



TERTIUS ORDO PENITENTIAE LETTER N° 5

Vigil of the Nativity of Our Lord

December 24, 2015

Dear tertiaries and aspirants,

To make up for our last late letter we send you this one so soon after. May it help you all profit by this feast and not just “celebrate” it, for as Saint Paul tells us in the epistle of midnight mass :

The grace of God our Saviour hath appeared to all men : instructing us that, denying ungodliness and worldly desires, we should live soberly, and justly, and godly in this world.

This is the message St. Bernard transmits to us as well. Christ was born to *save* us, which means to deliver us from our sins, and also to *convert* us so that we stop committing them and become virtuous. For, as Saint Paul goes on to say, Christ came :

that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and might cleanse to himself a people acceptable, a pursuer of good works. (Titus 2 : 11-14)

Saint Bernard explains as well the means Christ gave us to accomplish this conversion : the holy knowledge Our Lord came to communicate to us. His sacred Humanity is like a great candle lit with the light of the Eternal Word, which He passes on to all those who are joined to Him by faith. And he adds, at the end, that all of this happens through Mary “so that we should receive all we have through her”.

That is our wish for all of you on this feast of Christmas, and in particular that the Third Order of Saint Dominic help you in the attainment of this holy knowledge and the sanctity that follows upon it. We add a Christmas card made of photo of a church we visited recently in Maastrich, Holland, which is just down the road (like everything else in Belgium...)

In Sancto Patre Dominico

Father Albert

St. Bernard: Sermon III On the Vigil of the Nativity of Our Lord

« Today ye shall know that the Lord shall come and in the morning ye shall see His glory »
(Ex XVI : 6-7)

1. All ye inhabitants of the earth and ye sons of men, listen ! You who lie in the dust, wake up and give praise ! For the Doctor is coming to those who are ill, the Redeemer to those who have been sold, the Way to those who are lost, Life to those who are dead. For He comes to throw all our sins down to the bottom of the sea, to heal all our infirmities, to bring us back on His own shoulders to the dignity of our origin. Great is this power : but it is by an even more wonderful mercy that he who could come to our help willed to come like this. (...)

2. « Today ye shall know that the Lord shall come ». In my opinion two days are especially referred to by these words. The first day goes from the time of the first fall until the end of the world, day which the saints have often cursed. For from that most bright day upon which Adam was created, he was cast out and crammed into the straits of this world, he was plunged into a day of darkness and the light of truth was all but extinguished in him. This is the day into which we are all born, if indeed it should be called a day and not rather a night, if that unconquerable mercy had not left us, as it were, a little spark of the light of reason. The second day will be in the splendor of the saints for all eternity, when that most serene morning will dawn which is the promised mercy, when death will be swallowed up in victory. (...) But let us return to our day which, because of its brevity, is said to be like a watch in the night. (...)

Even in this day God has given men reason, He has granted them understanding, but it is necessary that He illumine by the light of His own knowledge man before he leaves this world lest he go out of this prison still extinguished and thus never be able to be enlightened forever. Indeed, that is why the Only Begotten of God, the Sun of Justice, was ignited and lit up in the prison of this world, like a candle of immense and brilliant light, so that all those who want to be illuminated might approach Him and be so joined to Him, that there be nothing between them and Him. For our sins have put a separation between ourselves and God. But once they are taken away, we are united to the true light to be enlightened and as it were incorporated in Him like an extinguished candle is joined without any intermediary to a shining and burning candle that it might be lit, to use an image of visible things to help us understand invisible things .

3. That is why then we light for ourselves the light of knowledge like a great and splendid star, before we leave the darkness of this world, lest we pass from darkness to darkness, eternal darkness. But what is this knowledge ?. (...)

