



Understanding the Sunday Gospels

CYCLE C

by Father Conley Bertrand

Nihil obstat: Reverend Jason Vidrine, M.A., Theology

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FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Gospel: Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

Jesus said to his disciples: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

The verse preceding today’s Gospel ends with “until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (24). The times of the Gentiles is a period of indeterminate length separating the destruction of Jerusalem from the cosmic signs accompanying the coming of the Son of Man” (*New American Bible* footnote 21:24). Luke has set, between the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world (25), this undetermined period of the Gentiles. The fall of Jerusalem makes manifest to all that the time of Israel ... had indeed come to an end. The passage in today’s Gospel concerns the end of the “time of the Gentiles” and the judgment of mankind (see *New Catholic Commentary*).

The mention of the “times of the Gentiles” provides an introduction to today’s Gospel passage. Luke’s perspective is now carried beyond the ruin of Jerusalem into the future (see *The Catholic Commentary*).

The times of the Gentiles is an echo of the Book of Daniel, which asserts that God has given to a Gentile kingdom the authority to devastate Israel for a time (Dan 12:7). ... A time when sin, long unchecked and unpunished, is at last confronted inexorably with God’s retributive justice.

“The retributions visited on Jerusalem are to be followed by the distress of the Gentiles. This upheaval, too, is described in traditional terms. The sea which threatens to engulf the world is the turbulent ocean upon which God imposed his will at creation, the reservoir of evil things (Rev 13:1) over which he has still to secure his final conquest. The powers of the heavenly bodies, identified with the gods of oriental and

Greco-Roman religion, are regarded by the Jews as angelic beings created by God and allowed by him to preside over the destinies of pagan nations (Deut 32:8; Is 24:21; 34:1-4). Thus the shaking of the powers of heaven denotes not so much the ruin of the physical universe as the overthrow of pagan imperial supremacy” (*The Pelican Gospel Commentaries*, G.B. Caird).

“The signs in the heavens and on earth ... shall precede the Parousia. In [Luke’s] context the time of the appearances of these signs is indefinite; moreover, the fear and distress caused by them are not confined to Jerusalem but spread over the world. Our Lord always insists that there shall be no warning signs of his second coming. He will come suddenly, when least expected like a thief in the night” (*The Catholic Commentary*).

“The scene of the last days is described in vivid apocalyptic language and imagery. What Jesus is certainly saying is that there will be sudden and violent changes in creation that will lead to the emergence of a new order. The strange occurrences will plunge humankind into panic, dread, commotion, and fear. People will realize that strange things are happening without really understanding what will soon befall the earth and humanity in general. Men and women will become desperate, filled with terror and anxiety as a result of the alarming convulsive changes (signs) in the stars, sun, and moon” (*The International Bible Commentary*).

“In these verses St. Luke gives our Lord’s prophecy concerning the end of the world and how we should prepare ourselves to meet it. While the language used here [regarding the sun, moon, and stars] is that used by the prophets (see Is 13:9-10; 34:4; Jer 4:23-30; Joel 2:19) to describe a visitation of God on his sinful people and therefore symbolic; it can be taken literally here perhaps—certain convulsions of the universe may precede the general judgment.”

“The end of our world will come while people are still alive on our planet, and the disturbances in the universe and perhaps more so still, the

realization of their unpreparedness for the judgment will cause some of them to die of fear” (*The Sunday Readings*, Kevin O’Sullivan).

“And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.”

“The title ‘Son of Man’ was used frequently by Christ to describe himself, but by nobody else. Taken from the Book of Daniel (7:13) ... it had acquired a certain messianic significance by the time of Christ. Christ used it perhaps to stress the reality of his humanity—his equality with his fellow men while at the same time giving an inkling to his followers as to his messiahship.

“Christ now foretells that at the end of time he will come in ‘power and glory’. His first coming was in meekness, humility, and poverty. His second coming as judge of all men will be different—his divinity, his divine sonship, will be in evidence, rather than his humanity.

“His true followers will have nothing to fear on that day—rather they will have reason to rejoice greatly for the gathering of all the elect—the completion of the number of the saved will be the consummation of all their hopes” (*The Sunday Readings*, Kevin O’Sullivan).

“In the midst of this distress the Son of Man will appear in glory, that is, in royal power and majesty ... Jesus tells his followers not to panic when they see these strange signs occurring; rather they should regard the signs as a prelude to the redemptive final consummation of the salvation worked by Christ on the cross” (*The International Bible Commentary*).

“When the end of this perishing life shall be accomplished, and, as the apostle [Paul] says, the fashion of this world passes away, then shall succeed a new world, in which instead of sensible light, Christ himself shall shine as a sunbeam, and as the king of the new world, and so mighty and glorious will be his light, that the sun which now dazzles so brightly, and the moon and all

the stars, shall be hidden by the coming of a far greater light” (Eusebius).

“For as in the world the moon and the stars are soon dimmed by the rising sun so at the glorious appearance of Christ shall the sun become dark, and the moon not shed her ray, and the stars shall fall from heaven, stripped of their former attire, that they may put on the robe of a better light” (Chrysostom) (*Cetena Aurea*).

“The cosmic events that will terrify the nations will indicate to the followers of Christ that the time of persecution is ending: their redemption ... is drawing near ... the End will be preceded by signs, but yet the Son of Man will appear like lightning” (*New Catholic Commentary*).

Jesus, the victorious Son of Man, is in control of the forces of evil whether these are wars (9) or sea (25); he is the judge.

“‘Your redemption is near’: this verse bursts with a message of confidence and hope for disciples. In contrast to the cowardly actions of other men and women (26-27), faithful disciples stand erect with heads held high to greet their faithful Judge, Jesus, Son of Man (9:26; 12:9; Acts 7:56)” (*New Jerome Biblical Commentaries*).

“The redemption of Christians is the object of their present hope, the consummation of God’s kingdom in the resurrection of the just. Taken eschatologically here it makes admirable sense. It is just possible, however, that by it Luke means the liberation of Christianity from Judaism. The cataclysm of A.D. 70 [the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple] was a sign of the eschatological age—it manifested, in some way, the kingdom of God—because out of it the Church came forth on its own, never more to be taken by anyone (as it had been taken in the beginning by outsider and insider alike) as merely another Jewish sect. It was now freed for the conquest of the Gentile world—‘They will assemble his chosen over the four winds,’ Matthew says. It might be considered, therefore, that in some real sense the Son of Man had in this event already been made manifest in his glory to the world, in the same kind of realized eschatology

with which we are familiar from the Gospel of John” (*The Four Gospels*, Bruce Vawter, C.M.).

“Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap.”

The suddenness of the Lord’s coming requires us to be on the alert and on our best behavior. But self-indulgence and drunkenness dulls our senses. We become drowsy and unalert. We lose our self-discipline and right judgment. Our sense of morality is dulled so that we easily slide into wrongdoing, and even into serious sin. The Lord’s appearance would find us completely unprepared.

Anxiety means that we have become totally caught up in the object of our anxiety and completely cut off from God. Instead of a holy concern in which we remain connected to God and implore his divine assistance, we lose touch with God and anxiously try to control and impose our will on forcing things our way—rather than surrender our will to God’s and trusting in his Providence.

We need to let go and abandon ourselves to divine providence. We may work hard, but we must keep our focus on God and his will. We must strive to do our best in making a living and advancing in life, but always with the desire to please God, do his will, and live in his presence. In this way, we would always be prepared and welcome his coming.

“For that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth.”

“That day” is the day of the Lord’s arrival when he returns as Supreme Judge. But we will also have to face him when we die at the particular judgment. We must keep ourselves ready for a sudden death. We must remain free from sin; or if we should sin, repent immediately and ask forgiveness.

“Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man.”

We maintain vigilance through self-discipline

and self-restraint. We practice temperance in food and drink. By such self-denial, we are able to live on a level of spirit dominance. We remain connected to God and live in close communion with him. Through such prayerful fellowship, we draw strength to patiently endure the tribulations and hardships that we have to face in this life.

We remain ready to stand before the Son of Man and face judgment. We are prepared to make the transition from earthly existence to heavenly life, when temporal life will be invaded by eternal glory.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.”

The time is important because the final age of the world is at hand. Only Luke has attempted to relate the time of the proclamation of the Gospel to the world into which the New Testament was born.

“There was no universal calendar at that time, so Luke, the careful historian, tries to pinpoint the exact year of the beginning of Christ’s public life by mentioning several of the well-known authorities who were in office at that time. The general consensus today is that John the Baptist began to preach in the year 28/29 A.D. and therefore Christ’s public ministry began that same year” (*The Sunday Readings*, Kevin O’Sullivan).

“The Gospel identifies very precisely the time and place of the public appearance of John the Baptist, the Precursor of Christ. Tiberius Caesar was the second emperor of Rome, and the fifteenth year of his reign corresponds to A.D. 27 or 29, depending on which of the two possible calculations is correct. Pontius Pilate was governor or praefectus

of Judea from A.D. 26 to 36. ...The Herod referred to here is Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, who succeeded to part of his father's territory with the title of tetrarch, not king. 'Tetrarch' indicated that he exercised his power in subordination to Roman authority. It was Herod Antipas, who died in A.D. 39, who had St. John the Baptist beheaded ... Philip, another son of Herod the Great and stepbrother of Herod Antipas, was tetrarch in the territory mentioned here up to the year A.D. 34. He married Herodias, who is spoken about in Mark 6:17-19. The high priest at the time was Caiaphas, who held the position from A.D. 18 to 36. Annas, his father-in-law, was still so influential that he was considered as the de facto head of Jewish religious and political life. That is why, when Christ was arrested, he was first interrogated before Annas (Jn 18:12-24). St. Luke therefore is perfectly justified in calling him high priest" (*The Navarre Bible*). Luke ... writes in the Greek style of the Septuagint, the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament.

"After the death of Herod the Great, his kingdom had been divided among his children as a tetrarchy (four provinces)" (*Collegeville Bible Commentary*). "Tetrarch" comes from tetra arche, meaning ruler of one fourth of a domain.

"[T]he word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert."

"The word of God came to him, as it had come to other prophets, and this word is to be understood as more than a message from heaven; it is God's active power going out from him to achieve results in the world—'He spoke and it was done' (Ps 33:9 cf Is 55:11). The prophets believed that when God's word came to them it meant that God was about to act and was taking them into his confidence (Amos 3:7). He was king and they were heralds, so that, when he spoke through them, his purpose was being let loose into the world. This was especially true of the symbolic acts in which they embodied God's message. When Jeremiah smashed his pitcher in the valley of Hinnom (Jer 19), he could say, 'There goes Jerusalem!' because through him, God had spoken his sentence of doom and the

city was as good as in ruins. God always keeps his word. John's baptism was a symbolic act of this prophetic kind, the purpose of which was to convey to men not merely what God was saying to them, but what he was already beginning to do with and for them" (*The Pelican Gospel Commentaries*, G.B. Caird).

"Here St. Luke formally introduces St. John the Baptist, who appears in his gospel a number times. When Christ praises the Baptist (cf Mt 11:7-9) he refers particularly to his strength of will and his commitment to his God-given mission. Humility, austerity, courage, and a spirit of prayer figure strongly in John's personality. So faithful was he to his mission of preparing the way for the Messiah that Christ praises him in a unique way: he is the greatest of those born of woman (cf Mt 11:11), 'a burning and shining lamp' (Jn 4:35). He burned with love, and shone by the witness he bore. Christ 'as the light' (Jn 1:9); the Baptist 'came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him' (Jn 1:7)" (*The Navarre Bible*).

"Luke has already described who John was in Chapter 1, and indeed with the words: 'was in the desert until the day of his manifestations to Israel' (1:80). This day has now come—he has received his heavenly call to the office of precursor—the one who was to prepare the way for the arrival of the Messiah" (*The Sunday Readings*, Kevin O'Sullivan).

"John was the son of a priest, now entering upon the thirtieth year of his age, and therefore, according to the custom of the temple, he was now to be admitted into the temple-service. But God had called him to a more honorable ministry. The scope and design of it were to bring all the people of his country off from their sins and home to their God" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary*).

John is the last of the old dispensation, serving as a bridge to the new. His call is patterned on that of Old Testament prophets (see Jer 1:2).

"The Baptist was an inspired prophet who broke the long silence of centuries since the days of the

prophet Malachi. Just as Malachi chapter 4 ends with a reference to the coming of Elijah who will warn Israel of the day of judgment, so the New Testament era opens with John's voice calling out this warning as if he were Elijah: 'Prepare the way of the Lord ...' (*International Bible Commentary*).

"The desert of Judea means the semi-mountainous, bleak wilderness rising between the Dead Sea and the central mountain ridge" (*Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

Some authors have conjectured that John lived for a while among the Dead Sea Covenanters. The scene of his first preaching and baptizing was only a few miles north of their settlement in the northwest bank of the Dead Sea. It has been pointed out that parallels between the New Testament and the Dead Sea Scrolls occur consistently throughout St. John's gospel, but in the three synoptics they are found only where John the Baptist appears. The fourth evangelist was a disciple of the Baptist and thus contacted the covenanters. The Baptist's opening words, drawn from the book of Isaiah, occur also in the Manual of Discipline, the ruler book of the Dead Sea Covenanters.

"Like the prophet Amos, John the Baptist was trained in the desert to seek God alone. Impatient with the false glitter of artificial joy, and angered by the sham-religion of mere externalism, he wanted no other joy than to hear the voice of the Bridegroom, Christ" (*The New Testament Reading Guide*, Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P.).

"[John] went throughout the whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

"[John's] mission was to preach repentance to get the people to turn to God, and as it was customary with the Jews to go through external rites of washing to represent the internal cleansing of the heart and mind, John chose the Jordan banks, the only river in southern Palestine, so that the rite of washing as a token of repentance could be carried out easily" (*The Sunday Readings*, Kevin O'Sullivan). Repentance consists of a turning away from sin to

a life of good moral behavior. "John was preaching a baptism of repentance (in Greek, *metanoia*, a change of heart) for the forgiveness of sins. The Gospels always quickly qualify the forgiveness of sin with some kind of interior renewal" (*The New Testament Reading Guide*, Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P.).

"John's baptism was a ritual act expressing the willingness of individual Hebrews to join the movement of renewal. It counted on an interior disposition of repentance without which there could be no forgiveness" (*Collegeville Bible Commentary*).

"The imagery [of the forgiveness of sins] stems from the cancellation of economic debts and release from slavery or imprisonment" (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

"As it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: 'A voice of one crying out in the desert: Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'"

"Deutero-Isaiah was describing the return from the Babylonian exile as a new Exodus, leading across another Sinai desert to a new and more glorious promised land. John the Baptist is depicted as realizing the dreams of Deutero-Isaiah" (*Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

In the second part of the Book of Isaiah (Chapters 40-55), which is called the 'Book of the Consolation of Israel', the Jewish people are told that they will once again suffer exile and a new exodus in which their guide will be, not Moses, but God himself; once again they will make their way through the desert to reach a new promised land. St. Luke sees the preaching of the Baptist, who announces the arrival of the Messiah, as fulfilling this prophecy.

"Because the Lord is imminent, people must prepare themselves spiritually, by doing penance for their sins, to receive the special divine grace the Messiah is bringing. This is what he means by leveling the mountains and making the Lord's paths straight.

"Every year in its Advent liturgy the Church proclaims the coming of Jesus Christ, our Savior,

exhorting every Christian to purify his or her soul by a new interior conversion” (*The Navarre Bible*).

“Isaiah’s words announce the restoration of Israel and the world (Is 40:3-5). John is the desert voice calling Israel to prepare for the Lord’s coming. Just as roads were improved for the procession of ancient kings, so John prepares for Jesus’ arrival and the salvation of all flesh. By citing the opening chapter of Isaiah’s central section (Chapters 40-55), Luke cues an entire symphony of biblical promises to be fulfilled by the Lord. He will rescue the poor and oppressed (Is 41:17; 42:7; 49:13), pour out the Spirit (44:3), restore Israel (43:5-7; 48:20; 49:5), come to Jerusalem as King (40:9-10; 52:7-10), destroy his enemies (41:11-13; 47:1-15), and show mercy to his children (43:25; 44:22; 55:7). At the summit of this stands the Messianic Servant, whose mission is to bless the nations (42:1-4; 49:1-6) and atone for sin (50:4-9; 52:13—53:12). All of this is fulfilled by Jesus (2:32; 22:37; 24:6; Acts 3:15)” (*Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*).

“Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth.”

“When a king or person of high rank was to visit another king or dignitary the host sent his slaves to level the paths and smooth the road for the guest’s camels. Isaiah used this simile to describe how the royal Messiah should be received. The people should prepare their minds and smooth their consciences by wiping out everything offensive to God—lowering the hills, and building up true fervor and sincerity—filling the valleys, and thus the rough way would be made smooth—they would be worthy to receive the Messiah” (*The Sunday Readings*, Kevin O’Sullivan).

“But the crooked places are to become straight when the hearts of the wicked, perverted by a course of injustice, are directed to the rule of justice. But the rough ways are changed to smooth when fierce and savage dispositions by,

the influence of Divine grace, return to gentleness and meekness” (*Catena Aurea*, Gregory of Nyssa).

“... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

“The virtue and knowledge of the Gospel shall be extended even to the end of the world, turning mankind from savage manners and perverse wills to meekness and gentleness. Not only Jewish converts but all mankind shall see the salvation of God” (John Chrysostom).

“All flesh, that is, every man cannot see the salvation of God in Christ in this life. The prophet therefore stretches his eye beyond to the last day of judgment, when all men both the elect and the reprobate shall equally see Him” (*Catena Aurea*, Gregory of Myssa).

“The prophet Isaiah, following the promise given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gn 12:3; 26:4, and 28:14), sees the future Messiah as the Savior not only of the Chosen People but of all nations—all mankind ... The salvation ... comes from God. The human race, because of its sinfulness, had abandoned God and could not return to him of its own strength. The infinite love and mercy of God however, went in search of the last sheep and through the Good Shepherd, the Messiah, brought mankind back once more to the true fold” (*The Sunday Readings*, Kevin O’Sullivan).

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Gospel: Luke 3:10-18

The crowds asked John the Baptist, “What should we do?” The people were shaken up by John’s preaching: “He said to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance. ... Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.’” (Lk 3:7-9)

The people were afraid. John made them realize

that divine judgment was imminent. They needed to change their spiritually fruitless lives before they faced God. So different groups of people came to ask John what they should do—with the exception of the Pharisees and Sadducees who had come to see what the Baptist was preaching and observe his baptism. “But we do not find them asking, ‘What shall we do?’ They thought they knew. But the people, the publicans and the soldiers, who knew that they had done amiss, and were conscious to themselves of great ignorance and unacquaintedness with the divine law, were particularly inquisitive. ... Those that profess and promise repentance in general must evidence it by particular instances of reformation. They that would do their duty must desire to know their duty. These here inquired, not, what shall this man do? But, what shall we do? What fruits meet for repentance shall we bring forth? Now John gives answer to each according to their place and station” (*Matthew Henry’s Commentary*).

“It is not the religious leaders who are willing to repent, but the ordinary Jewish people and those who, at best, are on the fringes of Jewish society: toll collectors and soldiers. These are the same people who respond positively to Jesus’ preaching. In his baptismal catechesis Luke reminds his churches that they should be as open to finding goodness outside the acceptable ways of life as John and Jesus were” (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

“It is plain that the hearts of his hearers were troubled and sought for advice from [John]” (*Catena Aurea*, Gregory of Nyssa).

“What great virtue there was in the discourse of the Baptist is manifested by this, that the Publicans, maybe even the soldiers, be compelled to seek counsel of him concerning their salvation” (*Catena Aurea*, Bede).

“Great is the force of virtue that makes the rich seek the way of salvation from the poor, from him that has nothing” (*Catena Aurea*, John Chrysostom).

John said to the crowds in reply, “Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise.”

“John directs his message to all persons and professions. The spiritual renewal he calls for entails, among other things, a return to social justice (3:11, 14), honesty (3:13) and generosity (3:11)” (*Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*).

“For because it was written in the Law, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,’ he is proved to love his neighbor less than himself, who does not share with him in his distress, those things which are even necessary to himself” (*Catena Aurea*, Gregory of Nyssa).

“But we are hereby taught, that everything we have over and above what is necessary to our daily support, we are bound to give to him who has nothing for God’s sake, who has given us liberally whatever we possess” (*Catena Aurea*, Basil).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “St. John Chrysostom vigorously recalls this: ‘Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs.’ The demands of justice must be satisfied first of all; that which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity” (AA8#5): “When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice” (St. Gregory the Great; CCC 2446).

“The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God” (CCC 2447).

“[The] passage [in today’s Gospel] explains the character of the repentance required as a preparation for the kingdom: it is a thorough-going conversion finding expression in the observance of the commandments and in works of charity. The recommendation to tax collectors and soldiers (most likely troops of Herod Antipas in whose territory John was preaching) is more specific in view of the special temptations of their way of life” (*New Catholic Commentary*).

“Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they said to him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He answered them, ‘Stop collecting more than what is prescribed.’”

“Again and again in Luke normal expectations and deep-seated prejudices are turned upside down. Toll collectors ... eagerly respond to Jesus’ preaching, too” (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

“The response to the proclamation of John must be repentance, and here are particular examples of what repentance might entail ... The Romans imposed taxes on all citizens under their jurisdiction and sold the right to collect them to the highest bidders. The tax-gathering agencies hired collectors who are the ‘tax-gatherers’ of the Gospels. There was obviously plenty of scope for exploiting people by demanding more tax than the Romans actually required. The injustice must be renounced, says the Baptist, as a preparation for the new order of things” (*Cambridge Bible Commentary*).

“The publicans (tax-collectors), who paid Rome for the ‘privilege’ of collecting taxes, were despised by their fellow Jews. John did not demand that they quit their jobs, but that they reform their morals ...” (*New Testament Reading Guide*, Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P.).

“The Baptist requires of everyone—Pharisees, tax collectors, soldiers—a deep spiritual renewal in the very exercise of their job; they have to act justly and honorably. God asks all of us to sanctify ourselves in our work and in the circumstances in which we find ourselves: ‘Any honest and

worthwhile work can be converted into a divine occupation. In God’s service there are no second-class jobs; all of them are important” (*The Navarre Bible*; Blessed J. Escriva).

“John appears as the balanced guide of sincere souls. He asks for fundamental things, as did the prophets before him: almsgiving on the part of everyone, justice on the part of publican tax collectors and soldiers” (*New Testament Reading Guide*, Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P.).

“Soldiers also asked him, ‘And what is it that we should do?’ He told them, ‘Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.’”

“It seems that these soldiers are Jewish men in the service of Herod Antipas. Since they helped to enforce Rome’s will in a subject country, they too were despised. As embodiments of Luke’s themes of reversal of expectations and God’s love for the despised, they present themselves for baptism. In the course of his gospel story Luke will present two other soldiers, centurions at that, who respond favorably to Jesus (7:1-10; 23:47). The first Gentile converted in Acts is the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10-11). These passages provide evidence for Luke’s positive view of Roman military authority ... The injunctions John gives to the soldiers reflect Augustan ideals of how the military should conduct itself.

“Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ. John answered them all, saying, ‘I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals.’”

“Luke’s comment implies that there were Palestinian Jews who awaited the coming of a Messiah i.e. an ‘anointed’ agent of Yahweh sent for the restoration of Israel and the triumph of God’s power and dominion. ... ‘All’ indicates the Lucan theme of universalism” (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

“John’s activity gave rise to speculation about the Messiah. Expectation had been high for decades; several pseudo-prophets and pseudo-Messiahs had already appeared (Act 5:36-37), leaving disappointment but only adding to the expectancy. John gives an official answer to ‘all’ in Israel. ‘There is one to come who is mightier than I.’ In comparison with the Messiah, John considers himself lower than the lowest slave: only a non-Jewish slave could be required to loosen his master’s sandal strap” (*Collegeville Bible Commentary*, Jerome Kodel, O.S.B.).

“‘Mightier than I’: This ... phrase indicated the expected eschatological deliverer, the one who would appear at the eschaton or final day. The mediator’s baptism would be ‘with spirit and with fire,’ synonymous terms for the power of God’s presence which burns away dross and ignites the fire of love. Baptism, consequently, is closely linked to the passion of Jesus, for it consecrates one to the full purification of spirit, absolutely necessary before one belongs entirely to God. Not only will Christ consider his passion a ‘baptism,’ but Christian baptism will be called a participation in the passion and resurrection of Christ” (*New Testament Reading Guide*, Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P.).

“John is inferior to Jesus. John uses the purifying agent of water; Jesus will use the superior purifying and refining agents of the Holy Spirit and fire. In Acts 2 Luke shows how the fire of the Holy Spirit accomplishes its work in human being. ... Jesus is more powerful than John in repulsing the powers of evil” (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

“Jesus is the great liberator in the war against Satan. The word ‘mighty’ is often used in Scripture for the leader of the final struggle with evil.”

“The Scriptures frequently attribute Messianic achievement to the Spirit, but special prominence is given to the Spirit in Lucan writings. Throughout the Bible many extraordinary accomplishments reveal the presence of the Spirit, the life-power of God: creation (Gn 1:2); warriors (Jgs 3:10; 11:29; 1 Sm 11:6); particular offices (Gn 41:38-40; Num 11:17, 25;

27:18); Servant of the Lord (Is 42:1); Messianic King (Is 11:1 ff).

“In Scripture, fire very often indicates the presence of the Savior God. Fire has a prominent place in liturgical services where man meets his Savior (Lv 1:7 ff; 6:2, 6). Great theophanies surround God with fire (Gn 15:17; Ex 3:1 ff; 13:21 f; Nm 14:14; Is 6; Ez 1:4 ff; Joel 3:3). God comes ‘in fire’ to judge, that is, to fulfill his promises to the elect and remove evil from their midst ...” (*The Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

“His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

“The image of winnowing wheat is a frequent one in the Bible for separation (purification) and fiery judgment (Is 29:5-6; 41:16; Jer 15:17). With a wooden [forked] shovel the Palestinian farmer tossed the crushed stalks of wheat into the air. The heavier grain fell quickly to the ground, while the lighter chaff was blown by the wind to the edge of the threshing area, where it was gathered and later burned” (*The Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

“God will similarly separate the righteous and the wicked at the final judgment” (Ps 1:4-6; Mt 13:24-30) (*Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*).

“Exhorting them in many other ways, he preached good news to the people.”

“Luke admits that he has given only a summary of what the Baptist preached on many occasions” (*New Testament Reading Guide*, Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P.).

“In the Lucan perspective there are so many similarities between John and Jesus that Luke can say that John preaches the good news as he inaugurates the new time of salvation” (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

“John kept on telling the crowds who came to hear him the ‘good news’ of the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah and thus prepared the way for Christ’s public ministry” (*The Sunday Readings*, Kevin O’Sullivan).

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Gospel: Luke 1:39-45

The angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would become the mother of the Messiah, the Son of David, whose kingdom would have no end. She would conceive him through the Holy Spirit and thus retain her virginity. Her child would be the Son of God. Then the angel gave Mary a sign in confirmation of his words to her: Elizabeth, her relative who is old and barren, conceived a son six months previously to show that nothing is impossible for God. Mary accepted God's will for her. Consequently, "Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth."

This passage concerns the second Joyful Mystery, the Visitation. Mary hastens to bring Jesus to others.

This "town of Judah", which was located in "hill country", "must be in the neighborhood of Jerusalem; a tradition going back to the 6th century points to Ain Karim, 5 miles west of the city. The 'haste' of Mary was inspired by friendship and charity; the journey would have taken some four days" (*A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*).

A four-day journey of perhaps 90 miles shows that the strength of Mary's character already stands out. The daring and boldness of this strong young woman shines forth from the beginning. Such virtue was her lifestyle that grew ever stronger. It reached phenomenal heights when she stood beneath the cross with the suffering, dying Jesus (Jn 19:25).

"[Luke] brings together the two mothers-to-be (1:25 and 1:36) so that both might praise God active in their lives and that Elizabeth's child might be presented as the 'precursor' of Mary's child" (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

"She entered the house" with the fullness of the divine presence. "Full of grace", she radiated the

divinity so that it shone brightly on Elizabeth. Consequently, "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb."

This event shows us how simple words of greeting, coming from a heart filled with God, can convey supernatural grace. An invisible spiritual explosion occurs when two graced persons meet. And the impact is felt by those who are near. The sound of a person saturated with the divine presence communicates grace and sanctifies the other persons who are the recipients. We can better understand what happens now when two graced persons meet from Mary's greeting Elizabeth.

The unborn John leaps for joy as he is sanctified in his mother's womb. This is just what the angel told Zechariah would happen: "He will be filled with the holy Spirit even from his mother's womb" (Lk 1:15). The word of God tells us that Elizabeth herself was "filled with the Holy Spirit" as a result of Mary's presence and greeting. She bears the newly conceived Jesus. She is overshadowed by the power of the Most High (see Lk 1:35). She is mothering the God-becoming-man. And as Mother of God made man, she continues to mother God in us. Man cannot exist without woman. That is the way God made us. "God created man in his image, in the divine image he created them" (Gen 1:27). Together they form the divine image. This is true both naturally and supernaturally. Jesus needed Mary to become human—not only to be conceived and born but also that his full human personality could develop. He needed to be formed and befriended by her. Just as Jesus needed Joseph to develop the masculine side of his personality, so he needed Mary to develop his "anima", the more delicate, inner feminine side of his male personality. It is in this sense that man needs woman in his life. Mary, the divine Mother, the Mother of grace, which comes to us through her Son, Jesus, must form us into complete children of God and human beings. We need her in our lives for continuous formation.

When Elizabeth and Mary met, the unborn herald leaped for joy to greet his unborn Lord. “At Mary’s greeting Elizabeth felt the infant move in the womb; as an inspired prophetess (‘filled with the Holy Spirit’) she understood that he had leaped for joy at the presence of the Mother of the Messiah” (*A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*).

“Elizabeth’s experience parallels that of Rebekah in Gen 25. Both Luke and the Greek Old Testament [the Septuagint] use the same verb (Greek: *skirtao*) to describe children leaping or stirring in the womb. As Rebekah’s experience signaled the preeminence of Jacob over his older brother Esau (Gen 25:22-23), so the similar experience of Elizabeth was a sign that Jesus would be greater than his older cousin, John” (Luke 3:16; Jn 3:27-30) (*Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*).

John’s leaping in his mother’s womb also reminds us of David leaping and dancing before the Ark of God (2 Sam 6:16), as well as the Messianic leap of joy among the poor (Is 35:6; Mal 3:20).

“Zechariah had been promised that his son would be filled with the Holy Spirit (1:15). Once Jesus is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit can become active in others. John receives the Spirit of the presence of Jesus; the Spirit fills Elizabeth, and later Zechariah and Simon. This foreshadows the future glorification of Jesus, which will release the spirit on all” (Acts 2:33) (*Collegeville Bible Commentary*, Jerome Kodell, O.S.B.).

“Although he was conceived in sin—original sin—like other men, St. John the Baptist was born sinless because he was sanctified in his mother’s womb by the presence of Jesus Christ (then in Mary’s womb) and of the Blessed Virgin. On receiving this grace of God St. John rejoices by leaping with joy in his mother’s womb—thereby fulfilling the archangel’s prophecy” (Lk 1:15) (*The Navarre Bible*).

“And Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, ‘Blessed are you

among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.’”

Mary, as model believer (see 1:38), is praised for her trust in the fidelity of God” (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

“St. Bede comments that Elizabeth blesses Mary using the same words as the archangel ‘to show that she should be honored by angels and by men and why she should indeed be revered above all other women.’ When we say the Hail Mary, we repeat these divine greetings” (*The Navarre Bible*).

“Since according to contemporary Jewish ideas a woman’s greatness was measured by the children that she bore, the Mother of the Kyrios would naturally be said to surpass all others. Luke here is foreshadowing 11:27, where a woman from the crowd utters a similar recognition of her” (*The Gospel According to Luke*, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.).

“Elizabeth blesses Mary with words once spoken to Joel and Judith in the Old Testament (Jgs 5:24-27; Jdt 13:18). These women were blessed for their heroic faith and courage in warding off enemy armies hostile to Israel. Victory was assured when both Jael and Judith assassinated the opposing military commanders with a mortal blow to the head. Mary will follow in their footsteps, yet in her case both the enemy destroyed and the victory won will be greater, for she will bear the Savior who crushes the head of sin, death, and the devil underfoot” (Gen 3:15; 1 Jn 3:8) (CCC 64, 489) (*Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*).

“The Holy Spirit ... revealed to Elizabeth the exalted mystery resting beneath the heart of her young kinswomen. Elizabeth ‘cried out with a loud voice’—a phrase redolent in the Bible of a liturgical shout of joy and praise. Overlooking the joy of her own motherhood, Elizabeth exclaimed with excitement: of all women you are the most favored by God; blessed be your child. Another series of biblical texts joins in chorus: the blessings of Deuteronomy [Deut 28:4; 7:12-14]; the acclaim of Israel’s women-saviors in the books of Judges and Judith. Elizabeth’s salutation,

repeated daily in the prayer “Hail Mary”, does not stop with Mary but rather proclaims that through Mary comes world salvation” (*New Testament Reading Guide*, Carroll Stuhlmueller C.P.).

“And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

“Just as Mary is miraculously informed about Elizabeth, so Luke seems to indicate that the latter learns Mary’s secret by the revelation of the Holy Spirit. In saluting Mary as ‘the mother of my Lord’ Elizabeth is at least recognizing the child’s Messianic dignity” (*A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*).

“This title [‘Mother of my Lord’] reveals the twin mysteries of Jesus’ divinity and Mary’s divine maternity (CCC 449, 495). Note that every occurrence of the word ‘Lord’ in the immediate (1:45) and surrounding context refers to God (1:28, 32, 38, 46, 56, 58, 68).

“Mary’s divine motherhood was the first Marian dogma expounded by the Church. The Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) defined her unique relationship to Christ and honored her with the title ‘Mother of God’ (Greek: *Theotokos*). This was reaffirmed in 1964 at Vatican II” (*Lumen Gentium*; 53) (*Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*).

“Even before his birth, Jesus is identified in Luke as the Lord” (*New American Bible* footnote).

“John has leapt in Elizabeth’s womb because Mary is carrying their Lord” (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

“Elizabeth’s question, ‘Who am I that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?’ recalls the words of King David when the ark of the covenant was being brought back to Jerusalem after having been captured by the Philistines: ‘How can the ark of the Lord come to me?’ (2 Sam 6:9). The ark symbolized the presence of Yahweh, the God of Israel. Mary’s visit to Elizabeth sanctifies her home with the presence of the Lord” (*Collegetown Bible Commentary*, Jerome Kodell O.S.B.). Like David, Elizabeth felt unworthy to receive her Lord as a guest.

It is consoling to know that the words of the Hail Mary, “Holy Mary, Mother of God,” are echoing the inspired words of Scripture uttered by Elizabeth.

Elizabeth continues, “For the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.”

Mary’s voice communicates sanctifying grace, communicates God, the source of joy. The unborn John is affected; he leaps with joy. John had been waiting, waiting. . . . And now the object of his desire has arrived. He can give free rein to joy. The Messiah’s arrival is a reality: Now John can announce him. He is here! “Rejoice with me,” John is saying, “let my joy draw you into my joy. Experience his saving grace—join me and Mary and say, ‘My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.’”

Our joy in God may also be communicated to others even as Mary did when “the sound of [her] greeting reached [Elizabeth’s] ears.” This will happen for us when our hearts are full of God’s joy.

Elizabeth said to Mary, “Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”

“Luke portrays Mary as a believer whose faith stands in contrast to the disbelief of Zechariah (Lk 1:20). Mary’s role as believer in the infancy narrative should be seen in connection with the explicit mention of her presence among ‘those who believed’ after the resurrection at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:14)” (*New American Bible* footnote).

Faith is a power that makes us capable of divine receptivity. Faith opens our hearts to God’s self-gift so that he can grow in us to full maturity. This means that if we live lives of pure faith in receptivity of the divine self-gift, he will pervade our whole persons and become “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28): our whole persons can then be continually permeated by the divine presence and illumine our whole beings with the purity of spirit (Wis 7:22-30). Thus, like Mary in her pure receptivity of obedient faith,

God is truly conceived and lives in us. As Jesus explained, we become his mother (Mt 12:50).

THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD — CHRISTMAS

Gospel: Luke 2:1-14

Today we come together to celebrate the birthday of Jesus. The Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, became a human being. The Virgin Mary gave him birth. He was born into our world as a little child. What did he look like? What did God's infinite perfection look like in a newborn baby? Could you experience God in his eyes and holy face? Did the glory of God shine around him illuminating the dark cave?

He comes to win our hearts: no one is afraid of a tiny infant. We are drawn to him. We want to take him in our arms and love him. Cher' bébé!

God is love. He wants us to approach him so he can love us. He became human so he could lift us up to a divine level of being. God became human so humans could start living the life of God.

By suffering and dying in our own human nature, Jesus destroyed the sin that separated us from God. By rising from the dead and giving us his sanctifying grace, he gave us a share in his divine life: he makes us children of God, able to call God "Father" and enter into intimate, personal communion with him.

The invisible God has made himself visible. Now, he can be seen in Jesus. Now, we know where he is so we can contact him. He makes himself available to us. We can locate him in the Catholic Church, which he founded. There, he left us the seven sacraments as meeting points with him. He is particularly present in the Holy Eucharist. You can visit with him anytime in the tabernacle.

The Christ-Mass gives us Jesus as he is in himself: Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. The Catholic Church does not only talk about Jesus; she gives us Jesus in the fullness of his humanity and divinity. Our redeemer, who was born and lived years ago, is still with us today as risen Lord.

The Holy Eucharist, which Jesus instituted for us at the last supper, and fully realized through his passion, death, and resurrection, gives us Jesus in all of his mysteries. Today, we focus on the mysteries of his childhood. The Eucharist gives us Jesus and the grace to live out the mysteries of his holy childhood: the grace to live as innocent children of God; the grace of depending on God like a child on his parent (A baby cannot survive without his parent.); the grace to reverence God as our Father; the grace to hug him tight and to live in continuous communion with him.

Today, prophecy is fulfilled in a most striking way—even literally. The dark world of ignorance of divine things has actually become all lit up by the light of the glory of God. A world of gloom and death is enlivened with heavenly music and cheerful song.

"The glory of the Lord shone around them ... a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, [were] praising God. ...

"I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord."

The qualities given to the newborn king were true in the fullest sense possible. This long-expected king is really wonder-counselor, God-hero, Father forever, Prince of Peace, Son of God. Ordinarily, these were titles given to kings when they were enthroned. But they were not fully realized. In Jesus, however, a descendant of King David, all of these qualities are literally fulfilled in his person.

You must come to know this Lord of yours better. He is far more wonderful than anyone else you have ever known. He is God incarnate. You can get to know him personally through prayer: heart to heart communion and doing what pleases him. When you do discover this wonderful Person, you will have come upon the joy of your life. He is not only a limited human being; he is also unlimited divinity.

The birth of Christ in our world is such a happy occasion that the word of God directs us to "sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done wondrous

deeds.” We express our joy by singing. This is why we sing Christmas carols at this time of the year. We want to express our excitement and wonder regarding the marvelous happening of God’s birth as a human baby. What dignity and honor he has bestowed on our human nature! That he would choose to become one of us!

“The grace of God has appeared” (Ti 2:11). God has shown us his favor. The loving kindness of God can now actually be seen. It can now be felt and experienced in the form of a human being: warm, tender, loving. Jesus is the grace of God embodied in human flesh. Now all know exactly where to find God. The unreachable, invisible God comes to visit us and reveal himself to us in Jesus. He shows himself not as one to be feared, but as a sweet little baby. He is the grace of God. We can approach him with confidence.

The Lord comes in this way because we are creatures of sense. We need to see, hear, and touch. This is why Jesus continues to be among us through his Church and in the sacraments. You hear his voice in his disciples—as Jesus promised: “He who hears you hears me” (Lk 10:16). You see him in the Eucharist, “This is my body” (Mt 26:26). “I am the living bread that came down from heaven ...” (Jn 6:51).

These are sure signs of Jesus’ presence in our world. He is here among us—not in some vague, uncertain way, but in a clear, definite, sensible fashion. Thus, we can know that we come in touch with God. For example, when you hear the priest say, “I absolve you from your sins” in the sacrament of Reconciliation, you can be just as sure that you met the mercy of God in Jesus as the sinful woman in the Gospel. Jesus assured his Apostles: “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them” (Jn 20:23).

“The grace of God has appeared [in Jesus], saving all and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly. ... Jesus Christ ... gave himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people as his own, eager to do what is good” (Ti 2:11-14).

Grace teaches us to partake of the pleasures of the

world with moderation, according to God’s will, as we remain faithful to loving God with our whole heart. Grace calls us to live according to the level of spirit, that which is highest in us, so we can live in constant communion with God and thus attain the highest degree of joy in this life.

This supreme life that grace calls us to is for everybody, not just the Jews or a privileged few saints. God’s mercy and love in Jesus goes to all people who would receive it. It is significant to note that Jesus first shows himself to the poor, lowly shepherds. He identifies himself with them by being born in a stable and laid in a feed trough. He does not disdain to associate himself with people that others despised. He is particularly attracted to us when we experience our own poverty of being: our weakness, our sinfulness, our misery, our helplessness. ... By taking up our human nature as his own, Jesus makes us all brothers and sisters. He goes even further than that and actually tells us, “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers [and sisters] of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40).

Every human nature owned by any and every human being belongs to Jesus because he has taken it to himself as his own in the mystery of the Incarnation. When we love them, we love him. When we neglect them, we neglect him.

The angel gave the shepherds a sign to recognize the Savior: a child wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. There, we find Jesus easy enough to identify and to love. Many will approach the manger and love him there. But what about the same Jesus who identifies himself with every human being, particularly those who are poor in some way and unattractive? Do we recognize him there and give him the same love we give him in the manger? We may not choose to love Jesus in one way and shun him in another. Jesus is more alive and real in any living person—even the person you think of as least—than he is in the crib.

May our love for Jesus be real. May we give Jesus the gift of our love and respect in each human being that we meet. There, we meet Jesus in a concrete, clear, definite way—the way he himself said you could locate and love him.

THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH

Gospel: Luke 2:41-52

Each year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover". Jesus went with them. What a beautiful sight: to see the whole family together on pilgrimage every year (an example for you).

There, in Jerusalem, the holy family would celebrate the Passover, when God delivered his people from slavery. Through the blood of the paschal lamb, the angel of death passed over the houses of the chosen people and spared them.

Then God opened the waters of the Red Sea and made his people pass over to the Promised Land. All of this anticipates the new Passover when Jesus will return to Jerusalem to initiate a new Passover through his passion, death and resurrection.

The new Lamb of God will shed his blood to save his people from the angel of death and sin. Jesus will open a way through the destructive waters of sin and evil and lead his people to the freedom of the children of God.

But first, just as Mary lost Jesus for three days and found him again safe in the temple after much anxiety while suffering the pain of loss, so too, she will lose Jesus again through crucifixion and death only to find him again three days later after much suffering and grief, safe in the new temple of God, Jesus' glorified body.

In the present scene, we read that after Jesus was found in the temple, he went back home with Joseph and Mary and was obedient to them. Jesus was obedient to his mother and foster father even if he was a divine person. He honored them.

We also need to honor our parents because they gave us life. We owe them our existence; without them we would not be; it is through our parents that God gave us life.

For this we owe them deep gratitude and respect; they are the mysterious source of our life: They could have chosen to contracept or abort us

instead of giving us life.

—What other reasons call us to obey and respect our Parents?

The first reading tells us that, "God sets a father in honor over his children; a mother's authority he confirms over her sons" (Sirach 3:2). In other words, God is the one who has given parents authority over their children and calls them to obey. That is a divine order. The New Testament confirms this: "There is no authority except from God ... therefore, whoever resists authority opposes what God has appointed ..." (Rom 13:1-2).

Obedience is a valuable virtue: Adam and Eve lost all the blessings that came with their friendship with God through disobedience. Jesus and Mary regained the blessings and friendship with God through obedience.

Through obedience, we submit that which is highest in us to God, our wills and all of our other faculties, which are under the command of the will. Thus, we submit our whole persons to God through obedience. In this way, we open ourselves to direct communion with God. We believe that God himself directs us through those he has given authority over us. That's the truth whether we are talking about parental authority, spousal authority, civil authority or ecclesiastical authority. We look beyond the immediate authority over us to see God commanding us through them.

One of the worst sins is pride. Submissiveness in obedience overcomes pride and opens us up to God. Humility is required for this.

Respect for parents goes far beyond obedience. We must honor them, and love them, and care for them. Holy Scripture is very strong in its condemnation of those who dishonor their parents. Here are just a couple of them:

"Whoever curses his father or mother shall be put to death" (Ex 21:17).

"The eye that mocks a father or scorns an aged mother, will be plucked out by the ravens in the valley; and eaten by the vultures" (Prov 30:17).

An evil end indeed promised to those who dishonor their parents!

But notice in the first reading all the blessings that are received from honoring our parents:

We atone, i.e. make up for sins.

We preserve ourselves from sin.

Our prayers are heard (twice mentioned).

We store up riches.

We are gladdened by children.

We will live a long life.

We will thus comfort our parents.

We must continue to be respectful of our parents when they are old or when their minds fail.

Notice, in the second reading, the different kinds of virtue that we are encouraged to practice in family life (see Col 3:12-21). The Scripture tells us that we are called to live in this virtuous way because we have been chosen by God; we are holy and have been consecrated to God in baptism; we are God's beloved children. Our nobility requires that we practice the following virtues; and therefore, we must exercise:

“Heartfelt compassion” toward one another; that means we must have a sympathetic awareness of other's distress, together with a desire to alleviate it.

“Kindness”, that is, we show goodness to others; we are affectionately helpful and loving.

“Humility”, that is, we are aware of our own lowliness so that we do not easily feel slighted; we are comfortable with performing menial tasks and consider ourselves to be the least of God's children.

“Gentleness”, that is, we have a mild disposition, free from harshness, sternness or violence. We are meek.

“Patience”, that is, we bear pain or trials calmly; we show forbearance under provocation or strain.

“Forgiving one another”, that is, we let go of resentment or a claim to getting even; we stop being resentful against someone who hurt or offended us. We forgive as the Lord has forgiven us.

“Love”, that is, we have an unselfish, loyal and benevolent concern for the good of others; we cherish others and want to do good to them through self-gift and acts of service or assistance.

Love expresses itself through all these other virtues just mentioned. Love also informs all these other virtues and holds them together as the bond of perfection. You can see why all of these virtues are needed in family life. These holy virtues will create an atmosphere of peace and concord among family members. You will live in harmony and unity. Practicing these virtues, of course, requires effort.

The second reading also tells us that we must be a grateful people. We express our indebtedness to one another for the least service—we are quick to say, “Thank you.”

We must also continually express our gratitude to God for all of his gifts—we give thanks to God, not only at meal times, but throughout the day; we express our gratitude to him for his abundant gifts. We are quick to say, “Thank you, Lord”; “Merci Bon Dieu.” Today's Scripture also tells us, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.”

We keep the Holy Bible open in our home, in a frequented place, like the kitchen table. We refer to it often. We learn our favorite passages by heart. We write them out and carry them with us. We share these scriptural quotes with one another and in this way enrich each other's lives spiritually.

Notice how Jesus is interested in his religion in today's Gospel. He listened to his teachers and asked them questions. “All who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers” (Lk 2:47).

Jesus would have gotten his knowledge and wisdom from Mary and Joseph who exposed him to the Scriptures, explaining their meaning to him. This he made his own, and in this beginning, he got his own insights. This is what you are called to do as parents in family life.

Let me close with this observation. The holy family of Nazareth was not free from moments of tension. The members of that family were also tested in understanding each other, in bearing with one another, and in learning to communicate with each other.

Observe the situation:

Mary and Joseph left the temple and started off on their journey back to Nazareth. Jesus stayed behind. His parents did not know it. Thinking that he was in the caravan, they journeyed for a day and looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances. But, not finding him, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days, they finally found Jesus in the temple. What joy they experienced at seeing him again (Fifth Joyful Mystery)! On the other hand, you can imagine how worried Mary and Joseph were! Perhaps Jesus had gotten kidnapped or murdered or that he was lost forever.

Mary expressed how troubled they were in these words: “Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.”

Jesus’ response was:

“Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

“But they did not understand what he said to them.” This was a real crisis in the holy family’s life. See the tension experienced in this event. Jesus is asserting his adolescent independence: he declares that God is his Father (in contrast to Joseph, his foster-father).

The claims of his heavenly Father must override all other demands; his mission will break or transcend all the natural ties of family—he will do this again later on in his public life. For example, when someone told Jesus that his mother was asking to speak with him, he replied, “Who is my mother? ... Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my mother” (Mt 12:46-50). Yet, see how this whole family ordeal was handled without arguing and fighting. But they discussed the matter, expressed their concerns and emotions and

stated the facts respectfully. Despite Jesus’ youthful nature, and his desire to enter prematurely into the adventure of the service of his heavenly Father, we read, “He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them” (Lk 2:51). Meanwhile, “his mother kept all these things in her heart”, pondering over them, seeking the grace to understand.”

Through obedience and family life, we are told, “Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man” (Lk 2:52).

It is through living family life well that we also are prepared to enter into our life’s mission.

**SOLEMNITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, THE MOTHER OF GOD
Gospel: Luke 2:16-21**

We dedicate the first day of the year to God as a sign that we want to give the rest of the year to God. We come to receive God’s blessing empowering us to do so. Today is the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. We honor Mary because she was chosen to be the mother of God made man and because she is full of grace. Jesus made her our mother, too. He said to Mary, standing under the cross, “Behold your son; and to the disciple, Behold your mother” (Jn 19:26-27).

We go in haste to Bethlehem to find Mary and Joseph and the infant lying in the manger. With the shepherds we contemplate the mystery of God-made-man. We prayerfully assimilate the mystery revealed by God’s word. We spend time, taking the mystery in at length. Only in this way can we experience the mystery and be moved to glorify and praise God like the shepherds.

Moreover, in the Eucharist, we take in the very mystery of the God made man into our very persons. In faith we draw the divine life from the Son of God given to us. We assimilate the innocence of holy childhood to live innocent lives, lives free from sin. All the graces of the mysteries of Jesus’ sinless human life are available for our assimilation.

“Fullness of Time”—2nd Reading

For centuries, God was preparing the chosen people, gracing holy men and women; prophets spoke God’s word to ready the people. Finally, time was brought to completion when Mary became pregnant with eternity, i.e. the eternal Son of God, Jesus, God-made-man.

So now, time has been sanctified by the presence of the Son of God. It has reached a new fullness. Time has become enhanced, enriched, elevated and eternalized. We use time to be sanctified and grow into eternal life. We pray that we use every moment of time well—to draw eternal, spiritual profit from it.

We must enter into communion with God through faith expressed as prayer. That is how we assimilate the divine life so that “we are being transformed into his very image from glory to glory” (2 Cor 3:18). The Eternal life of God becomes our own. God gives us a participation in his own divine life so that we actually begin to live the supreme life of God. We come to know and experience for ourselves the very blissful life of God himself (see Jn 17:3).

Happy New Year!

The Church has the power to give you a holy and therefore a happy new year. Jesus said, “I make all things new” (Rev 21:5).

Through priestly ordination and Holy Orders, we share the priesthood of Jesus, the eternal priest.

We have the power therefore in the sacrament of Penance to remove the heavy burden of sin that weighs you down. We can take away this oppressive weight and give you the joy of the children of God.

In the Mass we have power to give you Jesus himself, in the Holy Eucharist, giving you divine energy to live a supernatural life.

We give you the living word of God as interpreted by sacred Tradition and the teaching authority of the Church, giving you power to actually live that word. Thus you will be given the power to live a

“happy new year”.

Finally, we have the power to bless you, i.e. to call God’s favor down upon you.

The first reading tells us that the Lord told his priests of the Old Testament how they should bless his people:

“The Lord bless you and keep you” i.e., give you physical well-being, health and protection.

“The Lord let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you” i.e., smile favorably upon you and give you prosperity, material and spiritual.

“The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace” i.e., peace/shalom: a word that summarizes all the blessings: health, security, prosperity, etc.

“So shall they invoke my name ... and I will bless them”.

God promises that he will show favor to the people who are blessed by his priests. Jesus continued this tradition of blessing people, e.g. people would bring their children to him so he could bless them. Jesus’ very last gesture, as he was ascending to heaven, was to extend his hands over his followers in a blessing. (Lk 24:50-51).

The sacrament of Holy Orders gives priests a participation in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. We act in the person of Christ the head, “*in persona Christi Capitis*”.

Listen to what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says by quoting Pope Pius XII:

“It is the same priest, Christ Jesus, whose sacred person his minister truly represents. Now the minister, by reason of the sacerdotal consecration which he has received, is truly made like to the high priest and possesses the authority to act in the power and place of the person of Christ himself (*virtute ac persona ipsius Christi*).” (CCC 1548)

So when the priest blesses you, it is Christ himself who is blessing you through the Sacrament of the priesthood. It is up to you to open your heart in faith to receive that blessing. Through faith, you

contact Christ himself. Without this receptive faith, the blessing will not reach or affect you.

Like Jesus, we extend our hand(s) to bless you. But, we end with the sign of the cross through which Jesus won our salvation and all of the blessings we receive.

Because of the New Testament revelation, we can also be more explicit in calling upon God. He is not only “Lord” or “Yahweh”; he has revealed himself as Father, as Son and as Holy Spirit. So we invoke the Blessed Trinity in our blessing.

Not only do we bless you, God’s people; we also bless objects such as homes, cars, etc. so we will use these according to God’s will and so he will protect them or allow them to be a grace for us.

We also bless sacramentals, religious objects such as candles, scapulars, crucifixes, holy water, medals, etc. These little signs are meant to stir faith in us; they remind us of God and his saints whose intercession we seek. All of these stir faith and incite us to prayer; they remind us of God and call us to be receptive to his constant outpoured love.

The Gospel tells us that the name “Jesus” was given to the child in obedience to the angel who said, “You are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins”(Mt 1:21). The word “Jesus” means “Yahweh saves”. God is present in Jesus saving us from sin. We must call upon his name often. Rather than use vulgar or irreverent words when we are experiencing difficulty, we must call upon the Name of Jesus. The Name gives us the divine person who is ready to help us go through our troubles with patient endurance.

May Jesus himself bless you for a holy and happy new year.

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12

In the first reading, we see Jerusalem, symbolizing the Church and the people of God, all lit up with a bright light. “Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you ... upon you the Lord shines, and over you appears his glory.” This brilliant light expresses the presence of God. God often showed his presence to the Jews as fire and light. Recall the scene of the burning bush through which God appeared to Moses (Ex 3:1-6); and the pillar of fire (Ex 13:21) which guided the chosen people through the desert at night.

In the great messianic day, God will transform the holy city from within by his holy and glorious presence. This light in Jerusalem will glow and illumine the gentiles, all the nations of the world. The people in far away countries will be attracted by this light. They will be drawn to the light, which will, in turn, guide them to salvation. This light will fill the foreign nations with joy. These non-Jews will come to Jerusalem, the Church, with their wealth as presents in recognition of her God and King.

When the Babylonian invasion occurred (587 BC), the glorious presence of God left the temple (Ez 10:18—11:23); but now it returns; and now it is beaming light to all the world. The darkness of despair, ignorance, and evil will now be dispelled. A new temple, the risen body of Jesus, replaces the old. This new temple appears for the first time when Jesus was born. The dark night of the world was illumined by the bright star seen by the magi, wise men who studied the stars.

These wise men came to be pictured as kings (although the Gospel does not say they were). These were even given the names of Kaspar, Balthazar, and Melchior. These legendary figures were brought into existence from meditation on such texts as the responsorial Psalm 72 of today: “The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts: the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute. All kings shall pay him homage.”

St. Matthew's gospel shows the prophecy of Isaiah fulfilled: "They prostrated themselves and did him homage. They opened their coffers and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." Three gifts may have caused the supposition that there were three wise men. But again the Gospel does not tell us so. This reflects on the passage presented in the first reading, "Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Median and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense and proclaiming the praises of the Lord" (Is 60:6).

The miraculous star seen by the magi is a fulfillment of the second prophecy by Balaam in the book of Numbers: "A star shall advance from Jacob" (Num 24:17). According to popular belief of the time, each person is represented by a star, which appears at his birth. This star prophesied by Balaam represents a great leader who is to be David, a figure of the messianic king who was to come after him. Therefore, it would be an unusually bright star.

This star seen by the wise men, then, shows that Jesus is the long expected Messiah. This is the good news. Prophecy is fulfilled. God keeps his promises and comes to save his people.

A third prophecy is fulfilled also as shown by St. Matthew when he quotes Micah who prophesied this eight centuries earlier, saying that from Bethlehem, the place where David was born, a ruler of the people would arise. "From you [Bethlehem] shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel."

We also see a fourth prophesy being fulfilled. In the first reading, Isaiah predicts, "Nations will walk by your light and kings by your shining radiance." A fifth prophesy is made in Psalm 72, which declares that "all kings ... all nations will serve him", has come true.

Our faith must be greatly strengthened by the realization of such astounding prophecies. Living that faith will help us to acquire those luminous qualities that reflect God's increased presence within us.

Epiphany is a word that means manifestation or showing. This feast celebrates God's revelation of himself to all the nations and countries of the world. In Jesus, he shows himself to all of us, all peoples of all races. He comes to make brothers and sisters of all races.

St. Paul puts it this way in the second reading, "In Christ Jesus, the Gentiles are now coheirs with the Jews, members of the same body and sharers of the promise through the preaching of the gospel."

As children of the same family, whose Father is God, we inherit the same kingdom, which is the fulfillment of God's promises. We even become members of the same body of Christ.

So the feast of the Epiphany is the celebration of the gentile Christmas. On Christmas night, we remember how Jesus is shown to the Jewish shepherds through the message of an angel. Today, Jesus is shown to us Gentiles, represented by the magi, through the miraculous star.

Herod missed the chance of a lifetime. Because his heart was hard and evil, he missed the chance to see God in the flesh. Then he tried to kill the newborn king—but he failed; despite his evil cunning, God's will and truth triumphed. So God continues to prevail in our day. He manifests himself to his believing friends, but hides himself from disbelieving sinners.

People from far away saw the star, but Herod and his court were too blinded by selfish living to see it. The magi experienced great joy at seeing the star; whereas, Herod and all of Jerusalem "became greatly disturbed".

If we live with a clear conscience, the presence of God gives us great joy. But if our conscience is burdened by sin, we are afraid of God and try to hide from his presence.

