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ST. BENEDICT

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault
(Fontgombault, March 21st, 2023)

In vita sua suffulsit domum.
In his life he propped up the house.
(*Eccli* 50:1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
My dearly beloved Sons,

TODAY'S FEAST invites us to give thanks for St. Benedict's life and works, on the anniversary of his passing to God, in the year 547. The feasts of saints adorning the liturgical calendar reveal the richness and variety of the gifts God has laid down in the various human persons, as the preface of the saints sings:

For Thou art praised in the company of Thy Saints and,
in crowning their merits, Thou crownest Thy own gifts.

As Ben Sira said concerning Simon the High Priest, the saints build and prop up the house of God. Nowadays, the Temple of the Lord is the Church.

St. Paul has shown the path towards holiness in his epistle to the Romans:

To them that love God all things work together unto good. [...] For whom He foreknew, He also predestinated to be made conformable to the image of His Son: that He might be the Firstborn amongst many brethren. And

whom He predestinated, them He also called. And whom He called, them He also justified. And whom He justified, them He also glorified.^a

a. *Rm* 8:28–30.

The saints build not only the Church, but they also build the world. This universal call to holiness has been echoed by the Vatican II council in its Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*:

All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.^b

b. *LG*, n. 40.

St. Benedict therefore honours the monastic choirs of all epochs, especially by the Rule he has left. In it, he writes as a conclusion:

Now, we have written this Rule that, observing it in monasteries, we may show that we have acquired at least some moral righteousness, or a beginning of the monastic life we should lead.^c

c. *Rule*, ch. 73.

The last chapter in the Rule, in which are found the lines we just quoted, is called “That not the whole observance of righteousness is laid down in this Rule.” St. Benedict invites his sons to consider “the teachings of the holy Fathers, the observance of which leads a man to the height of perfection,” to engage in the study of Scripture, “a most safe rule for human life,” to read such and such books of the holy Catholic Fathers, to ponder on the lives of the first monks. He may thus promise:

Thou shalt with God’s help attain at last to the greater heights of knowledge and virtue which we have mentioned above.

But fortunately, the saints are not to be found among monks only. This afternoon, His Excellency Archbishop Jérôme Beau will bless the small oratory in the guests’ garden, at the heart of the group of houses where are received the monks’ families, or those who wish to spend some time for rest and prayer near the abbey. This oratory is dedicated to Louis and Zélie Martin, the parents of St. Therese

of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face. A relic of them was put into it.

This morning, is it possible to compare the holy Patriarch of the Western monks, and the holy Martin parents? Everything would seem to separate them: centuries, their ways of life... And yet, they are driven by a same yearning for holiness. Here are a few lines taken from Zélie Martin's letters:

I, too, would like so much to be a saint; but where should I start? There is so much to be done that I content myself with desire. During the day, I often say to God, "My God, I would like so much to be a saint!" And then, I don't do the necessary works. Yet, it's high time I began...

Nonetheless, it would be hard not to see in the Martin children their parents' holiness. Through the witness of an exemplary Christian life, "preferring nothing to the love of Christ^a, Who came first in the family home and its inhabitants' hearts, they led their children towards religious life and holiness.

a. Rule, ch. 4, n. 21.

Louis and Zélie had both desired to enter religious life. Providence had decided otherwise. Nine children will be born from their union, four of whom will die in infancy. The crosses of these separations, the crosses of Zélie's and Louis's diseases and deaths will leave deep marks in the life of the family.

The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle.* Spiritual progress entails the asceticism and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes.^b

* Cf. 2 Tim 4.

b. CCC, n. 2015.

Mr. and Mrs. Martin proved to be both demanding and kindly towards their children. They were active in social works, considering their employees as "members of their own household," and they taught their children to be merciful to the poor. From this life consistent with the teaching of the Gospel, will stem in their children a peaceful, humble, and fervent faith. Their home was a place of communion in

charity, where vocations to religious life could find a fertile soil, allowing them to grow.

Therese will sum up how she considered her parents in a few very simple words:

a. Letter to Fr. Bellière
(n. 261,
July 26th, 1897).

The good Lord gave me a father and a mother both worthier of heaven than earth.^a

Let us enter the school of the saints, as the already quoted Preface invites us to do:

By their way of life Thou offerest us an example, by communion with them Thou givest us companionship, by their intercession, sure support, so that, encouraged by so great a cloud of witnesses, we may run as victors in the race before us and win with them the imperishable crown of glory, through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

