



Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem ©
* Knights of Malta *

February
2016

Chancellor's Update

St. Gregory:

As we enter the holy season of Lent again, Holy Mother Church calls on us to rediscover the life of Jesus, whose death on the Cross made satisfaction to God the Father for the sin of our first parent. She encourages us further to seek a deeper meaning of Lent by reflecting also on our relationship with God in our own lives.

The sermon of Saint Gregory for Septuagesima Sunday enables us to make this Lenten season more meaningful by offering us a look at the history of mankind and salvation history for mankind. (Catena Aurea – Matt. xx. 1-16)

What a wonderful opportunity also to participate in the Jubilee Year of Mercy that was proclaimed by Pope Francis for year 2016. Both Lent and the Year of Mercy require the confession of sin, the acceptance of God's mercy in the confessional, and consequently the opportunity to receive the Eucharist.

On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception at the opening ceremonies of the Jubilee Year of Mercy Pope Francis expressed 'the grandeur of God's love'. "Not only does he forgive sin, but in Mary he even averts the original sin present in every man and woman who comes into this world. This is *the love of God which precedes, anticipates and saves*. The beginning of the history of sin in the Garden of Eden yields to a plan of saving love. The words of Genesis reflect our own daily experience: we are constantly tempted to disobedience, a disobedience expressed in wanting to go about our lives without regard for God's will. This is the enmity which keeps striking at people's lives, setting them in opposition to God's plan. Yet the history of sin can only be understood in the light of God's love and forgiveness. Sin can only be understood in this light. Were sin the only thing that mattered, we would be the most desperate of creatures. But the promised triumph of Christ's love enfolds everything in the Father's mercy. The word of God leaves no doubt about this. The Immaculate Virgin stands before us as a privileged witness of this promise and its fulfillment.

"This Extraordinary Year is itself a gift of grace. To pass through the Holy Door means to rediscover the infinite mercy of the Father who welcomes everyone and goes out personally to encounter each of them. It is he who seeks us! It is he who comes to encounter us! This will be a year in which we *grow ever more convinced of God's mercy*."

On the Gospel of Septuagesima Sunday

1. Many things need to be said in the explanation of this Gospel reading, which I wish, if I can, to set out briefly, lest you be wearied both by the long-drawn out procession, and by a too prolonged explanation. The kingdom of heaven is like to a man, a householder, who hires labourers to cultivate his vineyard. Who more truly resembles the householder than Our Creator, Who rules the world He has made, and governs His elect in this world, as a master cares for the subjects of his household? He too possesses a vineyard, namely, the Universal Church, which, from the time of just Abel until the last of the elect that shall be born at the end of the world, has brought forth as many saints, as it has sent forth shoots.

This Householder therefore, in the morning early, at the third hour, the sixth, the ninth, and the eleventh, hires labourers to till His Vineyard; because from the beginning of this world until the end He ceases not to gather together preachers to instruct the multitude of the faithful. For the morning of the world was from Adam to Noah: the third hour from Noah to Abraham: the sixth from Abraham to Moses: the ninth from Moses till the Coming of the Lord: the eleventh from the Lord's Coming till the end of the world. In which last hour the holy Apostles were sent as preachers, who, though they came late, yet received the full wage.

At no time therefore has the Lord failed to send workers to cultivate His Vineyard, which is to say, they instruct His people; as from the beginning by means of the Patriarchs, then the Doctors of the Law and the Prophets, and lastly by means of the Apostles, He has attended to the care of His Vineyard, when as it were by His labourers He has formed worthy dispositions in His people. The workers of the early morning, and of the third hour, the sixth, and the ninth, signify the ancient Jewish people, who, in their elect have from the beginning of the world endeavoured to serve God in true belief and have not as it were ceased to labour in the cultivation of the Vineyard. But at the eleventh hour the Gentiles were called, and it is to them it was said: *Why stand you here all the day idle?*

They who during so long a period of time had neglected to labour for their true life, have been standing *all the day idle*. But consider what they answered when questioned: *They say to him: because no man hath hired us*; since no Patriarch had come to them, and no Prophet. What does this mean: *No man hath hired us*, if not, that no man hath preached to us the way of true life? What excuse therefore shall we make for neglecting to do good, who have come almost from our mother's womb into the light of faith, who have heard the words of life from our cradle, who together with our mother's milk have drunk in heavenly teaching from the breasts of holy Church?