Because of selfish living, Herod and his people missed the greatest event that ever happened in their midst: the mystery of the Incarnation of God. But they were totally indisposed to enjoy it. The same may be said of us. The manifestation is

meant for us, yet our hearts may be ill prepared. We may be so engrossed in self-centeredness or sense gratification that the spiritual light of God is unable to penetrate the darkness of our heart. The star keeps on shining, but our hearts are unable to see it. We remain in darkness as we try to alleviate our miserable lives with superficial, fleeting, unsatisfying pleasure.

Those who see the star are overjoyed like the magi. It leads them to Jesus whose divinity they recognize. They “prostrate themselves and [do] him homage ... they open their treasures and offer him gifts. ...”

Faith is the star that they follow; when they lost it, they sought spiritual counsel. After seeking, the light of the star could be seen again. “[T]he star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother.” The star leads them into the presence of the Savior King. He touches the very core of their being with the fulfillment they have long desired. In him, they discover the divine element lost by our first parents. In him, they recover the complete satisfaction for which they so longed.

Notice, the mother and the child were in a “house”. We can suppose, then, that this event took place some time after the birth—perhaps several months. This corresponds with the fact that Herod “ordered the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity [who] were two years old and under” (Mt 2:16). He had carefully ascertained from [the magi] the time of the star’s appearance” (Mt 2:7).

In Christ, made present for us in the Eucharist, our search for ultimate happiness has come to rest. We have found him for whom our hearts yearned. There, we assimilate the spiritual riches of his divine fullness. We have found ourselves in him whose divinity completes our incomplete, impoverished humanity. His joy-giving presence lights up our whole being with his glory.

The Holy Eucharist is given to strengthen and intensify God’s indwelling presence. When we were baptized, the risen Christ, who is one with the Father in the Spirit, came to live in us.

At the Last Supper, Jesus consoled his disciples by telling them that although those who live for the pleasures, power, and prestige of this world would no longer see him, he would reveal himself to them, his disciples. He further explained that this revelation would take place within the very heart of those who truly follow him and keep his word. He said that he would reveal himself to them through his loving presence within their own hearts. Listen to what he said, “Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him” (Jn 14:23).

The saints—the true disciples of Jesus who keep his every word—experienced God’s loving presence in the center of their souls.

St. Teresa of Jesus, in her book, *The Interior Castle*, explains this amazing mystery of God’s indwelling presence in the center of the soul. Her teaching is based on Jesus’ other words, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places” (Jn 14:2). Jesus had explained earlier that his risen body is the Father’s house, the new temple of God (Jn 2:19). Each of us was joined to the risen Christ at our baptism. Each of us becomes a dwelling place, a mansion of God in this new temple, the Body of Christ, which we are (1 Cor 12:13, 27).

The word Epiphany means manifestation. Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany when God first manifested or revealed himself to the Gentile nations represented by the Magi. But God continues to reveal himself today to us through the guiding star of faith. Only now God reveals and manifests himself to us within our very hearts. The spiritual life is an interior journey within ourselves towards God’s indwelling in the center of our souls; it is a process of interiorization. We begin this journey on the surface of our being, in the first mansions. As we grow in purity of heart and union with God, we draw nearer to the center of our being and God’s

presence in the seventh mansions. As we become more virtuous and God-like, we become more spiritual; our personal experience and knowledge of God increases. In the words of St. Paul, “All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). As we are transformed into greater God-likeness, our persons, as God’s dwelling places, image God more and more. We live closer and closer to God—until we reach the very center of our being where God lives. Then our interior journey is complete. We will have found God within ourselves, in complete union with him. The star of our faith can then rest, for then we have found the place where God lives. We have become one with him, transformed in divine love. That inner journey, and the discovery of our indwelling God, is what comprises the adventure of the spiritual life.

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Gospel: Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

This is still the Epiphany Season—God continues to show his Son to us. Last Sunday, he led the Magi by means of a star to find the child and his mother. Today, the Holy Spirit came to rest on Jesus in the form of a dove and the Father’s voice proclaims Jesus his “beloved Son”. In fact, the Blessed Trinity itself is revealed as each of the three persons are mentioned or implied.

We had prayed to God during Advent: “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down” (Is 63:19). Today we see heaven opened as God comes to be with us to stay in his beloved Son. We are given to understand that we now have free access to God who has come to be one of us. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, available and accessible to each of us through faith. All we have to do is open our hearts in prayer to be in touch with him. Through our own baptism, he came to live in us.

Notice that it was while Jesus was in prayer that heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended

upon him. In this way, Jesus shows us the way to be in touch with God. When we pray, the Holy Spirit comes to us. Baptism has opened a freeway between God and us. The Father is well pleased with us too and proclaims us his beloved children when we look upon him in prayer and call him “our Father”.

Let us look at the Gospel in greater detail now so we can assimilate divine nourishment by reflecting upon the mystery of Jesus’ baptism. “The people were filled with expectation”, they were looking for God’s anointed one, the Messiah—someone who could save them from their miseries. Are you also “filled with expectation”? Are you full of hope that Jesus can help you to see and to bring you out of your miseries? Perhaps you are living a life of boredom, a gray, listless existence? You may ask, “Is this all there is to human life?” If you turn to Christ, he can restore you to joy and give you a meaningful existence. He is present in his Catholic Church to enlighten and enliven you through his teaching and his sacraments.

John tells those who were seeking the Messiah, “I am baptizing you with water”, i.e. an external rite or ceremony showing the cleansing power of a repentant heart. “But one mightier than I is coming,” someone greater than you or I, who will take away the sins of the world.

We are hopeless to overcome sin by ourselves. We do well to look to another with expectation. The Christ is being sent to us for this very reason. When you have lost all hope in yourself and find yourself needing a savior, then there is hope for you. Only if you look to one who is mightier than you can something be done for you. Only then are you disposed for salvation. As long as you are complacently stuck on yourself, nothing can be done for you. You are a hopeless case!

It is only when you will have experienced yourself to be a dead end and forced to get out of yourself that you will be ready for the salvation that Christ can give you. As long as you are content with yourself and sustained by the comforts, pleasures and the limited adventures of human existence,

you will not feel a need for Jesus, the Christ. But self-sufficiency can endure only for a time. Perhaps when you will have experienced the limits of human existence and created things and begin to feel pain in the doctor's office, hospital or nursing home, will you be ready for the Christ.

Christ Jesus transcends our human limitations. Through his Incarnation in which he assumed our human nature, Christ shows us that our humanity is meant to be complemented by divinity. Mere human existence is not enough. Divinity is now open to us also. Jesus has made his divinity available to us through his Church. It is in the Church that you will find his infallible teaching. The Bible is not enough. Your own selfishness can easily mislead you to misinterpret the Bible. You need the infallible teaching authority of the Church to guide you. It is also through the Catholic Church that Jesus gives you himself in person through the Sacraments. For example, it is Jesus himself who forgives your sins in the sacrament of Penance; it is likewise Jesus who gives you himself and his divinity in the Holy Eucharist.

Human existence is not enough for the happiness you yearn. It is too limited. Your human nature must be completed and perfected by the divine nature. This is what Jesus has come to give you through his Church.

Be "filled with expectation", "one mightier than [you] is coming".

"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." The word "baptize" means to wash and make clean, to plunge into water and engulf. But in baptism we are plunged into God, the Holy Spirit. "God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29). He purifies and transforms us into himself. If we surrender to him, we are in the process of "being transformed into his very image from glory to glory" (2 Cor 3:18). We are being deified by the Holy Spirit like the log in your fireplace is being transformed into fire. Baptism starts the process. It is being continued throughout our lives by the Holy Spirit who is working in us to complete the

process of deification, of transforming us into God, assuming that we have surrendered our wills to him.

St. Matthew tells us that when Jesus went to John to be baptized by him, John tried to prevent him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you ..." But Jesus replied, "Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt 3:14-15). In other words, Jesus wanted to fulfill every detail of God's will. He wanted to leave nothing undone.

Jesus stood in line with all the sinners as if he himself needed to repent and needed purification from sin. But he was the "Holy One of God", full of the very holiness of God, wholly adverse to the least deviation from God's will. Sin was the furthest thing from him. Jesus is not made holy by the water. Rather, he sanctified the waters so they could make us holy. In his baptism, Jesus is already taking upon himself the sins of the world (see Is 53:6). He is humbly identifying himself with sinners. That is one reason why the Father was so well pleased with Jesus and exclaimed, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." The only other occasion the Father came out openly and vocally to praise Jesus was on the mountain when he was speaking to Moses and Elijah. They were discussing Jesus' Exodus from the world through his passion and death when he, once more, in his humility, would identify himself with us sinners. Thus, he would take upon himself our sins on the cross in order to destroy them by his passion and death.

It was after Jesus was baptized and was praying that heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him. What is the meaning of this episode? The anointing with the Holy Spirit is Jesus' solemn inauguration into his public ministry. This is the moment the world has been awaiting, when God reveals his Messiah. The first reading expresses it in this way: "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations" (Is 42:1). Through the outpouring of the Holy

Spirit, Jesus, the servant of the Lord will give the nations of the world a participation in God's own life of holiness for right living. This is a new stage and development of Jesus' life. The anointing is empowering him to accomplish his mission of miraculous healings, his preaching with authority and victory over demons.

As Mary's consent to the Incarnation was followed by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, so Jesus' acceptance of baptism and his mission is followed by an outpouring of the Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus is being consecrated and invested with power for his life's work. Just as "the spirit rushed upon David" (1 Sm 16:13) when he was anointed by Samuel, so Jesus, the new Davidic king is flooded with the Holy Spirit. Through his humble acceptance of baptism, Jesus is now revealed as the servant of the LORD. His is a way of self-abasement, of willing obedience and redemptive suffering (see the suffering servant songs of Isaiah 42:-4; 52:13—53:12 read during Holy Week). Jesus' hidden life of obedience and service was a preparation for this moment. The temptations in the desert that will follow are an attempt of the devil to lead Jesus in the opposite direction.

The Holy Spirit will accompany Jesus in his role as suffering servant climaxing in his passion. The paschal mystery will open Jesus for a new outpouring of the Spirit, which he will lavish on the whole world. It is from this moment in Jesus' life that he became known as "the Christ" (Greek). He is "the Messiah" (Hebrew), that is, the "the anointed one" (English) who is saturated with the Holy Spirit unto overflowing. Jesus has become the source of the Holy Spirit for everyone who wants to receive him.

"If anyone thirsts," said Jesus, "let him come to me and drink, who believes in me. Scripture has it: 'From within him rivers of living water shall flow.' Here he was referring to the Spirit whom those that came to believe in him were to receive" (Jn 7:37-39). It is to Jesus we must go to immerse ourselves in God. It is through prayer that we

can enter into communion with him. This union is intensified and strengthened every time we receive communion worthily and devoutly.

Jesus is the point of our encounter with the Father who communicates his divine life through the Holy Spirit. This is the very same Jesus pouring out his Spirit through his open side that you receive in Holy Communion. The Holy Eucharist is Jesus himself personally present. In him we assimilate the divinity communicated to us through the Holy Spirit. But for this we must enter into personal communion with the Jesus whom we have received. We accomplish this through faith expressed in prayer and self-gift.

We are given some realization of the spiritual riches and gifts that Jesus received and which he in turn can give to us when we read Isaiah's prophecy concerning the Messiah: "The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord, and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord" (Is 11:1).

We also read in the second reading how the anointing moved Jesus to go about doing good works and freeing those oppressed by the devil. Grace flowed out of Jesus wherever he went—he diffused the sweet fragrance of his Holy Spirit by a mere look of loving kindness, by the compassion conveyed through his voice, by the love that was felt through his touch, and by the peace that people experienced issuing from his very being. His is not a way of harsh coercion into submissiveness but of gentleness and mercy, and the inner persuasion of love, as the first reading puts it: "A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he establishes justice on the earth" (Is 42:3). This is the same Jesus who is present and gives himself to us in the Mass so we can be and do the same for others.

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: John 2:1-12

“There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.”

Mary is not only there, she is the one in charge: She sees that the wine has run out—symbolizing that the old law has run dry. She is the one who has authority over the servants and gives them orders. She is the chief servant who makes the wedding feast possible: It is through Mary’s consent that the wedding between God and man takes place. The human nature and the divine nature are joined together in her womb. Mary’s cooperation with God as chief servant brings about the Incarnation: God becomes wedded to humanity.

The wedding at Cana is the formal celebration of the marriage between God and man, between heaven and earth.

The first reading tells us of God’s promise to marry us. We, the people of God, called “Jerusalem”, were defeated, humiliated and exiled from God by sin. But God will purify us from sin by suffering. This purification through accepted suffering will make us into new creatures and give us victory over sin. We will become so beautiful and glorious that God will desire to be united to us in a holy marriage. That’s the kind of intimate relationship he wants to have with each one of us. The prophet Isaiah expresses it this way, “As a young man marries a virgin, your Builder (God) shall marry you.” Today we celebrate the fulfillment of this promise in the Gospel.

But who are the bride and groom of this wedding? Mention of the names of the bride and groom is left out, so we would come to understand who the real bride and Groom are. Realize that you are very much involved in this celebration. The abundance of wine and the superabundance of grace it signifies is a sign that the Messiah has arrived in the person of Jesus. He came that we could have life in greater abundance.

Jesus himself described his presence among us in the kingdom of God, the Church, as a marriage feast: “The Kingdom of heaven,” he said, “may be likened to a king who gave a wedding feast” for his son (Mt 22:2). Jesus is talking about himself.

This is what the Gospel of today is celebrating: the presence of the Incarnate Son of God who has come to unite himself to us in love. Baptism united each of us to him. We are called to live in communion with him in a holy marriage. We are called to be personally intimate with him, even as married couples are intimate with each other. Moreover, Jesus himself tells us quite explicitly that he is the Bridegroom in today’s wedding: when he was asked why his disciples were not fasting, Jesus responded, “When the day comes that the groom is taken away, then they will fast” (Mt 9:15). Jesus considers himself to be the Groom of the wedding that he was celebrating in the kingdom of God. Similarly, when John the baptizer was approached concerning the fact that everyone was now flocking to Jesus, he explained: “You yourselves can testify that I said that I am not the Messiah, but that I was sent before him. The one who has the bride is the bridegroom: (in other words, the Messiah) the best man, who stands and listens for him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase; I must decrease” (Jn 3:28-30).

So we see then, that Jesus is the Messiah and Bridegroom of the wedding. And the bride is the people of God who come to be united to Jesus in faith.

The first reading identifies the people of God who are to be married to God as “Jerusalem.” This tradition of calling the people of God “Jerusalem” is continued in the New Testament. John the beloved disciple tells us in the book of Revelation about the final and greatest marriage feast to be celebrated when Jesus the heavenly Bridegroom comes to be united to us at his second coming, when God will become “all in all” of us (see 1 Cor 15:28). He writes: “I also saw the holy city, a new

Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband ...” (Rev 21:2). John identifies the people of God as the New Jerusalem. “Come here ...” the angel told John, “I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb (the Risen Christ). He ... showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It gleamed with the splendor of God. Its radiance was like that of a precious stone ...” (Rev 21:9-11).

In the Gospel today, then, we are really celebrating our own wedding, we the people of God, with our heavenly Bridegroom, Jesus, the glorious Lamb of God. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read, “The sign of water turned into wine at Cana already announces the Hour of Jesus’ glorification. It makes manifest the fulfillment of the wedding feast in the Father’s Kingdom, where the faithful will drink the new wine that has become the Blood of Christ.” (CCC 1335)

Each Mass is a renewal of the wedding banquet when we celebrate our deep love union with Jesus the God-man. Through the Holy Eucharist, he gives himself to us in love. And we in turn surrender ourselves to him. We open our hearts to receive his all-pervading love to cleanse and renew us in his love. We are strengthened to sacrifice ourselves for love of him as he sacrificed himself for love of us.

What meaning does Jesus’ presence at the wedding in Cana have for married couples? Again we must quote the authority of the *Catechism* (CCC 1613), which reads, “On the threshold of his public life Jesus performs his first sign—at his mother’s request—during a wedding feast. The Church attaches great importance to Jesus’ presence at the wedding of Cana. She sees in it the confirmation of the goodness of marriage and the proclamation that thenceforth marriage will be an efficacious sign of Christ’s presence.”

In the sacrament of matrimony, it is Jesus himself who unites you and holds you together by his holy presence. You must advert to his presence often to draw divine strength and love for a

happy and harmonious marriage.

Listen now to what the Second Vatican Council has to say about the sacrament of matrimony: “For as God of old made himself present to his people through a covenant of love and fidelity, so now the Savior of men and the Spouse of the Church (Jesus) comes into the lives of married Christians through the sacrament of matrimony.” He abides with them thereafter so that just as he loves the Church and handed himself over on her behalf, the spouses may love each other with perpetual fidelity through mutual self-bestowal. Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ’s redeeming power. ... Thus the love can lead the spouses to God with powerful effect and can aid and strengthen them in the sublime office of being a father or a mother. By virtue of the sacrament, as spouses fulfill their conjugal and family obligations, they are penetrated with the spirit of Christ. This spirit suffuses their whole lives” (GS # 48).

The Secret of drawing power from this union with Christ lies in living continuously in communion with him. Through this love-communion with this indwelling Jesus, you will derive all the grace you need for a happy marriage. You will be peaceful and happy rather than a grouch or a tiger. For example: You will have the love to overlook the differences you see between you and your spouse. You will have the strength you need to be patient and longsuffering. You will have the presence of God to fill your life. Thus you will not expect or need your spouse to do for you what only God can do. You will be able to accept, in peace, all the imperfections and things that go wrong in human life and human relationships.

You may find it strange that Jesus calls his own mother “Woman”. We can understand why he gives Mary this title only if we look beyond the immediate context. St. John the Evangelist makes several references to the book of Genesis in his gospel. For example, he begins his gospel with the same words as the book of Genesis, “In the beginning”. He uses the theme of light and

darkness, or the spirit hovering over the waters. These are just a few examples whereby he wants to signify a new creation. So too, the word “Woman” refers us to the book of Genesis, especially chapter 3. There we see the old Eve leading Adam into sin.

In the Gospel, we see Mary as the new Eve leading the new Adam to a good act, the miracle of changing water into wine in today’s Gospel, saving a family from embarrassment. In Genesis 3:15, God proclaims a perpetual enmity between the devil and the woman, and his offspring and hers. Although the serpent will strike and wound the heel of the woman’s offspring, he will crush the serpent’s head by his fidelity to God in his suffering, death, and resurrection. That is why we see in the Gospel of John 19:25-27, Jesus addresses his mother once more as “Woman”. She is the new Eve whose Son crushes the head of the serpent on the cross. Now she becomes the mother of all the children of God who are living the divine life. The new Adam and Eve regain by their obedience what the old Adam and Eve lost by their disobedience.

In the Gospel today, we see that Jesus was hesitant to perform his first sign revealing his glory as the heavenly Bridegroom and Messiah at the suggestion of his mother. That was because that full hour of glory, when she would become the mother of all the living as the new Eve, had not arrived. But when the hour came and Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing under the cross, he proclaimed her to be the new Eve, which means “mother of all the living” (see Gen 3:20) in these words, “Woman, behold, your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his home” (Jn 19:26-27). The beloved disciple took Jesus’ words seriously and began to live in a very close, loving relationship with Mary as his mother. We are called to do the same.

So the Gospel today sees Mary as the servant woman who sees a need and fulfills it. She is also the mother of Jesus with a special claim of authority over him as our intercessor. The word “woman” makes her our mother in grace as the

new Eve, confirmed by Jesus’ proclaiming her our mother on the cross. She sends us to Jesus and commands us, “Do whatever he tells you.” Moreover, we can also see in the word “Woman” that Mary is the new Eve and helpmate of the new Adam as representative of the Church and people of God. She is also the Bride of the heavenly Bridegroom!

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME **Gospel: Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21**

In his gospel, St. Luke presents to us the result of a new and accurate investigation of the “events” that have been “fulfilled” among us. He is speaking of the events surrounding the Incarnation of the Son of God—Jesus—events that were the fulfillment of prophecies made over the centuries.

In order to accomplish this, St. Luke must have contacted “those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning” so that we “may realize the certainty of the teachings [we] have received.” These witnesses contacted by St. Luke reassure us of the certitude of the events surrounding Jesus’ person. St. John the Evangelist, one of these eyewitnesses writes: “This is what we proclaim to you... What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched—we speak of the Word of life. This life became visible. We have seen and bear witness to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life that was present to the Father and became visible” (1 Jn 1:1-2).

What a striking testimony from a living eyewitness of his experience of the reality of Jesus. Such a vivid account reassures us in our holy, Catholic faith of the “certainty of the teaching [we] have received.”

St. Luke completes what others omitted in Jesus’ life. For example, he tells us about Jesus’ birth and childhood. The details he describes in his infancy narratives could only come from Mary herself: the virginal conception, the circumstances of Jesus’ birth, and the ensuing events of his childhood. The very words of Mary are quoted when she and

Joseph find him in the temple. “Only one human person was eyewitness of the Word [become flesh] from the very beginning, and that was the virgin mother. It was doubtless, therefore, that she was the evangelist’s primary source for his infancy narrative. This conclusion is confirmed by his insistence on her memory: ‘And his mother kept all these [things] in her heart’ (Lk 2:19, 51). [St.] Luke knew that Mary treasured the things of Jesus in her heart, because she had opened up that treasury to him” (*Cradle of Redeeming Love*, by John Seward, p. 191).

This makes sense to us because, “Tradition has it that the disciple John lived in Ephesus for a long time, together with the mother of Jesus” (*The New World Dictionary Concordance to the New American Bible*, p. 165). St. Luke lived with St. Paul and journeyed with him. They visited Ephesus during St. Paul’s second missionary journey. The two also stayed at Ephesus for two years during their third missionary journey (*Idem*, p. 164).

Continuing with the Gospel of today, we read, “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Holy Spirit.” Recall the events that preceded this moment: Jesus was baptized in the Jordan at about 30 years of age. He was filled with power by the Holy Spirit to inaugurate him into his public ministry.

The Spirit led him into the desert for a 40-day retreat. There, Jesus was preparing for his mission by prayer and fasting. He was tried and tempted by the devil who was no match for Jesus. Sanctified and strengthened by his desert experiences, Jesus returns to Galilee in the power of the Spirit.

“He taught in their synagogues and was praised by all.” The synagogue was a meeting place for the public reading of Scripture, prayer, and instruction. The blessing of a priest ended the meetings. Jesus was in the “habit of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath day”. That was his habitual way of keeping the Sabbath holy as the third commandment enjoins us. We also should have a strong commitment to go to church. Participation in the holy Mass must enjoy first

priority in our lives.

The Sabbath was changed to Sunday after the resurrection. It is interesting to know that when the early Christians separated themselves from the Jewish religion, they continued the synagogue service of the word and simply added the Eucharistic celebration to it. We continue the tradition of meeting weekly with prayer, Scripture, and instruction on the word of God called a homily. We also conclude the service with the priest’s blessing. Our Catholic religion is rooted in Jesus’ Jewish faith. But we perfect it with the Gospel and the celebration of the paschal mystery.

The first reading describes what their liturgy of the word was like. We can derive insights into the meaning of our own liturgy of the word by looking more closely at it.

First of all, the priest brought [the book of] the law before the assembly. The law, the Torah, comprises the five books of Moses, called the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). He opened the scroll so that all the people might see it ... and as he opened it, all the people rose.” This is a sign of respect for the word of God. Does it not remind you of when we stand to greet the Gospel?

Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. The word “bless” in this context means “praise”. Notice how similar their greeting is to ours: we sing “Alleluia” as we stand to greet the Gospel. It is a Hebrew phrase; the first part of the word “Allelu” means praise. The second part “yah” is the first syllable of the word Yahweh, the name which God gave Moses for himself. We translate it as “LORD”. We are actually saying “Praise the Lord” in Hebrew language. So we greet the Gospel in the same way that the chosen people did in the first reading. This may have taken place as early as 398 B.C.

The people responded with “Amen. Amen.” meaning yes, yes. So be it. So be it. We totally agree with you. Praise God for his greatness. He delivered us and brought us back from exile.

They raised their hands high as a bodily participation in their words of praise. "Then they bowed down and prostrated themselves before the Lord, their faces to the ground." This was their way of showing reverence to God, acknowledging his greatness and their submissiveness to him. We express our respect for God by a deep bow or genuflection. We recognize and reverence the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament as we enter into church; we do this before we enter our pew by bending the knee and touching it to the floor. We also bow before receiving Jesus in the holy Eucharist.

Then "Ezra read plainly from the book of the Law of God, interpreting it so that all could understand what was read." This is equivalent to our homily in which we explain and apply the word of God to our daily lives.

We are told today that this reading and explaining went on "from daybreak until midday". They were so happy to be able to hear the word of God for the first time after so many years of being deprived of it in exile. They could not get enough of it or spend enough time with God speaking his word. "For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets his children with great love and speaks with them" (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, art. 21).

Those who cannot bear to listen to the word of God have reason to be fearful. Jesus explained, "Whoever is of God hears every word God speaks. The reason you do not hear is that you are not of God" (Jn 8:47). "The people were weeping as they heard the words of the law." Theirs was a mixture of joy and sadness. Joy at hearing the words of God again after so many years of absence; sadness at failure to carry out that word which had brought about their humiliating defeat, deportation, and exile.

Their leaders encouraged the people to celebrate with food and drink. "Today is holy to the Lord your God," they said. "Do not be sad ... rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength."

Parts of the responsorial psalm are read to show us the value of reading and reflecting on the word

of God. "The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul ... giving wisdom to the simple ... rejoicing the heart ... enlightening the eye. ..." The law of God is not meant to be a burden but a guide for happy living.

The Ten Commandments are the minimum requirements for right living, a highway for safe travel on our journey to heaven. It is a way of living according to our spiritual nature as children of God; it urges us to check the evil inclinations of our human nature. Thus we can live on the level of the children of God and experience the happiness of God.

Let us return now to the Gospel. Jesus stood up to read. "He unrolled the scroll and found the passage" in Isaiah (61:1-2), which reads, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me." Recall the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism endowing him with power for his mission as Messiah. Remember that you too were consecrated and set apart by your baptism and confirmation for your mission in God's service.

"He has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor." We usually think of the "poor" in terms of physical and financial destitution. But the kind of poverty we mean here is poverty of being; we are all poor in virtue and moral strength. We fall into sin; we are incapable of loving God with our whole heart. We are weak and helpless to do good. We are very poor and in need of spiritual assistance.

"He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives." We are captives of our disordered desires and passions. We are prisoners of our addictions. We are slaves to our various cravings. We are under their control and cannot free ourselves. We are in desperate need of a deliverer, a Savior.

"And recovery of sight to the blind. ..." Our sight is limited to this world. We are blind to the supernatural world. We do not see beyond this life. The spiritual world is closed to us. We have no experience of the heavenly life and the joy of living in communion with God. We are wasting

precious time and life. We need a redeemer to give us sight, to see the horror of sin, to reveal God to us, and his beautiful world of the spirit. Only then will we mend our ways and start living the life of the children of God and the joys of his spiritual kingdom.

“To let the oppressed go free. ...” We are oppressed by our sins; we are enslaved by our uncontrolled passions of anger and concupiscence. The flesh and its lusts for pleasure, power, prestige, and riches, the false highs from alcohol and drugs: All take their toll in oppressing those who are their victims. We need a redeemer and his abundant grace to free us from such oppression so we can know and enjoy the true freedom of the children of God who are led by the Spirit of God.

“Today,” Jesus announces, “this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” The year of favor, the time of grace, the moment of deliverance has arrived. The Savior of the world makes himself available to every human being. The messianic era is here after centuries of waiting. This waiting began with God’s promise to Abraham around 1850 B.C., or even since the time of Adam and Eve when God promised that the offspring of the new Eve would crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). But now salvation is made present to us in Jesus. He is personally present and available in each sacrament. For example:

In the sacrament of Penance, Jesus is present in his priesthood to take away the sins that imprison and oppress you.

In the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, Jesus is personally present to nourish you with new strength, vitality, and sight to see your sins and empower you to win victory over them.

Jesus will free you if you allow him. Go to meet him. He is waiting to embrace and free you.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME **Gospel: Luke 4:21-30**

Today’s Gospel story contains the entire ministry of Jesus and the reaction to it. It is divided into two parts: The fulfillment story stresses the success of his teaching under the guidance of the Spirit; the rejection story symbolizes the opposition that his ministry will evoke among his own people. The rejection of him by the people of his hometown is a miniature of the rejection of him by the people of his own country.

“Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” What Scripture passage? The one read last Sunday: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... to bring glad tidings to the poor ... liberty to captives ... sight to the blind ... and to free the oppressed. ...” (Is 61:1-2).

Jesus is declaring the great jubilee year. He is the anointed one (English), the Messiah (Hebrew) the Christ (Greek). Jesus explained in John’s gospel that, as God’s Anointed One, he is the source of divine life. “Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink”, he said ... “As scripture says: ‘Rivers of living water will flow from within him’” (Jn 7:37-38).

The divinity, communicated through the Holy Spirit, flows from Jesus’ heart to sanctify us, for he is the source of the divine spirit.

At his baptism, Jesus was revealed to be the center of divine communications; heaven opened and the Holy Spirit came to rest permanently on him. The Father came out of his silence from heaven to tell us that Jesus is his beloved Son in whom he is well pleased (see Mk 1:9-11). This divine manifestation is known as a theophany.

The messianic era has arrived; the age of salvation—after centuries of waiting (cf Abraham 1850 B.C.). God is faithful to his promises. He fulfills and carries out what the prophets announced long ago. You can always be sure of God. He is truthful. He keeps his word. We also must keep our word. My father used to tell me, “You are as good as your word.” The implication

being, if you don't keep your word, you are not good.

God comes to celebrate the great jubilee year in person—in the person of Jesus. He comes to deliver us from the oppression, the captivity, and the blinding and impoverishing effects of sin. He is ever present with us through his Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit poured out upon us through the risen Christ, keeps the divine word living and effective. This Holy Spirit issuing from the open side of the uplifted Christ, the anointed one, pours out his divine life through the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist.

This Jesus, the Holy One of God, who is saturated with the divine Spirit of the Father, is freely available to us. We have free access to him in his indwelling presence. At our baptism, Jesus, one with the Father in the love of the Holy Spirit, came to dwell within our very heart (Jn 14:23). Through faith, activated by prayer, we have but to turn to him living in us. There, we need go no further in search of him; we can enter into direct communion with him. Holy innocence and purity of heart dispose us to abide with our indwelling God in love.

“All spoke highly of him and were amazed at his gracious words.” Words of grace and salvation flowed mellifluously, like honey, out of Jesus as charm and eloquence.

1. “My words are spirit and life” (Jn 6:63). Jesus explained on another occasion.
2. When Mary greeted Elizabeth in her visitation, her words filled Elizabeth with the Holy Spirit and John was sanctified in his mother's womb (Lk 1:41-44). Even more were Jesus' words communicative of divine grace.
3. “God's word is living and effective” (Heb 4:12). God's word affects us. It moves, changes, and transforms us into children of God. That is why we must read and reflect on it every day.
4. When the temple guards went to arrest Jesus, they came back empty handed. The chief priests

and Pharisees asked them, “Why did you not bring him in?” the guards replied, “No man ever spoke like that before” (Jn 7:45-46).

5. You will remember how the people in the desert were so enchanted with Jesus' words they remained there for three days listening to him until they ran out of food (Mt 15:32).

6. “Jesus ... left the crowds spellbound at his teaching” (Mt 7:28). They were enraptured by his words. The divinity issued from Jesus' very being; it poured out like honey from his mouth. His very words were sweet with its taste. You too will want to spend time reading, relishing, and savoring his word.

“They also asked, ‘Isn't this the son of Joseph?’” All of a sudden, the people began to reflect on Jesus' family background, his occupation, and upbringing in Nazareth. Who is he trying to make himself to be: he is only the son of a carpenter! We know him. He is trying to make himself more than he really is. The natural and the familiar were barriers too formidable for them to overcome. Their prejudice takes over. They no longer listened and allowed their hearts to be ministered to by Jesus' words of grace. They refused to allow Jesus to anoint them with the Holy Spirit, to give them a foretaste of heaven.

Sometimes we allow the faults and limitations of our priests to interfere with our being able to listen to their challenging words. Ordination has configured the priest to Christ, the Head. He becomes the instrument of Christ himself. “He who hears you hears me,” Jesus said (Lk 10:16). It is the priesthood of Jesus directly operating through them. God tells Jeremiah the prophet in the first reading, “Gird your loins;” (Get ready for action.) “Stand up and tell them all that I command you.” God tells the prophet: “It is I this day who have made you a fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of brass. ... They will fight against you but not prevail over you, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord” (Jer 1:17-19). When we resist the words of God's priest and prophet, we are fighting against God himself.

“Do here in your native place (Nazareth) the things that we heard were done in Capernaum.” Apparently, a lapse of time had occurred between the first part of today’s reading when Jesus received a favorable reception, and this last part when he is rejected. The first part is the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. But the second part speaks about the miracles he performed in Capernaum (see Mk 6:1-6).

The people were looking for the wrong kind of Messiah, a worldly one instead of a spiritual one. They were primarily interested in miracles for their curiosity. They wanted miracles of healing to escape human suffering rather than teachings on the spiritualizing, transforming, and deifying effects of accepted suffering (deify, that is, transformation into God brought about by patient endurance). In response, Jesus explains to his fellow townsmen that they put him in the same position as Elijah and Elisha. It is the faith of two Gentiles, the widow of Zarahath and Naaman the Syrian that merited miracles from these prophets. The people of Nazareth lacked faith. This lack of faith prevented Jesus from performing any miracle of healing for them (Mk 6:5).

The suggestion that Gentiles were better disposed than the people of Nazareth was an insult and produced an outburst of fury and nationalist fervor. If they had had their way, they would have thrown Jesus over the cliff and killed him—that’s how angry and hate-filled they were for Jesus, who only told them the truth. (We pray that when we are confronted with the truth, we will be humble enough to see and acknowledge it—we will repent and convert ourselves rather than rebel and fight against the truth and God’s spokesman.) However, the angry mob was overawed by the sheer majesty of Jesus’ commanding presence. They could not touch him: “Jesus passed through the midst of them and went away.” Jesus enjoyed divine protection. They could not harm him until God allowed it, when his “hour” would come on Good Friday.

The people had asked sarcastically for a miracle. He worked one by narrowly escaping from

their clutches. They were left high and dry to think about their sin—they had just rejected the promised Messiah, the anointed one, the Holy One of God, who had come to bless them with untold spiritual riches. But they only wanted to be entertained by miracles and passing temporal benefits. Is that what you are looking for in your religion and in your prayers?

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Luke 5:1-11

Today we see “the crowd pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God”. We have come here today to do the same. What value is there in that?

If we believe in Jesus’ word and obey that word by carrying it out in our daily lives, we also will be blessed even as Peter and his partners were blessed by the huge catch of fish. “Jesus taught the crowds from the boat,” Peter’s boat. Jesus teaches through the Church—Jesus communicates his divine mind through teaching—so we can be like him—knowledge flows into desire and action.

After he had finished teaching, Jesus proceeded to demonstrate, by the miraculous catch of fish, the power of his word. Peter and his companions are given a foretaste of their future apostolic success. For example, Peter’s first sermon on Pentecost Sunday produced 3000 converts. This incident reminds us of the parable of the sower of the seed. The seed that fell on good ground produced 30, 60, to 100 fold—the word of God produces abundant holiness. This shows us what will happen to us if we take God’s word seriously. We must read, reflect upon, and cherish it. Taking God’s word in, in this way, brings about a transformation in being and holiness of life.

After Jesus had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and lower your nets for a catch.” We are often superficial in our faith lives. For example: We tend to utter quick prayers without much reflection. Today we are commanded to “put out into the deep.” Praying more slowly, meditating on the meaning

of the words, will help our faith to plunge more deeply into God. Such immersion and communion in God would produce immense spiritual enrichment. Such a manner of praying would prepare us for a much deeper immersion into the glorified Christ when we receive the Holy Eucharist. Such a contemplative attitude would enable us to open our hearts for Jesus to pour out his divinity in them. Uttering quick, superficial words keeps us on the surface of our being and renders our reception of the Eucharist much less fruitful. Reading, reflecting upon, and cherishing God's word leads to communion with God—we are thus disposed for deeper communion with Jesus, the glorified Christ in the Eucharist.

Before lowering the nets, Peter, the fisherman, protested mildly to Jesus, the carpenter, that he had worked hard at fishing all night—which was the best time to fish—and had caught nothing. Much less was there any hope of catching anything during the daytime. At the same time, he was exhausted, sleepy, hungry, and discouraged.

But somehow Peter's belief in Jesus was strong enough to overcome his reluctance and obey his command. Jesus spoke with such authority, and besides, Jesus had already cured Peter's mother-in-law from a debilitating fever (Lk 4:38-39). So Peter lowered the nets. As a result of his obedient faith, he and his partners caught such a great number of fish their nets were tearing. They filled both boats to the point that they were in danger of sinking. There is no doubt about the miraculous nature of this event. The divinity in Jesus manifested itself in a stupendous fashion.

Here we see the power of Jesus' presence and word. They are productive of immense good in our lives. Without Jesus, Peter, with all his knowledge and hard work, had caught nothing. Life without Jesus is fruitless, dull, and boring.

To drown out the boredom of a life without Jesus, we turn to self-indulgence in food, drink, gambling, entertainment, pornography, gossip, cheap thrills, the occult, astrology, drugs, sexual deviation, the bizarre. ... Yet none of these can

satisfy us. We are left empty and still bored to death. Jesus demonstrates to us today that he is divine, that our lives will be immensely enriched if we allow him to become part of us, if we listen to his words and obey them.

Unless we come to know Jesus personally and enter into communion with his divinity, our life will always be empty and dull—unhappy, unfulfilled. Unless the divine complements our human lives, we will always be wanting and incomplete. That's bad enough. But we will also bring unhappiness to those around us by our negative behavior.

When Peter experienced the miraculous catch of fish, he fell at the knees of Jesus. He experienced the blinding light of Christ's holiness; he experienced the divinity in Jesus. Whereas Peter had called Jesus "Master" before, now he uses the word reserved for God alone: "Lord". Peter knew he was in the presence of the awesome power of God! "Astonishment at the catch of fish seized him and all those with him."

This experience reminds us of the people's experience of God on Mt. Carmel. In response to Elijah's prayer, God came down as fire and consumed the victim, the water-drenched wood, and even all of the water in the trench. As a result, the people responded, "The Lord is God; the Lord is God!"

The prophet Isaiah in the first reading had a similar experience when the prophet saw God and heard the Seraphim crying out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!" He thought he would die: "Woe is me, I am doomed!" he said. "For I am a man of unclean lips ... yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

The shock of sinful man coming into contact with the all-holy God throws him into turmoil, even to the point of believing he would die. When the holy evangelist, John, the Beloved disciple, saw the risen Jesus on the island of Patmos, the shock knocked him out of his wits—he passed out!

Quoting some of the words of the prophet in each Mass, just before the most sacred part, the consecration, helps us to prepare ourselves for our encounter with the divine Jesus. After the preface in the Mass, among the words we all say are, “Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory.” Then we fall on our knees as we await the holiest of moments, when Jesus in his paschal mystery becomes present on the altar—right before our eyes—yet veiled by the appearance of bread and wine.

Seeing the context of the prophet Isaiah’s experience today helps us to relive his experience when we recite his words in the Mass. The prophet also becomes aware that he is “a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips”. If Jesus said we would have to give an account of every idle word we utter (Mt 12:36), how much more blameworthy are irreverent, vulgar, and uncharitable words. As Jesus also said, “Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Mt 12:34). Unholy, sinful words reveal an unholy, sinful heart—totally unworthy of a child of God, worthy only of a cesspool!

Peter’s experience of Jesus, through that stupendous, miraculous catch of fish, caused him to see his own sinfulness, his own poverty of being, his own nothingness. Peter expressed his experience in these words, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” He became very uneasy, uncomfortable in the presence of the Holy One of God.

It is possible for us to lose a sense of sin. This may happen if you lose a sense of the presence of God. A life of mediocrity, of lukewarmness, can bring about this loss of the presence of God. This comes about when we no longer put God’s will and word first in our lives. Rather, we live according to what we want and like to do. We become self-centered and sense dominant. Since God is spirit, we no longer have a sense of his presence. It becomes easy then to lose our sense of sin. It becomes more difficult for God to communicate to us that we are slipping further and further away from him. Our consciences become hardened and dulled through repeated and unrepented sins. Perhaps it will be

necessary for some form of crisis intervention in our lives to bring us back to reality.

Now that Peter has experienced Jesus as the God-man, he is ready for the call to follow him. Jesus tells him, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” Jesus singles out Peter and makes him chief fisher of men. Later on, Jesus will make him chief shepherd (Jn 21), and then “The Rock” on which he will build his Church, the one who holds the keys of the kingdom, and the chief lawmaker (Mt 16).

Peter and his partners left everything and followed Jesus. They needed no further convincing. Jesus was more valuable to them than everything. They left all to follow him. May Jesus come to mean as much to you.

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Luke 6:17, 20-26

The first reading summarizes the beatitudes and woes of the Gospel. The person who trusts and relies on God will receive endless blessings in the joy of his connectedness to God. The person who trusts and relies on his own human powers, to the exclusion of God, is doomed to endless misery in the sadness of his disconnectedness to God.

Let us now look at the four beatitudes contrasted by the four woes as we pray for the grace to understand what Jesus is saying. We can only understand what Jesus is saying if we approach it with a spiritual perspective. We cannot understand his statements from an earthly, worldly point of view.

Jesus seems to be saying the opposite of what experience has taught us. These four beatitudes in St. Luke contradict the worldly view of attaining happiness. Jesus’ declarations concern our achieving fruition in the kingdom of God. The four beatitudes dispose us for the kingdom of God. They enable us to enjoy its blessings. The woes are detrimental to our entry into the kingdom of God. They prevent us from enjoying the blessings of the kingdom that Jesus brings us.

Let us now look at each beatitude and its contrasting woe.

I. Jesus says, “Blessed are you poor, for the kingdom of God is yours.” The poor are the ones who are really blessed. This is the opposite of what the world believes. The world is looking for earthly happiness on a human level. It looks for physical comfort. But earthly pleasures satisfy only our physical human nature and its five senses.

Jesus can truthfully contradict our beliefs and philosophy of life because he is thinking on a deeper level. Earthly happiness is passing and goes only so far. It cannot reach our spiritual nature and satisfy our needs as children of God. It is possible to be happy on a human level, but very unhappy on a spiritual level. Sin may satisfy us on the level of sense, but the sadness brought about by a remorseful conscience touches our very soul.

When we are poor, we lack material possessions. That means we have to do without; we cannot enjoy certain conveniences and even certain needs. That can make us very unhappy on an earthly level.

The reason Jesus says the poor are blessed is because poverty prompts us to lean and depend on God. Faith and hope then connect us to God so that we draw divine life from him. Poverty forces us to do without earthly comforts and pleasures. These tend to keep us anchored to earth. Pleasures cater to our senses so that we become indisposed to experience the spiritual joys of the kingdom.

Poverty on the other hand, forces us, so to speak, to practice discipline. Being deprived of the comforts and pleasures provided by riches calls for the practice of the virtues that dispose us to enjoy the spiritual riches of the kingdom of God. Patient endurance strengthens the virtue of fortitude; it also spiritualizes and transforms us into godlikeness. Bearing with such hard times and the practice of long-suffering requires spirit assertiveness. This spirit assertiveness disposes us for union with God who is spirit. Spirit is what is most like God in us. It disposes us for divine

receptivity; for union with God.

Poverty puts us in an environment of detachment from the senses and the pleasures of the world so that we are free for union with God. Jesus says that the poor are blessed because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Lived poverty gives us the kingdom. We experience the kingdom of God as a present reality. The kingdom is Jesus in his self-gift through the Holy Spirit. Union with our glorified Lord gives us an experience of the kingdom of God on earth.

We are called to live according to the spirit of poverty. St. Matthew’s gospel expresses it this way: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). That means we must detach ourselves from earthly goods and possessions through abstinence and self-restraint; thus we remain spiritually free for union with God, and we have alms to give to the poor.

On the other hand, Jesus says, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”

Riches tend to deprive us of enjoying the kingdom of God. We easily become possessive and preoccupied with riches. This causes us to be too focused on them to the exclusion of God. This danger is very real. Jesus went so far as to say, “You cannot serve God and money” (Mt 6:24). Part of the preoccupation with money is the fear of losing it or the desire and effort to make more. We then do not have energy or attentiveness left to love God with our whole heart.

Another problem with riches is that the luxury and sense gratification they make available to us weaken self-mastery. We tend to over-indulge and live on the level of sense. Disordered sense desire dominates our lives. We are no longer disposed for union with God, who is Spirit.

Living on the level of disordered-sense desire presents a serious obstacle to contemplative prayer. Such prayer is a spirit-to-spirit communion with God. We cannot achieve this state without detachment from material goods.

The abundance of pleasures, luxuries, food, drink, and entertainment provided by the riches make detachment difficult. Pleasures are always at hand to entice and tempt us to over-indulge our sense. We do not have the time or the will to pray or deny ourselves. Perhaps now you can see why Jesus says, “Woe to you who are rich.” Riches deprive us from relishing the spiritual kingdom. The pleasures they provide keep us on a surface level of sense. They prevent us from living on the deeper level of spirit and God where true, all-pervading, lasting joys abide.

II. Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are now hungry, for you will be satisfied.”

We can understand this beatitude if we compare it to its opposite. “Woe to you who are filled now, for you will be hungry.” The abundance provided by riches caters to over-indulgence so that we are not fit for the kingdom of God. But those who fast, or accept hunger in submission to God’s will are spiritualized and readied for union with God. Such a union gives deep, all-pervading, lasting happiness in the kingdom of God. Curbing our disordered appetite for food and drink by the virtue of temperance makes us spirit dominant and receptive to God who is spirit. We can then savor and enjoy the spiritual kingdom of God.

III. Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are now weeping, for you will laugh.”

Grief over sin and personal loss can be very purifying. We are made to see the evil and emptiness of sin. The losses we suffer wisen us. They disillusion us of our false, earthly expectations. They force us to detach our hearts from this world. We are then free to possess God and his kingdom. These grief-causing losses are blessings in disguise. They stop us from wasting our time and energy on the passing things of this world. The sadness of loss or failure can then help us turn to God in earnest. We then begin to spend our time and energy on what gives us everlasting benefits: We seek God and the eternal life available in the kingdom. We are drawn to serious prayer, the word of God, the

Holy Eucharist, and a community of spiritual support.

On the other hand, Jesus says, “Woe to you who laugh now, for you will grieve and weep.” How can Jesus say, “It will be just too bad for you who laugh now”? Laughter that is an expression of security and joy in God is blessed and good. But laughter by those who are not in union with God is based on a false security. This kind of laughter is superficial, false, and short-lived. This kind of laughter springs from passing, worldly success, or curious, strange, and funny ideas expressed in jokes. Such laughing persons need to get serious and seek to attain joy in God. Then laughter will be appropriate and an expression of true, lasting joy.

The fourth beatitude says,

IV. “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they insult you, and denounce your name as evil on account of the Son of Man.”

To be hated for love of God is very purifying. We do not naturally like to be insulted, rejected, and hated. Hatred and rejection are very difficult to bear. Such suffering for the lover of God is very sanctifying. It causes one to cling to God more strongly in order to be faithful to him. This requires greater love and fortitude. Much long-suffering is required in order to be able to bear with the trial. Patient endurance purifies unredeemed flesh. The suffering entailed transforms and spiritualizes disordered sense life. We are made into new creatures, children of God, who are led by the spirit of God.

The fourth beatitude according to St. Luke is contrasted with a woe. “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for their ancestors treated the false prophets in this way.” Normally, we like to please people and enjoy a good reputation—and that is good. We want people to speak well of us. But sometimes we say what people want to hear instead of confronting them with the truth. We are called to practice tough love. But we are too weak and cowardly to “speak the truth” in love. We are afraid of being disliked,

spoken ill of, and persecuted. Jesus calls us to be his witnesses. He warns us in these words: “Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father. But whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father” (Mt 10:32-33).

We are challenged to witness Jesus not only by our words but by our actions as well. ... Then we will have a good reputation with God, who judges us favorably and gives us his kingdom.

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Luke 6:27-38

Jesus tells us today, “Love your enemies.” In the alleluia versicle, Jesus says, “Love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus sacrificed himself for us when we were his enemies. In saying to us, “love your enemies,” Jesus is telling us what we are to do, how we must love, because we are children of God—and that is how God loves. His very nature is to love and to keep on loving, even those who reject his love: his enemies.

In baptism, we begin to share the very life of God through sanctifying grace. We have the very love of God in the Holy Spirit to prompt and assist us to love.

Besides the interior impulse to love coming from our hearts by the indwelling God, we also have the compelling example of Jesus loving his enemies. As St. Paul puts it, “It is precisely in this that God proves his love for us: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Jesus died for us when we were still against him. We were his enemies. St. John explained divine love in these words, “Love, then, consists in this: not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us and has sent his Son as an offering for our sins. Beloved, if God has loved us, so we must have the same love for one another” (Jn 4:10-11).

The divine love that is in us urges us to love our enemies and those who hate or persecute us. The love of God issuing from our hearts cannot be stopped by external circumstances such as adversity, repulsion, and rejection. God does not depend on

another’s good disposition for him to be able to love. His very nature is to love. “God is love” (1 Jn 4:16). To be able to love our enemies like God does requires that we keep in close contact with our indwelling God. We draw power from him in this way to love divinely. This supposes that we are prayerful and live in continuous communion with God.

Let us now return to our Gospel text for today and reflect upon Jesus’ words. In telling us to love our enemies, Jesus explains what he means in the verses that follow. For example, “Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, Pray for those who mistreat you.”

These are practical examples of how we can love our enemies. Every time we think of them, we must commend them to God. When they curse us or wish us evil, we must call God’s favor upon them. We look for opportunities to do good to them, such as acts of service. Such acts of love will enable us to grow in divine love in leaps and bounds. These acts of service are so effective for growth in charity because they proceed from sheer grace and acts of the will. We then begin to live on the level of spirit. We open ourselves to live in communion with the divine.

A good example of how to love our enemy is seen in the first reading. David had an opportunity to kill King Saul who was trying to kill him. Instead, he spared his life. He tried to show Saul how foolish his paranoid fears were. David tried to reason with Saul, to free him from his irrational, dark moods, and restore him to peace.

Jesus said, “To the person who strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well.”

This is Jesus’ typical use of hyperbole or exaggerated speech to express in an extreme way that we must not retaliate or return the injury by engaging in fighting. We must not carry the evil deed any further. We let it die there. Returning the evil deed would mean that we side with evil and further its cause. The point is not that we must invite further abuse in turning the other cheek, but that we ourselves must not engage in further aggression.

This interpretation is confirmed in St. John's passion account when one of the guards gave Jesus a sharp blow on the face. Jesus' response was, "If I said anything wrong produce the evidence, but if I spoke the truth why hit me?" (Jn 18:22-23). Jesus turned the other cheek by not retaliating. That is what he meant by saying, "Turn the other cheek"—not physically but symbolically by a non-retaliatory response. Yet he stood for his dignity and protested the abuse.

Jesus said, "From the person who takes your cloak, do not withhold even your tunic." Jesus is challenging us to the extremes of divine love. Love calls us to the utmost generosity. Love says, "Do not hold back. Cling to nothing. Open yourself to supreme love, divine love, pure spirit love." Jesus is telling us to take the opportunity occasioned by the selfishness of others to strip ourselves of all selfish tendencies unto utter generosity.

Jesus says further, "Give to everyone who asks you, and from the one who takes what is ours do not demand it back." This selfish tendency in us is to keep our possessions for ourselves. Jesus is urging us on the occasion when others ask or take from us to free ourselves from all selfishness and possessiveness. Jesus is saying, "Let it go. Remain unattached. Free your heart for God."

Jesus continues, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." This is the golden rule. Love others as you love yourself. Jesus challenges us to go beyond our natural behavior to a supernatural way of acting.

He asks the question, "For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them." Jesus pushes us to go beyond our normal, natural way of acting. Divine love will not grow if we give simply according to our natural tendencies. We will merely maintain the grace we already have. The divine agape love will grow when we spring beyond our natural limits and begin to operate on a supernatural level of sheer grace. We are called to leap beyond ourselves into the sphere of God.

Jesus challenges us still further, "If you lend money to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners and get back the same amount." Possessiveness is detrimental to our spiritual life. Lending is a way of sharing with those who are in need. Lending without the hope of return is a way to dispossess ourselves, of detaching ourselves from our possessions. It frees us from selfish clinging. Such clinging impedes spiritual growth and freedom of spirit. Sanctity requires total self-gift. Holy living goes beyond the natural tendency to hold on tight to what is ours. Jesus is challenging us to focus on spiritual rewards that produce eternal dividends and supernatural interest. Lending without expecting repayment will gain that kind of interest for us.

Jesus repeats himself. "Love your enemies and do good to them, and lend expecting nothing back; then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." Divine agape love is a flight into the freedom of the spirit; it disentangles us from the tyranny of the unredeemed self. All disordered self-love and interest are trampled underfoot. Jesus is anxious to have us live on the level of spirit, where love is its own reward and that love is God himself. He is our reward rather than natural compensation. The detachment from monetary compensation disposes us to live on the level of spirit where we enjoy communion with the Blessed Trinity.

Jesus exhorts us to live on the level of the children of God: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Mercy is love in its highest form. Our union with God himself, who is love, makes this kind of love possible for us. In this way, we show ourselves to be true children of God. We show ourselves to be like God in the kind of love and compassion we show to others.

Jesus says, "Stop judging and you will not be judged." And to explain what he means by that statement, Jesus continues, "Stop condemning

and you will not be condemned.” Judging becomes sinful only when it is in the form of condemning others, of convicting them of having sinned in their hearts, of believing they are worthy of some sort of condemnation by God. We may judge external acts regarding facts that we see people do or fail to do. But only God knows their motives, circumstances, and whether they are guilty of sin or not. Jesus continues to instruct us: “Forgive and you will be forgiven.” In other words, Do not cling to hurts. They preoccupy you and deprive you of communion with God. They make you focus on yourself or on another human being instead of God.

Unforgiven hurts foster anger and a desire for revenge. They also cause tension and ill health. Forgiving and letting go of the hurt frees you for God; it frees you from anger and hostility; you become a peaceful person again, free to love your enemy as you commend them to the mercy of God. You become like Jesus and say, “Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34).

You will be like St. Stephen. Even as he was being murdered, he prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).

The Gospel concludes with these words of exhortation from Jesus, “Give, and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.”

Jesus is encouraging us to give of ourselves, our service, and what we have as a means of loving. Such loving gives evidence that we have passed from the death of self-centeredness to the life of the children of God (see 1 Jn 3:14). Such giving and loving without measure open our locked up hearts to receive spirit, love, and life. The more we give, the more we open our hearts to receive.

Jesus’ statement, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35), can be interpreted in light of the passage we are presently reflecting upon: “Give, and gifts will be given you.” In other words, in exchange for giving service and things, we receive

God; in giving, we dispose our hearts to receive God himself; our hearts are opened wider to receive God’s self-gift in outpoured love.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Gospel: Luke 4:1-3

The spirit led Jesus into the desert after his baptism. He went on a 40-day retreat. There he could be alone with God; Jesus could then give his Father his whole, undivided attention. He could be totally receptive to the infused knowledge the Father would give him in preparation for his mission. All alone in the desert, he set himself apart for God; he consecrated himself for his holy purposes. God could then pour his divine love into him; the Father fortified Jesus and equipped him with divine strength for his arduous task as suffering servant. The Father empowered Jesus through his prayerful receptivity to be able to withstand the awful onslaught of his enemy, the devil. Jesus’ penitential attitude of self denial and fasting showed the Father his seriousness of wanting to be faithful to his will. With such a preparation of prayer and fasting, Jesus would be prepared for whatever trial would come his way.

It was after such preparation that the devil appeared on the scene to tempt Jesus. Jesus’ example of solitude, prayer, and penance in the desert shows us how we must fortify and prepare ourselves to meet and successfully overcome the temptations that await us in life.

That is why our holy Catholic Church established the 40 days of Lent from apostolic times to help us live the life of Christ; in this way, we also can be successful in overcoming temptation.

Let us hope and pray that the penances we take up will not be just a Lenten exercise that will end at Easter, so that we would resume our old bad habits of overindulgence.

The self-discipline acquired during Lent is meant to strengthen us in temperance and fortitude, so that we will begin practicing moderation when we indulge our pleasure appetites and patient

endurance in bearing with difficulties. After, prayer will have strengthened us and given us an understanding that the highest joys are in the spirit; they are far superior to the sense pleasures we tend to be addicted to. Spiritual joys are all-pervading and enduring—not just a passing moment of enjoyment. Therefore, we will want to maintain a strong spiritual life with sufficient time spent in prayer and meditation. We will find a holy joy in practicing self-control regarding our pleasure appetites; and we will enjoy better health as a result. Our exercises in prayer during Lent and the resulting connectedness to God will teach us to maintain union with God to draw strength for continued self-mastery. We must realize that the practice of virtue is not a matter of sheer will power; rather it is a matter living in prayerful communion with God through which we draw moral power to be virtuous. Continuous failure in virtue is often an indication that we do not spend enough time in prayer and meditation on the word of God. As a result, we do not have the strength to practice self-control and avoid sin in our lives, because we do not have continuous connectedness with our indwelling God from which to draw power for virtue.

Jesus had a human nature like ours. He was like us in every way except sin. Therefore, after 40 days of fasting, he was extremely hungry. The devil attacked him when he was most vulnerable. Jesus was very weak after being without food for so long.

The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” The words “Son of God” here mean the Messiah. The mystery of the Incarnation was kept secret from the devil. He did not know that Jesus was God become human. But the devil suspected Jesus of being the Messiah. As Son of King David and successor to his throne, he would have been called Son of God and Messiah.

The temptation here is for Jesus to use his miraculous powers for his own personal benefit, ease, and comfort. By caving into his hunger for food, Jesus would not be going the way of the

suffering servant according to God’s plan. Unlike Adam and Israel in the desert, Jesus is faithful to God’s plan. The chosen people allowed their hunger pains to prompt them to rebel against God in the desert. Jesus, however, continued to be obedient to God’s will in his hunger. He suffered through it as he awaited God’s providential designs. He knew that his Father would provide for him and not allow him to starve. Jesus trusted that God would not ask him to endure more than he could bear. As suffering servant, Jesus would not take short cuts by his miraculous powers to escape suffering. He would patiently abide in God’s will, as he trusted in his care for him. That is how faithfully doing God’s will in daily life, and practicing patient endurance in trial also sanctifies us.

