

# LIGHT & LIFE

FATHER REGINALD MARTIN, O.P., *DIRECTOR*

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## LOURDES REFLECTION

Fr. Reginald Martin, O.P.

Whenever I am asked which of the Rosary Center's novenas is my favorite, I answer without hesitation, "Our Lady of Lourdes." I have two reasons for this affection. The first is quite selfish; it is the coincidence of my feast-day's falling one day after we honor Mary as Our Lady of Lourdes. The second is a great deal more uplifting, and that is the magnificent sign of God's love Lourdes is for the world.

We commonly think of Lourdes as a place of healing, and so it is. But the waters at Lourdes are less important than the change of heart that was Mary's message to Bernadette. To be sure, Our Lady told Bernadette to wash, but her broader message to the world, repeated several times, was "Repent!"

In the gospel accounts, Jesus frequently encounters individuals suffering from illness or disease. These are symptoms of the deeper illness that besets creation as a result of sin. In the gospel, Jesus heals the individual and generally says, "Go, and sin no more." This is not a judgment that the person's illness is a direct result of a personal sin, but a recognition that accepting His message of repentance brings His Kingdom one step closer. We may envy the individuals able to make a pilgrimage to southern France and visit the site of Mary's apparition, but the physical cures that take place at Lourdes are signs of the deeper, spiritual healing God offers each of us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We can embrace the message of Lourdes at any time, at no cost, and without travelling very far from home.

I write this reflection as the days of Advent draw to their close, and we prepare for the birth of Our Savior. These days are truly Our Lady's season, and the liturgy daily recalls Mary's essential participation in the history of our salvation. Our First Parents did us an immense disservice back in the Garden. They said "Yes" when they meant "No," and so corrupted our language and our words. They closed their eyes, and the world was plunged in darkness. Each year, when our world languishes at its darkest, our Christmas celebrations



Silhouette by Sr. Jean Dorcy, O.P.

remind us that Christ's Light has invaded the gloom of creation, so we may see our true nobility as God's creatures. And each year God's Word comes among us to remind us we have voices so we may imitate Mary and say "Yes" to God when He calls us.

Each of Mary's feast days is a celebration of that "Yes." A single word, but one that transformed her, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, into the "living Tabernacle of God made flesh." As we honor Mary as Our Lady of Lourdes, let us embrace her "Yes" and make it our own, so that, like Mary, we may share her role in the Incarnation, giving flesh and blood and a human face to God's Word.

St. Thomas Aquinas asked whether the Incarnation was necessary, whether God needed to become flesh in order to save us. He replied that if by "necessary" we mean was the Incarnation the only way God could have saved us, the answer is no; God could have saved us in any number of ways. But if, he says, by "necessary" we

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TO BE OFFERED FOR YOUR INTENTIONS

# THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

## The Ten Commandments, II

### The First Commandment: "I am the Lord your God ... You shall have no other gods before me."

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

#### A REMINDER IN LOVE

When God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai He began the conversation by reminding him of the powerful deeds He had done for the Israelites in Egypt. The First Commandment is a call upon the Chosen People to remember their deliverance from slavery, and – in justice – to offer themselves to The One who delivered them. "God's first call and just demand," our *Catechism* reminds us, "is that man accept him and worship him" (CCC, 2084).

In our previous reflection we spoke of God's Covenant, which is an exclusive and binding union between God and His people. "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them." (Deut. 6:4) The Exodus marks a new beginning, and God wants His people to make no mistake: they have come into a new land, and they are living by a new set of rules.

#### A REMINDER IN LOVE

At the heart of these rules is God's love for us. Our theology teaches that mercy is compassion for another's distress, coupled with a will to relieve it. The Old Testament contains no example of mercy greater than God's leading His people from their slavery – which explains why the Exodus and its waters are so powerful a symbol for our Baptism and the deliverance Christ has won for us by His cross. Our *Catechism* asks us to reflect on this, and asks,

*Who could not place all hope in him? Who could not love him when contemplating the treasures of goodness and love he has poured out on us?*  
(CCC, 2086)

#### A RESPONSE IN FAITH

The first commandment demands a response to God in faith, hope and love. Our *Catechism* reminds us that St. Paul calls this "obedience of faith" our first obligation toward God, and tells us that "ignorance of God" lies at the heart of all the moral ills we see around us (Rom 1:5, 1:16, 1:18). "Our duty toward God is to believe in him and bear witness to him." (CCC, 2087)

Belief in a God who cannot be seen is no easier for us than it was for the Israelites in the desert. However, unlike our ancestors, we have the inestimable advantages not only of the Incarnation, but also Christ's on-going gift of the Church's teaching office (Magisterium), which lends a hand when belief is difficult.

*The Magisterium of the Pastors of the Church in moral matters is ordinarily exercised in catechetics and preaching, with the help of the works of theologians and spiritual authors. Thus from generation to generation...the "deposit" of Christian moral teaching has been handed on, a deposit composed of a characteristic body of rules proceeding from faith in Christ and animated by charity.* (CCC, 2033)

#### DOUBT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

That we sin against our faith when we reject what God has revealed and the Church presents for our belief should be obvious. Subtler sins against the faith are doubts we nurse, or the failure to seek resolutions to questions we may have about perplexing issues. "If deliberately cultivated," the *Catechism* warns, "doubt can lead to spiritual blindness" (CCC, 2088).