2. We may also see in these same varying hours the changing of the years in the life of every man. For the morning is the childhood of our reason. The third hour can be interpreted as adolescence, because while the heat of youth increases, it is as though the sun mounts higher in the sky. The sixth hour is young manhood, because as the sun is now as it were in its zenith, so now is the full strength of manhood attained. Mature age is signified by the ninth hour, in which, the sun descends from its highest point, because in

that age man already declines from the heat of youth. The eleventh hour is that time of life which is called senility or old age; concerning which the Greeks are wont to describe those that are advanced in years, not simply as old men but as *elders* (presbyters), that in this way they may show that they are more than old men who are regarded as advanced in years.

Because therefore one man is called to the good life in boyhood, another in youth, another in manhood, another in later life, another in old age, the labourers are as it were called at different hours to the vineyard. Therefore, dearly Beloved Brethren, look to your manner of living, and see whether even now you are labourers of God. Let each one look to what he is doing, and let him consider whether or not he labours in the Vineyard of the Lord. For they who in this life seek the things that are their own, have not yet entered the Lord's vineyard. For they work for the Lord who think upon the Master's gain and not upon their own; who serve Him with eagerness of love and the fervour of devotion; who are watchful to gain souls, and hasten to bring others with them to the true life. But he who lives for himself, who feeds on the pleasures his own flesh, is rightly rebuked as idle, because he seeks not for the fruit of divine labour.

3. He that has failed till his latest years to live for God, has truly been standing idle till the eleventh hour. Whence was it rightly said to those who were inert till the eleventh hour: *Why stand you all the day idle?* As if he said openly to them: And if you have been unwilling to serve God in youth and in manhood, at least in your old age come to your senses, and though it is late come yet to the ways of true life, since little time is left you wherein to labour. And such as these, therefore, the Householder calls to Him; and for the most part gives them their wage earlier, since they go forth from the body to His Kingdom earlier than those that appear to be called from their childhood. Did not the Good Thief come at the eleventh hour, though he came late, not through age but through punishment, and he confessed God from the cross, and almost with the words of his confession yielded up the breath of life. The Householder began indeed from the last to pay the *denarius* that was due, for even before Peter He leads the Thief into the repose of paradise.

How many Fathers were there before the Law, how many lived under the Law, and yet without any delay they entered the Kingdom who were called at the Coming of the Lord. They received who came at the eleventh hour that same wage which they desired with all their heart who had laboured from the first; because they who came to the Lord at the end of the world received the wage of eternal life equally with those who were called from the beginning of the world.

Because of this they who had preceded them in labour murmuring said: *These last have worked but one hour, and thou hast made them equal to us, that have borne the burden of the day and the heats.* They have borne the burthen of the day and the heats, because they to whom it befell to have lived from the beginning of the world, must also suffer more prolonged trials of the flesh. For to each one to bear the burthen of the day and the heats means, to be wearied by the heats of his own flesh throughout the days of a long life.

4. But you may ask how can it be said that they murmured who were called, though at evening time, to enter the Kingdom? For no one who murmurs enters the Kingdom, and no one murmurs who enters there. But because the Fathers, however justly they lived until the Coming of Our Lord, were not brought into the Kingdom until He had descended Who would open the gates of Paradise by the intervention of His death, they it was who murmured, because they had lived justly in order that they might enter the Kingdom, and yet they suffered long delay before they entered the Kingdom. It was they who had laboured in the Vineyard, and it was they who murmured, whom the abodes of hell, however peaceful, had received after their just lives. It was therefore, as it were after their murmuring, that they receive the *denarius*; they who after the long ages of hell reached at length the joys of the Kingdom. We however who have come at the eleventh hour, we murmur not after our labour, and we also receive the *denarius*, because coming into this world after the Coming of the Mediator, we are brought into the Kingdom almost as soon as we depart from our body; and we receive without any delay that which the ancient Fathers merited to receive after prolonged delay.