Jesus used Holy Scripture to respond to the devil’s temptations. He quotes the book of Deuteronomy 8:3. The passage refers to the forty years the chosen people spent in the desert and how they were tested by affliction to see whether it was their intention to keep God’s commandments. Verse 3 reads, “He therefore let you be afflicted with hunger, and then fed you with manna ... in order to show you that not by bread alone does man live, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

Jesus knew the Scriptures by heart. They were an expression of the truth and God’s will for him. So he used the word of God as his weapon to counteract the lies of the devil. That is one good reason why you must become familiar with the word of God and know certain important verses by heart. They will help you overcome temptation. One example of a verse from Scripture you could learn and apply in temptation is Ps 51:12: “A clean heart create in me O God and a steadfast spirit renew within me.”

Is this true of you that, “the word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (2nd reading)?

In the second temptation, the devil “showed [Jesus] all the kingdoms of the world in ‘a single instant.’ The devil said to him, ‘I shall give to you

all this power and glory... . All this will be yours, if you worship me.”

This temptation reminds us of the occasion when the people wanted to make Jesus king after he fed the multitude, and how Jesus escaped to the mountain alone. The temptation to go off on a tangent, away from God’s will, was always at hand. But Jesus remained faithful to his Father’s will; he centered his whole life on God—as his fasting in the desert symbolized. (Fasting shows that we depend primarily on God for subsistence rather than earthly food and drink.)

The temptation proposed by the devil reminded Jesus again of a passage from the book of Deuteronomy on which he based his life (Deut 6:13). In this passage, God was warning the chosen people not to forget him when he brought them into the land of plenty. Verse 13 reads, “The Lord, your God, shall you fear (reverence/worship); him shall you serve.”

When the Apostles were arguing about who was the greatest among them, Jesus rebuked them. He warned them that his kingdom was not of this world. Positions of authority in his kingdom are for service. Leaders in the Church must be humble and use their position as servants of the people instead of lording their authority over them (Lk 22:24-27). The same holds true for the authority of parents over their children and other forms of authority. Humility and loving service are primary—not power and glory.

In the third and final temptations, the devil takes Jesus to the peak of the temple in Jerusalem and tells him to jump off, just to show that God would catch him in his fall and prevent him from hurting himself. The devil uses Holy Scripture and perverts its meaning for his own deceptive purpose. Being able to quote Scripture is not proof that one knows them. It is very easy to misinterpret the word of God or apply it out of context. That is why Jesus set up the teaching authority in the Church with the help of sacred Tradition and promised the Holy Spirit to guide the Church in the correct interpretation of

Scripture. Private interpretation influenced by individual prejudice and selfishness can easily lead to misinterpretation of God’s holy word.

The devil quotes Ps 91:11 (see Psalm response) as the reason why Jesus should jump off the temple area, “He will command his angels concerning you to guard you” and “With their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.” The devil takes a psalm of hope and trust in God’s presence to protect his people in dangerous situations, and turns it into one of presumption; “Put yourself in danger,” he is saying, “and force God to come and rescue you so that you will not hurt yourself.” That is what we call “tempting or testing God.” God has already proven himself trustworthy and loving. We must not put ourselves in danger and expect God to save us. Scripture also says, “He who loves danger will perish in it” (Sir 3:25). If you put yourself in an occasion of sin, you are on your own—you are in grave danger of falling.

Jesus responds to the devil with another quote from the book of Deuteronomy 6:16. “You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.” When the devil saw how committed Jesus was to his Father’s will, he got discouraged and left him—for a time. The epistle of James tells us, “Submit to God; resist the devil and he will take flight” (Jms 4:7). When the devil sees how determined we are to be faithful to God, he realizes that his temptations are only causing us to grow in strength and merit. Therefore, he gets discouraged and leaves us alone. But the devil keeps trying.

The final verse in today’s Gospel says, “When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time.” He continued to tempt Jesus throughout his ministry. For example: **1.** When the people he fed with miraculous loaves and fish tried to make him king (Jn 6:15); **2.** When Jesus’ relatives were urging him to “manifest himself to the world” (Jn 7:4); **3.** When the crowds were pressing Jesus to give them a miraculous sign (Jn 6:30); **4.** When the chief priests with the scribes and elders tauntingly said, “Let him come down from the cross, and we will believe in him” (Mt 27:42).

We, like Jesus, must prepare ourselves by prayer and fasting to overcome the temptations of the devil. We are always being tested to see if we will remain faithful to God. If we rely on God like Jesus, we will prevail.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Gospel: Luke 9:28-36

Jesus took Peter, John, and James” ... Jesus formed a community of support for himself by calling the 12 Apostles. Among these, he had three special friends in Peter, John, and James. We, too, need to make friends and associate closely with others who seek God. They help us to be faithful to God and to keep on growing spiritually. They incite us to intensify our love for God and to seek him more ardently. That is what *Come, Lord Jesus!* groups are all about.

Jesus and his special friends “went up the mountain to pray”. The mountain was one of the places Jesus frequented to pray. The mountain provided an atmosphere that was conducive to prayer. The height of the mountain took him away from earthly distractions and brought him into the heavenly places to be with his Father again, away from the noises that interfere with heavenly communications.

We, too, need to go apart and spend some time in prayer alone with God. We must create for ourselves an atmosphere conducive to prayer. We need silence and solitude to be able to communicate with God in the depths of our heart. We need divine intimacy for personal spiritual enrichment. That is why I am so fond of living in my little cottage in the middle of a cane field in Prairie Ronde. It vies with Jesus’ place of prayer on the mountain.

“While he was praying, his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white.” Here we see the marvelous transforming effects of prayer. Prayer is not just speaking to God or an exchange of words between God and us. Prayer is engaging in an interpersonal

communion with God. We enter into God through faith, hope, and love. We open our hearts to receive God and his outpoured love. In this marvelous exchange, the indwelling presence of God, through our openheartedness, is allowed to pervade our whole being as purifying light, to illumine, cleanse, and sanctify us. That is what happened to Jesus. “His face changed in appearance.” St. Matthew tells us that Jesus “was transfigured ... his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light” (Mt 17:2).

Grace affects our aura, that energy field that emanates from our persons. “God is light” (1 Jn1:5). Immersion in God through prayer causes us to assimilate divine qualities such as light, heavenly glory. Purity of heart enables God to shine through us; we begin to radiate the glory of his divine presence. Didn’t Jesus say that “the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43)?

The opposite is true for those who separate themselves from God through serious sin. Such a separation from God throws them into pitch darkness (see *The Interior Castle of St. Teresa*, First Mansions, Chap II). Sin affects their whole persons. Their aura casts a shadow of darkness around them. It affects their behavior and the people who are around them. They contaminate others with their pessimism and their negative attitude and behavior. St. Jude in his epistle tells us to “abhor even their flesh stained clothing” (Jude 23).

On the other hand, the divine radiation shining through a person who is closely united to God through purity of heart, affects his immediate atmosphere with healing light. For example, we read in the Acts of the Apostles, “when handkerchiefs or clothes which had touched [St. Paul’s] skin were applied to the sick, their diseases were cured and evil spirits departed from them” (Acts 19:12).

Getting back to our Gospel text, “and behold, two men were conversing with him (Jesus), Moses, and Elijah who appeared in glory and spoke of

his Exodus". You may wonder why Jesus would be speaking to these particular Old Testament men. Moses represents the Law, since the 10 Commandments and the Old Testament religious laws or precepts were given through him. Elijah represents the prophets as chief among them. Moses was founder of the Old Covenant and Elijah was its intrepid defender.

These men of the Old Testament appeared with Jesus in glory. Although their bodies had died many years before (Moses lived about 1250 B.C.; Elijah lived about 860 B.C.), these men appeared in heavenly glory on the mountain and were talking to Jesus. They are witnesses to heavenly life, life after death. This happened about 29 A.D.

Remember the four qualities of resurrected bodies mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44. Our bodies will become incorruptible, glorious, powerful, and spiritual, qualities we look forward to receive. Jesus is getting a foretaste of his resurrection. His whole being is penetrated with God's glory. The divine presence fills him with radiant light.

Jesus had already warned the Apostles (Lk 9:22) about his forthcoming passion, death, and resurrection. In other words, the Messiah is going to accomplish his mission and win our salvation as suffering servant (see Is 42, 49, 50, 52, 53). Jesus is preparing his Apostles for the worst, his passion and death, by his transfiguration in glory. He wanted to convince them of the necessity of his sufferings as well as to understand his future glory.

St. Luke is the only evangelist who tells us what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were talking about: his "Exodus", that is, his departure from this earth through his suffering and death on the cross and his resurrection.

The Scripture says, "They saw his glory Peter said ... 'Master, it is good that we are here.'" The experience was so heavenly Peter wanted to build three tents and stay there.

A "cloud", which is a sign of God's enveloping presence, overshadowed them. "They became frightened when they entered the cloud."

God's overshadowing presence frightened them. Someone, God himself, something, God's radiating presence, produced an overwhelming experience of such greatness as they had never experienced before. They were afraid.

"Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my chosen Son; listen to him.'"

God the Father himself is so delighted in Jesus he openly announces and identifies him as his own dear Son; they must listen to him. The others, Moses and Elijah disappear. Only Jesus remains. He is the one to whom human beings must now listen. The others, Moses and Elijah, prepared people for Jesus' coming to earth. They have completed their task. They departed from the scene. Now we must focus our whole attention on God's beloved Son. We must become total receptivity to him and his words. He speaks with divine wisdom. He reveals the divine mind. He tells us what we must do to live as children of God. He speaks the truth by which we must live. We must take his words into our hearts and ponder them at length, cherish them, and keep them on our minds so we can live by them every moment of our lives.

Jesus is the Promised Land, the kingdom of God promised Abraham in the first reading. We will inherit the kingdom by being transformed into his likeness. "The Lord Jesus ... will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body" (2nd Reading).

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT **Gospel: Lk 13:1-9**

Pilate had had some Galileans murdered while they were offering sacrifices. Jesus assures us that it was not because these men were greater sinners than others that they were killed. Their deaths depend on divine providence, God's plan for them and how long they should live. Jesus is saying that whenever we hear of someone being murdered, it is a striking reminder of our own death; it is a call to repentance and reformation of life.

"If you do not repent, you will all perish as they

did!” Jesus is saying, “Be ready at any and all times. Regret your past sins. Have a great desire to please God and do his will. Try to make up for your sins of the past. Spend more time in prayer and worship. Meditate daily on the Scriptures. Go to daily Mass. You have only one chance at life. Live it well. Do penance for your sins. Devote yourself to works of charity. There is an urgent need for immediate action. Stop dead in your tracks; make an about face from your present apathetic life.”

Jesus draws the same lesson from the accidental deaths of the eighteen people on whom the tower of Siloam fell. These also were not guiltier than anyone else. Their fate is a warning to all. Life is uncertain. Only death is certain.

The media gives us constant reminders of our own deaths as we see or hear the daily news of those who died. Are you ready? Are you living a fruitful life, leaving a trail of goodness and good works behind you? Are you in the state of grace? Are you living in the presence of God?

The owner of the fig tree had a right to expect his tree to bear figs. He represents God the creator who created us to produce goodness and good works. Much care has gone into our creation and redemption. We have got to respond. Jesus wants his ministry to bear the good results of conversion, repentance, and holy, virtuous lives. But he finds none!

“For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?” Three years is about the amount of time that Jesus spent in public ministry. These culminated in his suffering, death, and resurrection. Is all of that going to be in vain?

What kind of effort are you putting into working out your salvation? How much time do you devote yourself to prayer, Scripture reading, receiving the Eucharist, going to Confession? To what extent are you consciously working to root out sins and faults? Why do you stand there all

the day idle? You also, go into the vineyard and work for your salvation.

We are reminded here of the second reading. The people in the Old Testament received so many blessings from God but did so little in response. The people were closely associated with Moses by going through the Red Sea; the cloud, which represented the divine presence, led them through the desert. They ate the miraculous manna that sustained them and drank the water from the rock. The rock foreshadowed the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit that flowed from his open side in the Eucharist, “yet God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the desert” (1 Cor 10:1-6, 10-12).

God seems to be doing all the work. But there is little or no response from the people. When things did not go to their liking and they had to suffer, they rebelled and complained against God and Moses (Num 21:5).

The Scripture continues, “These things happened as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil things, as they did.” Twenty-four thousand died of the plague caused by those who had taken part in the shameful immoral rites of Baal (the false god of the Moabites) (Num 25:1-9). “Do not grumble as some did, and suffered death by the destroyer,” that is the destroying angel. In punishment for their grumbling and complaining, refusing to accept God’s will in bearing the hardships of life in the desert, God sent fiery serpents among them. Many died from their bites.

The second reading continues, “These things happened as an example and they have been written down as a warning to us. ...”

When the owner ordered the gardener to cut the barren fig tree down, he replied, “Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.” The gardener may represent Christ. Jesus cares. His grace works on you to make you respond favorably to God’s love initiative. He will give you a little while longer,

a short span of life. But if you don't show fruits of repentance, you will be cut down: he will end your useless life.

Picture yourself on your deathbed. Look at yourself. What would you change if you could? You still have a little time left. Get to work and go to it. For example, retirement is not only for leisure and play. It is a time for serious reflection, meditation on the word of God, going to daily Mass, eradicating sin, going to confession, seeking spiritual direction, associating with others who are seeking God and holiness of life.

Put an end to your wayward passions and disordered desires by abstinence and self-denial. That is how you correct and control your evil tendencies and become more spiritual and pleasing to God. Engage in works of charity and almsgiving. Moderate your eating and drinking and TV viewing. Cut out vulgarity and irreverence in speech. Stop the gossiping and idle or uncharitable talk. Examine your conscience daily. Get ready to die! You are going to face God to be judged. What good fruit can you show for your life?

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT **Gospel: Lk 15:1-3, 11-32**

The Gospel today begins with sinners drawing near to listen to Jesus. The merciful love of God the Father in Jesus, working through the Holy Spirit, attracted sinners. They felt the solace of his love; he understood them. They experienced compassion in Jesus whose name means "God saves" his people from their sins (Mt 1:21). His merciful love brought peace and healing to their troubled hearts. In Christ, they were reconciled to God. These were repentant sinners. They had experienced the evil of sin and the unhappiness that it brought into their lives. They wanted to change. Their hearts were open to Jesus' person and his words. Jesus received these repentant sinners with compassion and love.

However, there were other sinners there who were not happy with Jesus. They complained

that Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. They were not open to Jesus' forgiveness. The repentant sinners had obviously broken the Law. They were aware of their sins. The other sinners, the Pharisees and scribes, did not believe they were sinners because they kept the external letter of the law. They failed to realize that their internal attitude did not correspond to their external actions. Their hearts were not in it, did not go along with the spirit of the Law. For example, they may not have committed adultery, but they lusted; they may not have stolen, but they coveted; they may not have killed, but they hated unto death.

The humble sinners were drawn to Jesus. But the proud, unrepentant ones hated him. They could not see or acknowledge their kind of sin. They were too proud to even see their own sinfulness. They were too hard hearted to admit sin or change their thinking and living.

So Jesus told a parable with the hope of helping them to see themselves. The parable is a story about a very kind, loving, generous, and merciful father. This good father had two sons whose attitudes demonstrated two kinds of sinfulness.

First, Jesus tells about the younger son. The good father gave into his demand for his share of inheritance. "Life was too dull on the farm," he thought. He wanted to go off and really live it up. The father allowed his son to go off and experience life for himself. The son soon learned that happiness is not in things. He spent everything he owned without finding any happiness in giving in to his passions and desires. Rather, he only found misery and unhappiness. The younger son became greatly deprived. He lost his dignity as the son of a wealthy father. His sins of self-indulgence began to cause him great pain. He sank to his lowest. He became a slave, living with pigs, and starving.

His humiliation and pain were illuminating. He began to see what he had lost. Happiness was being with his father, living in the joy of his company with the farmhands. Happiness is a matter of heart, heart full of love and

gratitude to God, our parents, and other benefactors or friends.

In this moment of enlightenment, the younger son made up his mind to admit his sinfulness to his father. He would return home and beg forgiveness from his father. Having lost his dignity as a son through his sinfulness, he would humbly ask to be received as one of the servants. Sin had degraded him and he was ready to admit it. He was no longer worthy of being a son.

The father caught sight of his son while still a long way off. Actually, it was the father's love for his son that helped him to see the light and to return. The father's love was touching his heart and drawing him to himself. The father was filled with joy at seeing his returning son. His heart was full of compassion as he ran to meet him. He embraced him and kissed him.

The son proceeded to make his confession. But before he could finish, his father ordered his servants to restore his son to his true, original dignity. The father wanted him to see how precious his son was to him by clothing him with the finest robe, a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet. The joy of the father in the full restoration of his son's dignity was expressed by a magnificent banquet, accompanied with music and dancing. The true joys the son was looking for in a faraway place were available right at home—by a change of heart. The father's munificent love and his son's humble and contrite receptivity brought about a total restoration of the devastating effects of sin.

As the prophet Ezekiel stated, "If the wicked man turns away from all the sins he committed ... None of the crimes he committed shall be remembered against him; he shall live because of the virtue he has practiced" (Ez 18:21). In the words of the 2nd reading, "Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come."

In the second part of the parable, Jesus speaks about the older son. He demonstrates another kind of sinfulness. The older son found out about

his brother's return as he was coming back from the field. He inquired from a servant about the music and dancing. When he heard it was because his brother was back, he became infuriated and refused to go in. His good father came out pleading with him to join in the celebration. But he adamantly refused. He was insulted that his younger brother was given such a joyful and extravagant reception after demonstrating such irresponsible behavior. He should have been severely reprimanded and punished! Instead, he is received with joy, showered with love and honors.

What about him? The older son who has been so faithful and obedient to his father? He felt neglected, unloved. His father didn't seem to care about him. He worked so hard. He was like a slave without any privileges. The father never gave him a barbeque!

How do we respond to this older son's hurt feelings? How do we explain the apparent unfairness of the father? Isn't this older son's anger justified?

First of all, the father's heart goes out to his older son also, as well as to his younger son. He tries to explain to his protesting son that he never lost him as he had lost his brother. He had him by his side all the time where he was loved and appreciated for his goodness and fidelity. But the father felt that he had to celebrate his younger brother's return because he had been away, lost, perhaps never to return, or even dead! Surely they had to celebrate his return. It's just like when they found the lost sheep. They made much more over that lost one when they found him than over the rest of the herd who were safe and sound.

But how do we explain the attitude of this seemingly perfect son? Something is not right: he has no sympathy whatsoever for his brother. He is jealous and full of hatred for him. He completely disowns his sibling. He is full of anger; he is disrespectful toward his father, if not down right insulting. He is full of resentment and bitterness. He is unforgiving both toward his brother and his father. On the other hand, his younger

brother saw the error of his ways and was full of regret. He changed and wanted to make up for his sinful behavior. He repented of his sins of passion and overindulgence. Perhaps his sins were more obvious and external. But the older brother's internal disposition becomes visible through his nasty attitude. His cold-blooded hard-heartedness is worse than his brother's sins of wastefulness and wild partying. The younger brother learned from his mistakes and is back in the love of his father. But the older brother does not see his coldness and lovelessness. He is hard and bitter. He is addicted to work, unable to celebrate, rejoice, and give thanks. He is choked up with anger and resentment, a slave to duty and unable to enjoy himself as a person. He also has lost his dignity as a son. He also has, in a sense, gone off to a far away country.

But how did all of this come about? How did he get to this point?

Let us remember that, in this parable, Jesus is describing the conduct of the Pharisees through the older brother. The Pharisees were resentful that Jesus welcomed repentant sinners who had broken the Law. They did not understand compassion and the mercy of God for sinners. They were rigorists. They believed that perfection consisted in moral flawlessness and that you could attain such "holiness" through sheer will power. You could do it if you wanted to—on your own. They prided themselves in being experts at keeping the Law of Moses. They despised others who did not observe the Law so meticulously. But they did not realize that, while they kept the external letter of the Law, internally, their hearts were far from God.

They did not see God as a loving and merciful Father; they viewed him as a hard taskmaster; instead of fostering compassion and love for others, they pridefully held them in disdain and judged them mercilessly. They arrogantly held themselves aloof from the common people who were not such specialists in observing the external letter of the Law.

Meanwhile, their hearts were not with God. They themselves had become the center of attention. They had maneuvered themselves away from the great commandment of loving God with all their heart and their neighbor as themselves.

So, in a roundabout way, we have begun to answer our question about how the older son came to be so resentful and bitter. He had serious misconceptions about his father. He did not realize how loving, generous, kind, and forgiving his father was. The older brother thought his father was as hard, stingy, and slavish as he was—so he dare not ask him for a kid goat to eat with his friends. In fact, he was such a slave to work he did not know how to rejoice and celebrate.

Slavish obedience and external observance of the letter of the Law is not the answer to becoming perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect. The essential element that is needed as we try to obey the law of God is the giving of our hearts. The command says, "Love God with your whole heart and love your neighbor as you love yourself." Perfection consists in love; loving God with all your heart. The heart refers to the inner core of the person: the spirit, will, and mind. God wants us to give ourselves to him in love as he gives himself to us. Impersonal obedience does not fulfill this requirement.

"My son," God says, "give me your heart, and let your eyes keep to my ways" (Prov 23:26).

The older son, representing the Pharisees, did not give the father his heart. He kept it for himself as he begrudgingly obeyed his orders. Where was his heart? —On himself? —On his own dreams and desires? —On all the property he is going to inherit? Where is your heart as you go about fulfilling your daily duties?

The human father represents the divine Father. As we obey his command, we must also give our hearts to him.

Life is God's gift to us, not only at birth, but he continues to sustain us from moment to moment. We must love him in return. We must

be in continuous loving communion with God our Father from moment to moment as he freely gives us life.

We must also be a grateful people. Like Jesus, we must be Eucharist: We must be in continuous thanksgiving to God for life and all the blessings that accompany it. As we carry out God's will, we give him our hearts, our persons, ourselves. We hold nothing back. Our hearts and persons were made for God. We can only be happy and fulfilled when our heart is given and resting in him. As the psalm response tells us today, "Look to him that you may be radiant with joy" (Ps 34:6).

If we withhold our heart from God, it becomes empty, void, a black hole. We become a negative complexity of dark moods: disordered desires, angry feelings, hostility, resentment, bitterness, hard heartedness, insensitivity, lovelessness, loneliness, unforgiveness, mercilessness, unhappiness, restlessness, unable to be satisfied and making everyone else miserable by our negative behavior. On the other hand, if we repent and give our hearts to God in love and gratitude, we are filled with God's reciprocal love and holy presence. We become loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled (see Gal 5:22-23).

As sons and daughters, we are always with the Father. Everything he has is ours. We celebrate and rejoice in his presence. We were dead and have come to life; we were lost and have been found!

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Gospel: Jn 8:1-11

Early in the morning [Jesus] arrived again in the temple after spending the night in the Mount of Olives. Sometimes he spent the night in prayer (Lk 6:12). At other times, Jesus would rise very early before dawn so he could be alone and pray (Mk 1:35). Then he would go to the temple area. "All the people started coming to him and he sat down and taught them."

Jesus spent much time in teaching people. They had a hunger for truth. They recognized Jesus

to be "The Truth" (Jn 14:6). So he imparted the divine wisdom to them in the form of truth. He nourished their souls with the word of God. Thus they understood the will of God and how to live in the truth. He explained the divine order of things with God at the center, drawing all to himself through love.

While Jesus was teaching, "the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle". You will remember that the scribes and Pharisees prided themselves in being perfect observers of the Law of Moses. Yet they were too blind to see that their sinfulness was just as bad as or worse than the adulterous woman. Their cold and callous hearts thought nothing of embarrassing the woman by exposing her to the crowd as they made her stand in front of everyone. Their cruelty exposed their own hardness of heart, totally devoid of charity. We are reminded of last Sunday's Gospel when Jesus told the parable of the merciful father to show that the elder son's cold and prideful aloofness was actually worse than his younger brother's repentant self indulgence.

Though the man and woman were caught in the act of adultery, only the woman was brought to trial. This indeed was gross injustice. But Jesus himself is here being unjustly tried.

The accusers said to Jesus, "Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" They thought that they had Jesus cornered. If he said, "Yes" to the stoning, he would have gotten into trouble with the Romans, who alone had the right to pass the death sentence. If Jesus said "No", he violated the Mosaic Law and encouraged others to do the same. "They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him."

How is Jesus going to get out of this trap? In response, "Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger." It would seem that if what Jesus wrote were important, we would have been told what it was. Perhaps he was simply tracing lines on the ground while he was

thinking; doodling we call it. Jesus shows a kind of disinterest in their old tricks. "But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her!' Again he bent down and wrote on the ground." By his tracing in the dirt, Jesus gives his attackers time to think about his statement and their own sins. The limelight is now on them! People who live in glass houses should not throw stones at others. "And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders."

Our own sinfulness disqualifies us from judging and condemning others. Thinking of our own sins is disarming. In condemning others we would be condemning ourselves. Others' sinfulness reminds us of our own. We are not in a position to judge and condemn others. Rather, we want to be compassionate toward them, hoping that God will be compassionate toward us. Jesus did say, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Mt 5:7). Others' sins remind us to be sorry for our own sins. They also remind us to be compassionate toward sinners since we ourselves are among them. If we loved ourselves as God loves us, we would be more accepting of our weaknesses as we try to improve. This self-acceptance is a form of compassion that is pleasing to God. Then perhaps we would be disposed to extend this compassion to others when we see them acting sinfully. The commandment does say, "Love your neighbor as yourself." I believe that because we are not accepting and compassionate toward our own failures, we are indisposed to accept and have compassion for those of others.

The Pharisees wished to condemn; Jesus wished to forgive. They wished to stone the woman to death and were going to take pleasure in doing so. They knew the thrill of exercising the power to condemn. Jesus knew the thrill of exercising the power to forgive. Jesus regarded the sinner with pity born of love; the Pharisees regarded him with disgust born of self-righteousness. Although the men who were accusing the woman left because they themselves were sinners, Jesus does not condemn them; he simply leads them

to recognize their own sinfulness. Jesus does not condemn the woman either. But he himself who cannot be convicted of sin and who alone can set us free from sin will be condemned to death.

Each time someone is caught in sin, we ourselves are on trial. Will we recognize ourselves in them? Will we have compassion on their miserable condition? Or will we judge harshly and condemn them? We may condemn the sin, but we must take pity on the sinner.

"So he was left alone with the woman before him." Mercy and misery are together. The witnesses and accusers have gone. The case falls to pieces. "Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She replied, 'No one, sir!' Then Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more.'" Jesus has no desire to act as judge, only to proclaim the mercy of God. God's mercy has been granted to her that she may avoid sin in the future.

There is a delicate balance between the justice of Jesus in not condoning sin and his mercy in forgiving the sinner. With regard to the past, God is merciful. We are full of hope for the future: for God loves us and strengthens us with his presence to overcome a sinful world. "In the world you will have trouble," Jesus said, "but take courage, I have conquered the world" (Jn 16:33).

The first reading puts it this way, "Remember not the events of the past ... See, I am doing something new! ... In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers." God makes conversion and sinlessness possible. Jesus won this grace for us by his suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus has overcome the world, and he gives us his Holy Spirit to empower us to do the same.

An example of conversion and triumph over sin can be seen in the second reading. St. Paul was a very angry person who persecuted the Church and was responsible for the death of St. Stephen. His experience of the risen Jesus totally changed him. "The supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus" was such a marvelous experience; he considered

his former life style to be “so much rubbish”. The “pursuit” of this new life now became his sole, all-absorbing interest.

Jesus confronted the adulterous woman in the Gospel today with the challenge of a sinless life. He said, “What you did was wrong. Change your life. Sin no more!” Here was a challenge, which pointed a sinner to heights of innocence, which she had never dreamed. Jesus confronts the sinful life with the challenge of virtue. Jesus did not say, “You are a wretched and hopeless creature.” He said, “Go and sin no more.” He believed that with his help, the sinner has it in him to become a saint.

Jesus’ method was to inspire miserable sinners with the unglimped discovery that they were potential saints. Jesus challenged the woman to reach out to the new way with him.

In conclusion, our first emotion towards anyone who has made a mistake should be pity and compassion. Secondly, this is the Gospel of a second chance. Everyone has a future as well as a past—a bright future at that for those who learn and are made wise by their mistakes.

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD’S PASSION

Gospel: Luke 22:14-23, 56

Jesus said to [the apostles], “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer ...” This was a most special night. Jesus and the Apostles were celebrating the great feast of deliverance from Egyptian captivity. Through the shedding of the blood of the lamb, the destroying angel spared the first born of the chosen people. They were then free to leave that place of enslavement and go to the Promised Land. Through Moses, God opened the Red Sea so his people could pass over into freedom. The Lord’s power destroyed Pharaoh and his pursuing army. This first Passover was symbolical of another and greater that would fulfill it and bring it to perfection.

Now Jesus is introducing this new Passover. He is

anticipating the shedding of the blood of the true Lamb of God symbolized in the Old Testament Passover. Jesus would surrender himself for our deliverance from the slavery of sin. By his suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus will make us Passover into the kingdom of God. He will give those who participate in it, through baptism and the Eucharist, the power to conquer their spiritual enemies; they will then pass over into the freedom of the children of God. Through it, they enter into the very presence of God and into that kingdom flowing with spiritual milk and honey.

We can understand, then, why this particular Passover was especially joyful for Jesus. He is going to anticipate his suffering, death, and resurrection by instituting a new Passover meal. He is going to give the Apostles the power to make his sacrificial death and resurrection present for all future generations so that his followers can participate in it and its saving effects. This Last Supper and Jesus’ command to the Apostles and their successors to repeat what he had done is what makes the Mass possible. Our communion with Jesus’ actual death and resurrection derives from that moment. His precious blood cleanses us from sin; his glorified body nourishes us with divine life. Jesus continues to be present among us in the holy Eucharist to love us; we in turn have the joy of being with him and loving him in return. No wonder Jesus said, “With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you.”

“I shall not eat it again I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” After his resurrection, Jesus returned to be with his disciples when he again shared this holy meal. As St. Peter explained, “This man [Jesus] God raised on the third day and granted that he be visible, not to all the people, but to us, the witnesses chosen by God in advance, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”

“[Jesus said,] ‘... the hand of the one who is to betray me is with me on the table’ ... and they began to debate among themselves who among them would do such a deed.” Sadly, each of us, like the Apostles,

has that potential. It is quite possible, experience may have taught us that, like the Apostles, we could walk away from that most sacred meal with Jesus and either betray or deny him. That is why we must “Get up and pray that [we] may not undergo the test.” The spirit may be willing, but the flesh is weak. We must remain watchful and “work out our salvation in fear and trembling”.

Even at such a solemn moment as the Last Supper when Jesus was about to be betrayed and delivered to death, “an argument broke out among [the apostles] about which of them should be regarded as the greatest”. How discouraging their self-centered attitude must have been for Jesus! They still did not understand what the kingdom of God was all about. Jesus had to explain again. Greatness in his spiritual kingdom consists in being virtuous. A humble attitude is what opens us to God, and, coupled with a heart full of love, prompts us to serve and give ourselves to God and others in self-sacrifice. This is what makes us great in the kingdom of God. This was Jesus’ attitude: “I am among you as the one who serves.”

“Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat ...”. This expression brings out the violent shaking that all the Apostles were about to undergo. They would get swept off their feet by the evil at hand. They would not be able to cope with the fear and risk of life compounded by the presence of the Evil One. Dread flooded their hearts; courage failed utterly. The temptation was too much for them to handle.

“But I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers.” Peter’s triple denial will humble him and prepare him to rely totally on Jesus for strength. Then he will be prepared to lead the other disciples and teach them that moral strength and courage come from living in communion with God and drawing divine strength from him.

One aspect of Jesus’ previous training of the Apostles for mission was reliance on divine providence: “without a money bag or a sack or

sandals”. But now he is preparing them for new circumstances and hard times. He is teaching them to be “wise as serpents” (Mt 10:16), ready to face and cope with difficulty and danger. “But now one who has a money bag should take it, and likewise a sack, and one who does not have a sword should sell his cloak and buy one.” Mention of the sword seems to be Jesus’ symbolical way of warning the Apostles about the evil that was awaiting them. But Peter took his words literally so that he actually struck with the sword and cut off the right ear of the high priest’s servant. Jesus, however, intervened, saying, “Stop, no more of this!” Then he touch the servant’s ear and healed him”. Jesus’ meekness did not allow him or his disciples to fight. He overcame evil with good. As St. Paul would put it, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil; be concerned for what is noble in the sight of all. ... Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil with good” (Rom 12:17, 21).

“When he arrived at the [Mount of Olives, Jesus] said to them, ‘Pray that you may not undergo the test.’” Jesus’ primary approach to facing trial and evil was prayer. He fled to God, his Father. That is how he drew strength in adversity. Human nature is not capable of overcoming severe temptation all alone. It is no match for the Evil One and his force. Only divine strength can endure and overcome the power of evil.

Jesus expressed his total reliance on his Father in a humble posture of dependence and begging; he fell on his knees and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done.” Jesus’ human nature cringed and wanted to flee from the heavy responsibility of carrying the weight of the sins of the world (see Is 53:4-6). “He was in such agony and he prayed so fervently that his sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground.” But Jesus’ prayer was efficacious. An angel appeared to strengthen him. His friends, the Apostles, were too grief stricken to help him. Jesus tells them and all of us, “Get up and pray that you may not undergo the test.” Without prayer, we are incapable of enduring any severe test without falling. We absolutely must

develop a habit of prayer so we can overcome the temptations that await us in life.

“Judas went up to Jesus to kiss him. Jesus said to him, ‘Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?’” Jesus had been patient with Judas all along. He tolerated his stealing from the moneybag (see Jn 12:6). He knew that Judas did not believe he could nourish us with his glorified flesh (Jn 6:64). But Judas could hide his disbelief and sinfulness only so long. Now Judas’ treacherous kiss exposes his hypocritical and hardened heart in all its ugliness. Yet our meek and humble Savior lovingly responds with a question that would appeal to Judas’ conscience to help him realize what a grave and heinous act he was committing, “Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?”

Similarly, after Peter’s triple denial of ever knowing Jesus, he simply “turned and looked at Peter”. That kindly, understanding gaze was enough to pierce Peter’s heart with compunction. “He went out and began to weep bitterly.”

Jesus then began to endure being ridiculed, beaten, and insulted by those who arrested him. “Herod and his soldiers [also] treated him contemptuously and mocked him.” Pilate judged Jesus to be “not guilty” three times; and yet, through weakness and fear he gave Jesus up to be crucified. He gave in to the pressure and the unjust demands of the rulers of the people. They preferred the release of a murderer instead of Jesus who was so full of goodness. Pilate “handed Jesus over to them to deal with as they wished”.

Jesus was more concerned about the weeping women than himself. He was aware of the future destruction of the city when thousands would be crucified or starved to death. Jesus said, “If these things are done when the wood is green what will happen when it is dry?” In other words, if Jesus who is innocent meets such a fate, how much worse it will be for those who are guilty. As Jesus was being crucified, he kept forgiving those responsible for his sufferings and death, saying, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”

One of the two criminals hanging in crucifixion on each side of Jesus said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” This man had defended Jesus against the other criminal who was insulting him. In response, Jesus promised the repentant criminal, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Paradise is the place where righteous people go after they die. Then Jesus himself, enveloped by the darkness of an eclipse of the sun, died, saying, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

“The centurion who witnessed what had happened glorified God and said, ‘This man was innocent beyond doubt!’

“When all the people who had gathered for this spectacle saw what had happened, they returned home beating their breasts.”

HOLY THURSDAY

Gospel: Jn 13:1-15

Before the feast of the Passover. ...” Jesus and his disciples were celebrating the Old Testament Passover meal—as described in the first reading.

Because of the blood of the lamb sprinkled on the doorposts, the first born of the chosen people were spared. The people of God were freed and passed over into the freedom of the Promised Land. “This day shall be a memorial feast for you, which all your generations shall celebrate with pilgrimage to the LORD as a perpetual institution.” This feast was fulfilled and replaced by a new Passover: Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection. Jesus anticipated this new Passover at his Last Supper by a new ceremony when he changed bread and wine into his Body and Blood. He then empowered and commanded his Apostles to do the same.

Jesus is the new Lamb of God. His blood is shed to take away the sins of the world. We eat the Lamb of God in Holy Communion. We are nourished with divine life. We are joined to God and each other. Together, Christ as head and we as members,

form one body of Christ.

The second reading expressed what Jesus did at the Last Supper. The Holy Spirit preserved this ceremony intact over the centuries through sacred Tradition. The sign of the consecrated bread and wine contains the Reality it signifies. Through it, we "... proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes". The redemptive power of Jesus' sacrificial death is unleashed and applied to the believer by its ritualization and celebration.

"Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father." Jesus' hour is St. John's way of referring to Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. What a beautiful way of looking upon death: the moment in time "to pass from this world to the Father". This saying also captures the meaning of life. Each moment of life is a way of passing out of this world to the Father, moment by moment, as we live out our lives in obedience to his will.

This thought is completed further on with, "... he had come from God and was returning to God." Here we see the dignity of the divine Son who is in the midst of accomplishing this humble service of washing the Apostles' feet and the death it symbolized. Both becoming human and returning to God by way of suffering and death involved a profound act of humility. And to think that it is the divine Son who is accomplishing all of this!

"He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end." "His own" are those who listen to his voice and belong to him. He loved his own till the very last moment of his life. This expression also means Jesus loved his followers, including us, to a supreme degree, to the utmost. He would show them the depth of his love. As the rest of this passage shows, St. John had in mind the washing of the disciples' feet, which was a symbol of Jesus' sacrificial death. He would give himself totally. He went as far as he could possibly go. We recall, too, that on this night and through this meal, Jesus, out of love for us, perpetuated his holy presence among us; he also left us his paschal mystery, making its redemptive power present

and available to us. This night and this supper were caught up in a suspended and unforgettable, eternalized moment of time when divine love defied all earthly perimeters and limitations. He broke out of all boundaries in his loving self-gift and brought it to heretofore unknown heights, fully comprehended only by divinity.

"The devil had already induced Judas ... to hand him over." Note the blatant contrast of the satanic driven betrayal of Judas, and the grace inspired, self-given love of Jesus. Recall the treacherous kiss of Judas and the kindly words of Jesus appealing to his sense of honor, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss" (Lk 22:48)? Doesn't this moment help us to understand the heinousness of our sins? Every sin is a betrayal, the treacherous act of handing Jesus over for crucifixion as the price of our sin in exchange for cheap pleasure—our 30 pieces of silver.

During the supper Jesus rose "... and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around his waist." The foot washing is part of this supper and night of love. Both the foot washing and paschal meal symbolize Jesus' sacrificial death as a humble service of love. How majestic and dignified Jesus appears in performing this humble task. Love changed and transfigured this most humble task in brilliant light. We, too, can transform our most menial acts of service with love, and make them glorious. A heart full of love brightens everything.

Peter said, "Master, are you going to wash my feet?" The incongruity of it all! Here we see a reversal of roles, of master and servant; such a demeaning chore. Yet this typified Jesus' whole life of ministering to others. ... Service was a concrete sign of Jesus' humiliation in his incarnate state. He emptied himself. He was free of any pride and self-importance.

"What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later." The full depth of Jesus' humility and love will be understood fully only through his death, which the foot washing symbolized. It was not clear at the time that Jesus'

life of service culminating in his sacrificial death was being shown here.

Peter said to Jesus, “You will never wash my feet.” It just did not make sense or seem possible that Jesus could perform such a menial task. But that is what Jesus’ sacrificial death is in its humiliating and cleansing effect. It is only by accepting and receiving the effects of his saving death that Peter and we can have Jesus’ inheritance.

Jesus’ inheritance is the glorious presence and Kingdom of the Father. It is the eternal life and the heavenly life with Jesus. The necessity of having our feet washed by Jesus and sharing in his inheritance as a consequence become intelligible only if we understand the foot washing as a symbol for Jesus’ salvific death.

Peter goes from one extreme of not allowing Jesus to wash his feet to the other of wanting to be bathed by him. But Jesus explains that the foot washing is all that is necessary because it symbolizes his humiliating death, which cleans a person entirely.

“... you are clean, but not all.” Jesus explained later (Jn 15:3) that his words have had a cleansing effect on the Apostles. They were clean of heart; no sin remained on their consciences to contaminate them. They desire and cling to nothing which is contrary to God’s will and truth. But they are not all clean.

“For he knew who would betray him ...” Jesus knew of Judas’ intention to betray him. Sin causes moral uncleanness; it infects and stains purity of heart; it cuts us off from the purity and holiness of God and opens us to the moral contagion of evil. Not even Jesus himself, his holy word, and sacraments can purify a person when his heart is attached to sin and evil desire.

Jesus said, “Do you realize what I have done for you?” Again, the washing is a sign of Jesus’ servitude in the Incarnation—a life of service culminating in his self-gift unto death on Calvary and in the Eucharist. Even this love did not melt the hardened heart of Judas, whom Jesus always

treated as a friend.

“If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet.” We not only have Jesus’ example moving us to humble acts of service for one another. Jesus’ self-gift in the Eucharist empowers and inclines us to give ourselves to him through ministering to one another. Jesus calls us to this loving task.

“I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” We have a duty to humble ourselves and serve each other in charity.

“... blessed are you if you do it” (verse 17). Service is a simple means of passing from self to others. Love for others is a high form of detachment from self-centeredness. Many opportunities are offered us each day to pass out of our self-centered world to the Father. There we will find true life. As St. John tells us in his first epistle, “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers [and sisters]” (1 Jn 3:14).

EASTER VIGIL – THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD

Luke 24:1-12

At daybreak, on the first day of the week ...” The dawning day is symbolical of a dawning, awakening faith in the possibility of the resurrection of Jesus. But it was slow and gradual in its full realization. The accumulating evidence was needed to break through the darkness of their shattered hopes for a triumphant Messiah in Jesus. Easter Sunday morning was dawning to bring new hope. But the disciples had to dispose themselves for the glorious rising Son of God to illumine their darkness.

The holy women were seeking Jesus. Their love for Jesus awakened them to something better than the darkness of sleep. Very early in the morning, “they took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb”. The hurried preparation of Jesus’ body for burial on Friday was unsatisfactory. The sacred body of the dead Jesus deserved better. The Temple of God required greater reverence and

care. The women, driven by love for the Savior, clearly understood that.

When they arrived at the place of burial, “They found the stone rolled away from the tomb”. What a surprise! How did that happen? St. Matthew tells us, “an angel of the Lord rolled back the stone” (Mt 28:2). Jesus had already risen. He did not need to have the stone removed from the sealed tomb. His “incorruptible ... glorious ... powerful ... and spiritual body” (see 1 Cor 15:42-44) could easily pass through the walls of the tomb. The stone was rolled away, not to free Jesus from the tomb, but to show the disciples that the resurrection had already taken place.

“When they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.” Jesus was already glorified: his crucified body was transfigured in the glorious light and presence of his Father. “While they were puzzling over this, behold, two men in dazzling garments appeared to them.” The empty tomb caused the women to wonder. The slight, beginning evidence stirred their curiosity towards an awakening faith. Moreover, the “two men in dazzling garments” conveyed the notion of their otherworldly nature. The women were already experiencing the glory of God in them. Later these two “men” are identified as angels (see verse 23). They are pure spirits whose mission is to be messengers (the Greek word for “angels”).

“[The women] were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground.” These heavenly beings radiated God. Encountering them was like coming into the presence of God. Such an experience was so overwhelming they nearly got knocked out of their wits.

“They said to them, ‘Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but has been raised.’” These holy women were seeking. Love for Jesus stirred their desire for him. This intense desire moved them to “seek” Jesus. This holy activity brought them outside of their grief-stricken selves. The effort of seeking prompted spirit assertiveness, which disposed them for the world of spirit and the supernatural. Their

seeking enables them to break through the barrier of flesh and its impediment to communion with God. The light of God can now begin to dawn on them, overcoming the darkness of ignorance of divine things.

Jesus is called “the living one” by the angels. He is “The Life” (Jn 14:6), Supreme Life. He has become a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor 15:45), the glorified God-Man overflowing with divine life. He is intensely desirous of pouring this divine life into those who dispose themselves through seeking him.

The angels said, “Remember what he said to you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and rise on the third day.” Jesus told his followers this on no less than three different occasions (see Mk 6:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). But his disciples could not grasp what Jesus was saying. Human experience told them that once you suffer and die, that’s the end. They had seen Jesus raise, resuscitate dead people back to life. But never before had anyone raised himself from the dead. And besides that, the Messiah was supposed to be an unconquerable hero, impervious even to death. They did not realize that Jesus was talking about the central mystery of our faith, the paschal mystery. That was how he was going to win the salvation of the whole world, by his suffering and death. Our Holy Father John Paul II says that Jesus retained his glorious wounds in order to show the victorious power of suffering. But the chosen people had never joined the concept of a glorious Messiah to that of the suffering servant of Isaiah (see Is 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13—53:12). Now, however, the glorious moment of fulfillment and the brilliant light of its full revelation are at hand. “And they remembered his words.”

“Then they returned from the tomb and announced all these things to the eleven and to all the others.” Let us give credit to the holy women, the true lovers of Jesus. They are the ones who remained faithful to Jesus and followed him on

the way of the cross, all the way up to Calvary. They have persevered in ministering to him even after he died, in the tomb. Their love for him prevailed over all obstacles and dangers. They put their love for Jesus above everything else and even themselves. They didn't care what people thought about them or what might happen to them. Jesus' love for them had conquered their hearts. Now their love for him was indomitable.

"But their story seemed like nonsense and [the apostles] did not believe them." The apostles were still in the darkness of disbelief. The resurrection sounded too good to be true. How could such adamant disbelief be overcome? Only the brilliant light of startling reality could do that. And so it happened when Jesus showed himself to his disciples. He had them see the place of the wounds so they could experience for themselves that he was the same Jesus they saw crucified. Though his wounded body was glorified, they could still touch him and experience for themselves that he was not a ghost (see Lk 24:36-43). But before this full appearance of the risen Jesus could take place, the apostles were prepared for it through a gradual dawning brought about by their responding to the joyful news of the holy women.

"Peter got up and ran to the tomb, bent down, and saw the burial cloths alone; then he went home amazed at what had happened." We can see the gradual awakening in Peter. If thieves had taken the body, they would have taken the burial cloths with them. Perhaps the shape of these cloths gave evidence that Jesus had passed through them. He even left his image on the holy shroud, which had wrapped his body.

Soon the apostles would come to full faith. Their seemingly unshakable disbelief makes their later faith all the more credible and convincing.

The Gospel has presented the evidence of the resurrection. It is for us to respond by acting upon it if we also, are to arrive at the joyful fullness of our holy Catholic faith.

EASTER SUNDAY— THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD

Gospel: Jn 20:1-9

On the first day of the week, on Easter Sunday, "Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning while it was still dark." This darkness symbolizes that the disciples were still sad and unenlightened about the joyful reality of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene "saw the stone removed from the tomb." We learn from St. Matthew's gospel that an angel of the Lord had done this. Jesus' spiritualized body had passed through the walls of the tomb in his resurrected body. The stone was removed, not to let Jesus out, but to show that he had risen.

"So [Mary] ran" in her excitement and awakening hope "and went to Simon Peter" as the leader of the Apostles, "and the other disciple whom Jesus loved" representing each of us.

Mary told them, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb and we don't know where they put him." The resurrection, still unknown to the disciples, comes as a complete surprise, even if Jesus had forewarned them about his suffering, death, and resurrection on three consecutive occasions (see Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). Mary and the other women (expressed in the "We don't know") thought that someone had removed Jesus' body from the tomb.

"So Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first." Here we have a vivid eyewitness account of what happened by someone who was a participant, namely the beloved disciple, John. Perhaps he outran Peter because he was younger and more agile. But John is also quicker because he loves more. The disciple closest to Jesus in love was the quickest to look for him and the first to believe in him. John is also the contemplative who is quicker to see because of his intuitive knowledge.

“He bent down and saw the burial cloths there but did not go in. When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place.” Perhaps it was out of deference to Peter as older leader of the Apostles that John waited for him to enter first. At any rate, the description of the event enables us to be present by this eyewitness account as if we ourselves were present to the unfolding of the drama.

The burial cloths assure us that the body was not stolen. Surely, thieves would have taken these along with the body. Perhaps the cloths were left behind as a sign that Jesus would not use them again. The fact that the cloth that had covered Jesus’ head was not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place leaves us without a clue as to any further meaning. Otherwise we would have believed that the shape of the cloths might have preserved the contours of the body that would have passed through them in the process of resurrection.

“Then the other disciple went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed.” John, the contemplative and the disciple of love, immediately believed. The burial cloths left behind by Jesus triggered total faith in the resurrection of Jesus. Love united the disciple of love to Jesus. The communion of the two gave John an interior knowledge of the reality that Jesus had passed from death to life, the supreme life of the divinity. As John would later write, “Whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony within himself” (1 Jn 5:10). John’s love for Jesus gave him the insight to detect his presence through perfected faith, that is, faith perfected by the gifts of wisdom and understanding.

In this episode of the empty tomb, we have come to see that God reveals himself little by little to those who seek him. The effort of seeking spiritualizes us and disposes us to experience God. The spiritual life is a progressive discovery of the risen Lord dwelling in us.

God had said through the prophet Jeremiah, “When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, you will find me with you” (Jer 29:13-14). Seeking is a way of leaving the impediment of self for God. Our personal effort is essential. The discipline of self-mastery and assertion of spirit opens us up for God who is spirit. God responds to our efforts by further self-revelation.

Mary Magdalene and the Apostles responded to God’s initiative in the opened tomb. Jesus in turn revealed himself more completely to them. God makes the first move in self-revelation. If we do not respond, nothing further will happen. We are spiritually indisposed to see him through our inertia. Human apathy and sloth are major obstacles to spiritual progress. We lazily say to God, “Show me and I’ll believe.” God responds, “Believe and I will show.” Act upon your faith and you will be disposed for God to reveal himself to you.

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Gospel Jn 20:19-31

Jesus appeared to the Apostles gathered together behind locked doors on Easter Sunday evening. His risen body was so spiritualized he could pass through walls and doors as if there were none. Jesus banishes all fear from their hearts by granting them the peace of forgiveness and reconciliation. Three times, in close succession, Jesus gives them his peace, a word that expresses the totality of the fruits of salvation: freedom from sin, fullness of grace, and the fruition of God’s presence. The Apostles’ abandonment of Jesus in his passion, and Peter’s denials, are all forgiven and forgotten.

“Jesus came and stood in their midst.” Jesus’ visible appearance standing in the midst of the Apostles is limited to that occasion. But Jesus’ standing invisibly in our midst is a permanent reality. The second reading from the book of revelation expresses this important reality in symbolical imagery.

“The one like a son of man [standing] in the midst of the seven gold lampstands” describes the risen Jesus standing in the midst of the Church. He permanently stands in our midst, especially when we are gathered together in his name (see Mt 18:20).

“... he showed them his hands and his side.” Jesus showed his hands and side to his Apostles. In this way he identified himself as the crucified one. John Paul II gives us another reason why Jesus retained his glorious wounds: to manifest the victorious power of suffering. We can accept our own sufferings with courage and patient endurance when we see how valuable they are: they are transforming us into the very image of God (2 Cor 3:18; see also 2 Cor 4:10-12, 16-18).

Jesus had promised the Apostles, “I shall see you again; then your hearts will rejoice with a joy no one can take from you” (Jn 16:22). Now as he returns to them, he fulfilled that promise: “The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.” But this joy of being in the presence of the Lord and the experience of immense peace and forgiveness is destined to become ours too.

So Jesus, who has become a life-giving spirit (see 1 Cor 15:45), symbolically breathes his own new Easter life into the Apostles, even as God had breathed life into Adam (Gen 2:7) in the first creation. Now, however, Jesus is infusing the Holy Spirit into the Apostles giving them the power to forgive sins and continue the new creation.

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Jesus was sent as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”. Now he is sharing his mission with the Church’s ministers. They are to minister his forgiving love won through his passion, death, and resurrection. They extend Jesus’ pardon through the sacrament of Penance. Jesus himself forgives us our sins working through the sacraments of Holy Orders and Penance.

“Thomas ... was not with them when Jesus came.” The Apostle, Thomas, was absent when Jesus appeared to the other Apostles. The assembled

community of believers, symbolized as the gold lampstands in the second reading is radiant with the presence of the glorified, divine Jesus in its midst. We suffer great loss by not being present when the community gathers each Sunday. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, “We should not absent ourselves from the assembly, as some do ...” (10:25).

The Apostle, Thomas, demonstrates how easily the darkness of disbelief can overshadow an individual who separates himself from the assembled community. It was in vain that the other Apostles shared their experience of the risen Jesus. Thomas absolutely refused to believe. He just could not bring himself to believe that someone could pass through death and return alive. He had seen what a horrible death Jesus experienced in crucifixion. Thomas’ experience taught him that once a person is dead, there is no way he can come back to life.

This is absolutely true on a natural level. But the resurrection is a new breakthrough, a supernatural reality never before experienced. It is not a mere resuscitation after some kind of temporary death. The resurrection of the body is a complete transformation of the body-person; it is a new creation, a supernatural phenomenon, a deification; it is a spiritualization of the body, making it glorious, incorruptible, powerful, and agile (see 1 Cor 15:42-44).

So the unbelieving Thomas is in for a surprise. When he returned from his discouragement and regained his composure, he again joined the assembled Apostles. This occurred a week later when the Apostles had already begun to meet for “the breaking of the bread”, the celebration of the Eucharist (compare Acts 20:7).

So when Jesus manifested himself to them again, Thomas was present to see for himself the truth of the resurrection in Jesus. When he saw the risen Lord, the sheer evidence of the truth of his glorious presence shattered all doubt from Thomas’ mind. The greatest doubter ever became the strongest proclaimer of the divinity of Jesus.

Thomas exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!” He identified the God-man, Jesus, as Yahweh, God himself. The glorious presence of Jesus completely demolished Thomas’ persistent and blatantly expressed doubting.

Jesus said to Thomas, “Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.” Why can Jesus say that those of us who have not seen the risen Jesus are particularly blessed? Because the grace to believe is normally communicated through hearing the word of God (Rom 10:17) rather than seeing. The appearances of the risen Lord Jesus during the 40 days of the Easter season were temporary. As the Acts of the Apostles expresses it, “He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

But after the Lord Jesus was taken up to heaven, faith comes to us through hearing the word of God. The word of God communicates the grace to believe for those who are well disposed. External visions can be deceiving, but the inspired word of God is based on the certitude of God himself.

Faith is the testimony of God revealing himself. As St. John’s epistle expresses it, “If we accept human testimony, the testimony of God is surely greater. Now the testimony of God is this, that he has testified on behalf of his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony within himself” (1 Jn 5:9-10). We believe because of the experiential knowledge of God revealing himself in our hearts. Our blessedness in these days after the resurrection appearances is that our faith is based on the indwelling presence of the risen Jesus revealing himself to us in our hearts. He is truly present within us, not just momentarily through some external appearance, but habitually, as he dwells in the center of our souls. There we have free access to him through faith perfected by the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding (see Rom 5:12; Eph 2:18; 3:12).

The blessedness of those who believe in the word

of God goes even further. Jesus explained in the Gospel today, “Through this belief [that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God], you may have life in his name.”

The name of Jesus means that God himself is present, saving us from sin and death. This is actually who Jesus is and what his name signifies. Faith, leading to baptism, has united us to Jesus, and through him, to the divinity. Through this union, we begin to have a created participation in the divine life. This supernatural life is the highest life attainable on this earth. For us to be able to experience the fullness of this life of the children of God, we must love God with our whole heart. This single-hearted devotion to God makes us spirit dominant. Then God, through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, can give us an experience of this higher life, the life of the Spirit, which is proper to the children of God.

May God help us to live our holy faith in all its fullness so we can be truly blessed with the highest happiness attainable on this earth. Then we will understand Jesus’ words, “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.”

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER **Gospel John 21:1-19**

Three times in today’s Gospel we read, “Jesus revealed himself.” Even after Jesus rose from the dead, he continued to mingle familiarly with his disciples. He makes himself present to them in the most ordinary events of daily life. He shows himself to always be near us to encourage us, to enlighten us, and to strengthen us. He ministers to us in all of our needs. Jesus is nearer to us than ever before. He makes himself available to us. We must learn to be keenly aware, as John was, of the delicate signs in daily events that indicate his presence.

The fact that there were seven disciples present signifies a certain fullness. This number represents the future community, the Church. The familiar relationship between the seven disciples and Jesus describes what can now be our own.

The resurrection of Jesus does not cancel out the natural activities in which we are engaged in our daily lives. Peter retains his identity as a fisherman and goes fishing during these glorious Easter days. Here again we see how his leadership stands out. After Peter announces, “I am going fishing,” the others follow him; “We also will come with you,” they said.

But these disciples are shrouded in the darkness of night. Jesus is not with them—so they caught nothing. But Jesus was not far away, observing them. At dawn, he was standing on the shore of Lake Galilee (also called Tiberias) right near them. He would have known their discouragement and was concerned about them. Reflecting on this event helps us realize Jesus’ nearness to us as he stands on the shore of eternity, not far from us, concerned about us and our problems, wanting to assist us.

When the disciples answered “No” to his enquiry as to whether they had caught anything, Jesus directed them to “cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something. So they cast it, and were not able to pull it in because of the number of fish.” We can depend on Jesus’ word: it is true; he keeps his promises. He has our interest at heart. If we obey his word, we will be greatly blessed.

Upon seeing this sign (the contrast between catching no fish at all and the huge catch), the disciple Jesus loved, St. John, immediately said, “It is the Lord.” His contemplative gaze, born of love, intuited the presence of Jesus. In this way, we are made to understand that the beloved disciple is given the primacy of love. We are reminded of how the wings of love had also brought John first to the empty tomb.

But Peter proves his leadership as a man of action. He jumped into the sea and swam ashore to be with his Lord as quickly as possible. He reached Jesus before all the others, for he too loved Jesus. The other disciples were “dragging the net with the fish”. But it was Peter who “went over and dragged the net ashore”. He is given first place in apostolic ministry.

The net contained “one hundred fifty-three large fish”. Only an eyewitness could have given us such an accurate count. The number represents all the species of fish known at that time; it indicates the universal mission of the Church and its commission to preach the Gospel to all nations (Mt 28:19). Fishing symbolizes the apostolic mission; the fish symbolize those brought into the Church through apostolic preaching. We recall that on Pentecost Sunday, as a result of Peter’s preaching, 3000 were converted and became members of the Church (Acts 2:41). “Even though there were so many, the net was not torn.” Despite the many converts, the Church is not torn apart by schism. The untorn net is a symbol of the unity of the Church.

“When they climbed out on shore, [the disciples] saw a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread.” Even after the resurrection, when Jesus became Lord of lords, he continues to humble himself and minister to the Apostles as chief cook. He himself, out of loving concern, prepared a picnic lunch for them. Love knows no labor or servitude. Love can only reign in the joy of giving itself to others.

