

May 19

MEDITATION ON SAINT PETER CELESTINE

127.1 First Point

From his youth Saint Peter Celestine was drawn to solitude. He therefore withdrew to a lonely mountain where he lived for three years, macerating his body in order to resist the temptations that bothered him. His macerations were carried to such an excess that when he slept he used a stone for a pillow. Silence was his element; a daily use of the discipline was his recreation; his belt was an iron chain. So assiduously did he give himself to prayer that this became his main exercise. Thus, seclusion, mortification, and prayer were the means this saint used to sanctify himself.

You too can easily use these means to go to God, since these exercises are the usual practices you have in your Institute. Be faithful to them, and be convinced that you will do good for souls only in proportion to the love you have for these three things and your practice of them.

127.2 Second Point

The outstanding holiness of this great servant of God was the reason why the cardinals, in his absence, chose him to govern the Church. As soon as the saint heard of this, he took to flight, but he was later obliged to accept this dignity. However, he maintained a religious humility in the midst of it. All he had to ride on was an ass. Once crowned as pope, he did not give up any of his austerities, and even in his elevated position preserved the same spirit of seclusion. This is how a person must act in the world, if he wants to save himself there and maintain himself in piety.

In your work you are obliged to have some contact with the world. Take care not to acquire its spirit; maintain your reserve and a certain air of self-control which will help you avoid being corrupted; this will edify your neighbor and inspire piety in those whose education has been entrusted to you.

127.3 Third Point

This saint had accepted the papacy with reluctance and felt completely out of place in that role. He thought only of his place of solitude and constantly longed for the seclusion there. He felt nothing but distaste for the pomp of the Roman court; his duty as sovereign pontiff, which obliged him to attend constantly to external business, put him into a situation totally opposed to the inclination for solitude that he had had from his childhood. This led him to request permission from the cardinals to withdraw and resign the dignity of sovereign pontiff.

Although it is by the will of God that you exercise the external functions of your work, and although you find therein the means of sanctifying yourself, these duties should not make you lose the spirit and the love of seclusion. Devote yourself to your work, then, in such a way that as soon as you are no longer needed there, you return home as to your place of refuge, and find all your consolation in assiduity and application at your spiritual exercises.

Peter Celestine (ca 1210 - 1296) was born in Abruzzi of peasant stock and while still very young retired to solitude. Despite his desires he was surrounded by followers and ended up founding the hermits of Saint Damian, also known as Celestines (later incorporated with the Benedictines). In 1274 their rule was approved by Pope Gregory X and as many as 36 monasteries came under the direction of Saint Peter. However, he resigned and became a solitary hermit until forced by the cardinals to accept the papacy in 1294 in an effort to settle a two-year stalemate over filling the vacancy of the Holy See. It was a mistake, because he had no talent for the job of pope; many abuses ensued. Finally he resigned in favor of his successor, Boniface VIII. He actually wrote a Bull to justify his resignation, citing past examples. But Boniface became fearful of a schism and arrested him, keeping him in a rather rough imprisonment until he died on May 19 in 1296. Clement V canonized him in 1313 at the request of Boniface's enemy, Philip of France. His feast is not listed in today's breviary.