For which reason the Householder says: *I will give to this last as to thee*. And since to enter heaven is due to the goodness of His will, He rightly adds: *Is it not lawful for me to do what I will?* Foolish is the questioning of man against the goodness of God. He should not complain if He does not give what He owes not, but if He does give what is due. Whence He aptly questions: *Is thy eye evil because I am good?* Let no one exalt himself because of his work, or because of his time: for having completed the last sentence Truth then proclaims: *So shall the last be first, and the first last*. For though we know what or how much good have done, we know not with what exactness the heavenly judge will weigh it. And it is certain that every man must greatly rejoice to be in the Kingdom of God at last.

5. But after these words, truly terrible is that which follows: *For many are called but few are chosen*: because they are many that arrive at faith, but few that are led into the heavenly kingdom. Behold how many are here gathered for this day's festival: we fill the church from wall to wall, yet who knows how few they are who shall be numbered in that chosen company of the elect? Behold the voices of all proclaim Christ, but the lives of all do not proclaim Him. And many keep company with God in word, but shun Him in deed. And it was with this in mind that Paul said: *They profess that they know God: but in their works they deny him* (Tit. i. 16). For this reason also James says: *That faith without good works is dead* (Jas. ii.20, 26). And says the Lord Himself by the mouth of the psalmist: *I have declared and I have spoken: they are multiplied above numbers* (Ps. xxxix. 6). At the call of the Lord the faithful are multiplied without number, because not a few come also to faith who do not belong to the elect. Here below they are mingled with the faithful, through confession, but because of their reprobate way of life they shall not merit to be partakers of the lot of the faithful. This sheepfold of the Church receives young goats with the lambs; but, as the Gospel bears witness, when the judge shall come, He shall separate the good from the bad, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats (Mt. xxv. 32).

Nor can they who are here slaves to the pleasures of their bodies, be there numbered in the flock of His sheep. There the judge shall separate from the lot of the humble those that now exalt themselves upon the horns of pride. Neither shall they receive a kingdom, who though formed in heavenly faith, with all their hearts seek the things of earth.

6. And within the Church, dearest Brethren, you will see many such persons, but you must neither imitate them, nor despair of them. What a man is today you can see, but what each one will be tomorrow no man knows. Often he that was seen to be behind us, has in his zeal in doing good come to outstrip us: and he whom today we excel, tomorrow we may scarce follow. We know indeed that while Stephen was dying for the faith, Saul held the garments of those that stoned him. Therefore did he by the hands of those who stoned also cast stones, since he encouraged them all to stone him. And yet this same person, within the holy Church, surpassed in labours the one whom, by persecuting him, he made a martyr.

Two things there are therefore upon which we should carefully reflect. Because many are called and but few chosen, the first is: let no one presume on his own salvation; for though he be called to faith, whether he is worthy of the eternal kingdom he knows not. The second is: let no one presume to despair of his neighbour, whom perhaps he sees lying in sin; for he knows not the riches of the divine mercy.

7. I shall now, Brethren, relate to you something which has happened recently, and if from your heart you look upon yourselves as sinners, you will then love yet more the omnipotent mercy of God. In this very year, in my monastery, which is situated close to the church of the blessed martyrs John and Paul, a certain brother, turned to repentance, entered the monastery, was devoutly accepted, and became himself yet more devoutly changed in life. His brother followed him into the monastery: in the flesh, not in the spirit. For though detesting the monastic dress, and the monastic life, he remained in the monastery as a guest; and he was unable to discontinue living there, though he shunned the life of the monks, because he had neither occupation nor the means to live.