Jesus invited the disciples to, “Come, have breakfast.” He knew how tired and hungry they were. They knew that it was Jesus, but they were in awe over the mystery of his transfigured person. The transforming effects of the resurrection had completely changed him (Mk 16:12). He was different, spiritualized (1 Cor 15:44): able to appear without notice, and then suddenly disappear again (Jn 20:19, 26).

“Jesus came over and took the bread and gave it to them, and in like manner the fish.” Jesus’ fellowship with his disciples continues after the resurrection in the context of a meal. In this way, both body and soul are being nourished, especially by love. Interpersonal love is the supreme food for the soul received through communion with God and with each other. The Church is encouraged to continue to give divine life to its children in this manner. This meal served by Jesus calls to mind his feeding of the multitude with bread and fish (Mk 6:34-44). Such meals remind us of the Eucharist. Jesus wished to share the intimacy

of his Messianic banquet with all believers. We too have the privilege of eating with Jesus as we recognize him in the breaking of the bread (Lk 24:30-31).

All of this was taking place by a charcoal fire (21:9). We are reminded of another charcoal fire (Jn 18:18) where Peter was warming himself after Jesus' arrest. It was on that occasion that Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. "When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Yes Lord, you know that I love you.'" Why would Jesus ask Peter whether he loved him "more than these", that is, the other disciples? It is because Peter had previously compared himself to the other disciples boasting, "Even though all should have their faith shaken, mine will not be" (Mk 14:29). But now Peter is no longer so sure of himself. His colossal failure in fidelity to Jesus has taught him a lesson for life. His confidence is now in Jesus' supporting grace. Jesus "knows" Peter better than Peter knows himself. He knows of his love for Jesus. But he also knows Peter's character and weaknesses. Now Peter will depend on Jesus to carry through his hopes to faithfully follow him.

This gives us a clue as to why Jesus chose Peter to be the first pope. Apart from being the natural leader of the group of disciples, Peter has learned the hard way that his fidelity and spiritual strength can only come from Jesus. He must rely on him for it. Jesus knew this all along. The moment he laid eyes on Simon, Jesus changed his name to Cephas, which means Peter or Rock (Jn 1:42). But he would have to experience trial, failure, and humiliation before he could understand the source of his strength was Jesus. Jesus hinted at this when he said to Peter, "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers" (Lk 22:31-32).

Now that Peter has "returned" to Jesus and abandoned his over-confidence and undue self-reliance, he can become the "Rock" he was meant

to be, as well as carry out the commission given him by Jesus to "Feed my lambs". Three times in succession Jesus commands him to feed his flock. Jesus singles out Peter out of the seven disciples present and makes him chief shepherd. He is to take Jesus' place as visible head of the Church. Peter must use his leadership ability to guide the Church and keep it in the truth. He must nourish his people with the word of God and the Holy Eucharist.

It is only in this last chapter of John's gospel that we can understand what Jesus meant in the first chapter when he changed Simon's name to "Peter", meaning rock. Various other terms are used in the other gospels to bring out Peter's leadership role: In St. Matthew's gospel also Jesus makes him the "Rock" on which he will build his Church; he gives him the "keys" of authority in his kingdom as well as making him the chief "Lawmaker" (see Mt 16:13-19). In St. Luke's gospel, Peter is again singled out from the other disciples and named "Chief Fisherman" who will be catching men (see Lk 5:1-11).

The scene in John's gospel today helps us to understand that the first duty of the disciple is to love Jesus. Three times Peter is asked this question, "Do you love me?" As Peter takes back his triple denial of Jesus during his passion by a triple assertion of his love, we see how important faithful love is to Jesus. That is the disciple's first responsibility.

But this allegiance of love must express itself in the action of ministering to those under our care. For example, the ceremony of baptism reminds us that parents are the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith. They are the ones primarily commissioned to form their children in the faith by example, word, and sacrament. The priest and catechism teacher only assist the parents. Parents must show their love for Jesus by being faithful to the task of nourishing their little flock.

The Gospel passage of today ends with Jesus telling Peter in veiled language of how his life will come to an end. This passage contains the oldest tradition of Peter's martyrdom by crucifixion.

Peter's aspiration to give his life for Jesus will finally be realized. Peter's confession of love will be tested by his willingness to die for Jesus.

Jesus' words, "Follow me," empower Peter to fulfill his mission. He will follow Jesus in caring for the sheep and in laying down his life for them. Peter did not feel worthy to die like Jesus on the cross, so he asked to be crucified upside down. Thus he proved his love for Jesus by laying his life down for him.

No matter how weak we are, Jesus can give us the power to be faithful and accomplish heroic deeds, even to surrendering our lives to martyrdom for love of him.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Gospel: John 10:27-30

This Sunday is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. In John's gospel, Jesus compares his relationship to us as a shepherd who leads his flock to water and green pastures. Moreover, Jesus also expresses his extreme love for us with this image: "I am the good shepherd; a good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11). Unlike the hireling who only works for pay and has no real love for the sheep, Jesus really loves his sheep, his people. This personal love leads him to sacrifice himself for them. They are so precious to him; he sacrifices his life for them on the cross and dies out of love for them. He allows the fierce wolves to devour him rather than his sheep, the people he loves so dearly.

The alleluia versicle brings out the mutual knowledge between shepherd and sheep. It begins with, "I know my sheep, and mine know me." But this relationship of knowledge between Jesus and us goes far beyond that of shepherd and sheep. It is a personal knowledge whose model is the knowledge between the Father and Son, filled with the love of the Holy Spirit.

"I know mine and mine know me," Jesus says, "just as the Father knows me and I know the Father" (Jn 10:14-15). Jesus speaks here of the heart-to-heart knowledge that we can experience

by living in intimate communion with him. This kind of supernatural knowledge is made possible by sanctifying grace. This grace lifts us up to a participation in the divine life of the Blessed Trinity. We are given by created grace a share in the divine knowledge between the Father and the Son in the love of the Holy Spirit. The virtues of faith and love, perfected by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, enable us to experience in a finite manner the personal and intimate knowledge between the Father and Son united in the love of the Holy Spirit. Prayer of the heart and a holy life dispose us for God to draw us into this deeper level of divine knowledge and love.

The second reading expresses this wondrous supernatural reality in symbolical language. The ones who experience personal and intimate knowledge of God and his glorified Son are pictured as standing before the throne of God and before the Lamb, the Risen Christ. The white robes they wear express the restoration of their baptismal innocence; the palm branches signify the victory that is theirs. They attained their victory by patiently resisting temptations, and enduring the various trials of life. Such patient endurance brought about purification and spiritualization, which disposed them for this high level of divine, loving knowledge. "They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." The sacrificial death of Jesus, communicated through baptism, confirmation, and the Holy Eucharist, empowered them to endure the sufferings entailed in being faithful followers of Jesus. As a result, "They stand before God's throne and worship him day and night in his temple." Purified by sharing Jesus' sufferings we stand in the presence of God who lives in us as his temples.

"They will not hunger or thirst anymore." They draw divine nourishment by living in continuous communion with God. "The Lamb who is in the center of the throne" is the risen Lord who lives in the center of the soul, which God made his dwelling place. "The Lamb ... will shepherd them and lead them to springs of life-giving water."

Jesus, the sacrificed and risen Lamb, leads those who are pure of heart to the very source of divine life, the indwelling Trinity.

Returning to the Gospel, Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice.” We belong to Jesus, the good shepherd: “You are not your own ... for you have been purchased at a price” (1 Cor 6:19-20), “with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pt 1:19). We are his sheep. He claims us to be his own. He calls us, “My sheep”. We must give him our hearts. We must not be like Judas who lived in close association with Jesus but withheld his heart from him. Jesus calls us to intimacy with himself. He gave himself up for us; we must respond by likewise giving ourselves to him. We are called to reciprocate by listening to his love-call. We give Jesus our attention. We remain focused on him. We listen to him in the depths of our heart. There we meet him and abide in his love. Jesus also speaks to us in the Scriptures, through his Church, and through all legitimate authority.

“My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” Jesus knows each of us personally and loves us according to who we are. But Jesus also allows us to know him personally as a divine person: “I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father” (Jn 10:14-15). Captured by this personal love-knowledge, we follow Jesus; we obey him, as he calls us to self-surrender through his Holy Spirit, returning love for Love. In light of this, we must come to realize that we are called to a divine romance. Our relationship to Jesus is a holy love affair on an entirely new and spiritual level; we are taken out of our lowly human manner of operating and raised to a divine sphere.

Jesus truly loves us; his love has transformed and beautified us. He says to us, “Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved, ah, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves!” And we, in single-hearted devotedness and admiration respond: “Ah, you are beautiful, my lover—yes, you are lovely” (Sg of Sgs 1:15-16). Wounded with love for our divine lover, we follow him wherever he leads us, even if it means the way of the cross—our overwhelming love for him

overshadows the cross. The power of love enables us to deal meekly with suffering. It is no longer overbearing. We can take it in stride and use it to turn our weak love into a stronger, more mature love. Our love then, can begin to resemble the great love of our self-sacrificing redeemer-shepherd.

“I give them eternal life and they shall never perish.” What is eternal life? Jesus tells us, “Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ” (Jn 17:3). Clearly, then, Jesus is saying eternal life is a present reality. The supreme heart-to-heart knowledge experienced by living in loving communion with Jesus and the Father, given to us by the Holy Spirit, is the beginning of eternal life. The fellowship of living in communion with the Blessed Trinity anticipates the life of heaven. We enter the life of knowledge and love of the three divine Persons and receive a foretaste of heavenly life.

Such a life of communion means that we have been firmly grasped by the good shepherd. Unlike Judas, who had given his heart to avarice (disordered love for money and possessions: see Jn 12:4-6), and who was deceived by the evil one, we are held closely in the bosom of the good shepherd and protected from the evil one. Our eyes are firmly fixed on our beloved shepherd and great lover who protects us from harm. He is one with the Father in love and obedience; moreover, he shares the divine nature equally with the Father. Our good shepherd made himself humble and lowly so he could love us and lift us up to a divine dignity and make us his bride. But he is Son of God and all-powerful, capable of warding off all evil from us if only we continue to cling to him.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Gospel: John 13:31-33a, 34-35

When Judas had left them, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified.” The darkest hour of Jesus’ life on earth, when he is betrayed by a chosen one, is seen as the beginning of his glorification. Judas left the supper and the chosen band of Apostles to hand Jesus over

to his enemies. His departure initiates the process of glorification. Jesus' betrayal and exaltation on the cross (his arrest and imprisonment under false pretenses, his mistreatment, his being ridiculed and flogged, the way of the cross and crucifixion) are looked upon in a positive light: they are the means that God chose in Jesus' life of love and service to complete the process of spiritualization and transformation into God. The darkness and negative aspects of Jesus' hour are but one aspect of the whole hour. The other aspect is that redemption, both personal and universal, is being accomplished: Jesus' human nature is being transformed through suffering as he redeems the world from sin.

We are reminded of Jesus' words to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Lk 24:26). These words are similar in meaning to the words that Paul and Barnabas used to "strengthen the spirits of the disciples" in today's first reading: "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."

Human beings have to undergo many hardships in life beginning with the shock of birth and ending with the agony of death. Life is full of challenging hardships and trials. But, through all of these, human nature is being purified and spiritualized if we respond like Jesus to the Father's will in accepting the limitations of human existence.

The Gospel today teaches us to have a spiritual outlook so we can interpret the hardships of life in a positive manner. Let us use other words of Holy Scripture to help us understand the value of suffering: "Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison ..." (2 Cor 4:16-17).

Our Holy Father John Paul II tells us that Jesus retained the marks of his wounds on the cross to "manifest the victorious power of suffering"

(*On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, No. 25). Such an attitude toward suffering will help us see the hardships of life in a positive light. Suffering and mishap will not mar our joy. Rather, we will embrace each trial that comes our way knowing that it is transforming us into the very image of God (see 2 Cor 3:18). We too can say with Jesus, "Now is the Son of Man glorified".

The term "Son of Man" was Jesus' favorite way of describing himself. On the one hand, through the mystery of the Incarnation, he became a lowly human being; on the other, he is coming on the clouds of heaven, which expresses his divinity. Jesus got this term from the book of Daniel. He uses this phrase "Son of Man" at this moment because in him the prophecy from the book of Daniel is in the process of being fulfilled in Jesus' hour, which is at hand. The top of that hour is the resurrection. We see "One like a son of man coming, on the clouds of heaven; When he reached the Ancient One and was presented before him, He received dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion ..." (Dan 7:13-14).

What a wonderful contrast this scene presents us as we see a beautiful human being coming on the clouds, endowed with divinity from God, to bring us salvation. He is one of us. When he is glorified through suffering, he lifts us all up with him through the cross of life and glorifies us with him; he purifies us from sin and opens us to his out-poured love and glory.

This scene of the most beautiful Son of God coming on the clouds is in contrast to the four horrible beasts coming from the turbulent sea, which come to make war against God's holy ones (Dan 7:1-27). What a relief to see one like us, who is at the same time divine, accept the challenge of confronting and overcoming the forces of evil. They were mustered together in full force during Jesus' passion, bent on destroying this beautiful Son of Man. He met them all in the passion and endured all the taunts and pain they were able to

inflict upon him. But Jesus prevailed through the power he received in his union with his Father. He accepted even the worst blow the enemy was able to inflict upon him, death itself. Jesus humbly and willingly succumbed to it in obedience to his Father. But then, after going through the ultimate humiliation to wipe out the last dregs of pride in sin, Jesus over-powered death in his own body. Every molecule of his body was vivified by the glorious Spirit of God and made to share in the very divinity of the Majestic Father.

So we can see through this reflection what Jesus meant with the words, “Now is the Son of Man glorified.” At last, after years of waiting, Daniel’s prophecy is being fulfilled in Jesus, the most beautiful among the sons of men, coming on the clouds of the glory of the resurrection and ascension.

In light of what we have just seen, we can understand how the second reading fits in with the Gospel. Jesus’ coming on the clouds of heaven from God brings a “new heaven and a new earth”. The horrible monsters of chaos coming from the bowels of the earth and the sea of turmoil are no more. Now we see a new people coming down out of heaven from God adorned and made beautiful as a bride for her husband, Jesus, the heavenly Bridegroom. A new era has arrived. The old order has passed away. We are united to our glorious, risen Lord in the intimacy of holy marriage. Paradise has been restored. God dwells with us again and wipes every tear from our eyes. Now we see all things in a new way. Our outlook on the pains of life is changed. The paschal mystery has given us a new perspective. “We know that all things work for good for those who love God” (Rom 8:28). Our understanding of the paschal mystery has changed our attitude toward the hardships of life. “Behold, I make all things new!”

The moment Judas leaves the holiness of the upper room and steps outside to be enveloped by the darkness of evil, both Jesus and the Father are being glorified simultaneously.

- Jesus is now revealed to be the greatest lover ever as he surrenders himself to be crucified for love of us

sinners. He accepts the kiss of Judas and continues to call him “friend,” even as he is being betrayed by him. The Father sustains Jesus in that limitless love.

- As Jesus goes through his passion with patient endurance, he is sustained in that virtue by the Father.

- Jesus gives glory to the Father by completing the work he sent him to accomplish as the Father empowered him.

- Jesus loves the Father and is obedient to the least detail of his will, even to the shameful death of the cross while he himself is sustained by the Father’s love.

- Jesus will exalt all human beings enabling them to become children of God for the praise of his glory while the Father glorifies Jesus so he can vivify us with the gift of the Spirit.

The word glory (and glorify) means the manifestation of divine majesty in acts of power. In our foregoing reflection, we see that “acts of power” refer to Jesus’ unconquerable love and patient endurance; we also see the Father showing his power in glorifying Jesus in the mystery of his passion, death, and resurrection.

Jesus knew that his hour had arrived. He freely accepted it for love. Love for the Father and us took him beyond the experience of suffering; that love sustained him, enabling him to endure all: “Love is patient, love is kind ... It bears all things ... endures all things” (1 Cor 13:4-7). Great love enabled Jesus to endure great suffering. That was possible because Jesus was so firmly united to God, his Father, who is love (see 1 Jn 4:16).

If “God is love”, then love is divine. That is why Jesus can point out love as the distinctive sign of discipleship: it demonstrates that we are God’s children. How can we tell that we are followers of Jesus, Christ-ians? By the love we manifest in our thoughts, our choices, our words, and our deeds.

Love made Jesus live his whole life to please his Father and to serve others. His love for others went to the extreme of love for his enemies, even

unto death. He died in the act of self-gift to his Father, "Into your hands I commend my spirit", and forgiveness of his enemies, "Father forgive them ...". Jesus expressed that love unto death by washing the feet of his disciples. He said, "If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do" (Jn 13:14-15).

The impetus of Jesus' love moves us to love like him. We receive this love as we need it through our union with him. Through living in communion with Jesus, we draw the power of his love to love one another. Like Jesus, we give ourselves to others through acts of humble service in daily life. We overcome our pride, our self-centeredness, and our laziness by the power of God's grace.

Jesus' agape love is a sacrificial kind of love. It calls us and empowers us to undergo inconvenience, discomfort, hardships, and pain for the love of others. We endure their weakness, faults, and sins; we forgive the hurts they cause us. We do all this for the love of Jesus who empowers us. For we see him in those we serve according to his words, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40).

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Gospel: John 14:23-29

Controversies in the Church are not new. They existed from the beginning. There were some, like the converted Pharisees, who held that the Gentiles coming into the Church must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. Others, like St. Paul, contested this. In order to solve the controversy, the Apostles and elders of the Church held a council in Jerusalem to look into the matter. "After much debate had taken place, Peter got up and said to them ... 'We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, the same way as they,'" the Gentiles.

For God had granted them the Holy Spirit, just as he did the Jews. He made no distinction

between Jew and Gentile, for by faith, he purified their hearts. As a result of Peter's talk, "the whole assembly fell silent ..." (Acts 15:1-12).

In the first reading today, we see that the Apostles took exception to the fact that some of their number (the party of the Pharisees) went out without any mandate from them and had upset the Gentiles with their teaching and disturbed their peace of mind.

Jesus had given Peter and the Apostles and their successors the authority to speak the truth and guide the Church. Others did not have the light or authority to teach. The Apostles and elders went on to impose certain rules on the first Christians out of respect for Jewish sensitivities such as "to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage." There is no longer any need to keep the first three because circumstances have changed: we no longer live among Jews.

Jesus himself gave the authority to the Church to make certain laws and to do away with them (see Mt 16:19; 18:18), (compare disciplinary rules regarding fast and abstinence). We learn today that these laws established by the Church are not merely "man-made" laws. They were inspired by God himself. We read today, "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us. ..." Whenever we obey the laws of the Church, we are submitting ourselves to God himself (compare Rom 13:1-2).

But now, let us reflect upon the Gospel. This first verse, John 14:23, is one of my favorite in the Bible. It tells us that if we love Jesus by obeying his word, the Father will love us and he and Jesus will come and make their home in us, in our very persons.

In earlier verses, Jesus had already said that if we love him and keep his commandments, he would ask the Father to send us the Holy Spirit to be with us always. We would know this Spirit of truth because he remains with us and will be in us (Jn 14:15-17).

In other words, all three persons of the Blessed Trinity live in us. "Do you not know that you are

the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? [T]he temple of God, which you are, is holy.” Being temples of God calls us to be holy. We are God’s living tabernacles. The very life of the Blessed Trinity is going on in our very hearts. We must reverence God living in us and enter into communion with him, a communion of personal knowledge and love. In his great love for us, God also gives us the opportunity to love him in return by drawing so near to us. There we can fulfill the great commandment of loving him with our whole heart all day long. We pour out our loving hearts to him as we go about doing his will in carrying out our daily tasks.

This verse concerning the divine indwelling is in response to the Apostle Jude’s question of how Jesus can reveal himself to the disciples and not to the world. Jesus had said, “In a little while, the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live and you will live. On that day, you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you” (Jn 14:19-20). Jesus is explaining that his disciples will see, that is, know him personally, even after he has died, risen, and ascended to the Father, because they will be living his own divine life.

In the next verse, Jesus explains that he will “reveal” himself to the disciples who love him by living according to his words (Jn 14:21). This helps us to better understand what today’s passage is saying: the divine indwelling is a revelation of love. The reason why the disciples can know the invisible Jesus is because he lives in them as a presence of love. The disciples have disposed themselves to know that love-presence by distinguishing themselves as loving persons, submissive to God. But those who live for this world do not keep Jesus’ word; they are not in tune with him and are therefore indisposed to know him. They are self-centered, unsubmitive, and sense-bound; they do not live on a spiritual level and therefore are unable to know Jesus who exists on the level of spirit (see 1 Cor 2:14-16; 2 Cor 3:14-18).

In the second reading, we are given a vision of “the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of

heaven from God. It gleamed with the splendor of God. Its radiance was like that of a precious stone ... its temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb ... the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb.”

This preview of heaven is already beginning among us who have been baptized into Christ. Joined to his risen body, we form the new temple of God (see Jn 2:19-21). The reason why the holy city shines with the splendor of God is because it is peopled by individuals who are indwelt by our glorious Lord. We are the many dwelling places in the Father’s house that Jesus spoke about (see Jn 14:2). Jesus prepared a place for us by his passion, death, and resurrection and has returned to take us with him to be with the Father. Jesus has accomplished his mission and brought us into the presence of the Father. He rescued us from this world of earthly living and took us to live in a heavenly mansion in the Father’s house. Each of us is a room in which God dwells. “Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them as their God” (Rev 21:3).

We summarize this explanation with the psalm prayer read after the third psalm on Thursday of the first week of the breviary: “The body of [the] risen [Lord] is the temple not made by human hands and the defending wall of the new Jerusalem. May this holy city, built of living stones, shine with spiritual radiance and witness to your greatness in the sight of all nations.”

We conclude this section with the words of Peter’s epistle: “Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God, and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pt 2:4-5).

“The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you.” The word “advocate” means one who defends us and takes

up our cause. He speaks and pleads for us.

The Holy Spirit comes in Jesus' name. He shares the divinity with Jesus and the Father. He will continue the work of Jesus. He will complete his revelation by enlightening the Church concerning the true and full meaning of what Jesus said and did. The Holy Spirit will teach the inner meaning and hidden riches of Jesus' words and actions. The mission of the Holy Spirit is to complete Jesus' mission.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you." Worldly peace simply means the absence of war. People can therefore carry out their daily activities without fear. Jesus' peace is an inner reality. It means that we are not at war within ourselves, split between allegiance to God and our selfish desires. Since we are at one within ourselves and are in communion with God's will, we are disposed to experience the presence of God. I believe that peace is our most common experience of the divine presence. The prophet Micah said that the Messiah would stand in the majestic name of the Lord and that "he shall be peace" (5:3-4). He is one with the Father in the Spirit dwelling in our hearts.

St. Paul also says of Jesus, "he is our peace" (Eph 2:14): He takes away the sin that separates us from God and replaces it with his divine presence. That is why Jesus calls himself "Sea Pacific" when he appeared to St. Catherine of Sienna. He is an ocean of peace, a peace experienced as Perfect Rest in the tranquil bliss of God.

"I am going away and I will come back to you." Jesus will leave his friends momentarily through his death and burial. But he will come back to them through his resurrection when he will visit with them for 40 days. He will return permanently and be with them through his indwelling presence with his Father and the Holy Spirit.

"If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father; for the Father is greater than I." It is the Father who generates the Son and sends him on his mission of redemption. In becoming human, Jesus emptied himself of the glory that

was his as a divine person. He is subject to human frailty and limitations. Now he is getting ready to return to his Father by his death and resurrection when he will resume his glory and majesty as Son of God. That is a great joy for Jesus. His work of redemption will then be complete. Moreover, he will be able to send the Holy Spirit upon all who are receptive and make them children of God, sharers in the divine life.

"And now I have told you this before it happens, so that when it happens you may believe." Jesus knew beforehand what would happen to him. He foretold his passion, death, and resurrection on three different occasions during his public ministry. Now at the Last Supper, he devotes a great deal of time and speaks in greater detail about his going away and return and abiding presence through the Holy Spirit. Jesus' purpose was to prepare his disciples ahead of time so that after the worst was over with, they might believe.

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

Gospel: Luke 24:46-53

The mystery of the Ascension is Jesus' entry into the fullness of divine glory in his human, glorified body. Jesus appears in the presence of God on our behalf. There he permanently exercises his priesthood in our favor. Jesus is the center of heavenly worship with the Father. His being seated at the right hand of the Father signifies the glory and honor of the divinity. He shares equal power with the Father. Seated at the Father's right also indicates the inauguration of the Messianic kingdom. All peoples, nations, and languages serve him. His dominion is everlasting; his kingdom will never be destroyed (Dan 7:14).

The Ascension marks the end of Jesus' bodily presence on earth and the definitive entrance of his humanity into God's heavenly domain. Jesus constantly intercedes for us as our mediator. He assures us of the permanent outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The Ascension crowns our human dignity with

heavenly glory. Jesus began to enhance the dignity of our human nature when he became human, a child, in the mystery of the Incarnation. The Ascension of Jesus shows us our glorious heavenly destiny as human beings.

Baptism opens us to this marvelous outpouring of love and life given us by God in Christ. We must remain in loving attentiveness to this indwelling Lord to receive his fullness poured out upon us.

Let us now look at the Scripture readings to seek further enlightenment regarding Jesus' final hours of physical presence on earth. The Acts of the Apostles speaks of "all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles. ..." It is surprising to see how active Jesus was and how he continued to teach the Apostles after the resurrection, even until the day of the Ascension.

We hope that you too will be conscious of the need to continually teach your children and grandchildren all the truths about our holy Catholic faith. Your exemplary Catholic lifestyle and its transforming you into such a holy and loving person will attract them to live that holy faith themselves.

"He [Jesus] presented himself alive to them [the apostles] by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." Jesus would appear suddenly to his Apostles from the invisible world where he lived with the Father. After showing himself to be the same Jesus they knew, by exposing his wounds to them, he would disappear again into the invisible world of the Father. In this way, he was preparing them to find him in their hearts after his physical departure. Recall how he promised to return and live within them with the Father and the Holy Spirit (see John 14:15-17, 23).

Jesus tells the Apostles to "wait for the promise of the Father." What is this "promise" that God made and where can it be found in the Bible? The

prophet Joel spoke for God when he said, "...I will pour out my spirit upon all mankind ... Even upon the servants and handmaids, in those days, I will pour out my spirit" (3:1-2). The prophet Ezekiel is another example of God promising to send his Holy Spirit to his people: "I will put my spirit within you," he said, "and make you live by my statutes, careful to observe my decrees" (36:23-29).

Jesus explained to the Apostles that they must "wait for the promise of the Father." At last, after all these centuries of waiting for the promised Holy Spirit, that moment in history is about to arrive. But they must prepare themselves for that gift. They must empty their hearts of earthly and worldly living so they will be spiritually disposed to receive this spiritual gift, God's own Holy Spirit, and in fact through him, the Blessed Trinity.

How did the Apostles "wait for" the promised Holy Spirit? We are told in the Acts of the Apostles, "all these [the apostles] devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (1:14).

We, also, will want to prepare our hearts for the gift of the Holy Spirit by serious prayer and meditation. For example, go to daily Mass, or at least read the daily readings of the Mass in your missal and meditate on them. They are all about the gift of the Spirit. The daily readings from the Breviary also prepare our hearts to receive the Holy Spirit. Meditate on the mysteries of the Rosary, especially the glorious mysteries. You may want to recite each day the prayer "Come, Holy Spirit, Come!" taken from the sequence read on Pentecost Sunday. Finally, you may simply want to pray quietly in your heart every time you think of it, "Come, Holy Spirit". You may want to add something like, "Fill me with your holy presence," or "give me purity of heart," or "prepare me to receive you."

In further explanation of the "promise," Jesus said, "... you will be baptized with the holy Spirit ... you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses

... to the ends of the earth.” The “power” given by the Holy Spirit is the courage to speak up for our faith in Jesus. He suffered and died for our sins so we could be forgiven. He rose from the dead and gave us the Holy Spirit to share his divine life and enjoy being in the company of the three divine persons. We must speak about those things: for example, how consoling it is to have all our sins erased; they no longer burden us.

St. Paul tells us that the word expressing our faith is near us: “‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we preach), for, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved” (Rom 10:8-10). It is not enough to believe in our hearts; we must express that belief to others. It is especially to the members of our own family that we are called to witness our faith. Jesus told the man he had freed from the devil, “Go home to your family and announce to them all that the Lord in his pity has done for you.” Then the man went off and began to proclaim ... what Jesus had done for him ... (Mk 5:19-20).

We are told that Jesus led the disciples as far as Bethany, which is on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. Then he “raised his hands, and blessed them ... and was taken up to heaven.”

Jesus acts as messianic high priest of the new people of God. He calls God’s favor upon them even as God had commanded the priests of the Old Testament (Lv 9:22; Nm 6:22-27). Through his priesthood, Jesus communicates the power of God for good upon all who are receptive in faith. The external gesture of lifting up of his hands is a posture indicating that he is radiating the Holy Spirit upon his followers, empowering them to live divine lives as children of God. But for this blessing to be effective, the recipients must be receptive in faith. Their hearts must be attentive and believe that this action of blessing is effective and communicates a grace bestowed by the holy

priesthood of Jesus.

He continues to impart this kind of blessing through the sacrament of Holy Orders each time the priest activates it in giving his people a blessing: for example, at the end of each Mass.

After Jesus was taken up, enveloped in a cloud representing the divinity, the disciples “did him homage”, that is, they worshiped him as God. They “returned to Jerusalem with great joy”.

Even if Jesus physically left them, they are no longer sad at his departure as they were at the Last Supper. They had experienced the risen Jesus for 40 days. They were exposed to his risen body-person and its radiating joy. He had overcome death. They experienced the joy of his presence. He had already breathed the Holy Spirit of life upon them. Although Jesus left them physically, in his ascension, he is still invisibly present in and among them. St. Matthew’s gospel ends without an ascension, but with Jesus’ words, “I am with you always ...” (Mt 28:20).

Now they are filled “with great joy”. And “they were continually in the temple praising God”. They had already begun to experience that they themselves are the temple of God. The indwelling presence already began to fill them with the glory of God. They found him within their own hearts and glorified him there.

The second reading explains that it is possible for us also to experience the glory of the risen Christ. St. Paul prays that the Father of glory “... give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of him. May the eyes of [your] hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones, and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe. ...”

St. Paul goes on to explain about “the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way”. We the church, are the body of the risen Christ. We are the receptacles

of his glory. We have the spiritual powers (the virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit) to know and experience this “fullness” of God himself, filling the body of the risen Jesus with his glory.

PENTECOST SUNDAY

Gospel: John 20:19-23

Pentecost—The fiftieth day (Greek word) after Passover.

In the Old Testament, Moses ascended Mount Sinai to meet God and returned with the 10 Commandments, the Old Law. In the New Testament, Jesus ascended into heaven to be with the Father. Now one with the Father in glory, they send the Holy Spirit, who is the New Law.

The Old Law was written on stone tablets. The New Law is written in the hearts of God’s people; it inclines them from within to live according to God’s word.

The Old Law consisted of an external compulsion derived from the fear of punishment. The New Law of the spirit of life in Christ consists of an interior impulse to love.

The Old Law was given by a mortal human being in the person of Moses. The New Law is given by the immortal Son of God, Jesus, the Christ.

The Old Law was temporary in order to prepare God’s people for the New Law, which is eternal.

In promulgating the Old Law God revealed himself as a God to be feared on Mount Sinai: There were peals of thunder and lightning; The people trembled; there was a very loud trumpet blast; Mount Sinai was all wrapped in smoke; the Lord came down on it with fire. The smoke rose from it as though from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently (Ex 19:16-18).

In promulgating the New Law, God revealed himself as a God of love: From the heavens the sound of a strong driving wind was heard; It filled the place where the disciples were staying; There appeared on them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them; They were

all filled with the Holy Spirit of God so that they began to proclaim the mighty works of God’s love and salvation (Acts 2:1-4).

The Holy Spirit inspired the disciples to speak in such a way that each heard them speak in his own language. This was a miracle of communication, which reversed the confusion of understanding at the tower of Babel (see Genesis 11:1-9, first reading of Vigil Mass). On that occasion, a prideful, egotistic people wanted to “make a name” for themselves, so “the Lord confused their speech”. This was a way of saying that God so created human beings that when they become self-centered and proud, they are incapable of listening to each other or understanding each other’s needs. They are prone to miscommunicate and misunderstand each other. Their sinful attitude of pride and selfishness causes division and separation. On the other hand, the humble disciples who had learned holy dependence on God during Jesus’ passion were disposed to receive the Holy Spirit of God who unified them in love. Out of concern for one another, they listened to each other; they communicated and understood each other.

“The law of the Spirit of life in Christ” (Rom 8:2) enabled them to live unselfish lives and tend to each other’s needs. They were of one mind and heart through the love of the Holy Spirit who united them.

We can see how true the psalm response is in the ability of the Holy Spirit to create a new world of love and accord: “When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth” (Ps 104:30).

The Holy Spirit given to the Church at Pentecost is communicated to us through the sacraments. Baptism made us children of God. The Holy Spirit made us new creatures, that is, children of God. He enables us to know God as children know their father. Confirmation strengthens that same Holy Spirit’s presence in us so that we can know God and live in communion with him. In each Mass, there is a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit through the Holy Eucharist, which is the glorified Christ. Through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we

are made more spiritually sensitive to the divine presence and inclined to obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

One of the ways in which the Holy Spirit helps us through his gifts is in prayer. The second reading of the vigil Mass (Rom 8:22-27) explains, "... we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit [himself] intercedes with inexpressible groanings [that is, with sighs too deep for words]. And the one who searches hearts [that is, God] knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because he intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will." This is a reference to prayer of the heart or contemplative prayer. In this kind of prayer, the Holy Spirit takes hold of our heart, or spirit, and enables us to communicate with God from our inner depths without images, words, or thought process. He puts us in direct communion with God who knows our heartfelt needs and consoles us with his holy presence. In this way, we know that the deep aspirations of our heart, our holy desires and longings, are known, received, and fulfilled.

The second reading for the feast of Pentecost tells us, "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." The "flesh" signifies all that is weak and sinfully inclined in us. Our unredeemed human nature tends to be self-centered and opposed to God and the Holy Spirit who lives in us; we are inclined to love ourselves selfishly, even before God; we are weak and earthbound, subject to all that withdraws us from God.

That is why St. Paul says further on, "We are not debtors to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." In other words, we must discipline our wayward human nature; we must practice moderation and self-control and refuse to give in to our unruly appetites. We must deny ourselves those things we crave that are not in accord with the promptings of the Holy Spirit. That is why we have a season of Lent so we can learn to do penance and grow in virtue by giving up things we like.

"The body is dead because of sin." In its

unredeemed state, the body is not communicative of grace and divine life. Rather, it obstructs communion with God. Therefore we must curb its sinful inclinations.

The Holy Spirit is the source of supernatural vitality. He enlightens and strengthens us to resist the self-centered and disordered sense desires that spring from our wounded, human nature. Perhaps one serving of soft drink or beer is enough and would please God more, rather than two or more. In this way, we will be freed from our disordered appetites that come from the flesh so we can live on the higher level of spirit; we will truly be children of God who are "led by the Spirit of God".

The Gospel of the vigil of Pentecost (Jn 7:37-39) presents Jesus as the source of the living water, the Holy Spirit. The water, which represents life, is the Holy Spirit flowing from Jesus' open side. It will become a spring within us who believe, springing up with eternal life, giving us a foretaste of heavenly glory.

The Gospel of Pentecost tells us that Jesus appeared to the Apostles on Easter Sunday, the Lord's Day, Resurrection day, when he was filled with the Spirit of glory. He came to breathe that Holy Spirit into the Apostles. Jesus had become a life-giving spirit. He gave the Apostles his own Holy Spirit to initiate a new creation, to raise up a fallen world and transform it with the Spirit of the risen Lord. Now this same Holy Spirit remains in the Church to make us children of God who live by that same Holy Spirit of Jesus. We must breathe that Holy Spirit on all we meet, on all of creation.

THE SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY TRINITY

Gospel: John 16:12-15

Today we celebrate the feast of the Most Holy Trinity: There is only one God but this one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We must try to understand, in as much as we can, what this mystery means. It was not known in the Old Testament. The first reading from

the Old Testament speaks about God's wisdom through which he made the world. It even speaks of wisdom as a person. But the fact that it was a distinct person among three in the Trinity really was not known until the New Testament.

Jesus is the one who revealed to us fully the mystery of God. He told us for a reason. The mystery of the Blessed Trinity is not meant to be viewed from a distance as having nothing to do with us. Jesus told us about the Trinity because it involves our Christian lives. We are called to relate to God as Father, Brother, and Lover; we go to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is the inner life of God, which each of us shares and participates in by sanctifying grace.

Jesus commanded his Apostles to initiate all who want to follow him by baptism. He said, "Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This means that at baptism we are immersed or united to each of the persons named. We begin to share the divine life. We begin to participate in the life of God as it is lived by the three divine persons.

Notice in this quote that all 3 persons are put on the same level: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are all equal and share the same divine nature. They are one.

Throughout the New Testament Scriptures, the three persons are mentioned. Sometimes all three persons are mentioned together. For example, the Mass greeting from 2 Cor 13:13: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

The second reading today speaks of "Peace with God (the Father) through our Lord Jesus Christ" and "the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit ..." The Gospel of today speaks of "the Spirit of Truth (referring to the Holy Spirit)" and Jesus says, "all that the Father has belongs to me." He is the Son who is equal to his Father.

God revealed himself as a Trinity because he wanted to help us understand who he is. The

reason why you would be attracted to someone is because he enjoys a full existence as a person, rich in being, full of life and personality; someone who has intelligence to communicate with you on a thinking level, able to talk; someone who can both give and receive love.

Since you were made in the image and likeness of God there must be something about yourself that resembles the Trinity. You are a being that knows and loves. From your being proceeds knowledge and love. God is like that. The Father is like the being of God from which the origin of the divine life proceeds. The infinite knowledge proceeding from the divine nature refers to the Son who, as wisdom and Word reveals the Godhead. From the divine Being (Father) and the divine knowledge (Son) proceeds infinite love (The Holy Spirit) who is the personal love of the Father and the Son. So the Trinity would be the Godhead (Father) living the divine life of knowing (Son) and loving (Spirit). This should help you to understand something of the Blessed Trinity.

Sanctifying grace gives you a created share in this divine life. You share in the being of the Father, the origin of the Godhead and divine existence. You enter into a higher state of being. This is the supreme life, the highest and happiest existence available to any creature. It's the beginning of heaven. We can experience this life if we live close to God and conform our wills perfectly to his.

You will come to know the life of the Son by knowledge. Faith, enlightened by the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, gives us a kind of divine knowledge so we can know God intimately, and the things of God. We share his infinite knowledge to some extent. In this way, we come to know the Son. As sons and daughters, we also know the Father and that we are being born of God. Our spiritual existence in grace, which is a wonderful knowledge, is being given to us by the Father: We are his sons and daughters by grace. We share the life of Jesus, his eternal Son.

But this life of union with God is also one of love. Experiencing the heavenly life of God causes us

to experience love. This love comes from enjoying the being of God and knowing or being aware of it. It is something like the infinite Love of God, which is the Holy Spirit. All of this we are meant to experience, know, and love, beginning on this earth as a foretaste of our heavenly life.

As adopted children, you are called to live the life of the Trinity. Jesus has come to reveal the divine life to us so we in turn could live it. The Gospel and New Testament writings show us how to live pure lives so that we can be worthy to participate more fully in this blessed, divine life. For example, Jesus said, "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God" (Mt 5:8). The pure, or single hearted, will see, that is, know God personally and share intimately in his divine life. In St. John's gospel, Jesus says, "On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you" (Jn 14:20). Purity of heart attained through living according to Jesus' words will dispose us to be aware of the divine persons in whose company we live. In another place, Jesus says we will also come to know the Holy Spirit. "You will know it [the Holy Spirit] because it remains with you, and will be in you" (Jn 14:17).

In today's Gospel, Jesus said to his disciples: "I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now." The Apostles were still spiritually immature and indisposed to understand Jesus. They needed further purification through the experience of his suffering, death, and resurrection, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. He will enlighten them.

"But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth." The Holy Spirit's presence in us gives us an affinity to truth, an inclination and a love for truth, and a spiritual instinct and attraction toward it. All truth, that which is real, comes from God and leads us to him. Living by this truth enables us to live in God, in Christ Jesus, who reveals the truth and who is Truth Itself. Living by the Spirit of truth disposes us to live spirit-dominant lives so that we can live in Christ and remain in communion with him. The Holy Spirit will lead us to know Jesus, the

risen Lord who is the Truth (Jn 14:6). If we follow his inspirations, he will bring us to a personal knowledge of our indwelling Lord as we grow in personal intimacy with him. Through the gift of knowledge, he will also help us to see that the world around us is filled with the presence of God as he continues to create, sustain, and enliven it.

"He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and declare to you the things that are coming." The Holy Spirit is one with the Father and the Son. His mission is to continue the work of Jesus and bring it to completion. Revelation is one: it comes from the Father through the Son and is completed in the Spirit to the glory of the Father and the Son. Jesus is the revelation, the word spoken by the Father. He has revealed everything to the disciples. But it is the mission of the Holy Spirit of truth to guide them into understanding this revelation and plumb its height and depth.

The Spirit explains Jesus' message in each new historical situation that the disciples find themselves; he draws spiritual nourishment for them; he increasingly discloses the truth of the Gospel to the disciples; he enlightens them to conform their lives to Jesus' teaching. The Holy Spirit guides them into the future. He makes what Jesus said or did intelligible and applies it in each new circumstance. He guides the community in its understanding of Jesus as the fulfillment of everything that had been promised in Scripture.

"He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you." The revelation from the Father comes to us through Jesus, the word of the Father. The Holy Spirit gives glory to Jesus and the Father when he illumines the disciples' understanding of that truth. The disciples will praise God for the great love which prompted such self-disclosure as the mystery of the Trinity, the inner life of God.

"Everything that the Father has is mine; for this reason I told you that he will take from what is mine and declare it to you." The Son shares the same divine nature as the Father. The Son possesses

the divinity equally with the Father. The Son's revelation to us comes from the richness of the divine nature, which is his. This is what the Spirit will take and reveal more fully to the disciples.

THE SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST (CORPUS CHRISTI)

Gospel: Lk 9:11b-17

Today we celebrate the feast of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ. We set this Sunday aside each year to dedicate it to the Holy Eucharist because it is so important: It is the central mystery of our faith; "the source and summit of the Christian life" (LG 11) (CCC 1324).

In the words of the *Catechism* (1382), "The Mass is at the same time, and inseparably, the sacrificial memorial in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated and the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord's body and blood. But the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice is wholly directed toward the intimate union of the faithful with Christ through communion. To receive communion is to receive Christ himself who has offered himself for us."

Let us reflect upon the readings today to help us meditate on this mystery of the Holy Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ. The Gospel tells us that "[Jesus]... spoke to the crowds about the kingdom of God"; then he proceeds to feed the multitude by multiplying the 5 loaves and 2 fish. The kingdom and the banquet are connected. Isaiah had said, "On this mountain [Zion, symbol of the heavenly Jerusalem, the Church] the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples a feast of rich food ..." (Is 25:6). So the feeding of the multitude is a great banquet announcing the arrival of the Messianic age; it is a foretaste of the Messianic banquet when Jesus will feed the multitude with his own body and blood, that is, himself. (Note: the word fish, *IXTHUS* in Greek, means Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.) The kingdom of God is being manifested. The banquet is symbolic of its richness in spiritual nourishment. Jesus will

provide nourishment for those who follow him in the kingdom of God.

St. Luke connects this Gospel scene by using words that take us back to the Last Supper. First of all, at the request of Jesus, the disciples got the people to sit down in groups, as for a banquet, just as they did Holy Thursday night. Then, using the same words as at the Last Supper, Jesus takes the loaves and fish, says a blessing over them (in the sense of giving thanks to the Father), he broke them and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. These words strongly remind us and connect us to the Lord's Supper when he commissions his disciples to feed the multitudes with his body and blood.

"They all ate and were satisfied." The food that Jesus provides for us gives us complete satisfaction. We are reminded here of Jesus' words, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger ..." (Jn 6:35)

"And when the leftover fragments were picked up, they filled twelve wicker baskets." We are taught not to waste anything. Everything is precious, even the leftovers. There is more left over at the end of the meal than they started with at the beginning. The leftovers are for future generations. The twelve Apostles and their successors will always have enough to feed God's people.

The way Jesus miraculously provided for the people recalls God's daily providence of manna for the Israelites while they were wandering in the desert. It shows God's concern for our physical well-being.

We also see Jesus' love and compassion stand out. He had taken the Apostles aside for a rest; however, his plans were thwarted when he was found by the multitude. But he always has enough reserved energy for more love. He has pity on the crowd; he welcomes and ministers to them. Something like when your family asks still more of you when you thought you had given all.

In St. John's gospel, Jesus uses the occasion of feeding the multitude to explain that he himself

is the bread of life. He himself, by his words of life and self-gift unto sacrifice, is our true food, a food that nourishes us with divine life. Jesus himself becomes our spiritual nourishment in person through the Holy Eucharist, which is his glorified body.

The second reading explains to us that it is through sacred Tradition that Jesus' words at the Last Supper are passed on to us substantially unchanged; they are kept intact by the Spirit of truth who has been given to us to preserve Jesus' words of life. These words in the Epistle were spoken about 30 years after Jesus first uttered them (compare the game of whispering to each other, how distorted the original saying becomes).

Here too we see Jesus giving thanks (*Eucharistein* in Greek, from which we get the words Eucharist). This is an example for us, and a strong reminder, to thank God before we eat the food he gives us. The breaking of the bread symbolizes Christ's body broken in suffering for us. The words, "This is my body that is for you," mean that what was once bread is now changed into the body of Christ. The substance of the bread is transformed into the body of Christ, although the appearance of bread remains the same.

The words of consecration of the wine, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood," cause the wine to be transformed into the blood of Christ. The other words, "Do this in remembrance of me," give the Apostles and their successors the power to re-enact this mystery. The *Catechism* tells us "The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice ..." (CCC 1362).

This is how our second reading ends, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes."

The *Catechism* instructs us that, "In the Eucharist Christ gives us the very body which he gave up for us on the cross, the very blood which he poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (CCC 1365). "The sacrifice of Christ and sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice: 'The victim is

one and same: the same now offers through the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the cross; only the manner of offering is different" (CCC 1367).

"The Eucharistic presence of Christ begins at the moment of the consecration and endures as long as the Eucharistic species subsist. Christ is present whole and entire in each of the species and whole and entire in each of their parts, in such a way that the breaking of the bread does not divide Christ" (CCC 1377). (Receiving a small piece of the host or a drop of the consecrated wine gives you the whole Christ.)

The *Catechism* continues, "In the liturgy of the Mass we express our faith in the real presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine by, among other ways, genuflecting or bowing deeply as a sign of adoration of the Lord. 'The Catholic Church has always offered and still offers to the sacrament of the Eucharist the cult of adoration, not only during Mass, but also outside of it, reserving the consecrated hosts with the utmost care, exposing them to the solemn veneration of the faithful, and carrying them in procession'" (CCC 1378).

Our Psalm response today makes this statement about David's son, who is the Messiah, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek" (Ps 110:4). What does that mean? Who is this mysterious "Melchizedek"?

The first reading helps us to understand the meaning. Melchizedek was king of Salem, which was later called Jerusalem. He was also a priest, who offered bread and wine. He blessed Abram whose name God will change to Abraham. Abraham gave a tenth of his spoils to Melchizedek. (Tithing goes that far back!) But it also signifies that Melchizedek is greater than Abraham insofar as he represents the new and eternal priesthood of Christ (see Heb 7:7). Listen to what the epistle to the Hebrews tells us of this kingly priest: "Without father, mother, or ancestry, without beginning of days, or end of life, thus made to resemble the Son of God, he

remains a priest forever” (Heb 7:3).

Since there is no record of his birth or death, Melchizedek is like the Son of God; he remains a priest forever. In contrast, the Levitical priesthood came from the family of Levi; there were many of them in succession to replace those who died; they offered many animal sacrifices.

Melchizedek is the same type or kind of priest as Jesus whom he exemplifies: Jesus offered bread and wine at the Last Supper, which he changed into his body and blood. As eternal Son of God, he has no ancestry, no beginning or end.

He continues as priest forever; he does not need successive replacements, since he lives forever through the power of the resurrection.

Jesus also offered only one sacrifice like Melchizedek and unlike the Levitical priests. Jesus was king by eternal, royal generation from the Father, as the psalm says, “... before the daystar, like the dew, I have begotten you” (Ps 110:3); he is also king through the glorification and immortalization of the resurrection.

Jesus, our immortal priest, continues to offer his one, unique, and eternal sacrifice through the sacrament of holy orders; he thus makes its fruitful, spiritual effects present and available to us in our day.

For the Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Sundays in Ordinary Time, see the Appendix.

ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 7:36—8:3

A Pharisee invited [Jesus] to dine with him, and he entered the Pharisee’s house and reclined at table” (36). Here we see that Jesus accepted an invitation to eat out. He did not mind mingling with people of means as well as the poor. Mingling with the wealthy was not a danger for him who was detached from everything but God’s will. He associated with the rich to bring them salvation and teach them the truth. Accepting an invitation from a Pharisee

gave Jesus an opportunity to teach the correct interpretation of the Law of God, its interior spirit rather than the mere external letter of the Law.

In Palestine people never sat on chairs or used tables for eating when there were guests present. Jews at that time adopted the Roman custom of reclining on low couches near the floor to eat festal and ritual meals. They leaned upon a cushion on their left side and ate with the fingers of their right hand. The food was placed in the center of the group on a large platter or tray and all those present ate from it until they were full. The leftovers were taken out and given to the servants. Servants never ate until the master’s family and guest had eaten.

“Now there was a sinful woman in the city who learned that he was at table in the house of the Pharisee” (37). We are not told the nature of her sinfulness. She is often assumed to be a prostitute, a public sinner.

We may wonder how such a sinful woman would be allowed to enter such polite society. “The houses of well-to-do people were built around an open courtyard in the form of a hollow square. Often in the courtyard there would be a garden and a fountain; and there in the warm weather, meals were eaten. It was the custom that when a Rabbi was at a meal in such a house, all kinds of people came in—they were quite free to do so—to listen to the pearls of wisdom which fell from his lips. That explains the presence of the woman” (*The Daily Study Bible Series, the Gospel of Luke*, William Barclay).

“Bringing an alabaster flask of ointment, she stood behind him at his feet weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears” (38). In his reclined position, Jesus’ feet were stretched out. And during the meal, the sandals were taken off. We can understand how the woman could stand behind Jesus and begin to bathe his feet with her tears as she wept.

This woman of the city must have heard Jesus speak and had glimpsed in him one who could lift her from her sinful life. Round her neck she

wore, like all Jewish women, a little phial of concentrated perfume; she takes out this small container made of alabaster (a beautiful soft white stone often carved into perfume vials), weeps tears onto Jesus' feet to clean them, wipes them dry with her hair—not with a kerchief or part of her robe—kisses his feet, and then rubs the soothing oil on them from the alabaster flask.

“For a Jewish woman to appear with hair unbound was an act of the gravest immodesty. On her wedding day a girl bound up her hair and never would she appear with it unbound again. The fact that this woman loosed her long hair in public showed how she had forgotten everyone except Jesus” (William Barclay).

“When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner’” (39).

So often times we underestimate the power of God's grace. We tend to judge people from what we know of them in the past. But they have moved on to new places in their lives. Like the sinful woman, they were graced with an encounter with Jesus. They have seen the truth about themselves and experienced a conversion. They came to know Jesus and his saving grace. They have abandoned their sinful ways and ardently seek to please God. Such was the case with this woman whose heart had been changed to one of utter gratitude—and she was now showing it through her overwhelming outpoured love.

Jesus was indeed a prophet and already knew of the converted state of that once sinful woman. The woman's touch, then, was one filled with Godly love—it was a holy touch, full of gratitude.

St. Ambrose makes this comment: “It was not the ointment that the Lord loved, but the affection; it was the woman's faith that pleased him, her humility. And you also, if you desire grace, increase your love; pour over the body of Jesus Christ your faith in the Resurrection, the perfume of the holy Church and the ointment of charity towards other.” Jesus knew what the Pharisee was thinking, so he

proposed a parable to him. “Two people were in debt to a certain creditor; one owed five hundred days' wages and the other owed fifty. Since they were unable to pay the debt, he forgave it for both. Which of them will love him more?’ Simon said in reply, ‘The one, I suppose, whose larger debt was forgiven.’ He said to him, ‘You have judged rightly’” (41-43).

Jesus then proceeded to demonstrate the Pharisee's lack of courtesy and love in comparison to the once-sinful woman's demonstrated love. “Then [Jesus] turned to the woman and said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? When I entered your house, you did not give me water for my feet, but she has bathed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since the time I entered. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with ointment’” (44-46).

“To invite an eminent person into one's home for a meal is an indication that one wishes to honor this person. Naturally every effort would be made in such a case to abide by the proper rules of etiquette, and yet the host, Simon the Pharisee, rudely ignores all the common courtesies normally extended to a respected guest. He would have met Jesus at the door, placed his hands on Jesus' shoulders, and kissed him. He would have ordered a household servant to rinse off Jesus' feet with cold water after he entered and then give him a small amount of fresh water to wash his face and hands before eating. This should have been followed by the offer of a few drops of sweet smelling ointment for Jesus' hair to give him a pleasant scent” (*The International Bible Commentary*, Samuel Oyin Abogunrin).

Jesus concludes, “So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love” (47).

“Jesus says that the woman has already been forgiven her sins; that is evident because of her love. She would not be able to show such love unless she had first accepted love (forgiveness, acceptance).

The forgiveness has set her free to love” (*Collegeville Bible Commentary, Luke*, Jerome Kodell O.S.B.).

“The lesson of the Lord’s parable, quite plainly, is: he who is forgiven much, loves much, while he who is forgiven little, loves little. He contrasts the mean spirit shown by the Pharisee in his minimal hospitality with the exuberant manifestation of the woman’s love. The Pharisee had little love in his make-up because he was not conscious of having been loved; he had not experienced the incredible mercy of God’s forgiveness because he did not know that he had done much to need forgiveness.

“The woman knew all that the Pharisee did not. She had repented of her evil life, doubtless as the result of Jesus’ preaching. Her faith had saved her (v 50). Aware of the divine love that been shown her, she loved much in return. It was because of this, Jesus said, because she has loved much, that he could confirm with all authority that her sins, many as they are, have been forgiven her. The parable has a great deal to tell us about the nature of love as Jesus understood it” (*The Four Gospels*, Bruce Vauter C.M.).

Jesus said to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven.’ The others at table said to themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ But he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace’” (48-50).

“When Jesus says, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ he is confirming what is already true of her; in the different context of the healing of the paralyzed man, Jesus forgave the sins at the moment of declaration (5:20). It is not her love that earned her forgiveness. By faith she accepted Jesus’ (God’s) loving forgiveness that saved her (see 1:77) and is now able to love. The woman has received ‘five hundred’ [days’ wages] worth of forgiveness, or a great amount. We do not know about Simon, but the implication is that he has been forgiven a lesser amount and is less able to show gratitude and love” (*Collegeville Bible Commentary, Luke*, Jerome Kodell O.S.B.). The Pharisee seems to be blind to his sinfulness, which hinders his freedom to love. “Afterward [Jesus] journeyed

from one town and village to another, preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Accompanying him were the Twelve and some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources” (8:1-3).

“The first members of that band are the Twelve, all men, who symbolize God’s intent to reconstitute through Jesus, twelve-tribe Israel” (Acts 26:7).

“Women comprise the second element of the band... The Physical well-being of these women, who had been healed of evil spirits and maladies is visible proof of the power of God’s kingdom in Jesus” (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Robert J. Karris O.F.M.).

“Luke presents Jesus as an itinerant preacher traveling in the company of the Twelve and of the Galilean women who are sustaining them out of their means. These Galilean women will later accompany Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem and become witnesses to his death (23:49) and resurrection (24:9-11) where Mary Magdalene and Joanna are specifically mentioned.

“The association of women with the ministry of Jesus is most unusual in the light of the attitude of first-century Palestinian Judaism toward women. The more common attitude is expressed in Jn 4:27, and early rabbinic documents caution against speaking with women in public” (*New Testament Reading Guide*, Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P.).

“Luke now mentions several other women who, like this woman, had been beneficiaries of Jesus’ healing ministry. It is one of Luke’s engaging qualities that he has striven to give women their proper place of prominence in his gospel set in the man’s world of Palestinian Judaism. This apparently summary statement that Luke has given us is actually of some importance in explaining how Jesus and his little band of disciples were maintained in their preaching activity through the support of several well-to-do women.

“Mary is called Magdalene presumably because she was a native of Magdala on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee; this city is today only a ruin. Luke introduces her here apparently for the first time, and there is no reason to suppose that she was the unnamed woman of the preceding episode, though popular tradition has made the association. There is no reason, as a matter of fact, to think that the Magdalene had ever been a notorious sinner: from whom seven demons had gone out need be nothing more than the Gospel’s way of saying that she had suffered from some extraordinary mental or physical illness” (*The Four Gospels*, Bruce Vauter, C.M.).

“Joanna is the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod Antipas’ estate, and a person of position and means. This evangelical traveling band images God’s kingdom, in which there is reconciliation between men and women, married and single, healthy and ailing, those with much and those with little” (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Robert J. Karris, O.F.M.).

“Luke introduces these women here. They will come back to play a prominent role during Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. Despite the danger involved they stood with Jesus at his crucifixion after his male disciples had fled (23:49); they helped prepare Jesus’ body for burial regardless of official hostility toward Jesus (23:55); and they faithfully reported the angels’ words to the eleven male Apostles. However, these male leaders did not believe a word they said (24:9-11). Is Luke suggesting that there existed a sharp contrast between the courage and loyalty of these few women and those of the twelve Apostles?” (*The International Bible Commentary, Luke*, Samuel Oyin Abogunrin).

“Jesus’ urgent mission left no time for him and the disciples to settle into a trade. Several women thus accompanied them to offer provisions and financial assistance. This challenged Jewish custom, which discouraged men from associating with women in public” (Jn 4:27) (*Ignatius Catholic Study Bible, Luke*, Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch).

TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Gospel: Lk 9:18-24

Jesus was praying in solitude.” Something important was about to happen. We know that Jesus customarily prepared himself for such events by prayer. In this way he opened himself to divine guidance and assistance; he expressed a holy dependence on God and awaited a new outpouring of grace to do God’s will and accomplish a particular mission. For example, when he was baptized by John, Jesus awaited the anointing of the Spirit in deep prayer (Lk 3:21-22). When it was time to make a decision about the choice of the Twelve Apostles, he went to the mountain to pray and spent the night in communion with God (Lk 6:12). And now that Jesus is going to reveal himself as the Messiah, but a Messiah who will bring about salvation through suffering, he seeks divine counsel in prayer.

Jesus teaches us by example. We must learn from the Master’s way of doing things. We too must approach important events in our lives with prayer. It is particularly helpful to read certain passages from the Bible dealing with the event or problem we are concerned about. We reflect upon the passage and talk to God about it, asking him to shed light on it for us. We look upon the Lord who is present in our heart and await his inspiration. We repeat the process, using other biblical texts dealing with our subject of concern. In this way, we prepare ourselves with wisdom and strength to approach important events like Jesus did.

As an example of this, read Mark 10:19 in preparation for Father’s Day: “Honor your father and your mother”. Having read the passage, reflect upon its meaning. Apply it to yourself. How do you honor, respect, obey, love, serve, appreciate, and thank your father for all he means to you? Refer your thoughts in prayer to God. Then remain in the presence of your heavenly Father in love and gratitude. Gaze upon him mentally with love and appreciation. Remain in loving attentiveness

as long as your attention allows you. Repeat the process. You will be much better prepared to celebrate Father's Day with this kind of prayerful preparation.

By such prayerful reflection, you will understand and actually be living out psalm 63, our responsorial psalm for today: "O God, you are my God whom I seek; for you my flesh pines and my soul thirsts ... Thus have I gazed toward you in the sanctuary to see your power and your glory ... Thus will I bless you while I live. ... I will call upon your name. As with the riches of a banquet shall my soul be satisfied. ... My soul clings fast to you; your right hand upholds me."

Returning to our Gospel text, Jesus asks the question, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" The disciples' respond, "John the Baptist ... Elijah ... one of the ancient prophets. ..." None of these is correct. The majority opinion is wrong. Beware of being led by a secular society. It will lead you into error. It does not seek enlightenment from God and from the church that Jesus founded.

On the other hand, when Jesus asked the Apostles, "Who do you say that I am?" it was Peter in his leadership position who answered for the rest, "The Christ of God." The only reason why Peter answers correctly is because he has been chosen by Jesus to lead his church in the fullness of truth.

As Jesus explains to Peter in St. Matthew's gospel, "... flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father" (Mt 16:17). The only reason why Peter answers correctly, Jesus says, is because he has been enlightened by God. Jesus proceeds then to put Peter and his successors in a permanent leadership role to guide the Church when he said, "... you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it ..." (Mt 16:18).

It is supremely important that we look to Peter and his successor John Paul II in their enlightened role for guidance in the truth regarding the important questions of life. We are surrounded by a secular society which does not know God. Its answers to life's questions are based on what is convenient

rather than objective truth. For example, it encourages abortion, killing the innocent, unborn, if it meets our need.

St. John's gospel cites another occasion of Peter's enlightened leadership role in preserving us in the truth. When the crowd heard Jesus say that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have eternal life, they could not bring themselves to accept his teaching. "This saying is hard," they said, "Who can accept it? ... As a result of this, many of his disciples ... no longer accompanied him ... Jesus then said to the Twelve, 'Do you also want to leave?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God'" (Jn 6:60, 66-69).

It is because of Peter's graced position as enlightened leader of the Church that he sees and speaks the truth. The crowds are engulfed in the darkness of the secular world; it makes its decisions based on the pursuit of the pleasurable and what is convenient rather than the truth of objective morality, what is right and what is wrong.

When Peter responded that Jesus is "The Christ of God", he is saying that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Hebrew word for the anointed one. Christ is the Greek word for the anointed one. He is the one endowed with the fullness of the Holy Spirit promised, for example, by the prophet Isaiah (compare Isaiah 11:1-11; 42:1). Through the gift of his Holy Spirit, this Davidic king will bring about reconciliation to the whole world: "The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him. ... Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them. ... the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord ..." (Is 11:2, 6, 9). This passage is a poetical expression of the reconciliation of opposites and the harmony that is effected by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit given by the Christ, the anointed one.

After Peter proclaimed Jesus "the Christ of God", our text says, Jesus "rebuked them and directed

them not to tell this to anyone". A clearer translation reads, "He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone" (NRSV). Jesus forbids the disciples to tell others of his identity because of the wrong idea that people had of the Messiah. They thought of the Messiah as a political leader who would lead a military rebellion against Rome. They might want to proclaim Jesus king and thus incur the wrath of the Roman authorities. The turmoil caused would interfere with Jesus' spiritual ministry of proclaiming the kingdom of God. This prohibition refers to the time of Jesus' own ministry. After the resurrection, he will enjoin the disciples to become witnesses of him as the crucified Messiah.

To counteract and correct the false notions of a political, worldly messiah, Jesus explains what kind of a messiah he is. He said, "The Son of man must suffer greatly ... be rejected ... killed and on the third day be raised." In this way, Jesus identifies himself as the suffering servant spoken of by Isaiah (see especially Is 52:13—53:12). He will bring about redemption through his suffering and death rather than by military prowess, valor, and skill. God himself will bring about the victory because of Jesus' obedience, even to death on the cross.

This whole idea of the Messiah being a suffering servant helps us to understand the first reading. St. John quotes it in his gospel in his description of the crucifixion scene, "They will look upon him whom they have pierced."

We are reminded of the throngs of people who gather every Good Friday to gaze upon Jesus on the cross as they fulfill the other prophetic words. "They shall mourn for him as one mourns for an only son, and they shall grieve over him as one grieves over a firstborn. ..." But as a result of the death of the innocent Lamb of God, redemption is achieved and the other prophetic words are fulfilled, "I will pour out on the house of David [Jesus and his descendants or followers belonging to the family of David] and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem [those who belong to the new Jerusalem, the Church] a spirit of grace and petition. ... On that day [when the Messiah

comes] there shall be open ... a fountain to purify from sin and uncleanness." Is this the verse St. John the Evangelist was thinking about when he wrote, "One soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out" (Jn 19:34). When we gaze upon Jesus and his open side, a stream of grace is poured out upon us and the world to purify from sin and uncleanness.

Then Jesus said to all, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." We are followers and disciples of a crucified Lord. We must go to crucifixion with him. This must be part of our daily Christian lives.

We have inherited, as members of the human race, a wounded nature whose orientation has been damaged: we are inclined to sin and to the line of least resistance instead of God and his will.

Jesus is telling us that we must oppose the sinful inclinations of our selfish tendencies. We must go against them. We do this by denying ourselves whatever movements in our hearts that are contrary to God's will. We forego our unreasonable bodily appetites. We deny the various cravings in ourselves that are contrary to right reason enlightened by faith. We oppose self-centeredness with self-denial so we can become God-centered; we replace self-will with God's will. We replace disordered self-love with an ordered love for self that is according to truth and right order.

This kind of spiritual activity calls for discipline and self-mastery. By such spirit-assertiveness, that which is highest in us and disposes us for communion with God (SPIRIT), rules over that which is lowest in us, our bodily passions which make us indisposed for communion with God.

As Scripture tells us, "Beloved, I urge you ... to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul" (1 Pt 2:11). And again, "Live by the Spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh" (Gal 5:16). Finally, in the Gospel today, Jesus says, "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it." In other words, self-

indulgence leads to personal disintegration and self-destruction. “But whoever loses his life for my sake will save it”, meaning, self-denial for the love of Jesus spiritualizes us and preserves personal spiritual integrity; it opens us to the higher life of the spirit and communion with the divine.

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 9:51-62

When the days for Jesus’ being taken up were fulfilled, he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem.”

Jesus knew that the high point of his life was approaching. The opposition and rejection he experienced in proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God would reach its peak in Jerusalem. There, the most important people in religion would also oppose, reject, and persecute him to death.

But the sufferings and death Jesus endured transformed and glorified him. In the mystery of the cross, he redeemed the world. His sacrificial love took away the sins of the human race and opened his own human nature to the invasion of the divine. In the mystery of his resurrection and ascension, he was taken up in the glory of God the Father.

The Gospel of St. Luke presents us with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, determined to fulfill his Father’s will. Nothing can deter him from reaching his destination. He sets his “face like flint” (Is 50:7) to overcome every obstacle in his way. He will not be delayed or sidetracked from accomplishing his mission as the suffering servant of Yahweh (see Is 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13—15:12). His trials will reach their climax in Jerusalem. There, he will show the zenith of his love for his persecutors and every human being. Lifted high on the cross, he will obtain forgiveness for us all as he cries, “... Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34).

Jesus will die in this posture of supreme, forgiving

love. It is with this disposition that he will be glorified, eternalized, and taken up to heaven and seated at the right hand of God where “... he lives forever to make intercession for [us]” (see Heb 7:25).

“He sent messengers ahead of him ... to prepare for his reception there. ... They entered a Samaritan village... but they would not welcome him because the destination of his journey was Jerusalem.”

In 721 B.C., the northern tribes of Israel were invaded by Assyria. All the important people were deported and brought into exile. Foreigners were imported and settled in their place. They mingled with the poor folk who remained. These people were the Samaritans. They worshipped God on Mount Gerazim in opposition to the Jews who worshipped God in the temple at Jerusalem.

So particularly, Jews who were on pilgrimage to Jerusalem stirred opposition among the Samaritans who would not allow them to pass through their village. This is just a sample of the kinds of opposition Jesus meets on his journey to Jerusalem. His infinite patience overcomes them all.

“When the disciples James and John experienced this rejection they asked, ‘Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?’”

James and John were known as “sons of thunder”. They were hotheads who wanted to destroy those who opposed them. They wanted to be like Elijah who called fire down from heaven to destroy the captains and their fifty men who came to take him to the king, Ahaziah (see 2 Kgs 1:9-12). Close association with Jesus, however, changed these two fiery Apostles into meek and gentle saints. Friendship with Jesus can also tame our fiery temperaments.

“Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they journeyed to another village.” Jesus refused to be identified with the fiery prophet or use his power to punish those who oppose him. Jesus demonstrates the kind of tolerance and patient endurance we need in dealing with those who oppose us.

“As they were proceeding on their journey someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’”

We take note of Jesus’ appealing dynamic personality that would so affect people. They would want to follow him wherever he went. We are reminded of the crowd who remained three days in the desert till they ran out of food to be with Jesus and listen to his word. We recall the woman who was so enthralled with Jesus that she exclaimed, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you.” The temple police similarly were so mesmerized by Jesus’ mellifluous words that they could not bring themselves to arrest him (see Jn 7:45-48). This is the Son of God who remains with us in flesh and blood whom we can encounter at every Mass and visit and befriend in every tabernacle.

Jesus answered him, “Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head.”

In other words, those who want to follow Jesus are forewarned: prepare yourself to face inconvenience and hardship. Following Jesus requires discipline and self-mastery. His is not the soft and easy lifestyle of the world. Following Jesus calls for detachment and self-sacrifice to respond to the urgent demands to proclaim the kingdom of God arriving in Jesus. Total dedication and commitment are needed to persevere in discipleship.

“And to another he said, ‘Follow me.’ But he replied, ‘Lord, let me go first and bury my father.’ But he answered him, ‘Let the dead bury their dead. But you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’”

Proclaiming the kingdom of God is an urgent priority: people need to be told about God’s love for us expressed in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, the evil of sin, eternal life, the value of suffering, the need to live by the truth of God’s word to avoid eternal damnation, etc. Proclaiming the kingdom is so urgent that those who have that special calling to proclaim the word of God must leave the duty of caring for aging parents to other members of the family.

It is unlikely that “bury” refers to a parent already dead since people in that hot country were buried the same day they died. It is more likely that the parent is aging and needs to be cared for until he died. How long is that going to take? A week? A month? A year? Ten years? The urgency to proclaim the kingdom is too demanding for such a delay. Hundreds and thousands of people cannot be kept waiting. Their lives and salvation are in peril. They must be enlightened about the truth regarding the great realities contained in the proclamation of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God has arrived in the Person of Jesus. People must be prepared to receive him and the eternal life made available through him.

“Let the dead bury their dead” is a striking way of saying let those who are “dead” to the urgent call to proclaim the kingdom care for the needs of aging parents. That is how they will grow in holiness and attain salvation. This will free those who are called to be at the service of the kingdom and its imperative demands.

“And another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say farewell to my family at home.’ To him Jesus said, ‘No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God.’”

How many days, weeks, or months is it going to take to say farewell to the family? How extended is this family? How much and how long has this disciple been thinking about the family so that his preoccupation has replaced his concern about proclaiming the kingdom? Perhaps he is beginning to have second thoughts about his mission and discipleship. ... The kingdom of God demands our undivided attention.

An uncompromising singleness of purpose and dedication are needed to meet the overwhelming demands of proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom. Total dedication demands total focus. As the psalm response said, “I set the Lord ever before me.” Looking back will interfere and distract from the full attention needed for the work in the kingdom.

The first reading today describes the call of the prophet Elisha. Elijah's act of throwing his mantle over the shoulders of Elisha expressed the divine call to share the prophetic mission. Elisha's prompt response through destruction of his plow and oxen is an example of total obedience and detachment from his former manner of living in order to promote the glory of God. Elijah reluctantly allows Elisha to kiss his father and mother goodbye and then begin to follow him.

The case of the Gospel today seems to involve a disciple who had already begun to follow Jesus. He was hankering for the dear ones he had left behind. He had not completely detached his heart from them. He wanted to go back home for a while. Perhaps, when his heart will be completely detached, a return visit will be allowed. But until that happens, he must complete the work of detachment for the work in the kingdom. The kingdom of God enjoys a priority over all other relationships and earthly matters.

Perhaps the second reading will help us to understand our need to choose the superiority of spiritual realities, which are imperishable and eternal. We read, "I say, then: live by the Spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh. For the flesh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you may not do what you want."

Sometimes there is a clash between the two, flesh and Spirit. Even legitimate matters such as filial piety in relating to family must give way to the higher calling of the Spirit to proclaim the kingdom of God.

Yet those who are left behind to care for those at home are also called to live by the spirit, "to serve one another through love". That is how "... you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh. For the

flesh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other. ..." The command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself", directs us to live according to that which is highest in us, spirit. Thus we will make a

concerted effort to subdue the sinful inclinations of the flesh toward self-centeredness and self-gratification. We will then be free to live for the love of God and neighbor.

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 10:1-12, 17-20

Jesus sent seventy-two others ... to every town and place he intended to visit." If we round out this number, we are reminded of the 70 elders that Moses chose to share his spirit and help him with the burden of leadership (see Nm 11:16-17, 24-30). We may also think of the 70 nations mentioned in Genesis 10 and the universal salvation that is coming through the kingdom.

Jesus sent these other disciples apart from the Twelve Apostles, "ahead of him in pairs", to prepare the people for his visit, to dispose them to receive Jesus, and to spread the word about his coming. They were sent "in pairs" for mutual support, encouragement, assistance, and love. When two are gathered together in Jesus' name, he is with them (see Mt 18:20). The work of the apostolate is too difficult for one person to do alone. Jesus himself chose others to be his companions for friendship, love, and support (see Mk 3:13-14).

Obtaining laborers to gather people for the kingdom of God is not an easy task. Special grace is needed to assist the well disposed to assent to the call. That is why Jesus said, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest."

Jesus promised the reward of a hundred times more in this life and life everlasting for those who accept the special vocation of following him in the apostolate (Mt 19:29). But leaving the pleasures of the world and giving up family and friends to follow Jesus is a difficult challenge. Only grace obtained through prayer will enable those who are called to say "Yes" to it. Jesus sends his special helpers "like lambs among wolves". Although they are defenseless and "innocent as

doves” (Mt 10:16), they will need to face hostility and opposition. But they must not be afraid: God will protect them (see Mt 10:28-31).

“Carry no money bag, no sack, no sandals.” Jesus does not want his disciples to clutter their lives with paraphernalia and unneeded baggage. He wants them to travel light and be free to give the proclamation of the Gospel their full and undivided attention. Their mission is urgent. The harvest is ripe; it must be gathered without delay—immediately. Once the hay has been cut, it must be baled and gathered into the barn before the rain comes and spoils it.

“Greet no one along the way.” Don’t waste time on superficialities and socializing. Concentrate on proclaiming the kingdom of God. Multitudes are living in ignorance of spiritual and supernatural realities. Their lives and eternal happiness are at stake. Meanwhile they are wasting their precious time on the vanities of their passing life. Don’t waste any time. Get to work and proclaim the kingdom.

“Into whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this household!’” The disciples are equipped to communicate the presence of God to those they visit. We are reminded of Mary’s visitation of Elizabeth. Her presence and words filled Elizabeth with grace and sanctified John in his mother’s womb. So, too, the disciples bring salvation to those they visit and the forgiveness of sins. Reconciliation with God is experienced as interior peace. Those who are indisposed, who cling to selfish behavior patterns so that they do not welcome the message and messengers, are left in this misery.

“If a peaceful person lives there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you. Stay in the same house and eat and drink what is offered to you ... Do not move about from one house to another.” Jesus advises his disciples to be simple and avoid unnecessary distraction. Getting acquainted with new hosts would require extra socializing. The disciples must also avoid complexity and competition by looking for a

better, more comfortable place to stay. All of this will distract and interfere with the urgent task of focusing on proclaiming the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, “the laborer deserves his payment”. The one who proclaims the Gospel has a right to live and be supported by it (see 1 Cor 9:7-12).

“Whatever town you enter and they welcome you, eat what is set before you.” Accept hospitality as it is offered to you.

“Cure the sick in it and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God is at hand for you.’” Sometimes God cures the sick when it is for their spiritual welfare as a sign that the kingdom of God has arrived. That means that God is present and is coming to dwell with and in his people. This is true for each individual as well as the whole people.

That is why the first reading has been placed with today’s Gospel. The time of fulfillment has arrived. The Lord has chosen Jerusalem to dwell and manifest himself to the nations through her. “Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad because of her, all you who love her; exult, exult with her, all you who were mourning over her!” The time of her exile has ended. Their sufferings have purified them; the Lord is returning to dwell with his people.

Jerusalem symbolizes the Church who nourishes her children with spiritual riches poured out through the Holy Spirit in the word of God and the sacraments. This is what is being expressed in the words, “Oh, that you may suck fully of the milk of her comfort, that you may nurse with delight at her abundant breasts! As nurslings, you shall be carried in her arms, and fondled in her lap; as a mother comforts her child ... When you see this, your hearts shall rejoice. ... The Lord’s power shall be known to his servants.”

The long awaited arrival of the Messianic kingdom is here. Psalm 66 joins Isaiah in rejoicing: “Shout joyfully to God, all the earth, sing praise to the glory of his name ... Let all on earth worship and sing praise to you, sing praise to your name! Come and see the works of God, his tremendous deeds among the children of Adam.” We are all

drawn in the current of excitement at the arrival of the presence of God and respond with praise and thanks to God.

“Whatever town you enter and they do not receive you, go out into the streets and say, ‘The dust of your town that clings to our feet, even that we shake off against you.’ Yet know this: the kingdom of God is at hand.” Shaking off the dust from their feet is a sign of disowning any responsibility for the people’s rejection of the Gospel. They were fully advised: the decision is theirs. They will be judged severely for their spirit of unrepentance, their refusal to accept God’s self-gift in the kingdom.

“On that day”, that is, on the day of judgment, they will be worse off than the people of Sodom who were destroyed with burning sulphur for their sins against nature, that is their sins of homosexuality (see Gen 19:1-29). To reject Jesus and the reign of God he brings is to choose self-destruction.

“The seventy-two returned rejoicing, and said, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us because of your name.’” The disciples experienced the presence and power of the kingdom of God. They were able to drive out devils. The power associated with the person of Jesus becomes effective through the invocation of his name. The dominion of Satan over humanity is at an end.

“Jesus said, ‘I have observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky.’” This is his symbolic way of summing up the effects of the disciples’ mission. Satan has been dethroned. This is brought about by the presence of God in the proclamation of the word and the truth it brings, disposing people to receive and live in communion with God.

“Behold, I have given you the power to ‘tread upon serpents’ and scorpions and upon the full force of the enemy and nothing will harm you.” The grace of ministry given the disciples enables them to overcome all spiritual enemies symbolized by serpents (Ps 91:13) and scorpions. He assures them of his divine protection, particularly from spiritual evil.

“Nevertheless, do not rejoice because the spirits

are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in heaven.” Jesus is cautioning the disciples not to overemphasize these external wonders. Possessing power over demons is no guarantee of life. Their power comes from union with God through faith and charity. Because of this, they are God’s chosen ones, destined for heaven. God himself has inscribed their names in the book of life, the heavenly registry of his own favored people.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Gospel: Lk 10:25-37

There was a scholar of the law who stood up to test Jesus: He wanted to see how well Jesus was versed in the law of Moses, how keen he was in his understanding of it. He said to Jesus, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Eternal life is living the life of God who gives us a participation in his own divine life. Eternal life is God’s gift to us. But we must dispose ourselves to receive it. The question is—how do I dispose myself to receive, to inherit as a free gift this eternal life, the very life of God? An important question indeed!

In response, “Jesus said to him, ‘What is written in the law? How do you read it?’” Jesus refers his questioner to the law, the Torah, the five books of Moses constituting the Pentateuch; these are the first five books in our Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Jesus begins to answer the man by asking how he understands it. The first part of his answer is taken from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 which is the Shema; the faithful Jew recited it twice each day. “You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind. ...” In other words, love is what unites us to God and gives us a participation in his own divine, eternal life. This love must be total and undivided. God deserves our all, the best we’ve got. Our love for God must have first place and must come before all else. We dedicate to God our highest faculty, our will, which controls all the

other powers of soul and body. We give God our heart in personal love-relationship, which sweeps our whole being, and all our strength, and mind into constantly serving and worshipping him.

The scholar of the law adds, “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He takes this passage from Leviticus 19:18 and connects love of neighbor with the love of God. We must love both God and neighbor. It’s the same love that is directed to both.

Jesus replied, “You have answered correctly; do this and you will live.” Entering wholeheartedly into loving God is entering into the fullness of life. It is entering into communion with God himself. Religion gives us a love and a life far greater than we can achieve on a natural level. “Do this and you will live” helps us to understand that a religious person is one who enters eternal life here on earth—he already experiences a greater abundance of life now.

Jesus urges the questioner to “do this”, to put the command into practice. This means that not only must he love God with his whole being, but also he is to extend that love and express it to and through his neighbor.

“But because he wished to justify himself, he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” The scholar of the law has a further reason for asking his original question. He also wants to know just who is this “neighbor”. Normally, “neighbor” was interpreted to mean a fellow Jew. What does Jesus have to say about that? The idea behind the question is, “When does my obligation to love my neighbor begin and end?” Whom must we love? What group of people is excluded? It appears that we need to set a limit to our obligation to love. When do we start and when do we stop loving?

In order to answer the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus proceeds to tell the story of the good Samaritan. “A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half-dead.” Jerusalem is 2300 feet above sea

level and Jericho is 1300 feet below sea level; a 3600 foot drop in just 12 miles. This steep road is mountainous, barren, and uninhabited; it is often impassible because of avalanches. Sharp hills and deep trenches provide perfect hiding places for robbers who can easily escape into the wilderness. It is a fearsome country for a lonely traveler to tread. At every turn, one could expect someone ready to waylay him somewhere behind a rock or fissure.

“A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side.” The priest was a representative of the religious leaders. He had a good excuse. He feared defilement so that he would not be able to perform his priestly duties: touching a dead body would have caused him to become unclean. Besides, the robbers might attack him if he lingered or went near the victim.

“Likewise a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side.” The Levite was an assistant at the temple, entrusted with minor services related to the temple cult and ceremonies. He also might become defiled if the man is dead, and become incapacitated to perform his temple duties. So he quickly, fearfully moves on, away from that dangerous territory.

“But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight.” The Samaritan is an outsider, a non-Jew, a mixed breed, a semi-pagan, a foreigner. He was overcome with deep emotion at the sight of the plight of the wounded man, who, we can suppose, is a Jew. But his race did not matter. The Samaritan felt responsible for his fellow human. His overwhelming love moved him to overlook the danger of the place or forget his hurry to reach his destination and care for his own business needs.

“He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them.” Wine was used as antiseptic and oil for its curative power.

The Samaritan loved spontaneously, warmly, personally, painstakingly, and totally: “Then he

lifted him upon his own animal, took him to an inn, and cared for him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, "Take care of him. If you spend more than what I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back." Love left nothing undone. The Samaritan loved completely.

Then Jesus asked the question, "Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?" The original question was, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus changed the question to "which ... was neighbor?" In other words, who acted as neighbor? Who proved himself to be a neighbor? Jesus is indicating, then, that our first concern is being neighbor.

The original question is also answered: Anyone in need is a neighbor and must become the object of our love. We are always in debt to love (see Rom 13:8), and opportunities for love are limitless. Every human being is in need of love and care.

In answer to Jesus' question, "Which ... was neighbor?" the scholar of the law answered, "The one who treated him with mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." Knowledge of who is a neighbor is useless unless applied. What is important is that we act as neighbor and be a neighbor to everyone in need. Active charity toward every human being is necessary to enter everlasting life.

The fulfillment of the command to love, however, requires effort, virtue, expenditure of energy, and self-sacrifice. Love requires will power to do the needed good. It calls for selflessness. And often we are slaves to selfishness instead. We are not free to give of ourselves and our possessions.

That is why we need Jesus to help us. We must live in communion with him and draw power from him through prayer and receiving him in the sacraments. He will give us his own selfless love with which to love others. As the second reading expressed it, "For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell." To express it more clearly in a parallel passage: "For in him dwells the whole fullness of the deity bodily, and you share in this

fullness in him ..." (Col 2:9).

The first reading helps us to conclude our reflections on the Gospel to be a neighbor to everyone in need. We read, "For this command that I enjoin on you today is not too mysterious and remote for you. It is not in the sky, ... nor is it across the sea. ... No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out."

But that is the challenge: possessing such an overwhelming agape love that will enable us to overcome our self-centeredness and free us to practice self-sacrificing love. We know what to do. It's not difficult to figure it out. It's a question of doing it. But we are weak in love. Only communion with God who is love will obtain the divine energy for us to be able to love.

Loving God and neighbor are not beyond our reach. God lives in our heart. Our neighbor is the person we live with or whom we meet every day. We have but to turn to our indwelling Lord to draw divine love through communion with him. Then we will be able to love others, that is, show kindness and patience to the people we live with, especially members of our own family.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Gospel: Lk 10:38-42

Jesus entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him." You will remember Martha and Mary as the sisters of Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead after being in the tomb for four days. They were from Bethany, close friends of Jesus, whom he frequently visited and loved very much (see Jn 11:1-44 and 12:1-11).

Martha was gifted as a great hostess. We see her serving again when she gave a banquet in gratitude to Jesus for raising her brother Lazarus from the dead (Jn 12:1-2). Martha excelled in the gift of hospitality and in being a generous servant. She practiced the corporal work of mercy in feeding

the hungry. Hospitality is a highly regarded virtue among the chosen people.

In the first reading, we see Abraham as a particularly generous and painstakingly attentive host. The Lord rewarded his kindness with the fulfillment of his promise of giving him and Sarah a long-awaited son. We read, “The Lord appeared to Abraham by the terebinth of Mamre.” Other translations speak of an oak tree. The word that is used stands for a large, stately tree, signifying a terebinth or an oak without distinguishing between them (the terebinth tree exudes turpentine). If you’re outside this summer as the temperature soars over 100 degrees, you can appreciate why many events and sacred meetings took place under a large shade tree.

In this apparition scene, we see both the nearness and the mysterious elusiveness of God. We are told, “The Lord appeared to Abraham.” But in “Looking up, Abraham saw three men standing nearby.” Is this the first hint that God is a Trinity of persons? But we learn that two of these men are angels (Gen 19:1).

When the Lord promised Abraham a son within a year, Sarah, who was listening behind the entrance of the tent, laughed, which expressed her doubts. She was sterile and too old to have children. The Lord himself confronted her about her laughing. She denied it. But he said, “Yes you did.” “Is anything too marvelous for the Lord to do” (see Gen 18:9-15)?

It is interesting to note that when the Lord told Abraham earlier that he would bless Sarah and give him a son by her, “Abraham prostrated himself and laughed as he said to himself; ‘Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Or can Sarah give birth at ninety?’ ... God replied, ‘Nevertheless, your wife Sarah is to bear you a son, and you shall call him Isaac ...’” (see Gen 17:15-19).

The word Isaac literally means “God laughs” or simply, “he laughs”. The name Isaac reminds us that both Abraham and Sarah laughed when God promised them a son. As if that would be a joy beyond any possibility of achieving. Yet God

is the one who has the last laugh when Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac—for nothing is impossible for God. He fulfills his promises. We can count on him. Still, after Isaac was born, Sarah no longer laughed in doubt. She said, “God has given me cause to laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me” (Gen 21:6).

But we see Abraham’s marvelous hospitality as he gives them water, rest in the shade, prepares a choice steer, yogurt, and milk; and he himself waits on them without realizing that he was serving God himself and two angels.

Jesus assures us of the same: “What ever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40). As “Martha welcomed” Jesus, she also did not yet realize that in Jesus, she was serving God himself. No wonder hospitality is such a highly esteemed virtue! While Martha was busy with her hospitality, “She had a sister named Mary who sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak. Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me.’”

In light of last Sunday’s Gospel about the good Samaritan, we would expect Jesus to immediately tell Mary to go and help her sister (which he may well have done later on after he had finished his teaching). The lesson we learned last week was that we must be a neighbor and expend all of our energies to help all those in need. Last week’s parable exemplified the second part of the great commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. This week’s scenario exemplifies the first part of the great commandment: to love God with all we’ve got and are. “The Lord said to her in reply, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.’”

Before we can properly love our neighbor, anyone in need, we need to prepare ourselves. We must unite ourselves to God, entering into communion with him by listening to his word in prayer. “God

is love” (1 Jn 4:16). He is the source of love. We do not possess it of ourselves. We must get it from him. We draw divine love from God by sitting at Jesus’ feet, uniting ourselves to his divine person as he speaks life-giving words to us.

Today’s narrative about Martha and Mary creates a balance between action and contemplation. Hyperactivity is detrimental to our spiritual lives. Martha’s attitude demonstrates how activity and work can create anxiety and tension. We are doing our work all alone, cut off from the presence and companionship of God. The many things that have to be done get the best of us. We lose our composure, our integrity and self-possession. We become impatient, frustrated, angry, and feel sorry for ourselves.

We need to regain our proper perspective. We accomplish this by sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to his word. In him we encounter God who gives us wisdom, strength, and love, enabling us to deal appropriately with our many obligations and responsibilities. Union in love with God attained through prayerful communion with him is the secret to retaining our peace in the midst of external turmoil. God keeps us intact as we cling to him. Psalm 63:9 succinctly expresses this important truth, “My soul clings fast to you; your right hand upholds me.”

When Jesus tells us today, “There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her,” he is saying that we must give priority to listen to him each day as he speaks the word of God in Holy Scripture. We listen, reflect, talk to God about it, and then simply remain in his presence as long as grace allows us. Then we repeat the process: read, mull over it, speak to God about it, and then remain in loving attentiveness.

Listening to Jesus, God’s Word, is the one thing needed, the better part. Priority is given to listening, over preoccupation with all other concerns. The proper service to Jesus is attention to his instruction. Listening to Jesus’ word is the lasting good that will not be taken away from the listener.

It is the will of God that we work. But we need balance. We need to nourish our spiritual lives with listening and reflecting on the word of God so that strengthened and enlightened by God’s grace, our inner life will remain at peace and well ordered. Otherwise our work becomes a burden and preoccupation. Anxiety cuts us off from communing with God.

Nothing can compensate for hearing the word of God and pondering over it. Unselfishness, service, and even sacrifice can be spoiled by self-concern and self-pity. Good works, which are not self-forgetful, can become a misery to the doer and those served.

The early Church learned the lesson Jesus taught in this Gospel very well. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that a problem arose in the early Church: the Greeks complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of provisions. Instead of frantically increasing their activity to solve the problem, “... the Twelve called together the community of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table. Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task, whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word’” (see Acts 6:1-4).

What is there in your life that is causing you “to neglect the word of God” in prayer? “There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part. ...”

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 11:1-13

Jesus was praying in a certain place.” Last week Jesus praised Mary for sitting at his feet, listening to his word. Jesus often sat at the feet of his Father and listened and learned from him. He is the model Son who teaches us by his own lifestyle. He would rise early in the morning and go off to a lonely place in the desert where

he became absorbed in prayer (Mk 1:35). At other times, Jesus went to the mountain to pray, spending the night in communion with God (Lk 6:12). We see Jesus at prayer before or during important moments of his life such as after he was baptized (Lk 3:21-22), at the Last Supper (Jn 17), during his agony in the garden (Lk 22:40-44), or while hanging on the cross (Lk 23:46). When Jesus felt drained from ministering to the people, he would leave the crowd and go off to the mountain to pray (Mk 6:46). He made the time to pray. He could not live without prayer through which he maintained communion with his Father, from whom he drew wisdom and strength.

The disciples noticed the frequency with which Jesus prayed and how much time he spent in prayer. They wanted to be like him. So, “when he had finished [praying], one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples.’” Jesus then proceeded to teach them the “Our Father”. St. Luke’s version is different from St. Matthew’s, the one we recite in the liturgy. St. Luke’s is older and closer to the original. It has only five petitions. St. Matthew’s version expanded it to serve the needs of the worshipping community. It has seven petitions.

In commenting on the “Lord’s Prayer”, let us realize, first of all, that it is the prayer to our Father taught and given to us by the Lord Jesus himself. The prayer is truly unique: it is “of the Lord”. In the words of this prayer, the only Son gives us the words the Father gave him (CCC 2765). [In explaining the Lord’s Prayer to you, most of the material I will be using comes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC). Please read 2759-2865 for a fuller explanation.]

But Jesus does not give us a formula to repeat mechanically. As in every vocal prayer, it is through the Word of God that the Holy Spirit teaches the children of God to pray to their Father. Jesus not only gives us ... the Spirit by whom these words become in us “spirit and life”. Even more, the proof and possibility of our filial prayer is that the Father ‘sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba! Father!’” (CCC 2766)

To call God “Father” requires a certain boldness. We are poor sinners addressing the all-holy God. It is only because of Jesus who purifies us from our sins that we can enter into God’s presence and dare to call him “Father” (CCC 2777).

“FATHER!”

We can invoke God as ‘Father’ because he is revealed to us by his Son become man and because his Spirit makes him known to us...” The Spirit of the Son grants us a participation in the personal relation of the Son to the Father (CCC 2780).

When we pray to the Father, we are in communion with him and with his Son, Jesus Christ. Then we know and recognize him with an ever new sense of wonder. The first phrase of the Our Father is a blessing of adoration before it is a supplication. For it is the glory of God that we should recognize him as “Father,” the true God. We give him thanks for having revealed his name to us, for the gift of believing in it, and for the indwelling of his Presence in us (CCC 2781).

We can adore the Father because he has caused us to be reborn to his life by adopting us as his children in his only Son: by Baptism.... The new man, reborn and restored to his God by grace, says first of all, “Father!” because he has now begun to be a son (CCC 2782).

Thus the Lord’s Prayer reveals us to ourselves at the same time that it reveals the Father to us (CCC 2783).

The free gift of adoption requires on our part continual conversion and new life. Praying to our Father should develop in us two fundamental dispositions: First, the desire to become like him: [we were] created in his image; we are restored to his likeness by grace; and we must respond to this grace. We must remember and know that when we call God “our Father” we ought to behave as sons of God (CCC 2784).

Second, [we must develop] a humble and trusting heart that enables us “to turn and become like children”: for it is to “little children” that the Father is revealed (CCC 2785).

“HALLOWED BE THY NAME”—to hallow is to recognize as holy, to treat in a holy way (CCC 2807). In this petition we ask that this name of God should be hallowed in us through our actions.

For God’s name is blessed when we live well, but blasphemed when we live wickedly. We ask that, just as the Name of God is holy, so we may obtain his holiness in our souls. When we say, “hallowed be thy name,” we ask that it should be hallowed in us, who are in him; but also in others whom God’s grace still awaits, that we may obey the precept that obliges us to pray for everyone, even our enemies (CCC 2814).

“THY KINGDOM COME”

In the Lord’s Prayer, “thy kingdom come” refers primarily to the final coming of the reign of God through Christ’s return. Since Pentecost, the coming of that reign is the work of the Spirit of the Lord who “completes his work on earth and brings us the fullness of grace” (CCC 2818).

The kingdom for which we pray is God’s reign and rule in our hearts and in our world. The kingdom is fully come in our risen Lord Jesus. We pray that his Holy Spirit will take full possession of each of us and our world. Then God will become all in all (1 Cor 15:28). The phrase added in St. Matthew’s version, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” is a further explanation of “thy kingdom come.” The more we are one with God and his will, the more perfectly his kingdom has come in us.

“GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD”

The trust of children who look to their Father for everything is beautiful ... Jesus teaches us in this petition, because it glorifies our Father by acknowledging how good he is, beyond all goodness (CCC 2828).

“Give us” also expresses the covenant. We are his and he is ours, for our sake. But this “us” also recognizes him as the Father of all men and we pray to him for them all, in solidarity with their needs and sufferings (CCC 2829).

“Our bread”: The Father who gives us life cannot

but give us the nourishment life requires—all appropriate goods and blessings, both material and spiritual. [Childlike trust] cooperates with our Father’s providence. He...wants to relieve us from nagging worry and preoccupation... Such is the filial surrender of the children of God: To those who seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness, he has promised to give all besides. Since everything indeed belongs to God, he who possesses God wants for nothing, if he himself is not found wanting before God (CCC 2830).

The drama of hunger in the world calls Christians who pray sincerely to exercise responsibility toward their brethren, both in their personal behavior and in their solidarity with the human family (CCC 2831).

The virtue of sharing calls us to communicate and share both material and spiritual goods, not by coercion, but out of love, so that the abundance of some may remedy the needs of others (CCC 2833).

Even when we have done our work, the food we receive is still a gift from our Father; it is good to ask him for it and to thank him as Christian families do when saying grace at meals (CCC 2834).

There is another hunger in the world. Our spiritual nature lives by the word of God and the Spirit he breathes forth.

There is a famine on earth of hearing the words of the Lord. The specifically Christian sense of this petition for bread concerns the Bread of Life: The Word of God accepted in faith and the Body of Christ received in the Eucharist (CCC 2835).

- “Each day” is an expression of trust. We trust that God will give us what is necessary for life, and more broadly every good thing sufficient for subsistence (CCC 2837).

“FORGIVE US OUR SINS FOR WE OURSELVES FORGIVE EVERYONE IN DEBT TO US”

Our petition will not be heard unless we have met a staunch requirement (CCC 2838).

In this new petition, we return to God like the prodigal son, and, like the tax collector, recognize that we are sinners before him.

Our petition begins with a “Confession” of our wretchedness and his mercy. Our hope is firm because, in his Son, “we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (CCC 2839).

Now—and this is daunting—this outpouring of mercy cannot penetrate our hearts as long as we have not forgiven those who have trespassed against us. Love, like the Body of Christ, is indivisible; we cannot love the God we cannot see if we do not love the brother or sister we do see. In refusing to forgive our brothers and sisters, our hearts are closed and our hardness makes [us] impervious to the Father’s merciful love; but in confessing our sins, our hearts are opened to his grace (CCC 2840).

It is impossible to keep the Lord’s Commandment by imitating the divine model from outside; there has to be a vital participation coming from the depths of the heart in the holiness and the mercy and the love of our God. Only the Spirit by whom we live can make “ours” the same mind that was in Christ Jesus (CCC 2842).

It is there, in fact, “in the depths of the heart,” that everything is bound and loose. It is not in our power not to feel or to forget an offense; but the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in the transforming the hurt into intercession (CCC 2843).

“DO NOT SUBJECT US TO THE FINAL TEST”

We ask God not to allow us to enter into temptation and not to let us yield to temptation.

We ask him not to allow us to take the way that leads to sin. This petition implores the Spirit of discernment and strength (CCC 2846).

The Holy Spirit makes us discern between trials, which are necessary for the growth of the inner man, and temptation, which leads to sin and death. We must discern between being tempted and

consenting to temptation. Finally, discernment unmasks the lie of temptation, whose object appears to be good, a “delight to the eyes” and desirable, when in reality, its fruit is death.

Temptation teaches us to know ourselves, and in this way, we discover our evil inclinations and are obliged to give thanks for the goods that temptation has revealed to us (CCC 2847).

Such a battle and such a victory become possible only through prayer. It is by his prayer that Jesus vanquishes the tempter, both at the outset of his public mission and in the ultimate struggle of his agony. In this petition to our heavenly Father, Christ unites us to his battle and his agony. He urges us to vigilance of the heart in communion with his own. Vigilance is “custody of the heart,” and Jesus prayed for us to the Father, “Keep them in your name.” The Holy Spirit constantly seeks to awaken us to keep watch. Finally, this petition takes on all its dramatic meaning in relation to the last temptation of our earthly battle; it asks for final perseverance (CCC 2849).

We pray that God will preserve us from apostasy, from falling away from the Christian faith and from grace.

The verses after the Lord’s Prayer tell us that we must pray insistently and persistently and God who will give us what we need, will surely hear us. Such prayer opens us to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. God thus gives us more than we ask for. His gift is eternal and divine. If our specific intention is not fulfilled, since it may not be good for us, we are given something much better: the Holy Spirit himself.

The grave sin, spoken of in the first reading concerns the sin of homosexuality. You can read about it in Genesis 19.

In this reading, we see the power of intercessory prayer. Abraham literally “Jewed” God down from 50 innocent people to 10.

We also see the value of innocent people that God would “spare the whole place for their sake”. Your holy lives can cause God to look upon our country with mercy and spare it from destruction.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Gospel: Lk 12:13-21

The Gospel today opens with a dispute over property, the division of family inheritance. Apparently, the first-born refused to share one-third of the inheritance with his brother, which was due to him. The man appealed to Jesus, as was the practice, as a teacher of the law: he used the title “Rabbi” or teacher, a title of respect. He had every right to his share of the inheritance: it belonged to him in justice. But it was not up to Jesus to force the issue. He did not have the legal authority to enforce justice. He left that to others under whose domain it fell. But Jesus took the occasion to teach about greed. “Take care to guard against all greed,” he said, “for though one may be rich, one’s life does not consist of possessions.”

What is greed? Greed is the lust to have more, more than is needed; the boundless grasping for more. The greedy person acts as if the important thing in life is only secured when one has amassed the superfluous. It is the lustful ambition to provide for oneself more than is necessary.

There would be no disputes to bring before an arbitrator if it were not for greed or covetousness. Such disordered desire for possessions blinds us to the truth and what is right and just. We want more than actually is our right to have. We will not even hear what others have to say about it. We are possessed and obsessed by our covetousness. It would be better to be a victim of injustice than to fall into the error of thinking that abundance of life is to be found in material possessions.

As spiritual beings made for God, we have a boundless desire for fulfillment and satisfaction. We have an endless personal need to love and be loved, to possess, to be possessed by Someone who can satisfy our unlimited longings for love and personal knowledge. Greed is misdirected desire gone wild for material possessions. But material things cannot satisfy our desire. Our

desire ultimately springs from our spiritual nature. Therefore, material things cannot satisfy this desire because it cannot touch or reach our spirit. Only the infinite Spirit of God can meet our need and give us personal satisfaction and fulfillment. That is why we must develop our spiritual powers to attain maximum communion with God. In this regard, prayer, the word of God, the sacraments, and spiritual friendships are primary. Strengthened in this way in our union with God, we will have the virtue to detach ourselves from this world to be free for God and live spirit dominant lives.

Jesus proceeded to tell a parable to bring out his point: why it is imperative that we “guard against all greed”. He tells about a rich man who had a bumper crop. He had to build new, larger barns to be able to store all the grain. In ecstatic self-satisfaction he said to himself, “You have so many good things stored up for many years, rest eat, drink, be merry!” But God said to him, ‘You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?’ Thus will it be for all who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich in what matters to God.”

The story is about a very successful farmer providing for the future. So what’s wrong about that? Nothing in itself. The virtue of prudence requires this. So why does God call the man a fool? It is because he did not provide for his spiritual, eternal life. He was totally unprepared for death. He was completely absorbed with earthly life, and unprepared for life after death.

The rich fool in the parable discovered too late that material wealth is not a permanent possession. Because he had devoted all his energy to amassing property, he had nothing he could call his own, and death disclosed his essential poverty. The only possessions worthy of man’s striving are those death cannot take away.

Death always comes far too soon for people whose whole heart is centered in this world. Far sooner than they think, they will have to leave the

riches they have been piling up. Worse than that, they will face the future life empty-handed. They have stored up nothing spiritual for themselves. All their time was given to earthly pursuits.

It is difficult to be in this world and not of it, to collect the necessary goods of this world by honest labor and yet remain detached from them, to possess, but not be possessed by worldly riches. This is an ideal to which our weak human nature responds very reluctantly.

Still, we must never let our temporal possessions come between God and us. We must not forget that at any moment, we will have to leave this earth and all we possess in it. We will exclude ourselves from eternal happiness if we let this world's wealth possess us to the exclusion of God.

We may still have time to stop building larger grain bins, barns, and savings account and turn our attention instead to collecting some treasure for heaven.

The point of the story in the Gospel today is brought home in the realization that the rich man was on the point of achieving an ambition in this present life without ever reflecting on what would be the aftermath of that ambition. Jesus' words thus bring a consideration of death into human existence: a human being shall one day answer for the conduct of his life. The prosperous farmer stands for humans seduced by every form of greed. The iniquitous seduction that invariably comes with the piling up of riches is that which distracts that person from the consideration of what life is all about.

The summons: "Fool!" comes when it is least expected or prepared. He had been "piling up treasure for himself" rather than also being mindful of others, like the poor and the needy. The man was "not rich with God" by storing up what really counts in the sight of God such as the proper use of material possessions for others. Divine scrutiny of the life given will not be concerned with barns bursting at their seams.

Because we know that our destination is heaven,

we have to make positive and concrete acts of detachment with regard to what we own and what we use. How much do we share our goods with the needy?

Our passage upon the earth is a time of testing ... on a certain day the Lord will come to settle accounts with us, to determine how well or ill we have administered his gifts. Worldly goods are but the means for us to attain the goal, which the Lord pointed out. These goods can never become the be-all and end-all of our existence. Our life is short and limited. Within a few years, perhaps not that many, we will find ourselves face to face with God. The destiny which awaits us is the consequence of our behavior on earth. Our temporal existence is the very means by which we prepare for our definitive life with God in heaven. To yield a rich harvest before God we have to sanctify this same ordinary life and the use of material goods. Every other lifestyle is built upon sand. By considering our death, we can also learn how to make good use of the days that remain for us. St. Paul tells us, "I tell you, brothers, the time is running out. From now on ... let those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away" (1 Cor 7:29-31).

The second reading reminds us that we have been "raised with Christ": through baptism, we have been joined to our risen Lord. Therefore, we must "seek what is above ... think what is above;" we must live in close relationship with Christ. In order to accomplish the task of living in heavenly realms, we must fight against our evil tendencies toward selfishness. We must resist our sinful desires and inclinations toward the earthly. In the words of the Epistle today, "Put to death, then, the parts of you that are earthly: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and the greed that is idolatry ... You have taken off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed, for knowledge, in the image of its creator."

The first reading states that "all things are vanity!"

Earthly things vanish like a breath or vapor. Unless they are undertaken with a spiritual purpose and informed by love, they are worthless and empty.

On the other hand, the Book of Revelation reassures us, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on . . . let them rest from their labors, for their works accompany them” (Rev 14:13). In other words, if we die in union with Christ, our good works accompany us. That means that our virtuous deeds are accomplished through spirit assertiveness and discipline. These spirit-assertive actions spiritualize us. They transform us from corruptible flesh to incorruptible spirit. It is in this sense that it is possible for our good works to “accompany” us.

Approaching work with this attitude makes us wise; and Scripture assures us that “the wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament . . . like the stars forever” (Dan 12:3).

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 12:32-48

Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for our Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.” We are afraid of so many things: losing our possessions, of accidents, afraid of getting sick, of dying . . . Jesus offers a remedy for all of these fears to his little flock, that is, to those who humble themselves and accept his gentle rule.

The remedy for all of our fears, Jesus says, is the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the Supreme Indestructible Reality, God himself, living and reigning in our very persons.

The kingdom of God is God’s domain, the place where he lives and reigns, which is within our very persons. The kingdom is God’s presence in us.

God’s kingdom, the place where he lives and rules most completely, is in Jesus. But he also establishes his reign in us. Through his passion, death, and resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit, God

began to live and rule in us. He created us anew when we were baptized, making us children of God; he gave us a new nature with spiritual powers through which God can operate and rule in us. We become God’s territory, his kingdom, the place where he reigns. The more we surrender ourselves and our wills to him, the more perfectly he lives and reigns in us: We enjoy his presence as we do his will and allow him free reign in our persons. His presence and the eternal life he gives overcome all our fears. We have everything in his kingdom. Even death cannot take it away from us.

But for God to completely possess our heart and rule our life, we must dispose ourselves. We’ve got serious work to do. We must let go of all our clings that oppose God’s presence and rule. We must dispossess our heart from whatever we’re holding on to which prevents God from reigning in us.

This is what Jesus is explaining in the Gospel today. “Sell your belongings and give alms.” This is Jesus’ way of shocking us into realizing how possessiveness interferes with our surrendering to God so that he can completely rule our heart: our attachment and preoccupation with material things are serious obstacles to God’s rule in us. Our overwhelming desire is for these worldly things—instead of for God. We love them more than him. Our heart is not free to be open in love and desire for him. That is why Jesus used such strong language in telling us that we must take drastic measures to free our heart from earthly impediments to the spiritual kingdom.

Perhaps your vocation does not allow you to “sell your belongings” like consecrated religious. But you must take steps to free your heart from all you possess. You will then be free to allow God to rule your heart rather than various earthly desires. Abstain from them to the extent that you can. For example, turn off the television and radio so you can meditate on the law of the Lord day and night as Psalm 1 advises us (see Psalm 1:1-3).

In telling us to “give alms”, Jesus is giving us another practical means of detaching our heart

from money and the things it can buy. Again, concern for worldly goods is a major hindrance to a wholehearted and purposeful seeking of the kingdom of God. Almsgiving, such as putting in the collection basket, benefits us by destroying in us the spirit of covetousness and greed. It is a way of letting go and freeing us from clinging to the things of earth. Then our heart will be free for God and his indestructible kingdom.

In telling us to “provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy,” Jesus is exhorting us to acquire spiritual treasure. Having detached ourselves from undue love for this world’s goods, we are free to devote ourselves to prayer, reciting the divine office, Scripture reading and study, spiritual reading of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, going to daily Mass and communion, receiving the sacrament of Penance, associating more closely with others who have a burning desire for God and his kingdom, and works of charity. All of these spiritual exercises open our heart for God to invade them and enrich us with his Holy Presence; he is heaven itself. No one can steal this treasure from us or destroy it.

This focus on acquiring heavenly treasure is extremely important. First of all, it is “inexhaustible”. We never run out of this treasure because it is God himself. Secondly, Jesus tells us, “Where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.” It is to this treasure that the core of your being will be present and attentive to; your heart will love and devote itself to what you treasure and value most in life. If you treasure earthly things like the rich fool of last Sunday, you are wasting your life away on the passing things of earth. Death will rob you of everything. If your treasure is the spiritual kingdom and God himself, the core of your being will be present and attentive to the Blessed Trinity dwelling in your very heart. You will love and devote yourself to him who invites you to enter into and share his heavenly life, the very life of the Blessed Trinity!

Jesus is telling us in the Gospel today that in order to enter into this spiritual kingdom enclosed within your very heart, you first of all must “Gird your loins”. In other words, put your belts on and tuck your long-flowing garments under them so that you will be ready for action. This calls for readiness, discipline, and attentiveness to live in the divine presence. “Light your lamps”: be alert; be vigilant; be prudent: let no one rob you of your treasure by enticing you to serious sin. “Be like servants who await their master’s return from a wedding, ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks.” His arrival could come any time. In fact, Jesus is in a perpetual movement of love towards us as risen Lord. “The coming of the Son of Man will be as lightning” (see Mt 24:27). “I am coming quickly” (Rev 3:11).

Jesus comes from his indwelling place in our hearts; the center of our soul is the seat of his enthronement from which he comes to us in grace. He wants us to be ever ready and alert to respond and open to receive him in love; He wants to enrich us with the spiritual treasure of the divine presence and deepen our love-union with him.

“Blessed are those servants whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival. Amen, I say to you, he will gird himself, have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them.” Jesus uses symbolical language to express how he serves us and nourishes us with a spiritual banquet when we are spiritually alert and live in his presence, ready to do his will and serve him. He gives us spiritual consolations when we are serving him in daily life and in prayer.

“And should he come in the second or third watch and find them prepared in this way, blessed are those servants.” The second and third watches were at midnight or before sunrise. Watchfulness must characterize the attitude of the disciple who awaits the master’s return. We must always be on the alert for the Lord’s coming. We must remain awake even at the time of our greatest temptation to be asleep, in the wee hours of the

morning. Such a perfect disposition will merit the greatest reward of union with God. The thief comes unexpectedly. We are uncertain as to when he is coming. So we must always be prepared for his arrival. That's how it is with Jesus, the Son of Man who comes to us as risen Lord. He comes in grace and glory. He comes now in grace; he will come at our death to take us with himself; he will also come at the end of time in glory.

In answer to Peter's question, this parable is meant for Jesus' faithful little flock, but it also applies to the leaders of the Church. They are expected to be faithful to the work they have been assigned. Their work is, for example, to preach the word of God, to nourish people with the body and blood of Christ, and to forgive sins. If the Master finds them doing their jobs when he returns, he "will put the servant in charge of all his property": He will reward them for their faithfulness; he will promote them to a higher place in the Kingdom; they will have grown in love and in union with God.

But the Master delays in returning. It seems that he will never come. This delay tempts us into being off guard: We get old on the job; we slacken our intensity and alertness. We tend to become irresponsible and even abusive to others over whom we have power. Moreover, we are tempted to self-indulgence. We lose our sense of discipline and self-restraint. We get tired. We give in to the line of least resistance. We "eat and drink and get drunk": We overindulge. We become dissipated. We lose our self-control. We are no longer intent on the spiritual kingdom. Disordered sense love takes over. We become very selfish. We no longer have the discipline to do God's will, to fulfill our duties; we are unable to work diligently or to pray. We become sense dominant. We lose control over our emotions and appetites such as eating and drinking. We overindulge in leisure and entertainment. We get downright lazy and neglectful. We become indisposed for the spiritual kingdom.

The temptations in these directions are real. What could be a deterrent to the danger of giving in to such serious temptations? "That servant's master will come on an unexpected

day and at an unknown hour and will punish the servant severely and assign him a place with the unfaithful." If love for the Master who loved us to the very end, even to dying on the cross does not inspire fidelity, perhaps the fear of punishment will—even as you keep traffic laws for fear of getting caught and fined. Punishment and damnation are chilling prospects! Jesus' words are a warning to church leaders and to all of us. Punishment awaits unfaithfulness; it will be administered more or less severely, depending on the amount of guilt.

The punishment of disobedience will be in proportion to knowledge of the Master's will. "That servant who knew his master's will but did not make preparations nor act in accord with his will shall be beaten severely; and the servant who was ignorant of his master's will but acted in a way deserving of a severe beating shall be beaten only lightly. Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more." The more we have been given, the more we are expected to respond and bear fruit.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Gospel: Lk 12:49-53

I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!" "God is Love" (1 Jn 4:16). And as love, he is "a consuming fire" (Deut 4:24). That is how he revealed himself to Moses "in fire flaming out of a bush" (Ex 3:2). Similarly, when God came to speak to Moses on Mount Sinai, "... the Lord came down upon it in fire" (Ex 19:18). And that is how the love and presence of God was manifested to the Apostles on Pentecost. "Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit ..." (Acts 2:3-4). And they were all filled with burning love and zeal.

Jesus was anxious to set the world on fire with the presence of the God of Love. As Isaiah's lips

were purified by a “burning coal” (Is 6:67 RSV), which took away his guilt, so the fire of divine presence would purify all who welcome him. For example, the fire of God’s presence contacted in the Sacrament of Penance burns out all the impurities of sin.

Jesus was anxious to transmit the presence of God to every believer, so that the burning love of God would inflame every heart. He wanted everyone to experience the all-consuming love of God—how boundless is God’s love for each of us. This is the love that drove Jesus to suffer tortures and die for us sinners, so that we could become free from sin and be filled with that same fire of divine love. He just could not wait until it would be accomplished.

“There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!”

The baptism Jesus is referring to is his being plunged into the depths of sorrow and suffering in his passion and death through crucifixion. He would be drenched and bathed in his own blood.

Jesus was in anguish over his forthcoming sufferings. Here we are given a glimpse of his distressed soul as he journeyed toward Jerusalem and the cross that awaited him. His was a mixture of anxious expectation and reluctance as to what was going to happen to him. On the one hand he wished he had already set the world on fire with the presence and love of God; on the other, he understood the indescribable sufferings it would cost him. And his present anguish would come to its peak in his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus also foresees what will happen as the result of his sending the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit in consequence of his Passion, death, and Resurrection. People will be forced into deciding for the truth or resisting it. They will have to take sides. It is not possible to remain neutral. You are either for or against Jesus. Failure to make a decision for Christ is to choose the side with evil, to allow it to prevail unchallenged.

“Do you think,” he said, “that I have come to establish peace on the earth?” We would think that the answer is “Yes!” for those who choose to accept his Gospel. They will know the truth and how to live in conformity with God’s will. In union with God, they will experience peace. He will fulfill their deepest yearnings. Their hearts will find rest in him.

But Jesus answers his question whether he comes to bring peace with, “No, I tell you, but rather division.” In other words, his coming is going to be an occasion for strife and division. His coming ought to bring peace, but many will choose to go against him and his followers. Their pride and self-will cause them to fight against and reject everything Jesus stands for. This is what Simeon had foretold would happen when he prophesied on the occasion of the Presentation of the Child Jesus in the temple: “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted . . . so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Lk 2:34-35). Those are the ones who choose to make themselves the center of the universe rather than God. This is the source of their refusal to accept Jesus and his teachings: their own self-centeredness.

This will take place even within the same family. “From now on,” he said, “a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three; a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother, a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”

Each has a free will and may choose as he pleases. We would hope that a person with a well-formed conscience would choose the truth and follow Jesus. But the proud and the arrogant refuse to submit to the truth; they take sides against Jesus. As a result, they are at war within themselves: they decide to go against the deepest part of themselves, which is inclined toward God and truth. Therefore, they are at odds within themselves; they contradict their very hearts.