The far graver sins against faith – more serious because they can lead others astray – are *heresy*, which is a baptized Christian's denial or doubt of some revealed truth that must be believed; *apostasy*, the turning away from the faith; and *schism*, which is refusing to submit to the Holy Father or to identify oneself as a member of those who are faithful to him.

In an earlier reflection, we considered the Holy Spirit's gift of Fear of the Lord. We concluded that "true" fear does not lead us to virtue because we dread God's punishment, but because we have no wish to offend a loving parent. This state of "loving fear" is intimately connected to the Virtue of Hope, which our *Catechism* defines as "...the confident expectation of divine blessing and the beatific vision of God; it is also the fear of offending God's love..." (CCC, 2090).

#### THE RESPONSE OF HOPE

Virtue is always the middle-road between extremes. The virtue of hope chooses the path by which we believe God will provide whatever assistance we need to achieve

our goal of eternal life. Opposed to this confidence (and our commitment to cooperate with God's grace on our behalf) are two faults. The first is *presumption*, by which an individual either imagines her or his own efforts can suffice to achieve salvation without divine assistance, or that God will accomplish our salvation with no effort from us.

The second sin against hope is *despair* in which a person refuses to believe God will forgive our sins, or provide help in our attaining eternal happiness. "*Despair is contrary to God's goodness, to his justice – for the Lord is faithful to his promises – and to his mercy.*" (CCC, 2091) The tragedy of despair is its refusal to embrace God's willingness to act on our behalf in the very ways our faith assures us God is most disposed to come to our aid.

## THE RESPONSE OF LOVE

The First Commandment is also a call to love. In his first letter, St. John writes,

*In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought to love one another.* (1 Jn 4.10)

God's love is the source of our love. It enables us to love God and then enables us to love God's creation as God loves it. This begins with our loving ourselves, and then spreads out to embrace those to whom we are most closely bound and, eventually, the rest of humankind.

*Faith in God's love encompasses the call and the obligation to respond with sincere love to divine charity. The first commandment enjoins us to love God above everything and to love all creatures for him and because of him.* (CCC, 2093)

## FAILURE TO LOVE

We sin against God's love through *indifference*, which is our refusal to reflect on God's love, or a denial of its power; and through *ingratitude*, which is our refusal to acknowledge God's love and return it. When he considers ingratitude, St. Thomas Aquinas observes we can sin by straying from virtue in two ways: excess and defect—that is, by doing too much or too little.

We might imagine an excess of gratitude impossible, but St. Thomas writes that we exceed the virtue if we express thanks for things which we have no need to be grateful, or if we offer thanks at the wrong time. Worse, however, is the defect of gratitude for the gifts with which God has blessed us. St. Thomas writes, "*But still more opposed to gratitude is the vice denoting deficiency...*" (ST II-II, 107.2). Each of us probably remembers a parent's stern reminder to send a prompt thank-you for birthday or Christmas gifts. This should remind us of our far greater responsibility to offer thanks, with our words and lives, for what God gives us each day.

Other sins against God's love include *lukewarmness* and *acedia*. Both of these involve a slowness to acknowledge or respond to God's love. They are the spiritual equivalent of laziness, which we often assume to be mere procrastination. This, however, is but a

symptom of laziness. True laziness is moving slowly when we ought to act with haste; responding coolly when we ought to respond with warmth.

## THE RESPONSE IN LOVE

But how do we manifest our loving obedience to God, and so fulfill the commandment, "Him only shall you serve"? When we studied the virtue of justice we learned it disposes us to give to each person what is due him or her. We might not think immediately of God when we consider the virtue of justice, but the First Commandment reminds us of God's rights – and our obligations toward Him.

## RELIGION AND ITS ACTS: ADORATION

Acting from a mere sense of duty can be a dull and sterile enterprise. Our love for God gives joy to our service and, as our *Catechism* reminds us, "...leads us to render to God what we owe him..." (CCC, 2095). Our theology names this willingness the virtue of religion. The first of the acts of this virtue is adoration, by which we humbly identify God as the source of everything we have and everything we are. "*To adore God is to acknowledge, in respect and absolute submission, the 'nothingness of the creature,' who would not exist but for God.*" (CCC, 2097)

## PRAYER

Jesus tells his disciples they must always pray and not lose heart (Lk. 18:1). This reminds us prayer is an essential element in our life with God, and an expression of our adoration. Prayer is so important a part of our spiritual life, we cannot obey God's commandments without it.

## SACRIFICE

We often think of a sacrifice as a willingness to do without something. The word actually means "to make holy." We make something holy by offering it up to God, as the priest does the bread and wine at Mass. We make a sacrifice, by making an offering to the poor, lending a hand to someone in need, or passing up a meal during Lent – whenever we give external expression to our interior love of God. Our *Catechism* observes, "*This is '...a sign of adoration, supplication and communion'*" (CCC, 2099).

