

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME
6 September 2026

Fr. Jim Fredericks

Part One: the readings for the day
Part Two: reflections on the readings
Part Three: guidelines for *lectio divina*

PART ONE: READINGS FOR THE DAY
Lectionary: 127

Reading 1 Ezekiel 33:7-9

Thus says the LORD:

You, son of man,
I have appointed watchman for the house of Israel;
when you hear me say anything,
you shall warn them for me.
If I tell the wicked, "O wicked one, you shall surely die,"
and you do not speak out to dissuade
the wicked from his way,
the wicked shall die for his guilt,
but I will hold you responsible for his death.
But if you warn the wicked,
trying to turn him from his way,
and he refuses to turn from his way,
he shall die for his guilt,
but you shall save yourself.

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us sing joyfully to the LORD;
let us acclaim the rock of our salvation.
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us joyfully sing psalms to him.

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us bow down in worship;
let us kneel before the LORD who made us.
For he is our God,
and we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides.

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Oh, that today you would hear his voice:
"Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as in the day of Massah in the desert,
where your fathers tempted me;
they tested me though they had seen my works."

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Reading 2 Romans 13:8-10

Brothers and sisters:

Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another;
for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.
The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery;
you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not covet, "
and whatever other commandment there may be,
are summed up in this saying, namely,
"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
Love does no evil to the neighbor;
hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.

Alleluia 2 Corinthians 5:19

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ
and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said to his disciples:

"If your brother sins against you,
go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.
If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.
If he does not listen,
take one or two others along with you,
so that 'every fact may be established
on the testimony of two or three witnesses.'
If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church.
If he refuses to listen even to the church,
then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.
Amen, I say to you,
whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.
Again, amen, I say to you,

if two of you agree on earth
about anything for which they are to pray,
it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father.
For where two or three are gathered together in my name,
there am I in the midst of them."

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READINGS

Saturday was the feast day of a saint – a relatively new saint. Ten years ago, yesterday, Pope Francis gathered with the faithful in the *piazza* in front of Saint Peter's Basilica and canonized Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

At mass in the *piazza*, the Pope said that, after much deliberation and consultation with the Church around the world,

we declare and define Blessed Teresa of Kolkata to be a saint, and we enroll her among the saints, decreeing that she is to be venerated as such by the whole church.

Today, I want to say that Mother Teresa of Calcutta (or Kolkata as it is proper to say) is very much a saint for our times, but not perhaps in a way you might think.

Let me explain.

To be a saint, of course, a person must be holy. But "holiness," like "love" and "grace," is a word we throw around too casually. So, maybe we should ask: what do we mean when we say someone is "holy"? What is "holiness"?

In regard to saints, at least, the traditional answer Catholics give to this question is that holiness means living a life of heroic virtue.

Measured by this standard, Mother Teresa was very holy. She went to India as a young nun and taught in an exclusive convent-school in Kolkata. She went on to become the head mistress of her school. In time, however, Sister Teresa came to believe that she was called to serve the poor living on the streets outside the walls of her convent.

So, in 1950, she founded the Missionaries of Charity. She started with a school for the children living on the streets of Kolkata and then a hospice for the people dying on those streets. In time, the Missionaries of Charity would open houses in 120 countries around the world. Mother Teresa received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1979.

There can be little doubt that Mother Teresa lived a life of heroic virtue. This is the reason Pope Francis placed her on the canon of the saints.

But remember what I said earlier. Mother Teresa is a saint for our times, but not perhaps in a way you might think.

Heroic virtue is one way to think about holiness, but by no means the only way. There is another kind of holiness. There is a holiness that doesn't garner much attention from the world and doesn't win Nobel prizes for peace. It is a holiness that is sometimes hard to see and easy to overlook.

I am speaking of the holiness of those among us who remain faithful to the vocation they received in their baptism even though they suffer from a sense that God is very far from them and even absent from their souls.

Curiously, the great saints, even with all their "heroic virtue," seem to know about this other kind of holiness. Saint John of the Cross, for example, taught his fellow Carmelites about the "dark night of the soul." Saint Ignatius taught his Jesuits about "desolation."

I want you to recognize the holiness of those who live lives of what Søren Kierkegaard, the great Lutheran thinker, called "quiet desperation." I refer to people who live lives of kindness and generosity and even selfless service to their neighbors, despite the fact that the sacraments bring them little solace and that God feels distant and even absent.

People such as these are holy. In fact, I believe that they are holy and precious in the eyes of God.

Mother Teresa was such a person.

Mother Teresa of Kolkata suffered from depression. This is not widely known. In letters to her spiritual director, she complained continually of the absence of God in her soul. She wrote,

Depression surrounds me on all sides.
I cannot lift up my soul to God.

Once, Mother Teresa said something very revealing about her, even though I don't think we understood this at the time.

She said,

I do not pray for success;
I pray for faithfulness.

Mother Teresa was not impressed by what the world saw as her "heroic virtue." Instead, she struggled inwardly to remain faithful. We should not try to appear great in the eyes of the world. Instead, we should recognize our weakness and sinfulness and our longing for God and then, with genuine humility, try our best to be faithful to God's command to love one another.

Do not pray for success. Pray that God give you the grace to be faithful.

In the second reading, Saint Paul writes,

Brothers and sisters:
Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another;
for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

There is a depth of wisdom in what Paul wrote. We must love one another. We owe this to one another, for love is commanded of us by God. We are obliged to love whether we feel like it or not.

For Christians, love is not a sentiment. Love is an obligation.

It's the feast day of Mother Teresa of Kolkata. Let us remember her heroic virtue. But also, let us recognize that her greatest heroism – and, I think, her true holiness – lies in her fidelity, not her remarkable success. Despite the desolation in her soul. Every day she took up her cross and fulfilled God's command by loving her neighbor.

PART THREE: INSTRUCTIONS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA*

I suggest that you use the readings and my reflections as an opportunity for practicing *lectio divina* ("divine reading"). This is an ancient spiritual practice that started with the great monks in the Syrian and Egyptian desert back in the early days of the Church. It is really quite simple.

Step one: calm your mind (my Buddhist friends describe the mind as "a mango-tree full of chattering monkeys"). I find that paying attention to your breath for a few minutes is a practical and effective way to do this.

Step two: read the readings slowly and attentively. Savor the words as if you were tasting a great Pinot Noir. Don't rush. You are not looking for information or instructions. You are making friends with a sacred text which will bless you abundantly if you will only open your heart to it and let it speak to you. In *lectio divina*, we are not actually "reading" the Bible. Rather, we are "listening" to the Bible as the sacred words speak to us.

Step three: repeat step two.

Step four: read the homily on the readings.

Step five: Ask yourself a few questions:

- What particular words in the readings call out to me most forcefully?
- What is going on in my life such that these words call to me so forthrightly?
- How am I being asked to change, both interiorly and exteriorly?
- In light of this *lectio divina*, how am I being invited to be of service to the world today?