Selfishness reigns. But they are restless and miserable and proceed to contaminate the rest of society with their own unhappy misery.

The conflict within us is so important! We need to consider it at greater length.

There is dissension occurring within our very selves. As Scripture puts it, “The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. These two are opposed to each other” (Gal 5:17).

Are you going to give in to the line of least resistance and surrender to the lusts of the flesh? Or will you discipline your wayward passions and follow the lead of the spirit? Will you choose to go along with your evil inclinations, and that which is lowest in you? Or will you choose to go along with your virtuous inclinations, and that which is highest in you?

If you surrender to the lowest, the flesh, which we have in common with the animals, you smother and enslave the spirit. That is why your conscience bothers you so much and keeps on screaming—unless you become so hardened and refuse to listen to it. You separate yourself from communion with God and the highest kind of joy and happiness. That means that you kill the life of God in you. You become a miserable slave to your passions and to the devil himself. “For the wages of sin is death ...” (Rom 6:10)—death to the life of God in you.

Will you take the side of Christ and refuse to follow the crowd? Will you be strong and bold and cling to the truth, no matter what others decide to do? Even if they make fun of you and no longer accept you as one of the gang? Will you have the courage to choose the truth with Jesus?

In order to be able to stand up for Christ you must draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power (Rom 6). That means you must have a strong prayer life and meditate daily on the word of God to know and love Jesus and the truth. He will empower you to resist the evils of the day such as sexual immorality, enslavement to alcohol, drugs, pornography, and gambling.

We are at war—whose side are you on?

We pray that we will be faithful to the truth as Jesus was, and not allow ourselves to be swayed by those who choose to go against him. This calls for a strong determination to follow Jesus no matter how difficult. We must be like the prophet Jeremiah in the first reading, who spoke the truth despite life-threatening persecution. The second reading exhorts us to “keep our eyes fixed on Jesus” for the encouragement we need. “For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising it shame. ... Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.”

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 13:22-30

Jesus passed through towns and villages, teaching as he went and making his way to Jerusalem.” Jesus tried to reach as many people as possible to tell them about the kingdom of God. He was concerned about their knowing the truth about the spiritual world, about God’s existence, his love for people, and how to dispose themselves to enter his kingdom, which he was establishing on earth. This truth taught by Jesus would make life so much more bearable and understandable.

Jesus did not answer the question as to how few or many will be saved. What is important, he said, was to “Strive to enter through the narrow gate ...” The gate to the spiritual kingdom is very narrow. Entry into it requires strenuous effort to squeeze ourselves through it. That implies struggle and expenditure of energy to live on the level of spirit. This effort supposes discipline to practice self-control and self-restraint. This effort will be expended in the practice of the virtue of moderation and temperance. By so restraining our appetite for the pleasurable, for the love of God, we are able to live on the level of spirit. Such restraint is made possible through

sprit assertiveness, which disposes us to enter and enjoy communion with God in his spiritual kingdom in our heart.

“... for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough.” The spiritual fitness needed to enter the kingdom of God is like physical fitness needed to play sports. Without physical fitness, one will not endure: the game requires more energy and fitness than we have and are. So too in the spiritual life. One who is sense dominant through soft and easy living is not able to enter and experience the spiritual kingdom.

We need spiritual exercise to get ourselves in good spiritual condition before we can enter into the narrow gate of our spiritual center where God lives. We must engage in the spiritual exercise of mental prayer, participate regularly in holy Mass, purify ourselves from sin by examining our conscience and going to confession, practice the virtues that overcome our sinful inclinations, foster spiritual friendships, do spiritual reading, etc.

“After the master of the house has risen and locked the door, then will you stand outside knocking and saying, ‘Lord, open the door for us!’ He will say to you in reply, ‘I do not know where you are from.’” There is an urgency to accept the present opportunity to enter that narrow door into the interior kingdom: it will not remain open indefinitely. Procrastination may mean we become more enslaved and deeply immersed in sin. You will not be able to free yourself. And again, perhaps tomorrow you will be dead. It will be too late. Indecisiveness will cost you the kingdom and eternal life. “O, that today you would hear his voice: harden not your hearts ...” (Ps 95:8). “Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2).

“And you will say, ‘We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets!’ Then he will say to you, ‘I do not know where you are from.’” In other words, mere casual acquaintance is not enough. It is necessary to be personally engaged in striving with Jesus, working out your

salvation as you make your way with him to Jerusalem. Then you will be in spiritual condition to be taken up with him into the kingdom. This requires effort in vigilance and discipline: a personal investment is required. Looking at the Lord as a distant spectator without getting involved will not transform you spiritually to prepare you to enter the narrow gate of the kingdom of God within you.

And Jesus will add, “Depart from me, all you evildoers!” What! How can he call you an evildoer?

In the spiritual life, not to be making efforts and ascending is to go downward. Human nature, wounded as it is by original sin, is dead weight and is pulling us downward. Not to be striving with Jesus is to gravitate toward sin and to accede to the current precipitating you toward evil, away from God.

“And there will be wailing and grinding of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves cast out.” Because of their failure to accept and commit themselves to Jesus and his way, they will be excluded from the kingdom then, as well as from the eschatological banquet in heaven. Their lot will be grief and anguish.

“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.” In other words, the Gentiles will come from the four corners of the earth to take the place of those who were originally invited to enjoy the banquet of the kingdom of God.

“For behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.” Meaning, there will be a reversal of roles: The Gentiles were the last to be called into the kingdom, but they will be the first to accept it. The Jews, who were the first to be called, will be last—they will be preceded by the Gentiles, the nations of the world.

What Jesus is saying fulfills what the prophet Isaiah said in the first reading, “I come to gather nations of every language; they shall come and see

my glory ... they shall proclaim my glory among the nations. They shall bring all your [brothers and sisters] from all the nations as an offering to the LORD ... to Jerusalem ...” In other words, God will summon the neighboring nations (the Gentiles) to Jerusalem, and from among them, will send to far distant lands to proclaim his glory to the Jews scattered throughout the world.

We spoke about the discipline needed to enter the narrow gate of the kingdom. Through spirit assertiveness, we keep a tight hold on our faculties so that they do not go astray or engage in disorderly conduct and become dissipated, causing us to become self-centered, self-indulgent, and sense-dominant, rendering us indisposed to enter the narrow gate of the spiritual kingdom.

When we are unable to discipline ourselves, it becomes necessary for the Lord to discipline us. That is what the second reading is about. And even if we are somewhat disciplined, the Lord disciplines us still more to bring us to perfection.

The Scripture encourages us to accept the discipline of the Lord in these words: “My son, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reprovved by him; for whom the Lord loves, he disciplines; he scourges every son he acknowledges.’ Endure your trials as ‘discipline. ...”

Previously, we had been speaking of self-discipline in the sense of self-control. Now the word is being used in the sense of being disciplined. Someone, God himself, is disciplining and correcting us. We are exhorted to accept such disciplining given us in the form of trials by patient endurance. God does for us, through such trials, what we cannot do for ourselves.

The book of Proverbs tells us, “By his own iniquities the wicked man will be caught, in the meshes of his own sin he will be held fast; He will die from lack of discipline, through the greatness of his folly he will be lost” (Prov 5:22-23).

But God loves us and wants to free us. For example, we suffer some kind of loss and so are freed from the undue attachments that kept us

from God. Another example: Various forms of overindulgence caused us to get sick. So we must suffer illness. We should look upon such suffering as the affectionate correction of the Lord who loves us as a father loves his children. First, we are forced to let go of whatever kept us from God. Secondly, patient endurance brings us closer to God. The spirit assertiveness required to endure pain disposes us for the spiritual kingdom. We are brought into communion with God. Thirdly, suffering that is patiently endured and accepted in obedience to God’s will is very purifying. Our disordered attachment to sense pleasure is corrected. Our disordered sensible tendency toward pleasure is spiritualized through the redemptive suffering. Thus we are brought closer to God and brought into loving communion with him in his indwelling kingdom. We come to realize how true are the words of the second reading, “... all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it.”

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 14:1, 7-14

On a sabbath Jesus went to dine at the home of one of the leading Pharisees, and the people there were observing him carefully.”

The Pharisees were astute observers of the Law of Moses. But they were more concerned about keeping the external letter of the Law than the spirit of the Law. Jesus had come to fulfill the spirit of the Law and bring it to perfection with the New Law of the Spirit. Some of the practices of the Law were purely external and no longer had value. So Jesus disregarded them. This angered the Pharisees. They did not understand what Jesus was about: he was looking to bring out the heart and interior meaning of the Law; he was going beyond the surface of the Law to bring out its heart and deeper meaning. It’s the truth, the inner core that really matters rather than the superficial letter of the Law.

The Pharisees were continually attempting to catch Jesus in his breaking of the Law to attack him and bring him into disfavor with the people. They were “observing him carefully” to see if he would do something contrary to the Sabbath rest.

We are called to observe Jesus carefully because we love him and know him to be the Holy One of God. He is the way, the truth, and the life (see Jn 14:6). We want to know how a Son of God behaves. We also want to be like him. We want to make our lives conform to his so we can become one with him.

We need to observe him carefully. We must meditate on his person and words daily—constantly. We must live in his presence and gaze upon him in our hearts where he comes to befriend and dine with us. His desire to be with us is timeless: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock,” he says, “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20).

Jesus, despite his being hounded and persecuted by the Pharisees, was not paranoid. He was at ease in the presence of his host and guests and took the opportunity to teach the kind of disposition that one ought to have in the kingdom of God; he noticed how they were choosing the places of honor, so he taught them about the virtue of humility. A humble attitude makes us aware of our own lowliness before God and others; we see the goodness of others while being very much aware of our own poverty of being and our own sinfulness. We may not know very much about others, but we are quite certain about our own sins and limitations. Such knowledge warrants us to choose the lowest place. Our self-knowledge prompts us to believe that others are more deserving of the place of honor, the first place. The grace of God helps us to see that we really ought to be the servant of others. We do not deserve any privileges. If they are given to us, we realize that it is only because of the sheer mercy of God rather than our deserving them. We pray for such self-knowledge.

This kind of self-knowledge will make us easily accept humiliation, rejection, mistreatment, and being slighted. Our sins make us deserve every kind of persecution and mishap. By patient endurance, we bear such hardship in the hope that we will be purified from our sins and more disposed for union with God. Humility moves us to readily ask forgiveness for our shortcomings. We are quick to admit our faults and mistakes and humbly ask forgiveness for any wrongdoing. We take correction easily. We are docile with those who are over us.

But humility also makes us aware of the truth of our own giftedness. This knowledge prompts us to be filled with a spirit of gratitude to God for our gifts and talents. We are aware that all our good comes from God. Such knowledge gives us self-esteem. We have been loved into someone beautiful. We were created in the image of God, gifted and redeemed by the precious blood of the Lamb of God. We rightfully have a sense of self-worth.

Pride, on the other hand, blinds us to our sins and weaknesses. Pride is undue self-exaltation. This vice induces us to seek to advance ourselves beyond the truth of our proven worth. God will not be fooled by such self-promotion.

Such an attitude makes us completely indisposed for the kingdom of God. And yet that was the attitude of the Pharisees who were supposed to be experts in keeping the Law. Pride in keeping the letter of the Law blinded them to the spirit

of the Law. They thought they were the best and the greatest. Now, in embarrassment, they are made to see themselves as the worst and the least before God. They had forgotten the words of our first reading, “My child, conduct your affairs with humility. ... Humble yourself the more, the greater you are, and you will find favor with God.”

Jesus uses the occasion of the meal to teach a further lesson. He gave advice on how to foster rapid spiritual growth through refined purity of intention and utter selflessness. We normally invite friends and relatives to share a meal with us—that is good to nurture friendship and

neighborliness. Such an act requires generosity and a certain amount of selflessness. Psalm 133:1 says, “How good it is, how pleasant, where the people dwell as one!” We are reminded of Jesus and his friends at the Last Supper. Jesus seems to have accepted such invitations from his friends at Bethany (see Lk 10:38-42; Jn 12:1-2).

But we tend to invite those who will invite us back. We look to an earthly recompense for our hospitality. We go no further than that. Jesus is urging us toward greater selflessness, generosity, and purity of intention. He counsels us to also invite those who cannot return the favor. He wants us to do this selfless act out of love for God and people: to share the mercy of God already shown to us, free of charge. Hosting or giving to those who cannot repay us will be richly rewarded by God in the resurrection.

Such hospitality is like giving alms. And the first reading tells us, “Water quenches a flaming fire, and alms atone for sins.” Generously giving what is ours through hospitality purifies our hearts from disorderly attachment to earthly possessions. Such selfish clinging makes our heart indisposed for God and his kingdom. Our stirred senses prevent us from having communion with God who is spirit. We are barred from enjoying the fruition of the kingdom of God in our heart. Almsgiving through hospitality helps to free us from such disorderly possessiveness, thus freeing us to enjoy God’s presence and companionship.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 14:25-33

Great crowds were traveling with Jesus and he turned and addressed them.” Jesus attracted many people—he healed them of their afflictions and freed many of them from the devil. His words were so consoling, enlightening, and reassuring. But these miraculous cures and exorcisms were often misinterpreted. They led people to believe Jesus to be a temporal, worldly Messiah who would restore Israel its independence from the Roman government. Might this finally

happen when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem? So Jesus proceeds to explain what is required to follow him in the spiritual kingdom that he is establishing. One must be spiritually well disposed by means of a firm commitment to Jesus. He says, “If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”

The word “hate” here can be misleading. We must “hate” those who try to come between Jesus and us only in the sense that we love them less than we love him. Because Jesus is Son of God and divine, he deserves our total allegiance. We must cling to him above all else because he alone gives us God and eternal life. He is the one who saves us from eternal damnation by sacrificing himself for us on the cross. We owe him our all. He has loved us more than anyone else. We must love our parents, siblings, and spouses. But we must hate any threat that would separate us from Jesus. We cannot afford to lose him. He is the way, the truth, and the life. We cannot agree or go along with anyone who would come between Jesus and us or his will for us. We must hate any sin that would break our holy relationship with Jesus. Such a sin is an intolerable evil. This we must hate with passion.

Even our very physical lives take second place to Jesus. We must prefer him above ourselves. Many martyrs gave up their lives rather than renounce their allegiance and faith in Jesus. We must be prepared to die rather than deny Jesus and give up our commitment to him.

This commitment to Jesus, even to the point of preferring him to our own selves, is all-embracing and extends to our choosing him above ourselves in daily living. Selfish acts that foster the life of the flesh, which opposes the life of the spirit, must also be renounced. The first reading speaks of how our unredeemed bodies weigh us down when it says, “For the corruptible body burdens the soul and the earthen shelter weighs down the mind that has many concerns.” We must not let it rule us, but raise it up by acts of spirit assertiveness, acts of self-denial.

Jesus came to teach us to love God the Father with our whole heart as he did. We must learn to love ourselves in the right way. Selfish inclinations that stem from original as well as personal sin must be opposed. That is genuine self-love according to the Gospel of Jesus. That is what he meant when he said, “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life” (Jn 12:25).

What is Jesus saying? If we love our natural lives and cater to them by giving in to the selfish desires of our flesh, we will self-destruct. But if we hate these selfish inclinations and refuse to follow them, we will become spiritually strong; our union with God will deepen and increase; we will share more abundantly in the spirit life of God now; and with it, we will pass through death unharmed and enter the sphere of heavenly life.

Jesus goes on to explain in the Gospel today, “Whoever does not carry his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”

Jesus is saying that the only way we can become a follower of his on the way to crucifixion is to carry our cross and be crucified with him. Crucifixion and death will bring about total spiritualization, immortality, and glory to Jesus. Suffering unto death tested Jesus’ total commitment, obedience, and love for the Father. Suffering forced the highest spirit assertiveness that transformed human flesh into spirit.

In our case, unlike Jesus, our flesh is tainted with sin; our flesh is sinfully inclined. It needs to be purified from such unholy movements away from God, as well as transformed into spirit. That is what carrying the cross does for us.

Bearing the cross can be considered both active and passive (in the sense of accepting an imposed cross). Taking up our cross in the active sense refers to self-denial. We voluntarily embrace the cross by going against what we would naturally like to do. We may fast from food and drink; we may abstain from some form of entertainment; or we may decide to discipline ourselves by carrying out an arduous task in the line of duty, or by

doing a good work such as visiting a shut-in, or volunteering to help with a chore or task. This is what Onesimus did for the imprisoned Paul in the second reading.

In the passive sense of bearing with an imposed cross, we mean enduring with patience and acceptance the difficulties and hardships that life presents to us. We lovingly accept the process of aging with its humiliations, limitations, and debilitating effects. We practice patient endurance when we are sick or when things go wrong. We suffer the trials entailed in difficult and painful relationships. We bear all of these for love of God, in obedience to his will, as we live in this limited, created world of ours. Through it all, we are being transformed into the very image of God from glory to glory (see 2 Cor 3:18). Scripture tells us, “This momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:17).

Jesus proceeds to give two brief examples that require careful calculation as to whether one should decide to undertake an important enterprise: To construct a tower, one must figure out the cost and whether he has enough money to complete it. So too, before engaging in a battle, one must think out carefully whether he has enough men and equipment to win it.

Deciding to follow Jesus is a supremely important enterprise. We must consider carefully the cost of following Jesus before we start. We must understand well what is required; face squarely what is demanded for us to travel the distance. Now that Jesus has presented the facts of the total commitment required to follow him, what are you going to do? Are you willing to pay the price?

The Gospel ends with one more required disposition to follow Jesus: “Anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple.” Total allegiance to Jesus demands that we allow nothing to come between him and us. The first part of the Gospel spoke about not allowing people to come between him and us. Now he says we must also not allow our possessions to

interfere with our allegiance to him. Love for possessions can easily capture our heart. Our love can easily be diverted to them. Then our allegiance becomes divided between creature and redeemer. Love and devotion to created things cause us to betray Jesus. We begin to love them more than him. We devote more time and energy to them than to him, our creator and redeemer. Like Judas, we betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver!

Insofar as possessions have taken over and replaced our allegiance to the Son of God, we must renounce them. We must pray for this grace and begin to dispossess ourselves through various forms of almsgiving. We must free our hearts from such possessiveness so Jesus can resume his rightful place as Lord of our lives.

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 15:1-32

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to [Jesus]. They were attracted to him. They experienced the compassion and mercy that issued from his sacred heart. They could not get enough of him. He was a medicine for their sick souls. Jesus welcomed these repentant sinners with love—their return to God gave him great joy.

“... but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them,’” as if to say that Jesus was encouraging them in their sinful ways. The Pharisees and scribes held themselves aloof from such sinners. They believed that a person should not associate with the godless.

Jesus then explains why he welcomes repentant sinners with joy. Each is precious and must not be allowed to remain lost. God’s merciful love does not simply wait for the sinners; he goes after them to bring them back. Jesus explained his seeking sinners out to save them with three parables. The first is about a lost sheep. The shepherd is so concerned about it, he leaves the ninety-nine to search for the lost one until he finds it. When he

does find it, he is so happy that he calls together his friends and neighbors to celebrate.

Jesus tells us that there is a special joy in heaven among God and the angels and saints over the return of one repentant sinner. This shows us the value of each person. God seeks him and her out until they have been reunited to him and are again in the state of grace and friendship with him. The others left behind are also loved, but they are safe and secure; they are not a source of concern like the lost one.

The lost coin in the second parable is also precious and valuable. It is very important to the poor woman. She carefully searches for it until it is found. She experiences great joy when she finds it—much more than if she had not lost it.

Both parables show how God’s love persistently seeks the person who has strayed away from the presence of God through sin. God is terribly distressed over his lost children—so much so that he sent his Son to earth to find and free us from the clutches of sin and evil. His infinite love for us causes him to be deeply pained, when we are lost in sin, until we are safe in his loving presence again.

In the third parable, Jesus describes two kinds of sinners. One knew he had sinned and was fully repentant; the other was so caught up in some of the good things he had done he was not even aware of how self-centered, cold, and hard-hearted he was. The two sons in this parable describe both the repentant sinners who were drawn to Jesus, and the Pharisees and scribes who considered themselves sinless—although they hated Jesus and disdained their brothers.

The father in the parable represents God himself with his ready, unconditioned and unstinted love and mercy manifested both toward the repentant sinner and his critical, unforgiving brother.

The generous father was under no obligation to give his younger son’s share of the property. But he allowed him to take it. He is like God the Father who gives us everything while knowing that we often waste and misuse these gifts. We

over-indulge, even to the point of seriously harming ourselves both physically and spiritually. The hope is that we will come to learn from experience what is good and what is bad for us. We pray that we will be wisened by our mistakes and not make the same ones twice. We become more prudent and avoid the occasions of sin. We learn to respect our weaknesses. Through it all, we come to appreciate how good, loving, kind, generous, merciful, and forgiving God, our Father, is toward us as we grope and bungle our way through life.

The younger son spent all his fortune and experienced dire poverty. He suffered the pangs of hunger and starvation. He suffered the humiliation of ultimate degradation when forced to be subjected to a Gentile and live with pigs. But suffering and humiliation purified and enlightened the young man. He began to see the goodness of his father and all of the good things and people he had left behind.

Grace touched him. He saw his sin and humbly admitted it. He realized he had lost his dignity as a son. He was ready to confess, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers." He was truly repentant, full of regret for his sinful behavior, ready to live rightly, longing to be in the company of his father again. So he headed back home.

"While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion." His father was looking for him, longing for him to return. It was his father's love that drew him and gave him the courage to come back home.

The father "ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him." The younger son received a wholehearted welcome. That embrace and kiss were signs that he was wholly forgiven. The father was so happy to see his son again. His heart was filled with joy. It had no room for anger or blame—only love.

The father was concerned about restoring the dignity of his son, which he had lost by sinful

living. He interrupted his confession and said to his servants, "Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet." The father completely restored the dignity that was due to a son of his. The robe, the ring and sandals were external signs of the interior restoration that had taken place through repentance and confession. It's like when you have just received the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

How great is God's happiness at the return of a sinner, a wayward child of his; how incredible is his mercy—so far beyond our just desserts. He gives us an interior feast to show us how precious we are to him. He celebrates our return, "... because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found." The younger son found the joy he had been looking for in a distant country right here at home.

The older son was returning from the field. "As he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing." When he asked one of the servants the meaning of this, he was told that they were celebrating his brother's return, "safe and sound." "He became angry and ... refused to enter the house ..." despite his father's pleading.

Here we begin to see how the older son demonstrates the behavior of the Pharisees and scribes. They are angry and full of resentment, like the older son, at how Jesus welcomed repentant sinners with compassion and love. Like the older son, they were obstinate and hardhearted; they refused to participate and rejoice in the return of repentant sinners.

The older son angrily complains to his father that, despite all these years of serving him without ever disobeying one of his orders, the father never gave him even a young goat to feast with his friends—but he slaughtered the fattened calf for his young son even after he "swallowed up [his] property with prostitutes."

The older son could only think of himself. He could not come out of himself to appreciate and value the return of his brother who was lost or perhaps dead. Obeying his father's every command had not sanctified him. Keeping the external letter

of the law did nothing for his attitude of heart. Rather, it caused him to become proud and self-centered; he was jealous and full of resentment; he disowns his brother, and disrespects his father. His self-righteousness separated him from his father and brother; it took him away to an even more distant country.

The father couldn't believe what he was hearing. He would have gladly responded to his needs had he known them. "My son," he said, "you are here with me always; everything I have is yours." The older brother does not know his father. His attitude is that of a slave rather than that of a son called to live in close communion with his father and enjoy his riches.

The father goes on to explain, "But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found."

In other words, the older brother was never lost or perhaps taken for dead like his brother: he was like the lost sheep or coin: there is a special joy at his recovery. That's why "we must celebrate". It is not that the father failed to appreciate the older son. The father continues to love the older son also, just like his brother.

But the older son is still separated from his father; he, like his younger brother, has gone off to a distant country by his prideful, sinful attitude. If only he could see and admit his sin, like his younger brother ... but the story ends without any signs of his repentance.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Gospel: Lk 16:1-13

A rich man had a steward who was reported to him for squandering his property." This parable is of interest to us because it tells us about ourselves. So let us meditate on it in detail. Such prayerful reflection will give us insights into our own selves as stewards of the possessions God has entrusted to us.

A steward is a manager of the things entrusted to his/her care. The steward in the Gospel was wasting his master's property because of poor or dishonest management. He is about to lose his job. The manager is told to: "Prepare a full account of your stewardship. ..."

How have you managed God's property put in your care? Examine yourself, for you will soon be dismissed from this life. The few years remaining will come quickly.

When the manager in the Gospel realized he would be dismissed, he quickly contacted the people who owed his employer and reduced their debts by about 50%. Thus he ingratiated himself with them; they would then feel indebted to the steward. So when he lost his position as manager, they would welcome him into their homes.

"And the Master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently." In other words, he foresaw what would happen to him, so he acted decisively to prepare himself for his future life.

This makes us ask ourselves how well we are preparing ourselves for our future life with God. Are we using the means at our disposal to prepare for eternal life?

Jesus asserts, "... the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." "The children of this world" are always thinking of making a profit. They're always figuring out how they can make more money and greater interest with their investments. This is exemplified in the first reading: the merchants were anxious for the end of the new moon or Sabbath so they could resume making money. Jesus' disciples are not so prudent and alert in increasing their spiritual riches. Some examples are: daily examination of conscience, daily Mass, spiritual reading, frequently receiving the sacrament of reconciliation, daily meditation on the word of God.

Worldly people whose interest is in the things of this world, are much more clever and zealous in

their task than are religious people whose interest is in the things of God.

Speaking to us Jesus says, "... make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." A word of explanation will be helpful here: "Dishonest wealth" literally means "mammon of iniquity". Mammon is a Hebrew word meaning, "that in which one trusts". The adjective "Dishonest" expresses a tendency of wealth to lead a person to dishonesty, stressing the tendency, or iniquitous seduction of mammon, to enslave those who pursue it and to lead them to forms of dishonesty. As the first reading puts it: "We will ... fix our scales for cheating."

Jesus counsels us to make use of our money to make friends for ourselves in eternity. These people we helped in this life will intercede for us before God and welcome us to be with them in heaven. Christian disciples are urged to make prudent use of material possessions to make friends for themselves for eternity.

Besides prudently investing your money with interest to provide for your earthly future, Jesus says that we must also provide for our life to come in heaven. By investing some of our money in needy people, for example, through the Bishop's Services Appeal, we will be making friends for ourselves who will welcome us in heaven.

There is a story told about a wealthy woman who died and went to heaven. St. Peter was taking her to her new home. As they came to a beautiful mansion, the woman thought surely this would be hers. But St. Peter kept on walking. They passed by another lovely home, which she thought for sure would be hers. But they passed on. Finally, they came to an old shack. St. Peter said to her, "M'amme, this is your new home." The rich woman felt insulted and protested. St. Peter replied, "I'm sorry, M'amme, but that's the best we could build for you with the little money you sent us."

The Lord tells us today to use our own worldly goods in a manner that will earn for us a lasting

reception and a beautiful home in heaven when our time comes to leave the world and all we had in it.

The Gospel also tells us, "The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones. ..."

A steward is a person who has been entrusted with God's property. What we have been given to care for is not our own. It belongs to God. We will have to give an account of our stewardship. Proper use and care of this world's goods, even in small matters, require and build virtue, character. The practice of virtue, even in small matters, requires spirit assertiveness, which deepens our likeness and union with God. Such practice of virtue, therefore, makes us strong and wise so that God can entrust us with greater responsibilities. These, we will be able to handle with ease and joy, prepared as we have been, by the faithful carrying out of lesser duties.

"... the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones." Unfaithfulness, even in small matters, gradually disintegrates a human person. Spirit begins to cave in to the demands of weak flesh. This weakened condition quickly deteriorates. Discipline, self-possession, and self-control are lost. Self-indulgence takes over. Weakness and irresponsibility begin to rule our lives. This all began in small matters. The spirit cannot afford to give in to the flesh and its weaknesses even in small matters. They quickly grow into monstrous proportions and bring us to ruin.

"If, therefore, you are not trustworthy with dishonest wealth, who will trust you with true wealth?" Worldly wealth is given to us in trust; it does not belong to us, but by our use of it, we can show whether are not we are fit to be entrusted with real wealth, the spiritual wealth of grace in the heavenly kingdom.

If disciples do not share possessions, they will not be entrusted with the true, heavenly reality. If disciples share possessions, which are on loan from God, they will be given the treasure of grace and of heaven itself as their own inalienable possession.

The man who fails to use the wealth or goods of this world properly, trivial and small as they are in comparison with eternal goods, is not worthy to be given the greater spiritual goods, the eternal rewards of grace and the possession of God.

Money can be redeemed from its sinister character only if it is used as a means of promoting friendships for eternity; to invest money in benefaction is to exchange it for the currency of heavenly grace and heaven itself.

Material wealth must remain external to us. But we can invest it to acquire true spiritual riches, which are our own. We convert material wealth into heavenly capital by sharing it with others.

“No servant can serve two masters ... You cannot serve [both] God and mammon.” Mammon is used here as if it were itself a god. The disciple must give exclusive loyalty to God or succumb to the enslavement of mammon; one is loyal to God by sharing mammon with others; especially those in want.

Christians should exercise appropriate stewardship with their money. One’s allegiance must not be divided between two masters, God and wealth. Wealth is God’s great rival for the devotion and service of men.

Which is going to govern your life: God or mammon (wealth)? If you allow yourself to get involved in the servile pursuit of wealth and reduce yourself to a slave of it, then you cannot really serve God. Mammon thus becomes the god that you serve.

“Serve” carries a different connotation when used in terms of God and personified money. To serve God connotes an honorable dependence and devotion. To serve money connotes a degrading enslavement to procure it and all that that entails.

Serving God and being a slave to riches are incompatible. To be dependent on wealth is opposed to the teachings of Jesus who counseled complete dependence on the Father as one of the characteristics of the Christian disciple.

We prove our superiority and independence over wealth, the mammon of iniquity, by regularly giving a certain portion away, for example, 10%. Thus we maintain a certain detachment from it and keep our heart free for God. Our great desire is for him, as we strive to love him with all our heart.

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 16: 19-31

Last Sunday’s Gospel ended with Jesus’ words, “You cannot serve God and mammon.” “The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all these things and sneered at him.” They expressed scorn and contempt for Jesus because of his teaching about wealth. He said to them, “What is of human esteem is an abomination in the sight of God” (Lk 16:13-15). In other words, money is everything in the eyes of the world; it is a kind of god which people worship. In today’s Gospel, Jesus explains further why he called money the mammon of iniquity. He demonstrates its dangers and evil effects in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

“There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day.” Here we already see how riches tempt us to luxury, which caters to sense life. We are inclined to the pursuit of pleasure, to the soft and easy life, which is opposed to the life of the spirit. As Holy Scripture puts it, “For the flesh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other ...” (Gal 5:17).

Since “God is Spirit” (Jn 4: 24) we can only remain in communion with him if we live on the level of spirit. But riches tend to foster the life of the flesh instead and strengthen the life of the senses. Thus we are indisposed to commune with God; we become blind to spiritual realities. Spiritual exercises such as prayer and Mass are distasteful, difficult, and boring. We get nothing from them because we are living on the level of sense.

In order to derive profit from spiritual activities, we must begin to live on the level of spirit. We

need to abstain from feeding and catering to the senses. We must assert that which is highest in us, spirit, and put a stop to all undue self-indulgence and sense gratification.

Returning to the Gospel text for today we read, “And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores.”

It was customary at that time for a family or friends to place a cripple at a street corner or at one of the gates of the city or near the entrance to a rich man’s home so that he could collect enough alms to eke out some kind of living.

But the rich man was too engrossed in himself and his pleasures to give Lazarus even the scraps of food that fell from the table. People would wipe their plates and hands with bread and then toss it under the table. The attention of the dogs licking his sores only added to the poor man’s miseries. And yet the rich man showed a total lack of concern.

The parable does not make the rich man out to be what we would call an evil man. He was a harmless, callous worldling, oblivious to the needs of the poor, basking in the pleasant thought that wealth indicated God’s good pleasure. We ordinarily find nothing wrong with a man spending his own money on himself as he pleases, so long as he harms no one else by doing so.

But the rich man used his wealth irresponsibly. His fault was not merely that he used his money for selfish ends, but that he failed to use it for the relief of the beggar. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “Those who hold goods for use and consumption should use them with moderation, reserving the better part for guests, for the sick and the poor” (CCC 2405). Moreover, the *Catechism* states further that “those who are oppressed by poverty are the objects of a preferential love on the part of the Church” (CCC 2448). The *Catechism* quotes St. John

Chrysostom’s convicting words, “Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and to deprive them of life. ... the goods we possess are not ours, but theirs. The demands of justice must be satisfied first of all; that which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity.”

“When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice” (CCC 2446).

As a background helps us to understand these statements, the *Catechism* states elsewhere that, “The goods of creation are destined for the whole human race” (CCC 2402). And, “The right to private property, acquired or received in a just way, does not do away with the original gift of the earth to the whole of mankind” (CCC 2403).

The fact that we have been gifted with an inheritance, or a good education, self-discipline, or a good, well-paying job does not exonerate us from being concerned and helping those who do not enjoy all of these blessings. They are our brothers and sisters. In caring for them we actually minister to Jesus himself (see Mt 25:40).

The problem with the rich man was not that he had riches, but that he had become callous and selfish, blind and deaf to the needs of the poor man who was so close to him. Because every Jewish landowner was Yahweh’s tenant (Lev 25:23), he owed “taxes” to Yahweh’s representative, the poor, and was thus expected to share the land with them in the form of alms (Is 58:6-7).

Today’s liturgy warns us that an excessive concern for comfort and the things of this world will inevitably lead to neglect of God and neighbor. The Lord contrasts two extreme conditions in this parable: vast wealth in one case, tremendous need in the other. Jesus says nothing about the rich man’s possessions themselves. He puts his entire emphasis on how they have been used, mentioning only expensive clothes and sumptuous daily banquets. Lazarus was not even given the leftovers.

The rich man had a good time for himself. He was not against God, nor did he oppress his impoverished neighbor. He was simply blind to the existence of the needy person on his doorstep. He lived for himself and spared himself no expense. What was his sin? He was too self-indulgent and self-centered to be able to see Lazarus's plight. He could have assisted him in his neediness if he had not been so selfish. He did not use his wealth in a way that was in conformity with God's will. He did not know how to share. "Wealth itself was not what kept the rich man from eternal bliss," says St. Augustine. "His punishment was for selfishness and disloyalty [to God's word]."

Selfishness can be manifested in an insatiable desire to possess more and more material goods. It can make people blind to the needs of their neighbors. Selfish people come to treat others as if they were objects without value. Let us remember today: we all have needy people living alongside of us—people like Lazarus. We cannot forget to administer what we have with generosity. In addition to the sharing of material goods, we should also be sowers of understanding sympathy, friendship... (see *In Conversation with God*, 26th Sunday, Year C).

Scripture warns us about the danger of wealth: "Those who want to be rich are falling into temptation and into a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires, which plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils, and some people in their desire for it have strayed from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pains" (1Tim 6:9-10).

We are not forbidden to have some of the world's goods. We need some, and God it was who provided them for our use. But we must use them properly and we must not set them up as idols to be adored.

On all sides of us, there are Lazaruses placed at our gates by God to give us an opportunity to exercise fraternal charity. Be a brother or sister to them now and you will not have to envy them in the hereafter.

Returning to the Gospel text for today, we read, "When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham."

As in life, Lazarus had no one to care for him, so in death, there was no one to bury him. So the angels came for him and brought him to Abraham's bosom. There, he could enjoy the company of his father, Abraham, where he would be loved; there, all his needs were fulfilled in the bliss of the eschatological banquet.

The Gospel text continues, "The rich man also died and was buried, and from the netherworld, where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side." The rich man is nameless throughout the Gospel, while the beggar, Lazarus' name is given as if to reverse the world's opinion. In the next world, the nobodies will be somebodies. The first will be last and the last first. There will indeed be a reversal of roles.

The rich man was buried with due pomp and ceremony, as we would expect. He was probably eulogized for being a success in life: he was rich; he knew how to make money as well as how to get the most pleasure in life.

But then, what happened after he died and was buried? We read that "he was in torment". He had no spiritual life whatsoever. He had no life of the spirit to enjoy communion with God. Rather, he had gorged himself and nurtured the corruptible flesh in sensuous living. Therefore, he suffered the torments of separation from God for whom his whole being craved. But now it was too late; he could not have him.

When the rich man finally recognized Lazarus, it was to make him his lackey. Heavenly life is a communion of love and respect for others. The rich man was totally unprepared for that kind of life: he only knew how to use people and disrespectfully treat them as objects. How do you treat people at home and at work?

The rich man cried out, "Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am

suffering torment in these flames.” But the time for repentance and mercy is in this life. Death brings closure to grace and reconciliation. Our self-made fate is sealed at death. It is the definitive point of no return. There is no crossing over from one side of the abyss to the other. Now is the time to change; now is the time to begin making proper use of wealth by sharing some of it with the needy and the deprived or other charitable works. In this way we free ourselves from wealth’s addictive hold on us so that our heart can give itself to its primary call—which is to love God with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourselves.

The rich man wanted Abraham to send someone from the dead to warn his five brothers. But Abraham asserted that such an apparition would be ineffective. If a person does not listen to the word of God and live his life accordingly, he is so stuck on himself and so blinded and caught up in his addictive pleasures he will not budge from his self-centeredness. The proof of this is that Jesus came back from the dead to verify his promise; he comes to keep us company and befriend us with his indwelling presence. But sensuous living makes us completely indisposed to know him personally and enter into joyful communion with him. Our only hope is for us to cry out to him in faith and beg him to pull us out of our quagmire so we can be free for him.

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 17: 5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith.” Perhaps you also, like the Apostles, are aware of a weak faith. Faith, believing in God and his revelation, is a gift. It comes from God. We must look to him for strengthening our faith in him. To say to Jesus, “Increase our faith” is itself a prayer. Every time we become aware of how weak our faith is, we too must pray, “Increase our faith”.

On another occasion, the Apostles were unable to cast out a mute spirit who possessed a young man. So his father pleaded with Jesus to cast him out—if he could. Jesus responded with, “Everything is

possible to one who has faith” (Mk 9:23) The boy’s father cried out, “I do believe, help my unbelief!” Then Jesus, with a voice of command, cast out the mute spirit.

Here we see the power even of weak faith. It connects us to Jesus and his power to save us from evil. At the same time, the man pleaded for more faith, just as the Apostles do today.

When the Apostles asked Jesus why they could not cast out the mute spirit, Jesus responded, “This kind can only come out through prayer” (Mk 9:29). The root cause of the Apostles’ weak faith and inability to cast out the mute spirit was a lack of prayer, that is, the conscious reliance on God’s power when acting in Jesus’ name. A prayerful attitude indicates that we live in constant communion with God. That is how we draw power from God and increase our trust and belief in God.

Prayer is an exercise of faith. Through prayer, we come in contact with God himself. And if we truly love God, obey him, and give our hearts to him, we come to know him personally and experience for ourselves that he is real. Through such prayerful communion with God, we live in his presence and draw spiritual power from him to do his will in life and resist the evils that surround us. At the same time, our faith grows stronger.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus responded to the Apostles’ plea to increase their faith with, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

Even if a mustard seed is tiny, it contains great power. The potency within it will cause it to grow into a tree! Consider the power in an acorn and its ability to grow into a gigantic oak tree. Similarly, simple faith also contains great power.

The spectacular example Jesus gives of commanding a mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea is meant to grab our attention and help us to realize what the power of faith can accomplish in our lives. Jesus’ statement is meant to bring out the power of faith; it is not meant to be taken

literally. We must look at what Jesus was trying to convey by such an astounding statement.

Jesus is calling our attention to the extraordinary power of faith. What is faith? Faith is, believing in God and accepting his self-gift and self-revelation. Quoting from the Catechism of the Catholic Church we read,

Faith is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by him. “Before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God to move and assist him; he must have the interior helps of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind and ‘makes it easy for all to accept and believe the truth’” (CCC 153).

In faith, the human intellect and will cooperate with divine grace: “Believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace” (CCC 155).

Having taken a brief look at what faith is, we now want to reflect on its power. Jesus is saying that the person with genuine faith and its transforming power is able to effect things beyond all expectation. Even that which looks completely impossible becomes possible by means of the power of faith. Consider the miracle of Mary’s receptive faith and trust, and how God was able to work through her by the power of the Holy Spirit: She conceived the second Person of the Blessed Trinity who became human. It was because of her trusting faith that the Incarnation could take place—the greatest miracle that ever happened.

As the angel told Mary, regarding the sterile Elizabeth’s conceiving John the Baptist in her old age, “... for nothing will be impossible for God” (Lk 1:37). It is the power of faith operating through a priest that causes the bread and wine to become the body and blood of Christ.

Consider other aspects of the stupendous power of faith: The theological virtue of faith is directed to God as its object. It actually attains God himself. Each time we posit an act of faith, we come into contact with God. We have free access to God

at any time, for as long as we want, through this virtue of faith. If we so desire, we can live in his presence. Isn’t that amazing?

Through this faith, the Blessed Trinity began to live in us, in the center of our soul from which he floods our persons with divine life. Isn’t that marvelous?

Through faith, we can really unite ourselves to God in his indwelling presence.

Through faith, we can remain connected to God and continually draw divine power for holy living. We can truly say, “My strength and my courage is the LORD” (Is 12:2). Faith ties us into the power of God himself.

Through faith and baptism, we become a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). We actually become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). We receive new powers called theological virtues: faith, hope, and love.

Faith perfects the intellect so that it can know God. Hope perfects the memory so that it can possess God. Love perfects the will so it can love and become united to God.

Our new nature as children of God is also endowed with the moral virtues: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. These powers thoroughly permeate our human nature so that we can relate in a holy way to people and things in the world around us.

Prudence perfects our intellect to live wisely, to live holy lives and avoid occasions of sin.

Justice informs our wills so we can give God due honor, worship, and love, as well as give our neighbor what is his due.

Temperance informs our pleasure appetites so that we practice self-control and moderation.

Fortitude informs our aggressive appetites so that we are able to control anger or be courageous in facing hardship.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit complete our new nature as children of God. These 7 gifts become

the bases through which the Holy Spirit can act directly in us to effect super human acts. For example, the gift of wisdom enables us to see all things in God, and gives us a foretaste of heavenly life. The gift of fortitude can make us find joy in great suffering. If we would use these powers well, we could become saints.

The marvelous power of faith has changed many a sinner into a great saint; St. Paul was transformed from a hating, murderous persecutor of the Church to a person completely transfigured into Christ. As he put it, "... I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me ..." (Gal 2:20). St. Paul was continually conscience of being immersed "in Christ", an expression he used some 165 times in his epistles.

It was faith that transformed a spoiled child into one of the greatest modern day saints, St. Therese of Lisieux. Faith is the greatest force in the world because it connects us to God himself. What a joy it is for us to know that the power of faith, which Jesus speaks about, is available to us to bring about these stupendous results in our very persons.

What is the rest of the Gospel telling us? The servant comes in from plowing and tending sheep. Instead of the Master thanking him and inviting him to eat with him, he tells the servant to prepare something for him to eat and wait on him while he eats and drinks. The Master expresses no gratitude. What is this saying?

We are always in God's debt. We have never done enough for him. We can never pay him back for the love he has already shown us. "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." When we have done our best, we have only done our duty. We can never stop and rest in the belief that we have worked enough.

We ought not to think of ourselves too highly. We perform our daily tasks as God's faithful servants. As such, we have no claim to position, prestige, or even a "thank you". The clear conscience of having done our duty is reward enough.

Having carried out our tasks, we can only regard

our self as an unprofitable servant. There is no room for human boasting. Our attitude in doing God's will by fulfilling our duty must always be that of a humble servant.

It may be possible to satisfy the claims of law, but every lover knows that nothing can ever satisfy the claims of love. When we love, we have never done enough for the One we love.

If the Gospel also frequently speaks of a heavenly reward that God will bestow on us in return for our service (e.g. Mt 5:12; Mk 9:41; Lk 6:23), it is only because of the divine promise that our good works thereby possess a value. Without it, they would have none. The supernatural is beyond us. Our good works, along with Christian justification and salvation itself, are the manifestation of God's grace and mercy from which they flow.

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 17:11-19

Jesus continues his journey to Jerusalem where he will be taken up. Meanwhile, his experiences of life on the way there are preparing him. His love for others expresses itself in healing and teaching. These acts of virtue are opening his being more and more for glorification. As St. Luke told us earlier, "And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man" (Lk 2:52).

Ten lepers met Jesus and stood at a distance from him.

They were segregated from the rest of society to avoid contaminating them. They lived in groups for mutual assistance.

They raised their voices saying, "Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!"

These pitiful people, afflicted as they were with a contagious disease, were fully aware of their plight. They petitioned Jesus to have pity on them—their prayer was heard by Jesus. He was moved with pity and healed them.

We are reminded of our meeting Jesus at the beginning of Mass. We call out to Jesus also, saying, “Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.”

I wonder how often we say these words out of habit, without realizing how afflicted we are with the leprosy of sin and how much we need Jesus’ mercy and healing. Perhaps we often say words that do not spring from faith and a conscious and deep need for forgiveness and cleansing. Consequently, perhaps we utter these words, “Lord, have mercy,” ineffectively. We would need to be more in touch with our sinfulness and misery and pray these words with the belief that we reach Jesus who forgives and heals us.

Perhaps we are stagnant and not trying to grow in virtue and holiness. Maybe we are not conscious of serious sin. But what about the smaller sins and imperfections that come between God and us—sins of impatience, selfishness, anger, gossip, unforgiveness, stinginess, uncharitableness, laziness, wasting time, complaining because we refuse to accept the limitation of our finite, human existence, etc.? There is enough sinfulness in our lives to prompt us to say with deep sorrow, “Lord, have mercy.” This prayer, said in faith, will reach Jesus whose grace will help us come out of our miserable, sinful habits.

Jesus responded to the leper’s plea with, “Go show yourselves to the priests.” Jesus observed the Mosaic Law, which required that priests verify the cure of leprosy and authorized lepers to return to normal life.

This command of Jesus to the lepers to show themselves to the priests was also a way of testing their faith. Jesus also tests our faith when he tells us to show ourselves to the priests. Some people do not want to show themselves to the priest. They are too embarrassed to confess their sins to a man. They want to go directly to God. But Jesus continues to work and distribute his grace through weak, sinful human beings in his church. He tells the Apostles on Easter Sunday night, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and

said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained’” (Jn 20:21-23). But how can the priest forgive our sins unless we confess them?

The Gospel today tells us that, “As they were going they were cleansed.” The cure of the lepers is not instantaneous. Their willingness (and ours too) to trust Jesus and to carry out his instructions is presupposed. The cure that results from such obedience is effected at a distance. Jesus himself was not in the scene when it happened, so too when we obey Jesus and show ourselves to the priest in the sacrament of reconciliation. The invisible Jesus is present and works through the sacrament of Holy Orders to cleanse his people from the leprosy of sin: “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven.”

The Gospel today tells us, “And one of them, realizing he had been healed, returned, glorifying God in a loud voice; and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. He was a Samaritan.”

The Samaritan was of a different race and religion. Yet grace touched him. His experience foretells how grace overflowed from the chosen people to pour itself out on the nations of the world, the Gentiles.

You will recall that a few weeks ago the Samaritans refused to allow Jesus to pass through their territory on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. But he did not hold this against the leper. He did not hold a grudge.

It is also interesting to note that Jesus and Samaritans were enemies. But the disease and need for support banished pride from their hearts so that they accepted each other; they were then able to live in peace and mutual assistance.

It is noteworthy that only the Samaritan was disposed to see and fully understand what really happened. Was it not because of his humility? He did not belong to the true religion of the Old Testament established by Moses. He belonged to a heretical sect. He did not belong to the chosen race of the Jews—he was a mix-breed. He had

nothing to brag about—he was a nobody. He was not prone to be self-centered and proud. He had nothing to boast about. He was free to be illumined by God. He clearly saw that his healing came from Jesus, that God was present in Jesus, effecting his cure.

The Samaritan turns back. He sees that salvation comes from Jesus rather than the Law. He expresses his conviction outwardly. He falls upon his face at the feet of Jesus, the one in whom he sees God present and acting. His prostration expresses his utter nothingness and indebtedness, his total unworthiness of so great a gift. Not only is he cleansed from his leprosy; he has seen the true light and the one that God has sent to free human kind from the leprosy of sin and its power to divide people from each other.

He who felt so unworthy is filled with gratitude. He praised and “glorified God in a loud voice”. And he thanked Jesus.

But Jesus said in reply, “Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine? Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?”

Where were the other nine? They trusted and believed Jesus enough to obey him: they went off to show themselves to the priests. But their faith went only so far. They did not see what the Samaritan saw. They failed to see the presence and power of God in Jesus as the source of their healing, worthy of being honored and showed gratitude. What might have blinded and arrested their initial faith from seeing Jesus for what he truly was? Is it because they belonged to the chosen people and in their pride thought they deserved to be cleansed of their leprosy, and the healing was something that was due to them?

Perhaps what blinded the nine is the same obstacle that we place to our faith: they were so taken up with their newly found health and freedom, they forgot about Jesus. They were too absorbed in the gift to acknowledge the Giver.

There is a spiritual principle which says, “Joy in the creature causes withdrawal from God.” We get so caught up in self and sense enjoyment, we are

indisposed for seeing and enjoying higher spiritual realities and even God himself. Sense dominance prevents the Holy Spirit from activating the gifts of the Holy Spirit. For example, the gift of understanding, which enables us to see and penetrate deeply into truths, such as the divinity of Jesus, remains inoperative. We are incapable of seeing and enjoying the spiritual world.

The Samaritan was able to keep himself free from such creature absorption; thus through the gift of faith, enlightened by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, he had the light to see Jesus in all of his wonder; he then proceeded to give him due reverence and express his utter gratitude to Jesus for saving him from the dreaded and incapacitating disease of leprosy.

Last week, the Gospel taught us about the power of faith and the need for humble devotion to duty without ever looking for gratitude from the ones we serve. This week, we are being taught to be a grateful people; it is proper for us to thank those who serve us. We feel unworthy.

The virtue of justice inclines us to give everyone his or her due. The virtue of gratitude inclines us to thank those who do good to us: that is their due. Jesus is telling us today that it is fitting for us to give thanks to God.

In this regard, we must model ourselves on Jesus himself. The Last Supper captures for us Jesus’ grateful attitude toward the Father. The word Eucharist, which means thanks in Greek, takes in Jesus’ whole attitude towards the Father. His self-gift to the Father in sacrifice is an expression of thanksgiving to the Father for eternally begetting him. As Jesus eternally receives the divine life as Son from the Father, he reciprocates in an eternal act of gratitude and self-gift.

We also want to be like Jesus in a continual act of gratitude toward the Father; we too want to be a Eucharistic people, grateful to God for giving and sustaining us in life from moment to moment. A spirit of gratitude takes us out of ourselves and flings us to God; it brings us into communion with God. It keeps us living on a divine level. Gratitude

keeps us out of ourselves and living in God.

Self-absorption is a product of original and personal sin. Faith sees God and prompts gratitude for the life and grace he gives us. Gratitude is response to grace moving us out of our disordered self-love to live in God.

Gratitude prompts us to leap out of ourselves, out of the good health we enjoy, and the good food, vehicle, or entertainment, family, etc., and impels us toward God in joyful appreciation for his gifts.

We must not allow the good gifts we enjoy from God to absorb us unto themselves or unto ourselves as if we deserve them. We must be an insightful, grateful people like the Samaritan leper who was healed by Jesus, and never stop thanking him.

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 18:1-8

Jesus told his disciples a parable about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary.”

We need to persevere in praying even if our prayer seems ineffective. Jesus tells us that we must be like the widow who overcame the resistance of the unjust judge by her persistence. She kept on knocking on his door day in and day out. She wore him out. Inspired by her desperation, she persistently brought her plea before him. She never gave up—she did not lose heart, even if her prayer seemed ignored. Persistence was her only weapon. The unjust judge was forced to give in.

If the persistent pleading of the helpless widow triumphed over an unjust judge, how much more will the infinitely good and merciful God, our Father, listen to the persistent prayer of his children? If an unjust judge yields to the entreaties of a powerless widow, how much more will a gracious God?

“Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night? Will he

be slow to answer them? I tell you, he will see to it that justice is done for them speedily.”

God comes to our aid speedily, that is, when the right time has come. God waits until we are prepared. Patiently enduring the trial at hand is purifying. The suffering entailed spiritualizes our disordered passions and desires. The virtue of fortitude is strengthened. The image of God is perfected in us. While this transformation of our being is taking place, the Holy Spirit is increasingly given to us (Rom 5:3-5).

This transformation of our being into God-likeness (deification) is far more precious and important to us than the temporal favor we are requesting. The prayer we are engaged in is eternalizing us as well as beatifying us. Spiritualization disposes us for a deeper union with God. In this way, we begin to participate in the joy of God himself. But this process of sanctification takes time. So God must delay his coming. As St. Peter tells us, “In the Lord’s eyes, one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years are as one day” (2 Pet 3:8).

But God is faithful. You can count on him. He loves you more than you love yourself. But he is looking to satisfy your real needs rather than your wants. Your spiritual and eternal needs are far more important than those passing needs in which we place so much importance. God is more concerned about our eternal welfare. When a certain degree of sanctification and spiritualization has been achieved, then the opportune moment has arrived. God comes quickly. He speedily answers your prayer.

“But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Can people sustain their confidence in God while they carry their crosses to the darkness of Calvary? Will they remain faithful to Jesus during the long haul caused by the delay of his return? Without prayer, there certainly will be no faith. Prayer sustains faith: calling on God day and night. We will persevere in faith if we continue to exercise it through prayer.

The first reading helps us to understand that we need support in order to persevere in prayer. When Moses grew tired and stopped praying, his people began to lose the battle. He needed the support of others to maintain his courage to keep on praying. When Aaron and Hur supported him, he resumed his praying, which enabled his people to win the battle. Those who are in *Come, Lord Jesus!* have experienced that kind of support every week.

The second reading shows us the value of sacred Scripture. It is “capable of giving you wisdom and training in righteousness.” “Faith comes through hearing” (Rom 10:17) or reading the word of God. It stirs faith, which connects us to God. The word of God then nourishes our prayer life; it sustains us in communion with God; it nourishes our soul with spiritual substance as well. We are encouraged to spend some time daily reading and reflecting on the word of God, then using it to talk and listen to God. When you are making your holy hour for example, don’t just read. Pause frequently to look at Jesus with a loving receptive heart.

We must do like Jesus: he would rise early in the morning and go off in solitude to pray (Mk 1:35). Sometimes he spent the night in prayerful communion with God (Lk 6:12). Jesus made prayer a priority in his life. At times, he found it necessary to dismiss the crowds so he could have enough time to enjoy prayerful intimacy with his Father (Mk 6:46). He did not allow the work of his ministry to usurp his prayer time. He scheduled the time to pray. Prayer was a necessity for him.

Prayer is as necessary for us as breathing. Without oxygen, we cannot live a human life. So too without breathing in God through prayer, we cannot live the divine life—we would suffocate spiritually.

Starting the day with prayer equips and disposes us to spend the rest of the day in prayerful communion with God. All day long, we think of God and talk to him. We spontaneously thank him for the good things we enjoy. We ask his help in difficult times and his forgiveness when we fail

him. All day long, we live in communion with God.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that, “the life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of ... God and in communion with him” (CCC 2565). We are aware of God’s indwelling presence in us; we are attentive to him; we love him; we desire him. We long for him.

What is prayer?

The *Catechism* says, “Prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst and ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him” (CCC 2560). In prayer, our mutual longings and desire for each other meet.

“Our prayer of petition is a response to the plea of the living God ... a response of love to the thirst of the only Son of God (CCC 2561). The God of love pleads for our attention and love.

“God tirelessly calls each person to this mysterious encounter with himself. Prayer unfolds ... as a reciprocal call between God and man” (CCC 2591). He calls us and we respond with love. We call him and he responds with love.

“In prayer, the faithful God’s initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response” (CCC 2567). God’s love for us draws us, so we respond. That is what prayer is all about.

Finally, the *Catechism* teaches us that, “it is the heart that prays. If our heart is far from God, the words of prayer are in vain” (CCC 2562).

God says, “My son, give me your heart and let your eyes keep to my ways” (Prov 23:26).

Where is your heart? Is it with God? Does it belong to him? He deserves to be your great love. “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). He created us and continues to sustain us in existence from moment to moment. Every breath, every heartbeat is his gift to you. He deserves to be loved with your whole heart, soul, strength, and mind (Mt 22:37).

We must allow no person or thing to come between God and us. Our heart would no longer be free for communion with God. We would only be saying words. Our heart would not be in

them. We would not attain union with God in our prayer.

For our prayer to be effective we must have purity of heart and be committed to do God's will; such a disposition enables us to attain union with God.

The challenge to remain united to God in prayerfulness is not to allow our love for creatures to become disordered in such a way that we no longer love God with our whole heart. This would call for detachment from that creature. Otherwise the love for created things would block or stand in the way of our interpersonal relationship and communion with God.

Where is your heart? Is it primarily with God? Does your heart belong to God? Do you live in constant communion with him? If you do, then you are witnessing to the fact that your heart is with him.

THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Gospel: Lk 18:9-14

Jesus addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else.”

It may be possible, at least for certain brief periods of our lives, to keep the external letter of the law. But because of original sin, we are often, sooner or later, inclined to personal sin. The Pharisees were experts at keeping the external letter of the Law of Moses, but the fact that they “despised everyone else” immediately warns us of the shallowness or incompleteness of their holiness. Their external conformity with certain aspects of the Law was the extent of their holiness. Internally, however, they were oozing with sin.

Their ability to keep certain aspects of the letter of the Law of Moses brought them to the conclusion that they were better than others. This led them to despise everyone else. To despise means to look down on with contempt or aversion; to condemn implies a vehement condemnation of a person. Surely such an attitude is a serious sin

against love for others. Leviticus 19:18 says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This is one instance, for example, that the Pharisees did not keep the whole Law.

We learn from this that the ability to keep the Law of God must come from God. God is above us. He is supernatural. To live his kind of life requires a union with him and a holy dependence on him. This requires the virtue of humility, which gives us a sense of our own lowliness and poverty of being. This virtue inclines us to a holy dependence on God for everything.

“What do you possess that you have not received? But if you have received it, why are you boasting as if you did not receive it” (1 Cor 4:7)?

Pride, on the other hand, is undue self-exaltation. This capital sin inclines us to be self-centered and independent of God. It can contaminate all of our good work. Pride also blinds us to our sins and weaknesses.