The text continues, "*Outward sacrifice, to be genuine, must be the expression of spiritual sacrifice*" (CCC, 2100). Only when the outward expression reflects the interior, does it begin to imitate the one, perfect sacrifice, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. When we unite our sacrifices to Christ's, our actions begin to achieve the perfection of His, and we approach the fulfillment promised by the First Commandment.

## PROMISES AND VOWS

The Church's *Code of Canon Law* defines a vow as "*a deliberate and free promise made to God concerning a possible and better good which must be fulfilled...*" (CIC, 1191.1). Although we may not have given the matter much thought, most of us have made several vows by the time we reach adulthood. The first are the promises

we make at Baptism, when we promise to renounce Satan and his works. We take further vows when we are confirmed, and promise to live as adult Christians. Couples who marry are familiar with their vows to love and honor their partners until death, and deacons and priests have no doubt they promise obedience to God and the bishops whom they will serve loyally.

Those who enter religious communities, or who commit themselves to a rule of vowed life while living “in the world,” discover additional ways to offer God a pleasing sacrifice, and the promises they make are yet another way of sanctifying the “days of our lives.”

## **YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME SUPERSTITION AND IRRELIGION**

Earlier in this reflection we considered the possibility of sinning through excess and defect. As we draw this reflection to its close we must consider, briefly, *superstition*, which the *Catechism* calls “a perverse excess” of religious enthusiasm, and *irreligion*, which is a defect in the good acts we have just studied. The latter is probably fairly easy to identify and understand. We see it when we doubt God’s providence. It is also evident when individuals mistreat sacred objects, or demand payment for some spiritual thing.

Superstition, by contrast, may be more subtle. It manifests itself by assigning too much importance to numbers of prayers, particular postures, placement of religious objects, or “...*mere external performance, apart from the interior dispositions they demand...*” (CCC, 2111).

## **IDOLATRY**

We delude ourselves if we imagine the only idols an individual can worship are the carved deities venerated by pagans.

*Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, Satanism) power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc. ...Idolatry rejects the unique Lordship of God; it is therefore incompatible with communion with God.* (CCC, 2113)

We have only to look at the advertising section of a newspaper or magazine to identify the gods that have been created to beguile us in the 21st Century. And here we ought to acknowledge the truly seductive power of sin. We are not led astray because something appears to be evil—who would choose something because it is bad, after all?—but precisely because it appears to be good. The options—and the choice—that faced our First Parents in the Garden are the same that face us each day.

## **MAGIC**

Scripture is filled with examples of God’s revealing future events to His servants, and even today mystics are occasionally given some glimpse of what the Creator has in store for us. However, these are extraordinary revelations, and common sense suggests we place our trust in God’s providential love rather than seeking signs.

The Church’s teaching on this subject is adamant and clear:

*All forms of divination are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead, or other practices falsely supposed to “unveil” the future... They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone.* (CCC, 2116)

The text continues, and here we see how truly terrifying can be the end toward which some of these occult exercises lead.

*All practice of magic or sorcery, by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one’s service and have a supernatural power over others – even if this were for the sake of restoring their health – are gravely contrary to the virtue of religion. These practices are even more to be condemned when accompanied by the intention of harming someone, or when they have recourse to the intervention of demons.* (CCC, 2117)

## **MARY, OUR MODEL IN PRACTICE**

Pope John Paul II called Mary’s journey to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth “*the first Eucharistic Procession.*” This journey stands for everything the First Commandment calls us to embrace in the daily practice of our lives: singular love of God, trust in God’s providence, and an eagerness to do what the virtue of religion requires.

St. Luke tells us that when the angel departed, Mary set out “*in haste,*” an adverb the dictionary reminds us means not only with speed, but with a purpose.

In Dante’s *Divine Comedy* the souls in Purgatory atoning for sins of sloth meditate on Mary’s journey to share the good news of the Incarnation. The souls awaiting their redemption are spurred on by the words, “*Haste! Haste! Lest time be lost by little love.*” ■

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## **LOURDES REFLECTION**

*(Continued from page 1)*

mean was the Incarnation the most convenient, the most elegant, or the most fitting way to save us, or did the Incarnation give us the best example, then the answer is yes — the Incarnation was absolutely necessary.

What could more aptly increase our faith than to have God’s son become a partner in our human nature? And what could be a better example, when we had forgotten what it meant to be God’s children, than to have God’s Son dwell among us — to go through every moment of our lives, first to last. Not so we wouldn’t have to, but to show us how it’s done, to get it right, and to show us what it means to be truly human. “*Flesh,*” St. Augustine says, “*which could be seen, was not to be followed; but God was to be followed who could not be seen. And therefore was God made flesh, that he who might be seen and followed by flesh might be shown to it.*”

Essential in all this, of course, is Mary and her saying “Yes.” She was conceived without sin to be a worthy mother of the sinless Word. At Lourdes she calls us to repentance that we may be worthy disciples of that same Word. May Our Lady of Lourdes pray for us!