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but their hearts are far from me." - Jesus,
quoting Isaiah

Twenty-first Week of Ordinary Time: Aug 27 - Sept 2, 2006

The Twenty-first Week of Ordinary Time

On the **Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time**, we continue the Bread of Life discussion, with many of the disciples finding Jesus' call to be nourished on his body and blood as tough to swallow. And they leave him. Peter speaks for the others: "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Monday is the **Memorial of Saint Augustine, bishop and doctor of the Church**. Tuesday is the **Memorial of the Martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist**. (This Memorial has its own proper readings.)

For the first reading we begin with a few selections from the **Second Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians** and then we have readings from the **First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians** for several weeks.

We continue to reflect on Jesus' words from **Matthew's Gospel** Jesus condemns the ways of the Pharisees, calling them hypocrites, "blind guides" and "whitened tombs:" "on the outside you appear righteous, but inside you are filled with hypocrisy and evildoing." In contrast to the ways of the hypocrites, Jesus tells his disciples to "Stay awake!" We are called to be faithful and prudent servants, stewards of what our Master has entrusted to us. If we are this kind of disciples, we will be blessed. Jesus tells the parable of the wise and the fooling brides' maids. The wise were prepared for the groom's coming, with enough oil for their lamps. Again, he says, "stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Then he tells them the Parable of the talents. A master goes off on a journey, entrusting his wealth to three servants. Two invest the money and earn twice as much for their master. The third, out of fear and laziness, won't take any risks and buries his master's wealth, which was entrusted to him.

On the **Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time**, our gospel flows from the readings this past week. When Jesus is challenged because his disciples don't follow the ritual washings, he defends them, quoting Isaiah: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Jesus calls us to an inner cleanliness: "From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile."

Daily Prayer This Week

Like physical exercises, which build strength and stamina, these exercises for finding intimacy with God in our everyday lives involve a practice regime. Nobody ever got good at soccer or baseball, running or dancing without careful practice that becomes a habit, a way of life. And, no one even attempts such a regimen without great desire. The same is true with getting good at having a relationship with our Lord. It takes great desire to sustain a routine of reflection and affective, intimate conversation. Such prayerful focus and connectedness takes discipline, but it quickly becomes natural. And, the rewards are phenomenal.

We can practice this week by asking ourselves some deep questions in the background of our life each day. Beginning each day by briefly expressing a desire to be more self-aware and transparent with our Lord, we can ask ourselves some probing questions.

In what ways am I a hypocrite? How do I use a double standard - harsher on others than I am on myself? How do I like to appear as a religious person, but actually lack mercy and deeds of charity? Am I a good steward of the gifts with which God has entrusted me?

As I grow in the ability to reflect throughout the day, I might try to recognize my inner spirit, my attitudes, the ways I respond. It is a way of staying "awake." Staying alert all day, places me with my Lord in conversation, in the background as I make decisions, as I experience my reactions to events and people. Sometimes, I might just be saying "Thank you, Lord," expressing gratitude for what I've been given. At other times, that will quickly turn to a reflecting on how I will be a good steward of those gifts. Hearing the readings this week, I might want to monitor how my fears or my laziness might prevent me from being bold about using the gifts the Lord has given me to build up the Kingdom in my world.

Preparing for celebrating God's love on Sunday, I can pay attention to the temptation to honor the Lord with mere "lip service." After this week of candid communication with Jesus, asking for important graces, I can more consciously be there, with my family, with my faith community, with a freer, inner cleanliness, and with a deeper gratitude giving God thanks and praise.

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