the servant, who came not to be served but gave his life to ransom the many, in the person of Christ the head of the Church who needs to provide that headship of his family, even if we're well past retirement age in our culture. The more we remember our dignity and the Lord who has given us that dignity the more we recognize that that gift is not so that we might lord it over others but serve.

Today we come forward not to St. Peter's Basilica but to his beautiful chapel, where the mystery of the incarnation St. Leo wrote about is perpetuated in a way that awesomely fulfills today's Gospel. Even though according to human logic, no slave would ever be invited in from working the fields in order to be served by the Master, that's exactly what Jesus does here. Just as Jesus put on an apron and washed the feet of the apostles during the Last Supper, so Jesus serves us here, going beyond that humble ministrations to feed us with his body and blood. And this is a foretaste, an embryonic participation in what he wants to do for us at the eternal wedding banquet, where he promises he will sit us at table, gird himself with an apron and proceed to wait on all those who have been vigilant in awaiting his coming and doing his work as they wait (Lk 12:37). It's here that Jesus strengthens us to embrace this calling, and this dignity, so that one day we may be seated next to St. Leo when we behold this prophecy fulfilled with glorified eyes.