An example of how pride blinded the Pharisees from seeing their sins can be found in St. Matthew's gospel, Chapter 23. Jesus exposes their sins; here are some examples in the form of quotes:

“All their works are performed to be seen.”

“They love places of honor.”

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. [A hypocrite is a person who puts on a false appearance of virtue or religion.] You pay tithes of mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier things of the law: judgment and mercy and fidelity ...”

“You cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of plunder and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisees, cleanse first the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may be clean.”

“You are like white washed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but the inside are full of dead men's bones and every kind of filth. Even so, on the outside you appear righteous, but inside

you are filled with hypocrisy and evil-doing.”

So the Pharisees were not without sin, as they thought they were. They had a very narrow and imperfect understanding of what true holiness consists. Here, we are reminded to remove the beam from our own eye before we can see clearly the speck in our brother’s eye (see Mt 7:3-5).

In the Gospel this week, Jesus continues to teach us about prayer. Last week, Jesus told us about “the necessity . . . to pray always without becoming weary”. This week, Jesus is teaching us about the attitude we ought to have when we go to prayer. He does this by telling the parable of “two people [who] went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector.”

The Pharisee’s prayer is boastful and self-congratulatory. He is very self-centered as he compares himself to others. He tells God how good, how perfect he is. He does much more than the Law requires. For example, instead of fasting once a year, on the Day of Atonement, he fasts twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays! That means no food or drink—not even water—from sunrise to sunset. That’s quite a feat in that hot, dry country. The Pharisee is very full of himself; he is blind to his own sinfulness, such as judging and condemning others without really knowing their hearts. So the Pharisee leaves the temple with the same burden of sins that he came with. He left without God or his grace of justification that would have made him right with God. You can see why self-knowledge is of paramount importance.

Our conscience echoes back to us whether we are in conformity with the will or law of God or not. We must be sensitive to the least knowledge of wrongdoing and repent. We must grieve over the least sin and ask God’s forgiveness. We pray for the grace to overcome our weakness. If our contrition is perfect, our hearts are totally cleansed so that no moral contamination or stain remains. St. Therese told her sister, Celine, that she grieved over the least sin or imperfection that she committed. She felt that such perfect

contrition cleansed her entirely from any residue of sin so that if she died then, she would not be detained in purgatory.

In certain cases of more serious sin, however, we may have to spend a longer time through prayer and penance to root out the weakness or inclination to sin.

The Pharisee’s prayerful boasting was made possible by comparing himself to others. But each has his own grace. When we see others sin, we need to say, “There go I but for the grace of God.” It is God’s grace that sustains us in living holy lives, in remaining right with God and his law: what is called righteousness. We do not know what graces other people have. That is between them and God. Therefore, judging others is off limits for us.

Self-knowledge must come from our consciences enlightened by the word or law of God as taught us by the teaching authority of the Church called the Magisterium. That is why daily meditation on the word of God is so important. We are thus sensitized daily to the will of God so we can live in conformity with his will and in unity with him.

From this we can see why our Holy Father Pope John Paul II is so strong in advocating *Lectio Divina*. In this way, we (1) read Holy Scripture, pause, and (2) reflect on the meaning of the passage and apply it to our lives. (3) Then we pray for the grace to live according to that word. (4) Finally, with the knowledge acquired from this experience, we remain in loving attentiveness to God. We stay in this heart-to-heart communion with God as long as we can. Then when we lose touch with the presence of God, we start the whole process of reading, reflecting, relating to God in conversation, and then again remain in loving attentiveness. Thus, not only do we get to know ourselves in our strengths and weaknesses, but also we receive the grace to continue living in union with God as well as overcome our sins and weaknesses.

“But the tax collector stood off at a distance and

would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, ‘O God, be merciful to me a sinner.’” And Jesus tells us, “He went home justified.”

Who were the tax collectors and why did they have such a bad reputation? Tax collectors, also called publicans, collected the taxes imposed by the Roman government on the Jews. These collectors were Jews. The Roman system of getting in their taxes made it a very profitable occupation for the collector. So long as he gave the Romans the sum imposed on a district, he could collect as much as he was able. This led to many tax collectors acting very unjustly. We can see why they were considered crooks.

But we can never underestimate the power of God’s grace working through a person’s conscience. A well-formed conscience will smart at the least deviation from God’s will. But even a somewhat hardened conscience can be affected by the power of God’s grace. Consequently, these tax collectors flocked to hear both John the Baptist (Lk 3:12) and Jesus as they preached the arrival of the Kingdom of God. Many were converted.

Again and again in St. Luke’s gospel, normal expectations and deep-seated prejudices are turned upside down. Tax collectors will eagerly respond to Jesus’ preaching whereas Pharisees remained aloof (Lk 5:27; 29-30; 15:1; 19:2).

The Gospel today exemplifies a repentant tax collector. He feels unworthy even to raise his eyes to heaven where God lives. His penitential demeanor moves him to strike his breast as a sign of guilt and repentance (just as we do when we pray the “I confess...”). He admits his sinfulness and begs God’s mercy and forgiveness. Jesus tells us that he went home justified, made right with God.

The same thing happens to us when we approach God with truly sorrowful hearts that deeply regret our sins and want to change. This is true in the liturgy at the beginning of Mass, but especially in the sacrament of reconciliation. All of our sins are taken away. We begin life again with a clean slate, charged with God’s grace enabling us to reform our lives.

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Gospel: Lk 19:1-10

We are astonished at the power of Jesus’ electrifying presence. He changes even hardened sinners into saints. This is the hope given us today.

The Gospel begins with: “Zacchaeus ... a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man, was seeking to see who Jesus was...” Is that true of you? Are you seeking to see Jesus, for example, through a deepening prayer life and purity of heart?

Last week we saw that being a tax collector was identified by the people as being a crook. And yet God’s mercy is so powerful that it enabled the publican to see his sinfulness and humbly beg God’s mercy when he went to pray. Grace moved him to depend entirely on God’s mercy for salvation. Such complete contrition and repentance opened the publican to be overwhelmed with the grace of justification: In other words, his sins were forgiven and he was made right with God again. We learned that that is how we also must approach God in the penitential rite at the beginning of Mass or in the sacrament of Penance /Reconciliation.

Today we see the power of grace affecting another tax collector—only he is the chief tax collector in the area to whom other publicans were accountable to bring in the money taken from the people. So he “enjoyed” a double notoriety among the people. His occupation brought him great profit. He was avaricious, money-hungry; and already a wealthy man. And we recall Jesus’ words about the danger of money, which he called the “mammon of iniquity”: wealth tends to take hold of our heart and rob it of devotion from God to center it on itself.

But God’s love for each helpless sinner and his mercy are infinite. The surge of grace from God’s overflowing mercy demolishes all resisting barriers. We see this happening to Zacchaeus. His conscience makes him uneasy with his unhappy

condition. However useful money can be—and we understand that a certain amount is necessary for living—it is still only a thing. It is impersonal. It does not satisfy our spiritual nature as persons. We yearn to relate in love to an infinite person, God, for whom we were made. Only he can satisfy our basic personal, spiritual needs.

This is a moment when Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, was spiritually vulnerable. And Jesus knew it! A sign of Zacchaeus' spiritual awakening was his overcoming the obstacle of the crowd. They prevented him from seeing Jesus. Everyone who wants to see Jesus must overcome the obstacle of the crowd. They have other interests. So Zacchaeus, being a short fellow, shook off any human respect, the fear of what people might think of him, or how such a feat might seem undignified; so he proceeded to climb a sycamore tree. Thus he would be able "to see Jesus who was about to pass that way".

How is the crowd preventing you from seeing Jesus? Is it because they take too much of your time? Then you would need to withdraw so you could make being with Jesus a priority. Is the crowd keeping you from Jesus because of worldly entertainment or wasting your time in idle gossip or some form of sinful activity? Don't stay down there! Follow your reprimanding conscience. Climb up higher for fresh spiritual air where you can see Jesus and enjoy his company. Jesus will recognize you and call you by name. He loves you and wants to be with you. He will flood your heart with divine grace and give you an experience of heavenly life; he will create in your heart an atmosphere favorable to his joyful presence.

Our psalm response tells us, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. The Lord is good to all and compassionate toward all his works" (Ps 145).

The first reading from the book of wisdom also tells us, speaking to God, "But you have mercy on all... you overlook the sins of people that they may repent. For you love all things that are and loath nothing that you have made ... you spare all things, because they are yours, O LORD and

lover of souls, for your imperishable spirit is in all things! Therefore you rebuke offenders little by little, warn them, and remind them of the sins they are committing, that they may abandon their wickedness and believe in you, O LORD!"

God's mercy and grace gently rebuking the sinner's heart for his sins and urging him to abandon his wickedness gives us some understanding of what must have been taking place in Zacchaeus. "Jesus looked up and said, 'Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.'"

I believe that Jesus knew Zacchaeus's name because he was already living in his heart. That is why he can invite himself to go and stay in Zacchaeus's house as his friend.

Each of us is invited to this opportunity to be with Jesus. He says to us, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him and he with me" (Rev 3:20).

Jesus has a great desire to live in our heart: "Today I must stay at your house," he says. We must be like Zacchaeus: "He came down quickly and received him with joy."

In Jesus, Zacchaeus found a greater treasure than he owned. Grace gives him a supernatural experience superior to all earthly goods. In Jesus, Zacchaeus experiences a whole new world expressed as JOY. Jesus is the God-Man. God is fully present in him. To experience Jesus is to experience God! There he found something better than what he was living for. Money and possessions had left him lonely, sad, and empty. At last, Zacchaeus has found, in his seeking, The Sweet Mystery of Life—Jesus, the Christ, God's anointed one. All he had to do was to open his heart to enter.

But the people were critical and quick to find fault. "They began to grumble." They could not bring themselves to celebrate the glory of God and the power of his grace and merciful love. They could not believe that these two could mix: Jesus, the holy one of God, and the chief tax

collector, that wicked extortioner and crook! But they underestimated the power of grace radiating from the majestic person of the Christ.

As evidence of his conversion, “Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, ‘Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over.’”

Zacchaeus demonstrates the effects of Messianic salvation. In Jesus the Messiah, he found something better than money and the things it can buy. In Jesus, he also found the grace to detach himself from the strangle hold that wealth, up to this time, had on him.

“And Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham.’” If sin had defaced his image as a son of Abraham and he had lost his dignity, now it has all been restored. “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.”

We must realize that the same Jesus that Zacchaeus met awaits us in the Holy Eucharist. Every time we receive him worthily in Holy Communion, the fullness of grace that struck Zacchaeus impacts us; it drives us to conversion and to open our hearts in repentance to receive Jesus ever more worthily. His grace urges us to let go of any impediment, any resistance to his will. He would have us let go of anything we’re holding on to that is incompatible with his holy presence.

Moreover, Jesus invites us to come and spend some time each day visiting with him in the tabernacle where he lives fully incarnate. There, in this visit, he will flood your heart with the same joyful presence, which inundated Zacchaeus’s heart.

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 20:27-38

Today the word of God fills us with the hope of eternal life: The readings assure us of immortality; we will pass through death, retaining our personal individuality; we

will continue to live as disembodied spirits, like angels, until our bodies rejoin them in the resurrection of the body when Jesus returns at the end of time.

We will now review the Scriptures more specifically to confirm our belief in immortality and the resurrection of the body.

The second book of Maccabees was written about 124 years before Christ. It treats of the events that occurred from 180 to 161 B.C. We are told of the martyrdom of seven brothers and their mother. Their strong faith, which united them to God, sustained them in the love of God. They preferred to die rather than break a commandment of the Law of God.

Their faith is expressed by one of the brothers: “We are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors.” The same brother goes on to express his belief in the resurrection of the body: “You are depriving us of this present life, but the King of the world will raise us up to live again forever.” Another brother put out his tongue and held out his hands in obedience to his torturers. He said, “It was from Heaven that I received these; for the sake of his laws I disdain them; from him I hope to receive them again.”

“Even the king and his attendants marveled at the young man’s courage, because he regarded his sufferings as nothing.”

Here we see the marvelous power of faith that connects us to God drawing fortitude from him to be able to endure horrendous suffering, even cheerfully.

Finally, the reading today presents us with another brother’s heroic testimony: “It is my choice to die at the hands of men with the God-given hope of being restored to life by him; but for you, there will be no resurrection to life.”

He could say this to his cruel persecutors because their hatred, turned to violent and fatal injury, proved them to be disconnected to the God of love who alone is the source of immortality.

I encourage you to read Second Maccabees, chapter 7 for the full account of the martyrdom of the seven brothers and their mother. If you also read chapter 6, verse 18 and following, you will see how the power of grace sustained a 90-year old man named Eleazar to be faithful to God. He preferred to die rather than sin. This is what he said, “The LORD in his holy knowledge knows full well that, although I could have escaped death, I am not only enduring terrible pain in my body from this scourging, but also suffering it with joy in my soul because of my devotion to him” (2 Mac 6:30). From this we can see why our second reading tells us, “May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the endurance of Christ.” Through our daily suffering, patiently endured, we share in the passion of Christ.

We can apply the last verse of our psalm response to one who is dying: “But I in justice shall behold your face; on waking I shall be content in your presence.”

Passing through death is like awaking from sleep. We awake to the sight of God; we are ushered into his presence and the fullness of a new human life informed and elevated with divine life; seeing God face-to-face means that the center of your being, spirit, experiences the indwelling God to a supreme degree because we share his divinity; we experience living the life of the Blessed Trinity; the sight of God is primarily an intellectual one of spirit-to-spirit knowledge; we are given an experiential knowledge of God himself; God pervades our whole being from the center of our soul where we experience him most keenly. But this knowledge includes the experience of God permeating our whole body-persons. Our spiritualized body knows him through experiencing his presence throughout our resurrected being.

When we look at the Gospel of today however, we find that the “Sadducees ... deny that there is a resurrection.” Their reason for this is that they limited themselves to the Torah, the Law, which consists of the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers,

and Deuteronomy. They believed that there was no mention of resurrection in these books.

The case the Sadducees presented to Jesus is intended to show the absurdity of belief in the resurrection. They cite the law of the levirate based on Deuteronomy 25:5-6: “If someone’s brother dies leaving a wife but no child, his brother must take the wife and raise up descendants for his brother.” This was done to preserve the name and memory of the man; this was also meant to prevent the family property from being alienated through marriage outside the clan.

For the Sadducees, the levirate law made belief in the resurrection ridiculous because if there is resurrection, there would be struggles in heaven over women inherited by brothers.

Jesus responds with, “The children of this age marry and remarry; but those who are deemed worthy to attain to the coming age and to the resurrection of the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. They can no longer die, for they are like angels; and they are the children of God because they are the ones who will rise.”

Jesus’ answer attacks the basic premise of the Sadducees: They thought that the life of the age to come was a continuation of this life and therefore the need for human propagation lest it die out. But they had it all wrong. We pass through death to a totally new mode of existence.

St. Paul tells us that the risen body is incorruptible, glorious, powerful, and spiritual (1 Cor 15:42-43). All bodily defects will be eliminated. We can no longer suffer or die. We are incorruptible, indestructible, and immortal—like angels.

Angels are pure spirits; but our bodies, once reunited to our souls, will be spiritualized. Our spirit will totally dominate our bodies, even as Jesus’ resurrected body was so spiritual, he could pass through closed doors and walls.

Our spirit is united to God through love; he sustains us in life; we enjoy loving communion with God through whom we receive an unbroken stream of divine life. Food and drink are no

longer necessary: these are weak and corruptible. God himself is our nourishment and sustenance. We are “children of God”, continuously born of God from moment to moment. We enjoy the ecstasy of divine life unceasingly. God himself is our supreme JOY and LIFE.

Jesus demolishes his would-be ridiculers with one final blow. He does this by quoting Exodus 3:2, a passage that they accepted as inspired by God. Here is the passage: “That the dead will rise even Moses made known in the passage about the bush, when he called ‘Lord’ the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; and he is not God of the dead, but the living, for to him all are alive.”

What is this passage saying? God identified himself to Moses as the God of the patriarchs, who were long since dead—then they must be living in some sense, for this identification not only shows that “the dead are raised”, but even that Yahweh is a God of the living, not of the dead; and furthermore, that “to him they are all alive.” Only living people can have a God, and therefore Yahweh’s promise to the patriarchs, that he is their God, requires that he maintain them in life.

If God is immortal, then those he loves and relates to are also immortal. Their spirit-to-spirit union with God perdures through the disintegration of the body. The divine life sustains their spirits, which will be reunited with their glorified bodies at the general resurrection. In other words, these patriarchs were physically dead but not spiritually dead. They lived on in God because of their immortal souls. They only awaited the resurrection of their bodies.

Here is another way of saying it: God speaks even now of himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who died centuries ago. He identified himself in relation to them, and because of their relation to him, the living God, they too are alive.

That Yahweh is God of the patriarchs implies that his relationship with them is everlasting

and personal. Abraham was God’s friend. While human beings may lose friends by death, God does not. It therefore follows that the dead are living and will one day share in the resurrection life that the Messiah will inaugurate.

Christians, who are not given in marriage in this life, model for the Church what life will be like in heaven, where the resurrected will neither marry nor be given in marriage.

Those who practice celibacy like Jesus are already anticipating heavenly living. They are sustained in this holy life by the powerful presence and love of God. He is enough for them. His all-pervading love keeps them happy. The gifts of the Holy Spirit give them a foretaste of the heavenly life. Their union with God foreshadows the divine nuptials in heaven, when God will be all in all (see 1 Cor 15:28).

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Lk 21:5-19

As we come to the end of the Church year, we are confronted today with judgment day. The end is coming and the Church urges us to prepare to face God and be judged. Human life on earth is not forever. It will come to an end, perhaps even to an abrupt end. The state of our soul at death will determine how we will spend the rest of our existence—our whole eternity. If we die as God’s friends in the state of grace, we will share God’s own heavenly beatitude, his divine happiness forever. If we die as God’s enemies in the state of mortal sin, we will spend eternity separated from God, suffering the pain of loss forever. This separation from God, for whom we were created and who alone can fulfill our deepest longings, will inflict excruciating pain on our miserable, deprived self; meanwhile, our remorseful conscience will not allow us one moment of peace, as it continuously and endlessly blames us for losing forever the happiness for which we were made—and all for cheap pleasure and doing our own selfish will instead of the will of God as directed by our holy Catholic faith.

In the first reading, the prophet Malachi gives us a severe warning: “Lo, the day is coming, blazing like an oven, when all the proud and all evildoers will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire, leaving them neither root nor branch. ...”

The phrase, “the day,” mentioned twice, is the day of the Lord, of judgment, when every evildoer will be condemned and removed from the company of those who are right with God; they will be thoroughly punished for their wickedness and disobedience to God.

“But for you who fear my name,” that is, those who love, reverence and obey God, “there will arise the sun of justice with its healing rays.”

God’s radiant presence will completely heal his faithful children from all the wounds of sin. All weaknesses of character will be wiped out and replaced with loving dispositions and strength for doing good. The beauty of each person will stand out, free from all personal defects of character. Each will image God in his or her own particular loveliness, radiating God’s own holiness and goodness.

An example of the healing rays of the “sun of justice” can be seen when Jesus, in his glorified state, met the enraged Saul who consented to the murder of St. Stephen (see Acts 7:58; 8:1). St. Matthew tells us that “[Jesus’] face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light” (Mt 17:2), giving us a preview of his glory. It is as the radiant Son of God that Jesus encountered Saul. We are told “a great light from the sky suddenly shone around [Saul]” (Acts 22:60) who fell to the ground from its impact. Jesus’ healing rays penetrated the inner depths of Saul’s being with the purity of his divinity and transformed him into St. Paul. The angry and murderous Saul became that peaceful and self-given St. Paul whose love for Jesus and his saving grace drove him to the ends of the earth to spread that contagious, healing love.

It is interesting to note what Saul was told as part of his healing process: “The God of our fathers

long ago designated you to know his will, to look upon the Just One, and to hear the sound of his voice (Acts 22:14).

The marvel of the mystery of the Incarnation is that this same “sun of justice”, Jesus himself, continues to live and shine in and among us. We must be conscious of Jesus’ continuing presence and availability to us in the Holy Eucharist. We need to expose our wounds of sin to his healing rays in the Blessed Sacrament. We too must spend some time gazing upon Jesus like Saul, so we can be healed and changed from sinner to saint.

Today’s Gospel tells us, “While some people were speaking about how the temple was adorned with costly stones and votive offerings, Jesus said, ‘All that you see here—the days will come when there will not be left a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down.’”

What a shocking statement! For the temple appeared to be indestructible. It was one of the known wonders of the world. It was built of hard, white stones, each about 36 feet long, 12 feet high, and 18 feet wide. The pillars of the porches were 40 feet high, one single block of stone. The beauty and elegance of the temple were awesome. The gate of the temple was completely overlaid with gold, with solid gold vines above it from which hung grape clusters as tall as a man.

The outward face of the temple was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight. It reflected the sun in such fiery splendor that onlookers were forced to turn their eyes away. The temple appeared at a distance like a mountain brilliantly covered with snow.

For the Jew, it was unthinkable that the glory of the temple should be completely demolished. And yet, this astonishing edifice, which was begun in 19 BC and completed in 64 AD (83 years), was utterly destroyed in 70 AD by the invading Roman army—just as Jesus predicted.

This whole section of the Gospel today is about the end of Jerusalem and the temple. The various signs that Jesus gave: wars, uprisings, natural catastrophes, omens in the sky, and persecutions

anticipated the end of Jerusalem, the temple, and the Old Testament world.

Jesus stressed to his followers that they must expect to suffer persecution if they are true to his Gospel. Witnessing a holy life aggravates and makes sinners uncomfortable. If you are faithful to Jesus and his words, you can expect to be ridiculed and hated.

Although some will be put to death for their faith, not a hair on their head will be destroyed. In other words, they will pass through death unscathed, unharmed. “By your perseverance (that is, steadfast endurance) you will secure your lives.”

Jesus witnessed the truth by his life. He preferred to die than to be unfaithful to the truth. By his adherence to the truth, he overcame death and attained the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. The truth is precious and more powerful than death. We also, like Jesus, must be faithful to the truth of the Gospel in our lives. By such living, we too are assured resurrection and eternal life. We pray for the grace to be strong so that we too would prefer to die rather than sin or not live according to the truth as presented by our holy Catholic faith.

As we reflect upon the magnificent temple in the city of Jerusalem and its total destruction, Holy Scripture reminds us, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? [T]he temple of God, which you are, is holy” (1 Cor 3:16-17).

The chosen people were severely judged because they rejected Jesus and his teachings. They lived according to the flesh rather than the spirit. The same thing will happen to you if you ignore Jesus, the Son of God, and fail to live by his Gospel. You have a decision to make for or against Jesus who teaches us a higher way of life and joy. We pray that today will be a turning point in your life in order to avoid utter destruction. Holy Scripture urges you: “[P]ut away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds,

and put on the new self, created in God’s way in righteousness and holiness of truth” (Eph 4:22-24).

The second reading tells us that the people of Thessalonica were expecting the Lord to return at any moment. Some felt so sure he would appear any second that they quit their jobs. They began to “act in a disorderly way”. St. Paul urged such people to get back to work. Those who were unwilling to work must not eat! Instead of being busy bodies minding other people’s business, they must work quietly and earn their own living.

Keeping ourselves busy is a good way to prepare for judgment day. Work is healthy for both mind and body. God told Adam to “cultivate and care for” the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:15). This command was given to Adam before he sinned. Work is not a punishment, but a holy way of discipline. Work develops our bodies and minds. Through work, we cooperate with God in creativity. God makes the tree while man develops it further into valuable building material for houses, cabinets, tables, and chairs. Work causes us to develop strength, self-control, and patient endurance. Work requires that we practice spirit assertiveness to accomplish it. It makes us develop our virtues, gifts, and talents. We share the profit of our work with family. When we work, we do God’s will. We keep ourselves from evildoing or idleness. We devote ourselves to doing good. Work is an effective way to keep ourselves holy for God. We contemplate him as our hands are busy at work. We follow St. Paul’s advice and “work quietly”. We avoid harsh, distracting sounds and idle talk so we can work in communion with God. We keep our hearts and minds free for an elevated conversation, a heart-to-heart communion with God, who lives in us. What a marvelous way to keep ourselves holy as we await the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ!

THE SOLEMNITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST THE KING

Gospel: Lk 23:35-43

Today we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. But the Gospel presents him hanging on the cross, being crucified between two criminals. He emptied himself of all human glory. He was humbled to the ultimate degree. “The rulers sneered at [Jesus]. ... The soldiers jeered at him ... [and] one of the criminals hanging there reviled [him].” However, our entrance antiphon says, “The Lamb who was slain is worthy to receive strength and divinity, wisdom and power and honor: to him be glory and power forever.”

It is because Christ suffered on the cross out of love and obedience to his Father that he attained the glory of kingship through the power of the resurrection.

If he refused to come down from the cross, it was because he was the King of love. He loved us more than himself. He valued suffering for the redemption of the world above his own immediate well-being. Everyone wanted Jesus to save himself by coming down from the cross. But Jesus had already advised his followers to do what he himself would do: “Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Lk 9:24). Jesus refused to descend from the cross. His self-sacrificing love had a better salvation in mind, for himself and the multitude who would follow him. Willingly enduring the cross for love of his Father and us, he will restore immortality and eternal happiness.

“Above him there was an inscription that read, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’” In other words, it was through the very sufferings that he endured that Jesus was made king and Messiah. The Jews did not realize that Jesus was the suffering servant of Yahweh described by the prophet Isaiah. It is through his sufferings that he will save his people and be glorified.

Jesus faced the cross; the very thing we fear and run away from is what Jesus embraced. Crowned with thorns, he reigns enthroned on

the cross on which he was crucified. He beckons us to remain on the cross of life with him. Jesus shows us the way to attain glory and kingship. He urges us to embrace the mystery of the cross, saying: “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23). For the cross is God’s secret and mysterious instrument and process of spiritualization and glorification of the flesh. Suffering forces us to rise, to live on the level of spirit. It burns out and purifies the sinful tendencies imbedded in the flesh of our human nature (see 1 Pt 4:1).

St. Paul tells us, “It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Accepted suffering prepares us for the spiritual kingdom.

Pope John Paul II explains, “Christ has overcome the world definitively by his resurrection. Yet, because of the relationship between the resurrection and his passion and death, he has at the same time overcome the world by his suffering. Yes, suffering has been singularly present in that victory over the world, which was manifested in the resurrection. Christ retains in his risen body the marks of the wounds of the cross in his hands, feet and side. Through the resurrection, he manifests the victorious power of suffering, and he wishes to imbue with the conviction of this power the hearts of those whom he chose. ...” (*On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, No. 25)

One of the criminals verbally abused Jesus and was trying to get Jesus to save them from their horrible fate. He was unable to face the truth about himself; he was still trying to flee accountability and justice; he was unwilling to listen to his hardened conscience, which condemns wrongdoing.

The other criminal, however, was rebuking him; he faced the truth about himself; he accepted just punishment for his sins, but delicately prayed to Jesus for consideration and mercy.

The fruitfulness of Jesus’ suffering can already be seen. This criminal is repenting. He is being given

the light of faith to see Jesus as Messianic King who is about to enter into his kingdom—for that is what the inscription over the cross stated, “This is the King of the Jews.” This criminal was so well disposed he could see the majesty of Jesus shining through his virtuous, patient endurance; he conducted himself as the innocent Lamb of God who opened not his mouth in complaint (see Is 53:7).

In response to his request, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” Jesus assured him, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Salvation is a free gift received by faith in Jesus who shows us mercy.

The repentant criminal will be with Jesus who still wants to have table fellowship with repentant sinners. All we have to do is admit the truth: humbly and sorrowfully acknowledge that we are sinners as we turn to Jesus to receive his mercy.

The assurance of Paradise that Jesus gave the repentant criminal hints at the return to the original creation and eating of the fruit of the tree of life and immortality. The gates of Paradise are about to be reopened through the obedience and faith of the New Adam. There, the repentant thief will experience the happiness and eternal life we were all originally meant to enjoy and more.

Let us now review the second reading to get a better understanding of Jesus our king and the salvation that he brings.

“Let us give thanks to the Father. ...” God the Father is the originator of our salvation “who has made us fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light.” We must live in continuous gratitude toward him.

It is the power of God, working through Christ, that has purified our hearts from sin so that we could participate with the angels and saints in the enjoyment of the abiding presence of God and the riches of his kingdom. Our purified hearts live in the light of God. The interior illumination of our whole being gives us an experiential knowledge of God’s indwelling presence as well as the ability to see God in all of his new, heavenly creation.

“He delivered us from the power of darkness. ...” It is God himself and his marvelous power, working through Christ and the Holy Spirit, that has freed us from the interior darkness of sin and its oppressiveness. The darkness of evil separated us from the joyful, liberating light of God’s presence.

“And transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son ...” We have been brought into the presence of God himself through the redemption of Jesus. The risen Jesus is totally saturated with the divine presence with which he has been glorified. Jesus’ Kingdom is the total reign or rule of God, who becomes all-in-all of us. We participate in his glory, which is his kingdom; all of us united together enjoy the riches of his glory.

“His beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Jesus won us back for God and freed us from our sins by his sacrificial death. He took our sins away and forgave us in his great love for us.

Now let us look at the remaining part of the epistle for a deeper insight of the kingship of Jesus.

He is the image of the invisible God. ...” Jesus images God for us in the flesh. He is the divinity translated into human form. He is the New Adam, who walks with us, demonstrating for us what a true son of God is like. That is why we must look very carefully at Jesus in daily meditation so we can learn how a Son of God behaves and acts in daily life. We can now contemplate the invisible God alive and made visible in Jesus.

“He is ... the firstborn of all creation.” He is the first among many who will share the image of God. Jesus is head of the new creation in grace, those who live in the presence of God, who do his will and live in loving communion with God and all his beloved children. Jesus has been commissioned to rule over all the earth. His is in a position of supremacy, authority, and power over all creation.

“For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth...” Jesus is the center of harmony and unity in which the universe was created. God

looked upon Jesus' perfections and beauty when he created the world, which reflects his glory. It is through the wisdom and power of the Son that the Father created the world—"all things in heaven and on earth"—even the angels take their existence and beauty from the Son: "the visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominations or principalities or powers." Who are these? These are names given to various classes of angels. Even the invisible angelic beings, who were thought to control the world, were created through the Son who is the wisdom of God. See the greatness of our humble King!

"All things were created through him and for him." The whole universe finds its goal and perfection in Christ. He is the complete fulfillment of all of our desires and longings. He perfects our being with his divinity and its infinite perfections.

"He is before all things ..." Jesus, the Son, enjoys a prior existence, importance, and excellence over all of creation, including the angelic world.

"And in him all things hold together." Our humble Jesus is also God. He is the incarnate wisdom of God. He is the cohesive power that holds the universe together, "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

"He is the head of the body, the church." Jesus, our King, is the source of authority and vitality for the Church. He rules and guides it through the Holy Spirit.

"He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead. ..." Christ is the nucleus of a redeemed humanity. He is the beginning of a new creation. His resurrection is the cause of the resurrection of those who follow him.

"That in all things he himself might be pre-eminent." There is no one before him. Our humble king is second to none. His excellence towers over all. We must look beyond the humble appearance of the human Jesus to see his divine stature to really understand who he is: the God-Man.

"For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell. ..." The very fullness of God himself dwells in Jesus: his presence, divinity and wisdom are in Christ who shares this fullness with the church, which in turn affects all of humanity.

"And through him to reconcile all things for him. ..." All creation must be restored to God. There must be no more enmities. Redemption and forgiveness bring about reconciliation, unity, and love.

... "Making peace by the blood of his cross through him, whether those on earth or those in heaven." It is the sacrifice of Jesus that has restored peace to the world. The emphasis here is the cosmic effect of God's power working in Christ and in the Church.

"Behold your King."

SPECIAL FEASTS BEGIN ON NEXT PAGE.

FEBRUARY 2 – THE PRESENTATION OF THE LORD

Gospel: Lk 2:22-32

Our Gospel begins with these words: “When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, just as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord,’ and to offer the sacrifice of ‘a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,’ in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord”.

According to the Law of Moses (Lev 12:2-4), a woman who gave birth to a son must go through a ceremony of legal purification forty days after the birth. The law also stated that every first-born male belonged to God (Ex 13:2, 12-15). But he could be redeemed for five silver shekels (Num 18:16). All of this took place at the Temple in Jerusalem. We meditate on this event in the fourth Joyful Mystery of the Rosary. Jesus already belonged totally to God, his Father. But the Holy Family fulfilled the law in obedience to God. This perfect obedience reminds us of Jesus’ desire to be baptized by John, although he was sinless, in order to fulfill all righteousness, i.e. all the details of God’s will and plan for him (Mt 3:13-15).

Mary and Joseph presented the offering of the poor instead of a year old lamb: one bird was for a holocaust of adoration; the other as a sin offering (Lev 12:6-8; 5:7-10). They had no sin, but wanted to fulfill the law and give good example.

“Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the holy Spirit was upon him” (25).

Simeon awaited with longing for the Messianic age, “the consolation of Israel”. This was the time when many believed that God would deliver his people from Gentile or Roman rule. God, they hoped, would reestablish the glorious kingdom of David in Jerusalem (Lk 1:71; 2:38).

This understanding needed to be corrected and perfected with a more spiritual notion. Whatever the real truth was, Simeon experienced it in this exciting moment. At last it had come! It fulfilled his whole life’s waiting. “... the holy Spirit was upon him ...”: he did not have to know the details. The consolation he experienced in the Holy Spirit was enough to fill him with supreme joy.

“It had been revealed to him by the holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord” (26).

Through a deep prayer life, the Holy Spirit revealed in Simeon’s heart that he would actually see the Messiah. His dedication to worship the Lord in the temple in solitude and prayer disposed him to receive these divine intuitions.

“He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, he took him into his arms and blessed God... ”

Fully possessed and led by the Spirit into the temple (Compare Rom 8:14), Simeon awaited that graced moment. What he had been waiting for all these years was finally arriving. When Mary and Joseph came into the temple with the Child Jesus, the Holy Spirit enlightened the old man’s understanding that this child was truly God’s anointed one. There was something so very special about this child. The glory of God shined through his human features: the light in his eyes, the glow in his smile, the radiance of his being. And his parents were so filled with holy peace and joy.

Simeon could not resist the impulse to take the child in his arms and press him to his bosom. He received a most powerful grace in this personal encounter with this infant Messiah, God’s anointed one. That anointing spilled over and graced the holy man with holy joy. So he broke out in thanksgiving and praise of God, saying, “Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in sight

of all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel.”

Simeon, who had served God in the temple for so long, felt that he could now die in peace. All that holy longing he had experienced was now fulfilled. He was ready to die so that, at last, he could be with God who had fulfilled his promise. We are reminded, here, of St. Bernadette. Once she had seen the Blessed Virgin Mary’s smile, that taste of heaven made her want to die so she could experience this heavenly life forever. Earthly life was nothing compared to that one heavenly smile she experienced in Mary. Simeon also felt that way, once he had come face to face with the divinity’s radiating light in Jesus, the infant Savior.

Simeon felt like a watchman who had accomplished his task and could now be released from duty. He had actually experienced in his very person the salvation of God that was in the making for all peoples. That blessed meeting with the infant Savior gave him a foretaste of his redeeming presence: what it means to be saved. It means to be plunged into God. And this stupendous grace would be available to all peoples—not only the Jews—but through them, it would become available for the Gentiles—all the nations of the world. At the same time, this marvelous salvation experienced in person by Simeon, available to everyone else on this planet, would redound to the glory of those first chosen, the people of Israel. For it is from them that God’s anointed came and was born.

St. Luke tells us that “The child’s father and mother were amazed at what was said about him” (33).

The evangelist has already made it clear that Mary conceived Jesus without a human father, through the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:31-35). Joseph became the child’s adopted father. They marveled over Simeon’s recognition of this child as Messiah. How did Simeon know? They were in awe at the way God was revealing him. Mary and Joseph already knew from the angel Gabriel that Jesus would be given “the throne of David his father”,

and that he would “rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there [would] be no end” (Lk 1:32-33). But they could only marvel as the mystery of his Person was gradually revealed.

“... and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, ‘Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.’”

Simeon blessed the holy family by calling God’s favor upon them. But then he proceeds to single out and address Mary, his mother. He foresees and points out that Jesus’ very Person will be a dividing line. Some will be for and others against him. Those who love and live by the truth will decide in his favor and follow him. These are the humble whose lives are centered on God. Whereas, the proud will choose to go against him. Their decision is based on the desire to keep the self at the center of existence rather than God. These refuse to convert themselves to live according to the truth. The truth is that God, the creator and sustainer of all, is the center of the universe. The proud, however, refuse to conform to this reality—they live a lie—they usurp God’s place through a self-centered existence. Jesus exemplified the truth by centering his life around God, the Father, and conforming his will to God’s will. Jesus was obedient to this right order of truth even unto death. In this way, he attained eternal glory. The father exalted him in the glorious resurrection. There he can be clearly seen as “the Way and the Truth and the Life” (Jn 14:6) for all to follow. Now we know with certitude the humble way to live—but the proud refuse to budge from their false, self-centered position. Separated from God in this way will lead to their ruin in this life and in the next.

We can easily see then “that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed” (35) as a result of Jesus’ coming. People will respond to his coming by deciding for or against Jesus and his teaching. They are forced to make a decision. They cannot remain neutral. To attempt to remain neutral is to

side against Jesus; it is to refuse to live according to the truth and therefore dispose oneself for condemnation.

Simeon prophesies that Jesus' being a sign that will be contradicted is going to cause Mary much suffering. She is told that a sword will pierce her very soul. This image symbolizes the deep anguish and suffering Mary experienced at seeing Jesus attacked by his enemies, their continuously persecuting and, finally, crucifying him. The extreme extent of Mary's suffering cannot be fully expressed in words. She stood beneath the cross and suffered in her heart with Jesus the excruciating pains of crucifixion (Jn 19:25). The sequence for the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows celebrated on September 15 expresses Mary's sorrows in poetic form. For example, "Through her heart, his sorrow bearing, now at length the sword had passed ... Christ above in torment hangs, She beneath beholds the pangs of her dying, glorious Son ... Bruised, derided, cursed, defiled, She beheld her tender child, all with bloody scourges rent" These were the pains of spiritual childbirth through which Mary became mother of the Church (Rev 12:2; Jn 19:26-27).

St. Luke tells us that the eighty-four year old widowed prophetess, Anna, who never left the temple but worshipped night and day with fasting and prayer came forward at that very time when Jesus was being presented in the temple.

"... she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem" (38).

Anna, like Simeon, recognized Mary's baby as the Messiah. What an astonishing presence that child presented to these two holy people that made them realize in such a striking way that they had indeed come into the presence of God's anointed one! She could not but tell everyone she met about the arrival of the infant Messiah. Thus, both Anna and Simeon join the shepherds and the Magi in bearing witness to the arrival of the Messiah in Jesus. We, who have experienced his glorious presence within our very persons, must

also proclaim him in some way to all we meet.

St. Luke concludes this Sunday's Gospel passage with, "When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him."

St. Luke does not mention that the Holy Family had to flee to Egypt to escape the jealousy of Herod. St. Matthew explains that an angel warned Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt because the king was going to search for the child to destroy him (Mt 2:13-15). It was only after Herod died that Joseph was again told by an angel to return to Israel. He was told to go to Galilee.

So the Holy Family settled there in a town called Nazareth (Mt 2:19-23). Actually that meant that they were back home again. That was where they lived before they left for Bethlehem to be enrolled (Lk 2:4-5). And there, too, Jesus' hidden life began—except for the episode of his being left behind in the temple and found by his parents after three days (Lk 2:41-52).

In that hidden life, Jesus grew up and learned to practice the virtues that built up his strong character in preparation for his public ministry. Jesus was known as "the carpenter's Son" (Mt 13:55) and later "the carpenter" (Mk 6:3). The difficult work of carpentry without the convenience of modern tools, contributed to making Jesus into a strong man. That hidden life was also a contemplative one where Jesus could observe nature prayerfully and learn wisdom in the secrecy of his heart. He could draw from that experience of life the wisdom that he learned to preach vivid and impressive, easy-to-understand sermons. That is one of the reasons why the crowds were so astonished at his teaching" (Mt 7:28).

MARCH 19 – ST. JOSEPH, HUSBAND OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY
Gospel: Matthew 1:16, 18-21, 24a

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.” Here, we are speaking of Jesus’ birth in time. As Son of God, he had no beginning. He always was eternally begotten by the Father. He existed with the Father before the world began. St. John begins his gospel with this notion: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:11). But the Gospel today is speaking of Jesus’ conception and birth in time.

We should note too, that Christ is not Jesus’ family name when we say, “Jesus Christ”. He would more properly be called Jesus the Christ, which is the Greek word for the Anointed One; in Hebrew, the Messiah.

Jesus, the Christ, was born in time by means of a human mother. He wanted to be human like us in order to take upon himself our sins and redeem us.

“When his mother Mary was betrothed [or engaged] to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit.” Usually a couple was engaged for about one year before the couple began to live together. Engagement was a serious contract that ended in marriage. Unfaithfulness was equivalent to adultery; breaking the contract was considered divorce.

When Mary returned from her visit with her cousin, Elizabeth, after some three months of visitation, her pregnancy must have become noticeable. Mary seems to have remained silent about her miraculous conception: Who would believe her? What anguish she and Joseph must have experienced! But saints must undergo great trial and suffering in order to be more perfectly purified.

The fact that Mary “was found with child through the Holy Spirit” means that Jesus has no human father. God alone is his Father through the action of his Holy Spirit.

“Joseph, her husband, since he was a righteous man, decided to divorce her quietly.” Notice, that although they were simply engaged, Joseph is already said to be Mary’s “husband”. The law (Deut 22:21-23) called for death by stoning for adultery even if the couple had not yet begun to cohabit. And Joseph was a righteous man: he was obedient to the law. Yet no such sin could be proven against Mary. St. Joseph would solve the problem by ending the engagement before two witnesses without stating the reason in public.

“According to some of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, Joseph wanted to put [Mary] away privately, not because he was ignorant of the Virginal Conception and suspected her of adultery, but because he already knew she had conceived by the Holy Spirit and felt unworthy to live in her presence. In his Commentary on St. Matthew’s gospel, St. Thomas [Aquinas] summarizes the argument as follows: ‘Joseph had no suspicion of adultery, for he was well aware of Mary’s chastity. He had read in Scripture that a virgin would conceive ... [H]e also knew that Mary was descended from David. It was easier, therefore, for him to believe that this had been fulfilled in her than that she had committed fornication. And so, regarding himself as unworthy to live under the same roof with someone of such sanctity, he wanted to put her away privately, as Peter said, “Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man” (Lk 5:8)’” (*Cradle of Redeeming Love*, by John Seward, p. 205).

“[T]he angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her.’” When Scripture attributes the conception of Jesus to the Holy Spirit, it does so because that conception is an operation of God’s love; and the Holy Spirit is the Love of the Father and the Son. The heavenly Father is the only Father of Jesus. He possesses the divine nature from eternity through his generation by God the Father.

“And when God in his wisdom and love chooses by his own power to produce in the womb of Mary the effect that is naturally produced by male seed,

that effect is called the miracle of the Virginal Conception. In relation to the matter supplied by the Mother, the conception of the Son is natural, for, like every other child, his body is fashioned out of her blood; but in relation to the active principle, the conception is miraculous, for the maternal matter is fertilized, not by male seed, but by the Holy Spirit.” (*Cradle of Redeeming Love*, p. 200).

In the second reading, St. Paul speaks of “the gospel about [God’s] Son, descended from David according to the flesh”—not only legally. Jesus is connected to King David first of all through his mother, Mary. The Fathers of the Church, such as St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Irenaeus, St. Justin martyr and Tertullian, have no doubt: our Lord is “of the seed of David by the birth He has from Mary.” St. Justin Martyr, who lived in the second century, says that the Son of God is “born, by the will of the Father, of a virgin of the race of Abraham, of the tribe of Judah, and of the stock of David.” St. Leo calls our Lady “the royal Virgin of David’s stock.”

“Jesse is the root, David the tree, Mary the branch and Jesus the flower the branch brought forth.”

“According to the law, a man must marry within his own tribe (see Nm 36:6f.). Thus, if Joseph is of the house and lineage of David, then so, too, is Mary, and so, too, through Mary, is Jesus” (*Cradle of Redeeming Love*, p. 287-288).

But the Gospel linked Jesus to David through his legal father, Joseph, because in Jewish law, ancestry was counted only through the father—in this case, the adopting father.

Whichever way we look at it, we see that Nathan’s Messianic prophecy is being fulfilled: God had told David through Nathan, “I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins, and I will make his kingdom firm ... Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever” (2 Sm 7:12, 16). This prophecy is fully realized in Jesus, son of David, whose kingship will be established forever through the mystery of the resurrection.

The Gospel text continues, “She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Joseph shows that he is adopting the child by naming him. And yet it is really God who is naming this child. Jesus is really God’s own son. The name tells us who the person is. Jesus means “Yahweh saves”. In Jesus, God himself is saving his people in person, that is, as the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

Joseph is told why he must name the child “Jesus”: “because he will save his people from their sins.” God is stating very explicitly from the very beginning that Jesus’ mission is a spiritual one—not a political one—he is being sent to save his people from their sins—not from Roman domination.

St. Matthew sees all of this as the fulfillment of Scripture. He writes, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.’” This prophecy was uttered more than 700 years before Christ. We read it in our first reading. St. Matthew gives the Hebrew text a new dimension of reality and affirms the virgin birth initiating the Messianic age. In the Hebrew version, the word “alma”, meaning a young woman is used to translate the word “virgin”. But St. Matthew followed the Greek Septuagint translation. The word “parthenos”, which means “virgin” in the strict sense of the term is used.

So Mary, in conceiving Jesus as a virgin, is seen as fulfilling this prophecy. Moreover, the text tells us, “the virgin shall conceive and bear a son ...” Even in giving birth, she remains a virgin. That is why we speak of Mary as “Blessed Mary ever virgin.”

The name “Emmanuel” that is given tells us about this child: he is God living and acting among us, bringing salvation to all by saving us from sin. Jesus realizes the presence of God among his people in an entirely new way. Jesus is present to his people, not only when he walked briefly upon the earth, but especially now through his Church, particularly in the Eucharist where he is God with us, nourishing us and transforming us into divinity.

“When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home.” Joseph was an obedient man. He lived by faith—not by feeling. He accepted the explanation of the angel, no matter how unusual it was. He believed the message and cooperated with God’s plan, becoming a great saint in the process. As guardian of the Holy Family, he was perfected in virtue and became patron of the universal Church. I feel a need to review the Church’s teaching regarding Mary’s virginity. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, following Scripture and Sacred Tradition, places considerable focus on Mary’s virginity and explains why. Here follows some excerpts from the statements made by The *Catechism*.

496 Jesus was conceived solely by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, affirming also the corporeal aspect of this event: Jesus was conceived “by the Holy Spirit without human seed.” The Fathers see in the virginal conception the sign that it truly was the Son of God who came in a humanity like our own.

497 The Gospel accounts understand the virginal conception of Jesus as a divine work that surpasses all human understanding and possibility: [a human father would cast doubt]. That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit,” said the angel to Joseph about Mary his fiancée. The Church sees here the fulfillment of the divine promise given through the prophet Isaiah: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (Is 7:14).

499 The deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary’s real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man. In fact, Christ’s birth “did not diminish his mother’s virginal integrity but sanctified it.” And so the liturgy of the Church celebrates Mary as *Aeiparthenos*, the “Ever-virgin.”

The *Catechism* further explains why God wanted his Son to be born of a virgin.

503 Mary’s virginity manifests God’s absolute initiative in the Incarnation. [A human father would cast doubt.] Jesus has only God as Father ...

504 Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary’s womb because he is the New Adam, who inaugurates the new creation [Like the first Adam, Jesus comes directly from God.] ... From “his fullness” as the head of redeemed humanity “we have all received, grace upon grace.”

505 By his virginal conception, Jesus, the New Adam, ushers in the new birth of children adopted in the Holy Spirit through faith [a purely spiritual conception]. ... The acceptance of this life is virginal because it is entirely the Spirit’s gift to man. The spousal character of the human vocation in relation to God is fulfilled perfectly in Mary’s virginal motherhood.

Here we recall God’s words to his people: “For he who has become our husband is your Maker; his name is the Lord of hosts ... (Is 54:5).

506 Mary is a virgin because her virginity is the sign of her faith “unadulterated by any doubt,” and of her undivided gift of herself to God’s will.

507 At once virgin and mother, Mary is the symbol and the most perfect realization of the Church: “the Church indeed ... by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother. By preaching and Baptism she brings forth sons, who are conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of God, to a new and immortal life. She herself is a virgin, who keeps in its entirety and purity the faith she pledged to her spouse.”

MARCH 25 – THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE LORD

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee call Nazareth.” The village of Nazareth was situated in northern Palestine, in the region of Galilee. It was so insignificant as never to have been cited in the entire Old Testament. Nazareth’s sole claim to fame in history is as the residence of Mary and the Holy Family.

In keeping with the marriage customs of the time, Mary was probably a girl of some fourteen or fifteen years at the time of the annunciation. Her

home was probably like most in this poor village, a cave dug into the side of a hill with perhaps a small extension to the front. There could have been a single door to the house, with a small opening on the side for ventilation. Light came from the open door or from a lamp consisting of a saucer of oil in which floated a wick. On the floor were perhaps a few mats, perhaps not even that. The floor itself was simply clay beaten hard by the many footsteps of the family.

Mary's life was definitely a hidden one, leaving her intimate relationship with God undisturbed and free to grow and thrive.

"The angel ... was sent ... to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary." The word used for virgin in Greek usually means a young girl of marriageable age. But St. Luke used the word "parthenos", meaning virgin in the strict sense. St. Luke uses the word twice in the same sentence. We are reminded of the prophecy of Isaiah, which says, "The virgin shall be with child, and bear a son ..." (Is 7:14). The prophet had used the word "alma" to mean a young unmarried woman in this passage. But when St. Matthew quoted it in his infancy narrative, he changed the word to "parthenos" as St. Luke did to indicate that Mary was a virgin in the strict sense. The virgin in Mary's case implies that she had consecrated all of her love and affective powers to God. Her whole being was directed immediately toward loving God; her whole life was dedicated exclusively to God. It is the heavenly life already begun, as Jesus explained, "At the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels in heaven" (Mt 22:30).

The virgin was betrothed, promised in marriage, to Joseph. Espousal was a solemn engagement, a binding contract, among the Jews. It lasts one year. At the end of the year, the groom took the bride to his own house; then they became husband and wife.

"The virgin's name was Mary." In Hebrew, Mary's name is Miriam, which means "the exalted one".

Joseph, Mary's fiancé, was of "the house of David".

Mary also is believed to be of the family of David. The book of Numbers says, "This is what the Lord commands with regard to the daughters ... : They may marry anyone they please, provided they marry into a clan of their ancestral tribe ..." (Num 36:6). Thus both Mary and Joseph were from the family of David. But it was important that Joseph also be "of the house of David": following Jewish custom, Joseph's legal fatherhood was equivalent to natural fatherhood in matters of inheritance. Joseph thus confers the privilege of a Davidic descendant upon Jesus. In this way, God's promise to David of raising up an heir to "make his royal throne firm forever" can be fulfilled (see 2 Sam 7:12-13).

The angel said to Mary, "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you." "Hail" is a common greeting, which literally means "Rejoice!" This greeting crowns the theme of joy and gladness that punctuates St. Luke's Infancy Narrative. The call to rejoice echoes Old Testament passages that address daughter Zion. In the prophets this refers to Mother Jerusalem, whose faithful children will rejoice in the Messianic age because God has chosen to dwell in their midst. Mary, chosen to be the virgin Mother of the Messiah, is greeted with the same summons because she is the embodiment of faithful Israel and the most privileged recipient of God's Messianic blessings.

The angel's greeting, "full of grace", means that Mary is the object of God's grace and favor. The Greek word means "most favored one". This title not only preserves all that "full of grace" might imply of personal sanctity, but also points to the reason for that fullness; for the favor that will make of Mary the "Favored One" par excellence is the Messianic motherhood, the divine maternity.

The titles "full of grace" and "most favored one" indicate that Mary is the object of God's grace and favor from the beginning. She has been chosen for a long time past, making her a vessel who has been and is now filled with divine life. God endowed Mary with an abundance of grace to prepare her for the vocation of divine motherhood, and to make her a sterling example of Christian holiness.

The angel's addressing Mary as "most favored one" points in the direction of Mary's Immaculate Conception. St. Luke's Annunciation Narrative is an important indicator of Mary's lifelong holiness. God is her "Savior" (1:47) in the most perfect way possible: he sanctified Mary in the first instance of her conception and preserved her entirely from sin and even from the inclination toward sin that we experience.

Mary, more than any other human being in the Bible, is the recipient of the most impressive salutations (see Lk 1:28, 30, 35, 42-49; 2:19 ff, 34). In her, more than in anyone else, God's Messianic fulfillment is achieved. As such, she has received more, from and through God's anticipation of Jesus' redemptive work, than anyone else in the Old or New Testament.

"The Lord is with you," means God will aid Mary in carrying out the role for which he has chosen her to be, mother of the Messiah. These consoling words are a guarantee that the promise will be efficacious; the divine purpose will be accomplished. Mary is assured of this; she will not be alone; God will be present working through and with her.

"But [Mary] was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be." Mary is naturally disturbed and surprised to hear herself called God's favored one; she had as yet no idea of why she should be called this. There was also that initial fear which a person normally experiences when God gives him or her a special calling. The fact that Mary felt this fear is a perfectly natural reaction in the face of the supernatural and in the presence of an angel.

"Then the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God.'" God's divine graciousness has endowed Mary with a supernatural quality making her pleasing in his sight. God has favored Mary to the full, above and before all other creatures. She was the closest of all creatures to God because of the all-important roll given her as Mother of the Messiah. Moreover, her humility, her joy in God, her love for others, her fortitude and plentitude of virtues demonstrate

how well she has responded to her graced and favored condition.

The angel goes on to declare to Mary, "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus." He is explaining to her why she is so favored by God. God's plan for her is to become the Mother of the Messiah. She is about to conceive a son whom she is to name Jesus meaning "Yahweh saves." The Gospel of St. Matthew explains, "You are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). By this time, Mary would have recalled the text from Isaiah which says, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us!'" (Mt 1:25; Is 7:14). She would have realized her involvement in becoming Mother of the Messiah.

Another passage that Mary would have remembered was, "The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst [literally, in your womb] ... Fear not, O Zion ... The Lord, your God, is in your midst [in your womb], a mighty Savior; he will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love ..." (Zeph 3:15-17).

The angel reveals further that "He [her son] will be great and will be Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary's son will be great because he is divine, a greatness he will not lose when he takes on the lowliness of human nature. The angel also reveals that Jesus will be king of the Davidic dynasty in keeping with his promise; his kingdom will last forever, for his humanity will remain forever joined to his divinity.

The "Most High" is a title for God commonly used by St. Luke. Mary's future son is described with language ordinarily reserved for God's redeeming presence among his people. He, in fact, will truly be Son of God.

The throne of David his father will be given to Mary's son. This is a reference to God's Messianic

promise to David, which was given through the prophet Nathan. (This was what we read about in the first reading in 2 Sam 7.) Since the monarchy came to an end, Israel had been waiting for its restoration under the Lord's anointed, the Messiah. He would in a special sense be called "Son of the Most High". The angel is now explaining to Mary that she is now being involved in this event, the fulfillment of God's promise to send a Messiah who will occupy the throne of his father David.

"He will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." The "house of Jacob" is a traditional Old Testament term for the kingdom of Israel. The angel is revealing to Mary that Jesus, her Son, is this anointed Davidic ruler who will re-gather the tribes of Israel with all the nations into his glorious kingdom (compare Acts 15:13-18). Exactly what that all meant in practice, only time would reveal; so much mystery and the darkness of faith would still await Mary to bring her to perfection. How is it that "he will rule ... forever"? The paschal mystery was still hidden from Mary; she would have to go through the dark night of Calvary before Jesus would be immortalized through his glorious resurrection. Only then could Mary and we understand how this prophecy could be realized and Jesus would rule forever, "and of his kingdom there will be no end".

Here Mary would have remembered the words of the prophet Daniel, "One like a son of man ... received dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away, his kingship shall not be destroyed" (Dan 7:13-14).

"But Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?'" It would be better if this passage read, "How will this be ...?" Mary is not questioning God's ability to give her a son; but she is inquiring as to how such a plan will unfold. Her saying, "I have no relations with a man" refers to her virginal state. Her concern is that she is a virgin at present and that she intends to remain one in the future. The announcement

of a miraculous conception thus causes Mary to wonder aloud how God will bless her with a son and yet preserve her virginal purity. Her words are inexplicable otherwise.

Mary believed the angel's words—she did not doubt as Zechariah had done (1:18). Her question, "How will this be?" expresses her readiness to obey the will of God even though at first sight it implied a contradiction: on the one hand she was convinced that God wished her to remain a virgin; on the other, here was God also announcing that she would become a mother. Then the angel Gabriel announced God's mysterious design, and what had been impossible, according to the laws of nature, is explained by a unique intervention on the part of God.

Mary's resolution to remain a virgin was certainly something very unusual. However, in the Old Testament, there were some who, in keeping with God's plan, did remain celibate: for example, Jeremiah, Elijah, Elisha, and John the Baptist. The Blessed Virgin, who received a very special inspiration of the Holy Spirit to practice virginity, is a first fruit of the New Testament, which will establish the excellence of virginity.

"And the angel said to her in reply, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.'" The Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High—God himself—will produce this seemingly impossible result. This power is attributed to the Holy Spirit of God. That Spirit hovered over the waters of creation (Gen 1:2) and now hovers over Mary to bring perfection to humanity, which otherwise would remain in a chaotic state.

"The power of the Most High will overshadow you" indicates that the conception of Jesus within the womb of Mary will be entirely supernatural, the result of God's creative work within her. The shadow is a symbol of the presence of God. When Israel was journeying through the wilderness, the glory of God filled the Tabernacle and a cloud covered the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 40:34-36). The angel mentions the Holy Spirit, the Most

High, and the Son of God, offering Mary a glimpse of the Trinity.

“Therefore,” the angel continues, “the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.” Mary’s virginal conception leaves no doubt that Jesus is God’s son—the child who will be born will not be the son of any human father; he will be conceived by the power of God alone and will therefore be the Son of God.

The prophet Daniel tells us that the Messianic times will be marked by the anointing of “a most holy” one (Dan 9:24). Jesus’ humanity was anointed by the divinity at his conception. This signals the inauguration of the Messianic age. The Holy One will be Son of God in an entirely new sense because he will be conceived by the power of God alone.

