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Our Lady of Dallas Cistercian Abbey
Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
Sunday, August 21, 2022

“And people will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God.”

It’s gonna be quite a party. My brothers and sisters, today’s readings are about getting to Heaven. About the *importance* of getting there... about the *non-inevitability* of getting there... a bit about *how* to get there... or about what kind of people “fit”, or belong, there... and about how surprising, even joyfully shocking, will be the eternal plan that is revealed there that God has for the human race.

“Some are last who will be first...” In today’s readings there’s even a question that points us in the uncomfortable direction of wondering about the relative demographics of Heaven and Hell. Will only a few be saved? Do most people go one way...or another? Or is it a 50/50 split? My hunch is that most of us don’t like to talk about or even to think about such topics very often. My hunch is that many of us Christians even find it strange or slightly... *improper* when someone starts speaking too sincerely about Heaven, as if it were bringing up a controversial political opinion with someone you’d just met. Thank God, then... that the *Word* of God, as proclaimed in the Church’s lectionary contains plenty of passages that force us to do just that... that force us to speak, and to think about Heaven, and even perhaps to yearn, sincerely, *for* Heaven.

Now, at this point, I'm going to hedge my bets with the rest of this homily and say that the most important piece of advice I can give you about Heaven is very simple and direct: go to Eucharistic Adoration. As often as you can. For some of you it might be once a month, for some once a week, for some, almost every day. Why do I say this? Because the desire for Heaven, the *real, sincere* desire for Heaven, is part of our getting there. And like *real* faith, or *real* hope, or *real* love... the *real* desire to be with the *real* God forever, in Heaven, is like a muscle in our soul... a muscle that must be exercised, or risk becoming weaker and gradually still weaker... to the point of truly dangerous, even permanent, loss of spiritual muscle-mass. And when we're in the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, we can in a very real sense, focus and meditate on the fact that Heaven itself is just a few feet or a few dozen feet away from us. We can exercise the muscle.

We humans are such funny, distractible, distracted, at times insane... creatures. I've lived in this monastery for 18 years, and it took me about 16 years to figure out that Eucharistic Adoration was about stretching and growing and building up our desire for Heaven, and that *that's* the most practical --- eternally speaking --- thing we can do each day of our lives. Only in the past few years, when we as a community started having twenty minutes of daily Adoration at 5:30pm, did I really start to *believe* more deeply that I needed it. That I need it all the time. But I would not have discovered that if I hadn't at least first committed

myself to persevering for these 18 years in a community one of whose characteristics is the individual and collective striving for Heaven. When I was a novice, one of the older, wiser monks told me---rather spontaneously, as I recall---that this place had its faults, and that the monks had plenty of personality conflicts, and sometimes other problems and crises that could become real, *real* crosses to bear.....but...he said, and in a tone of absolute conviction and certitude...he felt great peace in that he truly believed that every single person in the community was sincerely *trying* to get to Heaven. That was a perspective I had never considered so directly before. I thought you joined a place like this to put on funny robes, and then eventually to go do cool priest stuff! And the food's pretty good, too. But over time, I have come to share that monk's belief about the members of this community trying to get to Heaven, and I have come to see that it is the most precious thing one can share in *any* relationship, friendship, group, team, or community!

So, if my most important advice today is to spend time literally gazing upon the doorway to Heaven, Christ in the Eucharist, and exercising and growing your holy desire, then my second piece of advice is: base your most important relationships *on the sharing and mutual building up of this desire...* and to teach your young people, especially, but really everyone you care about... to do the same. A corollary of this, of course, is love... charity... charity in truth, charity

joined with the faith as proclaimed and taught by the Church... charity that wants the full good, the *eternal* good of the other person, and that acknowledges that Heaven is neither cosmologically guaranteed to any man by the laws of Nature, nor is Heaven the unassailable right of anyone. What I am getting at here is as simple as any of the other points in this homily. We must not settle for merely *liking* others. Rather, we must choose all the time to *love* others, in the deepest possible sense, by desiring, working for, and praying for, their eternal blessedness in Heaven. We don't accomplish that by pretending that they'll just end up there, automatically, no matter what kind of life they live. We must pray for a courage so fire-tried... a faith so deep and true... and a love so genuine for others that these virtues of our soul would serve as constant guards in all of our relationships, in all our dealings with other people, against any form of *eternal indifferentism*, and especially against teaching such an attitude to those whom we claim to care about. If our Lord tells us that people will come from the east and west and north and south and recline at the banquet table of His Father, we should believe him, and trust in Him, and rejoice even now, in hope. But... when he also says, strive to enter through the narrow gate, and insinuates that it is all too possible that one's freedom could be so badly used that Christ would not recognize that person at the Heavenly banquet... then, we should heed Christ with equal intensity, and be

moved to reform our lives, to redouble our efforts, and to pray humbly, and often, for our own souls, and for the souls of others.

But we get distracted, and then if we're not careful, we even learn to seek distractions ever more engrossing and complicated, throughout life. If we're honest, we all have a natural instinct that runs a mile deep in each of us to seek distraction, and entertainment, and dissipation for the sake of evading our personal sufferings and those of the larger world. And if we get too good at this evasion, our hearts and minds can lose their grasp on all this Heaven business. Here, let the words we heard today from the Letter to the Hebrews call us back to our right minds again and again, for our entire lives: our sufferings, and all our trials and worries, are *discipline given by a loving Father*. We are being perfected, or repaired, all the time, by so many kinds of graces from God, but perhaps especially through sufferings. If we believe in the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, then this is the logical outgrowth of that core of our faith. Hence, as we continue to live our daily lives with their countless distractions, and to encounter suffering in forms new and old, day by day and year by year, let us not let our sufferings, big or small... go to waste. Let us very intentionally accept them...a dozen times a day, if we can... as necessary correctives for the true aiming of our deepest longings, and as opportunities for entering more deeply into the saving mystery of our Lord's own Passion and Resurrection... for our own sake, and for the sake of every soul

we have every claimed to care about. And to close with the last words of Chapter 72 of the Rule of Saint Benedict: and may Christ bring us all, together, to everlasting life.

Amen.

Let us now stand and profess our faith.

Gathered together to be guided by Christ's word and nourished by His Body and Blood, let us now offer our prayers through Christ to our Heavenly Father.

For the Church throughout the world, that she may continue to be a sign of contradiction and a salt that seasons all human interactions and endeavors, WPTTL

For our Holy Father Pope Francis, that he may continue to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ with perseverance, humility, and charity, WPTTL

For all Christians, that we may encourage one another, by word, admonition, and generous example, to strive for eternal life in Heaven, WPTTL

For all men and women, especially the young, who are yearning to be freed from the slavery of sinful habits or addictions and to live with a more sure and joyful hope of Heaven, WPTTL

For all elected leaders and government officials, that they may serve their people and communities with wisdom, moral courage, and humility, WPTTL

For all students, faculty, staff, and families in the Cistercian and UD communities, that they may begin the new school year with greater faith, hope, and charity, WPTTL

And for all the intentions that we bring to the altar today in the silent prayers in our hearts, WPTTL

Almighty Father, trusting that you will grant these prayers as they be for our Good and for your Glory, we offer them all to you through Christ our Lord. Amen.