His evil conduct was a burthen to all; yet all endured him with patience out of love for his brother. And though he knew not what followed after this present life, yet, arrogant and uncertain, he scoffed if anyone wished to instruct him in this. And so, flippant in speech, restless in movement, empty in mind, disorderly in dress, dissipated in behaviour, he lived on in the monastery, but in the dispositions of the world.

During the month of July last, he was stricken down in that epidemic of the pestilence that you remember; and as he was approaching his end he was urged to put his soul in order. The power of life now remained only in his heart and in his tongue, his extremities were already dead. The brethren stood by him, helping him in his end by their prayers, as far as God permitted. Suddenly, beholding the demon coming to take possession of him, he began to cry out in a loud voice, "Look, I am delivered over to the dragon to be devoured; but he cannot devour me because of your presence. Why do you delay me? Go away that he may finish me!"

And when the brethren exhorted him to sign himself with the sign of the Cross, he answered as well as he was able: "I want to bless myself but I cannot, because I am held fast by the dragon: my throat is held in his jaws, and the foam of his mouth has smeared my face. Look! My arms are imprisoned by him who has my head in his jaws!"

While he was saying this, trembling, pale, and dying, the brethren began ever more earnestly to pray for him, to help by their intercession this man here tormented by the presence of an evil spirit. Then of a sudden he was delivered, and began to cry out aloud, "thanks be to God. See, he has gone, he has fled: the dragon who already had me in his grip, has fled before your prayers." There and then he vowed to serve God, and to become a monk; but from that moment until now he lies oppressed by fever and weakened by pain. He was truly snatched from death, yet not fully restored to life. For he is afflicted by tedious infirmities, and tormented with grievous weakness: the severe fire of purification burning away the hardness of his heart; for it has pleased divine Providence that prolonged illness shall cleanse him of even more prolonged habits of evil-doing.

Who would have believed that this man would have been preserved and converted? Who can fathom the so great depths of the mercy of God? An evil-living young man sees in death the evil spirit he has served in life; nor did he see him that being brought down he might lose his life, but that he might learn who it was that held him in bondage, and knowing might resist him, and resisting would overcome him; and he saw him by whom, unseen, he was held a slave, that he might afterwards be free.

What tongue can speak of the bowels of the divine mercy? What soul is not awed at the richness of the divine kindness? It was this treasure of the divine mercy the psalmist had in mind when he said: *Unto thee, O my Helper, will I sing, for thou art God my defense; My God My mercy* (Ps. lviii. 18). Here reflecting on the labours of which man's life is made up, he calls God his helper. And because He lifts us out of present tribulation into eternal peace, he calls Him also his defense. But remembering that He sees our evil-doing, and suffers it in patience, that He is unmindful of our offences, and with all this brings us through repentance to final reward, he wished not to say that God was merciful, but called Him mercy itself, saying: *My God my mercy*.

Let us keep before our minds the evil we have done: and let us think of the great kindness with which we are suffered in patience; and let us consider what are the deep sources of the mercy of God, that not alone forgives our offences, but having forgiven our sins, promises an eternal kingdom to those that repent of evil-doing. And from the depths of every heart let us cry out, let us all together cry: *My God my mercy*, Who livest and reignest, Three in One, and One in Three, for ever and ever. Amen.

Copyright 2016 by the Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, Inc. All rights reserved. The O.S.J. Messenger and the Chancellor's Update are among the authorized publications of the Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, Inc. and the Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem-Knights of Malta. World Headquarters and Convent of the Order are located in Reading, Pennsylvania in the United States of America.



Jerusalem 1048-1291, Cyprus 1291-1310, Rhodes 1311-1523, Malta 1530-1798, Russia 1798-1907, U.S.A. 1908-

<http://sovereignorderofsaintjohnofjerusalemknightsofmalta.org/>