4. In its first stage this knowledge produces repentance and sorrow, converting laughter into mourning, singing into wailing, joy into sadness, and those things which before pleased you exceedingly begin to displease you, and you especially have in horror what you especially delighted in. For it is written: « He that addeth knowledge, addeth also labour » (Ecclesiastes 1 : 18) so that from the argument of a veritable and holy knowledge sorrow follows. In its second stage it works correction, so that you no longer exhibit your members to sin as instruments of iniquity, but you restrain gluttony, you destroy lust, you repress pride and you make your body, which formerly served iniquity, serve holiness. For repentance without correction is useless, as the Wise man says : « When one buildeth up, and another pulleth down : what profit have they but the labour ? When one prayeth, and another curseth : whose voice will God hear ? He that washeth himself after touching the dead, if he toucheth him again, what doth his washing avail ? » (Ecclesiasticus 34 : 28-30) rather, according to the word of our Savior, it is to be feared that something worse happen to him (Jn 5 : 14). But since all of this cannot be had consistently unless the soul constantly watches and waits with much circumspection, in the third stage this knowledge works solicitude, so that the soul begins now to be solicitous in walking with her God, and looks out in all directions lest she offend in the least thing the face of that tremendous majesty. In repentance this knowledge is lit, in correction it burns, in solicitude it gives light, and thus is renewed interiorly and exteriorly.

5. Now the soul begins to breath again after all the tribulations and sorrow, and moderate by spiritual gladness the greatness of fear, lest she be absorbed by a too great sadness for the enormity of her sins. Thus although she fears the Judge, she hopes in the Savior ; for now in her heart fear and gladness vie with each other and meet ; sometimes fear conquers gladness, sometimes gladness excludes fear and encloses it in the secret of its joy. Happy the conscience in which this battle takes place unceasingly until what is mortal be swallowed up by life, until all that is left of fear be banished and perfect gladness succeed to it ; for fear is not forever, but gladness is .

Thus burning and giving light, let such a one not imagine himself yet to be in the house where a lighted candle can be carried without any fear, but may he remember that he is outside and let him be careful to cover with both hands the light he carries, and let him not trust the air, even if it seems to be calm. For suddenly, at the moment that he least expects it, it will change and even if he immediately puts his hand back, the light will go out. Even if, as is sometimes happens, the hand the carries the candle is burnt, may he choose rather to suffer rather than take his hand away, because in a moment, in the blink of an eye, it can be blown out. If we were in the house not made by human hand, that is eternal, in heaven, where no enemy ever enters and no friend ever leaves

there would be nothing to fear. But now we are exposed to three very strong and very vicious winds : the flesh, the devil and the world, which strive to put out our illumined conscience, blowing into our hearts evil desires, unlawful movements and they trouble you so suddenly that you don't know if you are coming or going. Although two of these often stop, with the third there is no way to ever find a truce. Thus with both hands, that of the heart and that of the body, the soul must be covered, lest what had been already illuminated be extinguished, and one must never give in or retreat, even if the great heat of temptation violently afflicts both body and soul, but rather one must say with the saint : « My soul is constantly in my hands » (Ps. 118 : 109). Let us choose rather to burn than to give in. And just as we don't easily forget what we have in our hands, so we will never forget the affair of our souls and it will remain the principal concern of our hearts.

10. (...) God gave you Christ through Mary to heal you. (His incarnation) is a remedy, for a cataplasm was made out of God and man in order to heal all your infirmities. These two ingredients were mingled and mixed in the womb of the Virgin as in a mortar, the Holy Ghost being the pestle that softly blends them. But because you were unworthy that He be given you, He was given to Mary so that you would receive through her all that you have, she who, because she was a mother, gave birth to God for you and because she was a virgin, was heard in your cause and that of the whole human race for her reverence. If she had only been a mother, it would have sufficed for her to be saved by the generation of children : if she had been only a virgin, she would have sufficed for herself ; but then the blessed fruit of her womb would not have been the price of the ransom of the world. In her first role, as mother, the remedy was made ; by her second role, as virgin, she is a helper for us ; for God willed that we should have nothing that didn't pass through Mary.