“And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God.” Elizabeth is Mary’s relative, but we do not know to what degree—it is not stated.

The sign given to Mary in confirmation of the angel’s announcement to her is the pregnancy of her aged relative, Elizabeth. If a woman past the childbearing age could become pregnant, why, the angel implies, should there be doubt about Mary becoming pregnant as a virgin? “For nothing will be impossible for God.” The angel Gabriel insists that God can surmount every obstacle to motherhood, including the infertility of Elizabeth and the virginity of Mary. Mary, unlike Zechariah, had not asked for a sign or a proof from the angel, but she was given one anyway.

“Mary said,” in response to the angel, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.” Now that Mary knows the divine purpose, she accepts God’s will and plan unhesitatingly and with perfect simplicity. Mary freely and actively embraces God’s invitation to bear the Messiah. The Greek expression denotes more than mere passive acceptance, indicating that she wishes or desires to fulfill God’s will

in her life. Unlike Zechariah she welcomes the angel’s words uninhibited by doubt. She humbly accepts God’s will for her and considers herself as God’s handmaid and servant. Gladly, she will do whatever God wants of her. And she persevered in doing his will to the very end, even to “standing by the cross of Jesus” as he was being crucified (Jn 19:25). By her obedience, she undid what Eve had done by her disobedience. Thus Mary became the New Eve, “the mother of all the living” (Gen 3:20) in grace, in cooperation with the New Adam, the Messiah (see Rom 5:17-19; 1 Cor 15:20-22, 45-49).

JUNE 24 – THE NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

Gospel: Lk 1:57-66, 80

When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child she gave birth to a son” (57). St. Luke tells us that Elizabeth was from the daughters of Aaron and that her husband Zachariah was a priest. “Both were righteous in the eyes of God, observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years” (Lk 1:6-7).

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah announcing that his prayer had been heard, that Elizabeth would bear a son whom he must name John. Joy and gladness will be theirs and “...many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will be filled with the holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb, and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of fathers toward children and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to prepare a people fit for the Lord” (Lk 1:14-17).

What an exciting moment this must have been! Elizabeth did conceive and now she just gave birth to this male child. All of this became possible because God intervened and had special plans for this child. God is the one who vivified

nature and made it possible for this aging, barren couple to conceive and then give birth to this child. This couple must have been exceptionally holy to prepare their son to be precursor of the Messiah. And now at last this specially blessed child has arrived to begin his formation.

“Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy toward her, and they rejoiced with her” (58). Even on a natural level there was reason for much rejoicing. Every child is a unique creation willed into existence from all eternity by God (Eph 1:4, Jer 1:5). Until now this aging couple had been deprived of the joy of having their own child. Moreover, this child was even more special because of his position in the history of salvation. He is the one chosen by God to introduce Jesus as the Messiah to the world.

“When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child, they were going to call him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said in reply, ‘No. He will be called John.’”

Circumcision on the eighth day goes back to the time when God was making a covenant with Abraham. It was then that God changed Abram’s name to Abraham to signify that he was to “... become the father of a host of nations”; God promised him “... the whole land of Canaan, as a permanent possession ...” (Gen 17:5-8). God proceeded to tell Abraham, “This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you that you must keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. Circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the mark of the covenant between you and me. Throughout the ages, every male among you, when he is eight days old, shall be circumcised ...” (Gen 17:10-12).

John’s circumcision was a sign of his incorporation into God’s chosen people, Israel; that was the sign of the covenant, that is, God’s enduring love-relationship with his people.

Those who do not believe in infant baptism need to take note that neither John nor Jesus (Lk 2:21) was given a choice about their being incorporated into God’s people—they were only eight days old!

A boy was named on the eighth day when he was circumcised. A girl could be named at any time within thirty days of her birth. These names were descriptive of the child. Sometimes they described a circumstance attending the birth of a child (for example Gen 25:25-26); sometimes they described the child, (for example, blond); sometimes the child received the name of the parent or more usually the grandparent; often the name described the parents’ joy, or the parents’ faith. For example, Elijah means “Yahweh is my God”. This was Elijah’s parents’ way of asserting their faith in the true God at a time when the false god Baal was worshipped.

The neighbors were surprised when Elizabeth insisted that her son be called John. “But they answered her, ‘There is no one among your relatives who has this name.’ So they made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called. He asked for a tablet and wrote, ‘John is his name,’ and all were amazed” (61-63).

The parents were simply following the dictates of the angel to Zechariah when he appeared to him. John is a shortened form of the name Jehohanan: it means “Yahweh has shown favor, God is gracious.” This was the name that the angel Gabriel (Lk 1:19) told Zechariah to name him (Lk 1:13).

“Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God” (64).

This was the fulfillment of the angel’s prophecy. This is what the angel said: “I am Gabriel, who stand before God. I was sent to speak to you and to announce to you this good news. But now you will be speechless and unable to talk until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at their proper time” (Lk 1:19-20).

Zechariah’s imposed silence because of his unbelief became a great blessing to him. Silence subdued his egotistical self so that he could more easily ponder the divine mystery intervening in his life. He had been sanctified by living in

God's presence and enlightened. He was filled with wisdom and insight, "... and he spoke blessing God." He was "... filled with the holy Spirit..." (67), and began to prophesy. He now fully realized that God was actually visiting his people in order to bring them redemption. And John is the one chosen to go before David's son to prepare his ways; through him, people will experience salvation by means of the forgiveness of their sins. All of this will happen because the Messiah is coming to visit his people to shine on those who sit in darkness and guide them into the path of peace (Lk 1:68-79).

Through Zechariah's silence, God was able to communicate this infused knowledge to him. This helps us to understand the value of a silent retreat and what a blessing it can be in our lives.

"Then fear came upon all their neighbors, and all these matters were discussed throughout the hill country of Judea" (65). The whole event experienced by the people conveyed a reverential fear upon them. God was obviously intervening in the life of his people. This filled them with hope and expectation of things to come.

Elizabeth's unexpected pregnancy and giving birth to this male child who is given a special name, and Zechariah's regained ability to speak with such speech in praise of God, and the role this child was going to play as precursor of the Messiah ... all of this caused the people to be seized with awe and wonder.

"All who heard these things took them to heart, saying, 'What, then, will this child be?' For surely the hand of the Lord was with him" (66). Such excitement could not be contained. It had to be expressed to everyone they met. Something new was happening in their midst. God was manifesting himself anew in the history of Israel. He is showing himself to be alive once more by revealing himself in these events. This gave rise to new hope among the people. God's hand, his protective power, was manifestly upon this child. What was he to become? What would be his

role in the history of salvation? Zechariah gave a broad outline about his future. But the details would have to be worked out in time. Meanwhile, they had much about which to ponder in their hearts—and such pondering is salvific.

"The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the desert until the day of his manifestation to Israel" (80). God must have guided John since childhood to seek him in solitude and prayer. We can believe that the young John gradually extended his time away from home to be along with God who was calling and instructing him.

The desert area referred to is probably the Judean wilderness, which stretches from the northwestern shores of the Dead Sea to the hill country of Judea. This area consists of a barren steppe (usually level and treeless tracts of arid land) with bushes and basic vegetation which attract bees and grasshoppers or wild locusts. Many caves exist in this area which can be used for shelter.

JUNE 29 – SAINTS PETER AND PAUL, APOSTLES

Gospel: Mt 16:13-20

Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi, named in honor of Caesar Augustus by Philip the tetrarch. It was located twenty miles north of the Sea of Galilee, the extreme northern frontier of Palestine. Situated just below the foothills of snow-covered Mount Hermon, which rose majestically before them, it was a place of great natural beauty.

It was undoubtedly for solitude and retreat that Jesus had brought his disciples there, and it is unlikely that they entered the pagan city itself. St. Luke notes that Jesus was at prayer before the important interchange that was to follow (Lk 9:18).

Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist." You will remember that Herod Antipas and his court believed that Jesus was

John the Baptist risen from the dead (Mt 14:1-2).

Others believed that Jesus was Elijah because he was expected to return to prepare the people for the Messiah. Still others believed that Jesus was Jeremiah. St. Matthew mentions this prophet here because he is the prophet who in his own experience of rejection and suffering announces the rejection and suffering of the Messiah. Or perhaps, the people thought, Jesus might be some other prophet.

Such was the popular opinion, what we would call today, the majority opinion—and they were all wrong. We must take care lest we be led astray by the current of an unbelieving world whose opinions are based on unenlightened, selfish thinking by unvirtuous people.

Jesus said to his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” How do you answer that question? Who is Jesus to you? A holy man? An enlightened thinker? A great human being? Surely, your commitment to follow a mere mortal would be very weak and limited. Who do you say that Jesus is?

Simon Peter said in reply to Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Peter speaks in his own name and that of the twelve. “Son of the living God” was a title used by the prophet Hosea (Hos 2:1) for the new Israel “in the last days” (see also Rom 9:26). All the more is the title applicable to the Messiah of Israel.

St. Matthew undoubtedly expects us to see in the title “the Messiah, the Son of the living God”, not the obscure affirmation of the disciples pre-resurrection experience of Jesus as Messiah, but the fullness of meaning which Peter, the disciples, and the entire Church attached to the title “Messiah”, the Christ, when confessing their resurrected Lord and Savior. As an example of this faith, Peter concluded his Pentecost homily with, “Therefore let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). It is because of this implied fullness of faith in Jesus’ divinity that Peter’s insight into

Jesus’ person is attributed to a divine revelation. It was not from the human reasoning of “flesh and blood” that Simon had come to acknowledge Jesus’ Messiahship and divinity implied in “Son of the living God” but through divine revelation from Jesus’ Father who is in heaven.

Is this your faith? And if you believe that Jesus is divine, are you ready to believe everything he taught and to follow his teachings as absolute truth to which you have surrendered your life? We pray for this grace.

What we have been saying is confirmed by the words of Jesus, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.” Simon is particularly blessed because the Father has taken hold of him and given him a unique insight into who Jesus is, and now he is going to bestow upon Simon a special role based on his strong faith in Jesus.

Jesus goes on to say, “And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church ...” Simon has named Jesus the Christ; now Jesus names Simon the Rock.

Jesus gave his disciple, Simon bar Jona, the Aramaic name “Kepha” (Jn 1:42), the name by which he was commonly known in the apostolic church. The Greek “Petros”, whence our “Peter” is a translation of this word, which means “rock”. The word provides Jesus with the figure by which he designates Peter as the foundation of his Messianic community. The Messiah was to the Jews inconceivable without a Messianic community; now Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, and Jesus replies: and you are the foundation of the Messianic community.

The verb is in the future tense “shall build”, for the Church comes into being only in the apostolic age following the resurrection and the gift of the Spirit. After the resurrection, Jesus confirmed his promise to Peter. Jesus revealed himself to the seven disciples who had gone fishing. Again, he singled Peter out from among them; and after

asking him three times, “Do you love me?”, Jesus proceeded to commission Peter each time to “Feed my Lambs. Tend my Sheep” (Jn 21:15-17).

From the first day Jesus set his eyes on Simon, “Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon the Son of John; you will be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter)” (Jn 1:42). And now Jesus expressed fully what he had in mind for Peter the moment he met him. St. Leo the Great writes, “It is as if our Lord had said to him, I am the unbreakable stone, I am the cornerstone ... the foundation apart from which no one can build. But you are also the ‘rock’, because through my power you have acquired such firmness that you, by participation, share with me the power which I have by right.”

Christ is the irreplaceable foundation of his church (1 Cor 3:11); but precisely for that reason, he had the right to join indissolubly to himself a visible rock whereby it may be recognized that to belong to the Church of Peter is to rest on Christ himself.

In the context, the reason why Peter is called the rock is his confession. He has made real the faith of the disciples; and it is upon faith in Jesus as the Messiah that the group Jesus has formed will endure.

Jesus, now in his divine capacity, imparts to Peter his mission. This function is contained in his name in Aramaic, *Kepha*, which even if not first given here (see Jn 1:42), is here first explained. The giving of a name to correspond to a special function or mission in the history of salvation is a frequent occurrence in the Bible.

For example, God changed Abram’s name to Abraham to signify his becoming the father of many nations (Gen 17:5); God also changed Jacob’s name to Israel because he had contended with divine and human beings and had prevailed (Gen 32:29). God alone gives such a mission and the name that goes with it.

From the very beginnings of Christianity, the faithful have venerated the Pope. The Prince of the

Apostles is everywhere mentioned before the others (Mt 10:2; Mk 3:16; Lk 6:14; Acts 1:13); Peter makes frequent use of his special primacy and authority over the rest; he proposes the election of a new Apostle to replace Judas (Acts 1:15-22); he is the one who speaks to the crowd on Pentecost and makes the first converts (Acts 2:14-36): he replies to the Sanhedrin on behalf of all (Acts 4:8ff); he punishes Ananias and Saphira with full authority (Acts 5:1ff); he admits Cornelius, the first Gentile, into the Church (Acts 10:1ff); and he presides at the Council of Jerusalem and rejects the attempts of the Jewish Christians to impose circumcision on the Gentile converts, laying it down that salvation is to be had only through faith in Christ (Acts 15:7-10), (see *In Conversation with God*, by Fr. Francis Fernandez).

The supreme authority is given to Peter for the benefit of the Church. Because the Church has to last until the end of time, this authority will be passed on to Peter’s successors down through history. The Bishop of Rome, the Pope, is the successor to Peter. Pope Benedict XVI is the 264th successor to Peter. Where Peter (and his successor) is, there is the Church that Jesus founded.

Jesus founds his own community of the last times corresponding to the community of God in the Old Testament—so again, he is claiming a divine prerogative.

The Church is the community of the new chosen people, which Jesus is setting up on earth to carry on his work. It was to be made up of all races from all parts of the world. As its mission was to bring the message of salvation to all people, it was to go on until the end of time.

Jesus promised that “the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.” Death, which overcomes all else, will be powerless against the Church, because Jesus, her founder, has made her indestructible. This is a promise of indefectibility for the church founded on Peter. Since this church is essentially a teaching society, its indefectibility implies infallibility, for to be in error while making

the claim of teaching in the name of God is to be overcome by the error; this would ultimately bring about its disintegration.

The powers of death, the gates of Sheol, will be unable to prevent the Church from taking all people from its clutches and giving them eternal life.

Death, in a purely natural sense, is opposed to life. But death as figured here is a city with gates, just as the Church, the New Jerusalem, is “built” on a rock. The gates of an ancient city were its stronghold both for defense and offense. Death and the Church are thus seen as two warring cities, and victory is assured the Church.

In the biblical view, death was never something merely natural as the inevitable lot of man—the pagan idea—but as evidence of the power of Satan (Heb 2:14), the reign of sin, and evil inimical to life and truth (1 Cor 15:26; Rev 6:8, 20:13 ff). Against all of this, the power of the Church will be able to withstand and prevail.

Jesus went on to tell Peter, “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.” The metaphor changes: the besieged citadel founded on a rock now becomes the kingdom with its chancellor to whom Christ will, in due time, commit his own keys (Jn 21:15-17). The gift of keys implies responsible stewardship as the keys of Eliachim implied stewardship in the Davidic household (see Is 22:20-23). This idea serves as a bridge from the rock metaphor to the more direct definition of Peter’s powers.

The key was a symbol of leadership and authority; it was a symbol of the office of master of the palace, the highest of the officers of the Israelite court, and Peter is thus declared master of the palace in the *ekklesia* (church).

The term “kingdom of heaven” is used here not in its usual sense of reign, but of the community established by the reign, practically synonymous with *ecclesia* (church).

Here, St. Matthew relates the Church to the

kingdom: the Church is an interim arrangement which mediates salvation in the time between the earthly ministry of Jesus and the future coming of the kingdom.

Jesus continues, “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” To bind is to give a decision that imposes an obligation, and to loose is to give a decision that removes an obligation. God shall bind and loose what Peter binds and looses. This verse gives enormous authority to Peter. The authority to bind and loose is given to the disciples in Matthew 18:18, but to Peter alone are accorded the revelation, the role of rock, and especially the keys.

The Church should be certain that what it teaches people to believe and to practice is what God wants them to believe and practice. In today’s Scripture, St. Matthew tells us how Jesus provided for this necessity. In making Peter the head of the apostolic college, the foundation stone of the Church, the guarantor of its stability in the symbol of the keys and the promise that all his decisions would be inspired and ratified in heaven, Jesus gave him the power of freedom from error when officially teaching the universal Church. In other words, Peter received the primacy in the Church and gift of infallibility in his official teaching on matters of faith and morals.

As the Church was to continue long after Peter had died, it was rightly understood from the beginning that the privileges given to him, and which were necessary for the successful mission of the Church, were given to his lawful successors, the Popes.

This has been the constant belief in the Church from its very beginning. The first Vatican Council solemnly defined this dogma and it was recently reconfirmed in the second Vatican Council. In giving these powers to Peter and to his lawful successors, Jesus was planning for our needs. In order to preserve and safeguard the right conduct of all its members, he provided a central seat of

authoritative power in the Church. Through the gift of infallibility, he assured us that whatever we were commanded to believe (faith) and do (morals) would always be what he and his heavenly Father wanted us to believe and do (see *The Sunday Readings*, by Fr. Kevin O’Sullivan, OFM).

After Jesus finished speaking to Peter, “he strictly ordered his disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.” Jesus imposed silence on the Apostles because of the people’s misconception about his role as Messiah. They would want to make him king and overthrow the Roman government that was ruling them. Jesus would also be hindered in his spiritual work.

It is for these reasons that Jesus, from that time on, began to teach the Apostles about his role as suffering servant: St. Matthew tells us, “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised” (Mt 16:21).

AUGUST 6 – THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD

Gospel: Luke 9:28b-36

“Jesus took Peter, John, and James ...”

Jesus formed a community of support for himself by calling the twelve Apostles. Among these, he had three special friends in Peter, John, and James. We, too, need to make friends and associate closely with others who seek God. They help us to be faithful to God and to keep on growing spiritually. They incite us to intensify our love for God and to seek him more ardently. That is what *Come, Lord Jesus!* groups are all about.

Jesus and his special friends “went up the mountain to pray”. The mountain was one of the places Jesus frequented to pray. The mountain provided an atmosphere that was conducive to prayer. The height of the mountain took him away from earthly distractions and brought him into the heavenly places to be with his Father again, away from the noises that interfere with heavenly communications.

We, too, need to go apart and spend some time in prayer alone with God. We must create for ourselves an atmosphere conducive to prayer. We need silence and solitude to be able to communicate with God in the depths of our heart. We need divine intimacy for personal spiritual enrichment. That is why I am so fond of living in my little cottage in the middle of a cane field in Prairie Ronde. It vies with Jesus’ place of prayer on the mountain.

“While he was praying, his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white.” Here we see the marvelous transforming effects of prayer. Prayer is not just speaking to God or an exchange of words between God and us. Prayer is engaging in an interpersonal communion with God. We enter into God through faith, hope, and love. We open our hearts to receive God and his outpoured love. In this marvelous exchange, the indwelling presence of God, through our openheartedness, is allowed to pervade our whole being as purifying light, to illumine, cleanse, and sanctify us. That is what happened to Jesus. “His face changed in appearance.” St. Matthew tells us that Jesus “was transfigured ... his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light” (Mt 17:2).

Grace affects our aura, that energy field that emanates from our persons. “God is light” (1 Jn 1:5). Immersion in God through prayer causes us to assimilate divine qualities such as light, heavenly glory. Purity of heart enables God to shine through us; we begin to radiate the glory of his divine presence. Didn’t Jesus say that “the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43)?

The opposite is true for those who separate themselves from God through serious sin. Such a separation from God throws them into pitch darkness (see *The Interior Castle of St. Teresa*, First Mansions, Chap II). Sin affects their whole persons. Their aura casts a shadow of darkness around them. It affects their behavior and the people who are around them. They contaminate others with their pessimism and their negative

attitude and behavior. St. Jude in his epistle tells us to “abhor even their flesh stained clothing” (Jd 23).

On the other hand, the divine radiation shining through a person who is closely united to God through purity of heart, affects his immediate atmosphere with healing light. For example, we read in the Acts of the Apostles, “when handkerchiefs or clothes which had touched [St. Paul’s] skin were applied to the sick, their diseases were cured and evil spirits departed from them” (Acts 19:12).

Getting back to our Gospel text, “and behold, two men were conversing with him (Jesus), Moses, and Elijah who appeared in glory and spoke of his Exodus.” You may wonder why Jesus would be speaking to these particular Old Testament men. Moses represents the Law, since the Ten Commandments and the Old Testament religious laws or precepts were given through him. Elijah represents the prophets as chief among them. Moses was founder of the Old Covenant and Elijah was its intrepid defender.

These men of the Old Testament appeared with Jesus in glory. Although their bodies had died many years before (Moses lived about 1250 B.C.; Elijah lived about 860 B.C.), these men appeared in heavenly glory on the mountain and were talking to Jesus. They are witnesses to heavenly life, life after death. This happened about 29 A.D.

Remember the four qualities of resurrected bodies mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44? Our bodies will become incorruptible, glorious, powerful, and spiritual, qualities we look forward to receive. Jesus is getting a foretaste of his resurrection. His whole being is penetrated with God’s glory. The divine presence fills him with radiant light.

Jesus had already warned the Apostles (Lk 9:22) about his forthcoming passion, death, and resurrection. In other words, the Messiah is going to accomplish his mission and win our salvation as suffering servant (see Is 42, 49, 50, 52, 53). Jesus is preparing his Apostles for the worst,

his passion and death, by his transfiguration in glory. He wanted to convince them of the necessity of his sufferings as well as to understand his future glory.

St. Luke is the only evangelist who tells us what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were talking about: his “Exodus”, that is, his departure from this earth through his suffering and death on the cross and his resurrection.

The Scripture says, “They saw his glory ... Peter said ... ‘Master, it is good that we are here.’” The experience was so heavenly Peter wanted to build three tents and stay there.

A “cloud”, which is a sign of God’s enveloping presence, overshadowed them. “They became frightened when they entered the cloud.”

God’s overshadowing presence frightened them. Someone, God himself, something, God’s radiating presence, produced an overwhelming experience of such greatness as they had never experienced before. They were afraid.

“Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my chosen Son; listen to him.’”

God the Father himself is so delighted in Jesus he openly announces and identifies him as his own dear Son; they must listen to him. The others, Moses and Elijah disappear. Only Jesus remains. He is the one to whom human beings must now listen. The others, Moses and Elijah, prepared people for Jesus’ coming to earth. They have completed their task. They departed from the scene. Now we must focus our whole attention on God’s beloved Son. We must become totally receptive to him and his words. He speaks with divine wisdom. He reveals the divine mind. He tells us what we must do to live as children of God. He speaks the truth by which we must live. We must take his words into our hearts and ponder them at length, cherish them, and keep them on our minds so we can live by them every moment of our lives.

Jesus is the Promised Land, the kingdom of God

promised Abraham in the first reading. We will inherit the kingdom by being transformed into his likeness. “The Lord Jesus ... will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body” (2nd Reading).

AUGUST 14 – VIGIL OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Gospel: Lk 11:27-28

At the end of her earthly life, Mary was taken up body and soul into heaven. Let us look at the readings today and see how the Scriptures support our belief.

St. Luke’s Gospel on the feast of the Assumption sees Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant, you will remember, is the golden box containing the tablets of the Ten Commandments of the Old Covenant.

In the New Covenant, it is Mary, who bears Jesus, the Word of God, in her womb, who is the Ark of God. In Jesus she contains the New Covenant. She is truly the Ark of the New Covenant.

Today, we celebrate that this ark was taken to heaven body and soul. So we gather around it with music and song to celebrate the occasion just as when David and the people gathered together to honor the ark when it was brought into the place the king had prepared for it. “He and all the Israelites were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouts of joy and the sound of the horn” (2 Sm 6:15). The first reading tells us, “David commanded the chiefs of the Levites to appoint their kinsmen as chanters, to play on musical instruments, harps, lyres, and cymbals, to make a loud sound of rejoicing.”

“They brought in the ark of God and set it within the tent which David had pitched for it. Then they offered up holocausts and peace offerings to God.”

You can see why the Church places this particular reading for our reflection. We celebrate Mary in joy and song as she, the Ark of the New Covenant, is brought to the place which Jesus prepared for

her. She is taken up to heaven body and soul in the mystery of the Assumption. We use the Old Testament setting of David and the people of God welcoming the ark to the place the king had prepared for it. We welcome Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant in the context of the liturgical service. We offer Jesus as our sacrifice of thanksgiving just as David offered sacrifices in thanksgiving for the Ark of the Old Covenant. As Mary is received with honor in heaven in the mystery of the Assumption, we too share in that heavenly celebration.

In the Gospel tomorrow, you will see that Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth, said to her, “And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Lk 1:43) Elizabeth experienced a sense of unworthiness in the presence of Mary, Mother of the Messiah, and bearer of the new Law.

When the sacred writer of the Gospel, St. Luke, wrote this, he was thinking of the very same thoughts that David expressed concerning the ark: David did not feel worthy of receiving the ark into his house; he said, “How can the ark of the Lord come to me?” (2 Sm 6:9).

Another reference to the Ark of the Covenant in St. Luke’s Gospel can be seen in Elizabeth’s words when she says, “The moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy” (Lk 1:44). These words remind us of “David leaping and dancing” (1 Chron 15:29) before the ark “as he and all the Israelites were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouts of joy ...” (2 Sm 6:15).

St. Luke’s final reference to Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant can be seen in the last verse of the Gospel for the feast of the Assumption. He tells us, “Mary remained with her [Elizabeth] about three months and then returned to her house” (Lk 1:56). This verse runs in close parallel with a statement about the ark: “The ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obededom the Gittite for three months, and the Lord blessed Obededom and his whole house” (2 Sm 6:11). For the third time then we are given evidence that

St. Luke looks upon Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant.

The Gospel of the vigil tells us that a “woman from the crowd called out and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that carried you. ...’” Mary is the ark insofar as she contains Jesus within her womb. This is what makes her the Ark of the New Covenant.

But Jesus responded, “Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.” In other words, Jesus is saying that Mary is especially blessed not so much because she is the physical mother of Jesus but because she heard God’s word through the angel Gabriel, believed it, and carried it out.

It is because she is so faithful in carrying out God’s word that Mary is sinless and was not allowed to experience corruption in the grave.

The second reading speaks about “when that which is mortal clothes itself with immortality.” This is what we celebrate in the mystery of the Assumption. Mary’s body became incorruptible just like Jesus’ body after his resurrection. She too, like Jesus, was taken into heaven.

Mary represents all of us, the Church. She is the first one after Jesus to share the joy of glory in her body. But all of us will experience this. We see our victory over death in Mary’s glorification and assumption. She is the first of us to be transformed and taken up body and soul into glory.

“Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” Jesus, by his passion and death, resurrection and ascension into heaven, has pulled the sting out of death. Death is now harmless—it cannot hurt us any more: Death gets the power to hurt us from sin. And Jesus has taken away our sin and all its effects.

We can already see this in the life of Mary. Even the effects of sin, which is death and corruption, have been destroyed. Both Jesus and Mary are incorruptible and in glory.

That is why there is great rejoicing among the

people of God today. We make merry and sing. We have a foretaste of what it will be like in heaven, not only in the celebration, but also in its effects. We receive the power to overcome sin and to live holy lives. Like Mary, we have a relish for God’s word and his will.

Now, let us really make this a celebration. Mary, one of our own, has been taken into heaven. There, she awaits and intercedes for us. We, her children, will follow her later.

AUGUST 15 – THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Gospel: Lk 1:39-56

At the end of her earthly life, Mary, being free from original and personal sin, was taken up body and soul into heaven. She is the first among us to participate, body and soul, in the resurrection and glorification of Jesus. We hope to follow her.

The first part of the Gospel today, which deals with the mystery of the visitation, helps us to celebrate the feast of the Assumption by presenting Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant, you will remember, is the golden box containing the two tablets of the Ten Commandments of the Old Covenant. In the New Covenant, it is Mary who bears Jesus in her womb. In Jesus, she contains the word of God himself and the New Covenant. Mary is truly the Ark and sacred container of the new law and the New Covenant.

Today, we celebrate that this “Ark,” who is Mother of the Word made flesh, was taken body and soul into heaven. So we gather around it with music and song to celebrate the occasion just as when David and the people gathered together to honor the ark when it was brought into the place the king had prepared for it. (The first reading of the vigil Mass dealt with this event.) We welcome Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant in the context of the liturgical service.

We offer Jesus as our sacrifice of thanksgiving

just as David offered sacrifices in thanksgiving for the Ark of the Old Covenant. As Mary is received with honor in heaven in the mystery of the Assumption, we too share in that heavenly celebration.

We have said that the first part of the Gospel today looks upon Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant. We see this subtle reference on three occasions in the text describing Mary's visitation of Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist.

First, Elizabeth says, "And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk 1:43). Elizabeth experienced a sense of unworthiness in the presence of Mary, Mother of the Messiah, the Word of God and the new law. When St. Luke wrote this, he was thinking of the very same thoughts that David expressed concerning the ark: David did not feel worthy of receiving the ark into his house; he said, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" (2 Sm 6:9).

The second reference to the Ark of the Covenant in the Gospel today can be seen in Elizabeth's words when she says, "The moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy" (Lk 1:44). These words remind us of "David leaping and dancing" (1 Chron 15:29) before the ark "as he and all the Israelites were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouts of joy" (2 Sm 6:15).

The third and final reference to Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant can be seen in the last verse of the Gospel today. We read, "Mary remained with her [i.e. Elizabeth] about three months and then returned to her house" (Lk 1:56). This verse runs in close parallel with a similar statement about the ark: "The ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obbedom the Gittite for three months, and the Lord blessed Obbedom and his whole house" (2 Sm 6:11).

These three parallel passages show us how St. Luke looked upon Mary as the new ark of God.

The first reading today from the book of Revelation also uses this theme of the ark to

bring out the mystery of the Assumption. We read, "God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant could be seen in the temple" (Rev 11:19).

Until now, the Ark of the Covenant had been hidden. Jeremiah the prophet had hidden it before the Babylonians destroyed the temple. He placed the ark in a cave on Mount Nebo. The prophet said, "The place is to remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows them mercy. Then the Lord will be seen in the cloud, just as it appeared in the time of Moses and when Solomon prayed that the place might be gloriously sanctified" (see 2 Mac 2:4-8). And now, at last, St. John tells us the Ark of the Covenant has been revealed.

And to show that St. John the Evangelist looked upon Mary as the ark, the Church immediately presents the following words for us to read: "A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon beneath her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (Rev 12:1). The Church connects the two ideas of ark and woman to show that these are fulfilled in Mary when she was assumed into heaven.

St. John, author of the book of Revelation, seems to have two intentions about the word "woman" in the first reading. First, it refers to the Church, beginning with the people of the old covenant, such as Mary from whom Jesus, the Messiah, was born. Secondly, it refers to Mary who is a type or example of the Church. She is a sample of what the Church is and will be at its best. She embodies the Church in her very person.

The book of Genesis (3:15) speaks of a woman whose offspring will crush the head of the serpent. Twice in John's gospel, Jesus addresses his own mother, Mary, as "Woman". St. John seems to be insinuating that Mary is that woman who crushes the head of the serpent through her Son, Jesus. This seems to be continued in the book of Revelation (first reading) in the woman clothed with the sun, with the Apostles or the people of God standing around as stars. The deadly poison of sin did not

corrupt her. She won perfect victory over the devil. She is immortal in glory with Jesus. This is what the mystery of the Assumption is all about.

Our responsorial psalm, 45, corroborates this teaching by saying: “The queen takes her place at your right hand in gold. ...” Mary, the Queen Mother, is already enjoying God’s favor at his right hand next to Jesus—so much did he desire her beauty (see Ps 45:12).

The rest of the Church will follow as the bride of Christ to be with him in glory. As the psalm continues, “They are borne in with gladness and joy; they enter the palace of the king.” If only we can be faithful like Mary and allow God’s will to be done in us as she did, we too will enter heaven, the palace of the King.

The second reading tells us, “Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” Mary is the first to follow him. We also read that Christ “must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” This perfect triumph over the devil, sin, and death is already perfectly realized in Mary. It is only a question of time before the same victory will be realized in our own persons. Mary assumed into heaven, body and soul, is a perfect picture of the future church in heaven, which includes us.

The second part of the Gospel read for the feast today is significant for us in still another way. It is Mary’s response to Elizabeth, called the Magnificat. In it, Mary magnifies and praises God for what he has done for her in her lowliness. It is meaningful to us today on this feast of the Assumption in that Mary fulfills for us spiritually, the role of Judith in the Old Testament.

Judith is the strong woman who cut off the head of their enemy, General Holofernes, to give victory to the chosen people who were in a hopeless situation surrounded as they were by the Assyrian army. The scripture is loud in praise of the woman who saved the people from destruction. St. Luke sees this event perfectly fulfilled in Mary. And the Church applies it today,

the feast of the Assumption, when Mary enters into glory, thus escaping uncontaminated by sin and triumphant over the devil. This final victory of hers will be shared with all her children.

Notice the similarity between the words of the Gospel and those concerning Judith as we lay them side-by-side for you. This makes Mary in her assumption the new Judith who has saved God’s people from destruction and caused them to triumph over their dreadful enemies.

First, we will quote the inspired words in praise of Judith followed by a parallel passage concerning Mary.

Uzziah said to Judith:

“Blessed are you daughter, by the Most High God, above all the women on earth... .” Jdt 13:18

Elizabeth said to Mary:

“Blessed are you among women” Lk 1:42
(The women are congratulated for their exalted position above all other women.)

In praise of Judith:

“Your deed of hope will never be forgotten by those who tell of the might of God. May God make this redound to your everlasting honor, rewarding you with blessings” Jdt 13:19, 20a

Mary’s words:

All ages to come shall call me blessed. Lk 1:48
(As a result of their saving deed, the women attain fame and are honored by the people.)

Judith’s words:

“God, our God, is with us. Once more he has made manifest his strength in Israel and his power against our enemies... .” Jdt 13:11

Mary’s words:

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. Lk 1:46
“He has shown might with his arm Lk 1:51
“He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones” Lk 1:52

(Both women see that victory was achieved through God’s power. He is the one to be praised.)

Judith's words:

"Praise God, who has not withdrawn his mercy from the house of Israel, but has shattered our enemies by my hand. ... The Lord struck him down by the hand of a woman." Jdt 13:14, 15

Mary's words:

"He has helped Israel his servant, remembering his mercy..." Lk1:54

"He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart. He has thrown down rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly." Lk 1:54, 51-52 (God, in his mercy, is praised for confusing the enemy and striking them down.)

The Gospel, therefore, is read today so that we can compare Mary to Judith. Her perfect sinlessness and consequent glorification in the mystery of her Assumption is a complete victory over the devil. Once more, God has chosen women, the so-called weaker sex, to achieve salvation and redemption.

SEPTEMBER 14 – THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS
Gospel: John 3:13-17

Jesus was trying to explain to Nicodemus heavenly things. He knew as one who had come down from heaven what he was talking about. By mentioning the "Son of Man", that mysterious figure in the book of Daniel, who is human and yet comes on the clouds and receives dominion, glory, and kingship from God (Dan 7:13-14), Jesus is hinting to Nicodemus at who he is. He is trying to enlighten him through a scriptural phrase that will awaken faith in him.

"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." The people complained against God and Moses in the desert. They were disgusted with the manna. In punishment, the Lord sent among the people serpents, which bit the people so that many of them died. They then admitted their sin and asked Moses to take away the serpents. At

God's command, Moses made a bronze serpent and mounted it on a pole; and whenever anyone who had been bitten looked at the bronze serpent, he recovered (Nun 21:4-9).

Jesus sees the bronze serpent as an image of his own crucifixion and the healing it will bring to a rebellious world. It shows the value of his being raised up on the cross: those who look on him with faith can obtain salvation.

Implied here, is the deadly and destructive nature of sin. The guilt of sin is like the pain of the biting of a fiery serpent; its infectious power is like the diffused venom of the serpent. The devil is the old serpent whose temptations are like fiery darts, which wound the sinner with fiery and deadly bites.

The word "lift up" refers both to being lifted up on the cross and being lifted up into heaven. In Jesus' return to his Father in heaven, the cross is the first step on the ladder of the ascension. Only when Jesus is raised up can the Spirit of which he has spoken to Nicodemus be given. Moses' serpent is an example of salvation coming through being raised up on a cross.

Looking at this in greater detail: In John, being lifted up refers to one continuous action of ascent: Jesus begins his return to his Father as he approaches death (13:1) and completes it only with his ascension (20:17). It is the upward swing of the great pendulum of the Incarnation corresponding to the descent of the Word which became flesh. The first step in the ascent is when Jesus is lifted upon the cross; the second step is when he is raised up from death; the final step is when he is lifted up to heaven. His being lifted up will lead to the gift of eternal life to all who believe in Jesus. The eternal life is the life of the sons of God, the life begotten from above, the life begotten of the Spirit. When Jesus will be lifted up in crucifixion and ascension, his communication of the Spirit will constitute a flowing source of life for those who believe in him (7:37-39); (see Fr. Raymond Brown, *The Anchor Bible*, Doubleday & Co., Inc., Garden City, New York, 1966).

We see the importance of faith in today's Gospel. Faith connects us to Jesus enabling us to draw divine life from him. Through faith, we attach ourselves to Jesus' person and become involved with him; we enter into communion with him; through faith, we begin to participate in the eternal life of God, which is in Jesus. Faith also accepts as true what God has revealed. Faith is a movement towards the person of Jesus; it is giving oneself to him and accepting him as he has revealed himself, that is, as the only, beloved Son, generated from the Father.

The eternal life given to those who believe is the supreme life of God; it refers to the quality of life we receive in communion with the divine; it is much more than endless human life; it is the divine life of the Trinity personally known and experienced through grace perfected by the gifts of wisdom and understanding. We will enjoy its fullness in heaven, but the clean of heart already have a foretaste of it on earth (Jn 17:3; Mt 5:8).

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” It is God's infinite love that prompted him to give and deliver to death his only begotten Son (infinitely loved, coequal with himself) for the salvation of the world. The Greek word used for this kind of love which comes from God is *agape*: it is the perfect, constant, unconditional love of a Perfect Being who is Love; it is love given even when undeserved; this is the love of God.

The magnitude of God's love is matched by the magnitude of his gift. He gave us his Son in the Incarnation and he gave him over to death in crucifixion. Jesus is the manifestation of God's love for the world. Thus the breadth of God's love is the world of mankind for whom Christ died; and the depth of his love is his most precious gift, his only beloved Son, whose life, especially his death, reveals how much God wants to share his own eternal life with mankind. It was an act infinitely costly to God. He did not spare his own Son, but surrendered him for us all (Rom 8:32), echoing the story of Abraham

and his son. John stresses the gratuity of God's love, extending even to this extreme.

The prevenient, merciful love of God takes the form of sending his only-begotten Son into the world and of delivering him up to death in expiation for sin. The Son is the most cherished and precious gift that God can bestow upon the world. Sending his Son into the world and giving him over to crucifixion is the most profound mystery of God's love; his expiatory death is the supreme manifestation of the Father's love.

The world is sinful mankind which has turned away from God. It is the world far from God and yet profoundly longing for him and sensing its need for redemption. That world is the object of God's infinite love and mercy. God has manifested that love in an historical act, the mission of the Son and his delivery to death. The only-begotten is also the uniquely loved. It is this Son, most intimately united to him and supremely loved, his own and only Son, that God has given to the world to snatch it from destruction.

The purpose of God's loving act is the giving of “eternal life”, which is supremely important and indeed indispensable since it saves men from “perishing”. Destruction already hangs over man, and he can only escape from his catastrophic situation by believing in the Son of God.

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.” Though alienated from God, the world is not evil in itself; it remains the object of divine compassion. The only purpose of the sending of the Son of God into the world was to save it. God wills the salvation and not the destruction of the world, the well being of all men and not just that of a privileged few.

NOVEMBER 1 – ALL SAINTS

Gospel: Mt 5:1-12a

Jesus went up the mountain and began to teach the crowds. St. Matthew sees Jesus as a new Moses who is proclaiming a new revelation.

Jesus sat down as a sign that he was ready to teach, since teaching was normally done in a sitting posture. It also conveys one who speaks with authority.

In the beatitudes, Jesus presents a complete change from the usual and generally accepted human values, such as those of the Pharisees. They saw earthly happiness as God's blessing and reward; they looked upon unhappiness and misfortune as God's punishment.

In general, ancient man, even among the people of Israel, had sought as his chief wealth, pleasure and power, and being held in high regard by others. He considered all these things as the acme of well-being, the fount of all happiness. Jesus here proposes a totally different way. He exalts and blesses poverty, meekness, mercy, purity, and humility.

The beatitudes institute a moral revolution. They are opposed to the conventional values of the world and pronounce blessings on those who do not share in these values. Not only are the external values of wealth and status repudiated, but also those goods of the person that are achieved and defended by self-assertion and strife.

The beatitudes lay down the religious dispositions and moral conduct that Jesus demands of all who want to follow him. They are different aspects of the demands for sanctity directed to everyone who wants to be Jesus' disciple.

Let us hope that as we review these beatitudes, our desire for holiness will become the axis around which our whole life will revolve.

“Blessed” means happy or fortunate. In each of the beatitudes, Jesus begins by promising happiness; he also points out the ways to achieve it. Everyone has an irresistible longing for happiness. Our Lord

points out in the beatitudes the ways that can lead to limitless and endless happiness, both presently in the kingdom of God, as well as throughout eternity.

The beatitudes are not simple statements; they are exclamations, congratulations: Jesus is saying, for example, “O the blessedness of the poor in spirit! Theirs is the kingdom of God!” It is a blessedness which exists here and now—not postponed to some future world of glory. It is not something into which the Christian will enter at some future time; it is something into which his holy disposition has already brought him into: the Kingdom of God.

This beatitude is serene and untouchable. It is a self-contained joy which is completely independent of all the chances and changes of life. The greatness of the beatitudes are triumphant shouts of bliss for a permanent joy that nothing in the world can ever take away.

Let us now look at each of the beatitudes and try to understand what dispositions Jesus is calling us to acquire. In this way, we will come to see how well disposed we are for union with God in the kingdom. By the “kingdom of God or heaven”, we mean God's presence in us, ruling our hearts through his grace and its virtues and gifts. To the extent that we surrender to God and his will, he will be able to rule our hearts more completely.

1.) “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

In other words, the poor in spirit, who cling to nothing, are already enjoying God's kingdom. God lives in and rules hearts which are free for him. Empty your heart, and God will fill it with himself. Free your heart from creature attachments in exchange for the enjoyment of God himself.

Poverty of spirit has more to do with a religious attitude of neediness and of humility towards God than with material poverty. That person is poor who has recourse to God without relying on his own merits, and who trusts in God's mercy to be saved. This religious attitude of poverty is closely related to what is called “spiritual childhood”.

A Christian sees himself as a little child in the presence of God, a child who owns nothing: everything he has comes from God and belongs to God. He is totally dependent on God for everything.

The poor are aware of their own lowliness. Their poverty of being does not allow them the arrogance and assertiveness of the wealthy and egoistic.

The poor in spirit stand without pretense before the Lord, realizing their lack of self-sufficiency. They are the humble and the helpless who put their whole trust in God.

In this beatitude, Jesus announces that the reign of God is being given to those very people who are wretched, powerless, and poor. They looked to God to help them, and their waiting and leaning on him has not been in vain. Their accepted earthly deprivations have disposed them for the kingdom of God, which is now theirs.

2.) “Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

In other words, those who turn from the world to God, through loss and grief, will be comforted by God himself.

We so often wrongly place our hopes for happiness in this world. Sooner or later this world fails to meet our expectations. We become disillusioned and saddened by it. Our experience of loss and frustration with this world and the grieving that follows it make us turn toward God for solace. God is mercifully present for us. His loving embrace comforts us. He cures our ills and heals our wounds. He turns our sorrows into joy. Indeed, with the enlightenment and change of direction that it has brought us, our mourning became a blessing. It has disposed us for the spiritual kingdom. We have allowed God to enter and rule our heart.

Another experience that brings us sadness is sin. In sin, we choose something other than God. Our preference for a creature may be serious enough

to actually separate us from God. For one with a delicate conscience, separation from God brings about the greatest sorrow.

We are also grieved when we see others who live in sin or who commit sinful acts which hurt others. We mourn interiorly as we see a good God ignored, insulted, and abused. When we return to God through Reconciliation, our hearts are gladdened as we are received by our merciful and forgiving God. We experience anew the blessedness of the kingdom of God within our own hearts.

3.) “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.”

In other words, the meek and gentle of heart possess the land of the kingdom in God’s self-gift.

The meek are those who have the fortitude to bear sweetly and gently the trials and adversities of life. They are sustained by the presence of God who rules their hearts.

The meek face hardships with patient endurance. Suffering patiently, in this way, is very effective in bringing about spiritual transformation in the person. Accepted suffering quickly spiritualizes us into the image of God (compare 2 Cor 3:18). “Although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor 4:16).

The meek person shows great strength as he or she remains serene, humble, and steadfast in adversity. The meek do not give way to resentment and discouragement. They are sustained by God, to whom they remain closely connected. They can truly say, “My strength and my courage is the Lord, and he has been my savior” (Is 12:2). God himself is the source of their meekness.

Jesus tells us, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29). In other words, accept the crosses and burdens of life; humbly bear with them instead of pridefully and angrily rebelling against them. Such an attitude toward them will sanctify you and make you like Jesus. He is the servant of the Lord, who “though he was harshly treated, he

submitted and opened not his mouth” (Is 53:7).

Such suffering, meekly borne, purifies our passions, especially that of anger. Patient endurance purifies our hearts and makes us gentle. And in our stilled, loving hearts, we discover God’s indwelling presence and that, in the whole process, we have come to possess the “land” of the kingdom of God within our very selves.

4.) “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.”

In other words, those who hunger and thirst for holiness will be satisfied with the fullness of God himself. They experience an overwhelming desire for God, whose holiness they have tasted, giving satisfaction to their famished souls.

Righteousness refers to God’s own holiness, which he shares with us through sanctifying grace. We try to do what is right by doing God’s will. By pleasing God in this way, we live in union with him and share or participate in his own divine life of holiness.

We seek to increase this holiness, deepening our union with God, by spending as much time as we can in prayerful reflection on the word of God and communion with God himself. We also seek God as we hunger and thirst for him in the Holy Eucharist. We seek his mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Our hunger for him increases with hearts freed from sin.

We express our hunger and thirst for God by yearning for him throughout the day. If he is the great love of our life, we express our longing for him. We are careful not to let other loves captivate our hearts or become consumed or distracted by the attractive creatures God has made. We keep God in the fore of our minds by reciting the mysteries of the rosary. We also increase our hunger for God by associating closely with God-loving friends. We try to go to daily Mass. We spend time with Jesus in the tabernacle. We love him with all our heart. We also express our love for him in other people through various forms of service.

In various ways, we express our deepening

desire for God’s own holiness in himself and find ourselves being more and more satisfied with the one we have consumed and into whom we have been transformed.

5.) “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

In other words, those who are merciful and compassionate toward others open their hearts to receive the mercy of God for themselves. By forgiving others, we dispose our hearts to receive forgiveness. By dispossessing our hearts to give to others in need, we free our hearts to receive God’s outpoured love.

We have understanding for other people’s defects and shortcomings for we are aware of our own. We can overlook them and help others cope with theirs, loving them despite, or even because of, the character weaknesses we see in them. We can be merciful because we have been shown mercy ourselves. We pass on to others the mercy that has been extended to ourselves. We share the very mercy of God, which we have received and assimilated. We then proceed to reflect God’s own steadfast love to others. This faithful, unconditional love of God becomes our own. We live and thrive in that divine “hesed” love through our union with God who suffuses us with his own merciful love. We ourselves are surrounded and permeated with that mercy; we cannot but convey it to others.

6.) “Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.”

In other words, the clean of heart let nothing mar their communion with God, so they enjoy the knowledge of his presence.

Their single-hearted allegiance to God keeps their heart free from any impediment that would block the sight of their indwelling God. The pure of heart let nothing come between them and God. They are determined to always do what is pleasing to him. They are committed to doing his will. They prudently avoid occasions of sin. They fortify themselves to resist the world, the flesh, and the devil. They unite themselves more firmly

to God through prayer; they meditate on the word of God daily as well as receive the Holy Eucharist. They go to confession and receive Reconciliation often to be purified from sin and receive new strength for fidelity to God. They befriend holy people to receive support in maintaining a pure love for God.

They try to deepen that purity of heart by detaching themselves from creatures that call attention to themselves unduly and tend to usurp their love for God unto themselves.

The pure of heart are prudently careful to keep away from harmful images that would absorb their attention. These would then distract the person and interfere with spirit-to-spirit communion with God.

The pure of heart enjoy being in the presence of God. They cherish the privilege of this personal knowledge of God and do everything they can to avoid losing it. They realize how “blessed” they are.

7.) “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

In other words, those who foster reconciliation and harmony among others prove themselves to be children of a peace-loving God.

Those who go about reconciling others through understanding and forgiveness are children of God like Jesus, whose great desire was that all might become one (see Jn 17:22-23).

To be peacemakers, we first of all must be at peace within ourselves. We are at one with God in following his will for ourselves. This unity of being with God makes for at-oneness within ourselves and with God.

God himself is peace. He continually identified himself to St. Catherine of Sienna as “Sea Pacific”: an ocean of peace. The prophet Micah revealed that the Messiah would stand “in the majestic name of the Lord, his God” and that “he shall be peace” (Mic 5:3-4). When Jesus came, he had that peace and gave it to his disciples. “Peace I leave with you,” he said; “My peace I give to you”

(Jn 14:27). That peace is of God; it is the most common experience we have of God. When we are intimately united to God, we exude that peace and can communicate it to others. It is a grace, given and received as God’s gift to us. We must lovingly communicate this gift of peace to others. We do this by a loving friendliness as we mingle amiably with others; we unify people by our conversations that speak well of others. We bring out their goodness and their virtuous accomplishments. We do not allow other’s negative comments to live on. We let them die.

We want all to think well of each other. We try to reconcile differences between people. We forgive others and encourage them to forgive one another. We, like Jesus, desire and work to bring all together in love. For, we are all children of God with one Father. We live together in the love and unity of the Holy Spirit.

8.) “Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

In other words, those who endure persecution and mistreatment because of their pursuit of holiness are already established in the power of the kingdom of God.

Those who are attacked and made to suffer because they are leading holy lives are already receiving the blessings of the kingdom of God.

Fidelity to God’s will disturbs those who live godless lives. These sometime attack the faithful to discourage them from their holy practices. This beatitude tells us that suffering various kinds of attack or ridicule from others in this way is particularly blessed by God. He strengthens them to endure and be sanctified by the experience. The very suffering endured for the love of God puts them in touch with God, thus enabling them to experience his reign in themselves.

Persecution may be experienced in subtle ways. Sometimes those who, out of fidelity to God, have large families are ridiculed. Refusing to cheat in school may result in having peers hating you. A person insisting on modest behavior on a date,

for love of God, may result in being shunned or rejected. Faithfulness to Sunday Mass may cause you to be left out of activities and eventually dropped by those you thought were your friends.

Jesus warned us, “If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but because you do not belong to the world, the world hates you ... If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (Jn 15:18-20).

Jesus further explained, “I have told you this so that you might have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world” (Jn 16:33).

NOVEMBER 2 – THE COMMEMORATION OF ALL THE FAITHFUL DEPARTED (ALL SOULS) Gospel: Jn 6:37-40

Jesus said to the crowds: “Everything that the Father gives me will come to me. ...” The Father gives Jesus disciples to follow and be formed by him. Jesus explained how the Father gives him followers: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. ...” (Jn 6:44). And how does the Father “draw” people to Jesus? He does so by grace. In general, he inspires them to do good and avoid evil. If they respond, he then goes on to enlighten their minds and warm their hearts with love for Jesus. He attracts people to Jesus through his virtuous life. They are made to see Jesus’ beautiful personality as he goes about doing good by his preaching and miracles, his works of mercy shown to suffering humanity.

It is important that people respond to that grace and go to Jesus. Jesus explains: “Everyone who has listened to the Father and has learned comes to me” (Jn 6:45).

These promptings of grace that the Father gives us through the Holy Spirit inspires faith in Jesus. We listen to the Father in prayer; he teaches us. Having learned about the truth of Jesus’ divinity as he reveals the Father, we begin to believe in

him. We are moved by this enlightened faith to come to Jesus. We reach out to him in hope and unite ourselves to him in love.

Jesus is our merciful Savior. He became human – one of us – precisely to save us from sin and give us eternal life. Therefore, he will not reject any of us who go to him. Jesus is the Holy One of God; when we go to him, it implies that we regret our sins and want to live a virtuous life. Jesus always receives repentant sinners. His mission given him by the Father is to save us from sin and give us eternal life. The Father’s will is Jesus’ will, which is to love and to snatch us from sin and the grips of the devil.

Jesus explained: “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work” (Jn 4:34). “... I always do what is pleasing to him” (Jn 8:29).

And it is the will of the Father who sent him that he should not lose anything of what he gave him. Jesus went to great lengths to redeem us from sin. His suffering by crucifixion and death shows how much he loves us and desires our salvation. We can be confident that he will receive us joyfully if we go to him (see Lk 15). His great desire is to give us the life of God, which is the beginning of eternal life even now (see Jn 5:24). This eternal life is a participation in the very life of God. It is spiritual and incorruptible. Physical death cannot harm it. If we possess it at death, our soul passes on to God to be with him to enjoy the heavenly life with all the saints—unless we have to be purified for a time from the remnants of sin in purgatory – for, nothing unclean can enter into heaven (see Rev 21:27). But Jesus tells us that he will raise or resurrect our body on the last day, the day of general judgment. Then both body and soul will enjoy the glory of God and see him face to face.

With this understanding, we can have the same confidence and attitude that Jesus expressed at the Last Supper, the night before he died. This is what the Gospel of John tells us: “... Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father” (Jn 13:1). He was “fully aware ...

that he had come from God and was returning to God” (Jn 13:3). He told his Apostles, “If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father ...” (Jn 14:28). For Jesus, death was a happy occasion; it meant that he was returning to the Father to receive the glory of which he had emptied himself in becoming human.

All of this is true for us too. This is the meaning of death. It is the moment when we pass from this world to the Father. We came from God who created our spiritual souls; when the body becomes too feeble or damaged for the soul to function, it leaves the body and returns to the Father who created it.

We go to God to be rewarded for a virtuous life, for having completed the mission for which he sent us into this world, and for fulfilling the will of God by a good life. Such a life spiritualized our being, making it receptive to the glory of God; our created spirit longs to be complemented by the uncreated spirit of God who will glorify it.

Jesus explained what will happen to us if we accept his word and live by it. He said, “Amen, amen, I say to you, the hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (Jn 5:25). We begin to live a supernatural life now by grace if we listen to and obey Jesus’ words; and when Jesus calls us on judgment day, we will arise to live the glorious, eternal life of heaven.

Jesus further explains, “... the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life, [and] those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of condemnation” (Jn 5:28-29).

As a sample that Jesus’ power is capable of fulfilling his promise, we have but to look at his power in raising his beloved friend Lazarus whose body had been decaying in the tomb for four days (Jn 11). He can and will do the same for us on the last day, when this world will come to an end. For we, like Lazarus, are the ones whom Jesus loves. Jesus has proven himself to be the resurrection and

the life: He embraced death for our sake so that he could enter into its realms and destroy it. His magnificent resurrection demonstrates that he is truly the Resurrection and the Life in himself and for us.

Our Gospel ends with these words: “For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him [on] the last day” (Jn 6:40).

To believe in Jesus is to come to him (Jn 6:35) and to open our hearts to receive his self-gift. Since Jesus is The Life (Jn 14:6), this means through receptive faith, we receive the eternal life of God. Looking upon him in his indwelling presence (Jn 14:23) as risen Lord, prompts us to come to him to be filled with his glorious life. To know Jesus in his indwelling presence as risen Lord is the beginning of eternal life (Jn 17:3). This supposes, of course, that we have removed sinful habits that blind us to his presence (Mt 5:8). We must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus (Heb 12:2) and remain continually connected to him to be unceasingly flooded with divine life. St. Paul was told by Ananias that God designated him “to see the Righteous One”, Jesus (Acts 22:12-14). And he, Paul, explains how we are also privileged to look upon our glorious Savior. “All of us”, he says, “gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory ...” (2 Cor 3:18). He explains how our gazing upon the glory of our indwelling Lord enables us to know in an anticipatory way the wondrous glory that we will experience in eternal life. This is how St. Paul puts it, “God ... has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of [Jesus] Christ” (2 Cor 4:6).

Thus we are given a foreknowledge of the glory of eternal life which we will receive in all the fullness when we pass through death to return to the Father like Jesus did. For the glory of God can be mystically perceived shining on the face of Jesus dwelling in our hearts.

The Book of Wisdom, which was written one hundred years before the coming of Jesus,

expresses the same belief in eternal life. The first reading puts it in these words, “The souls of the just (those who die in God’s friendship) are in the hand of God and no torment shall touch them”.

God sustains them in life and protects them from harm. “They are in peace.” All of their desires are being fulfilled. Their deep yearnings are being met with total satisfaction. Their hope for immortality is being realized. In their lives on earth, they experienced different levels of trial. But they continued to be faithful to God in doing his will. And since they died united to him in love, they will shine with his glory in heaven. God’s grace and mercy remain with his holy ones. His loving care remains with them throughout eternity.

NOVEMBER 9 – THE DEDICATION OF THE LATERAN BASILICA

Gospel: John 2:13-22

Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem.” The Passover was the greatest and most important religious feast for the people of the Old Testament. It was celebrated every spring to commemorate Israel’s rescue from Egyptian slavery. This feast was fulfilled when Jesus passed over from death to life on Easter Sunday; Jesus saved us from sin and death. The Passover was replaced by our celebration of Jesus’ glorious Resurrection. The festivals of Judaism are emphasized by John as part of his way of showing how Jesus has fulfilled the hopes of which they were the sign.

John mentions that Jesus attended three Passovers, indicating that his ministry extended over two years. Nearly eighty percent of John’s narrative places Jesus in Jerusalem. The synoptic Gospels give greater attention to the ministry of Jesus in Galilee.

It was obligatory for every male Jew who lived within fifteen miles of Jerusalem to attend the feast of Passover. It was the dream and aim of every Jew, no matter in what land he lived or how far away, to celebrate at least one Passover in Jerusalem. Astonishing as it may sound, it is

likely that as many as two and a quarter million Jews sometimes assembled in the Holy City to keep Passover.

Jesus traveled south from Galilee to Jerusalem in Judah and yet it is said that he “went up to Jerusalem”. That is because the Holy City dominated one of the highest points of the mountain chain of Palestine at about 2540 feet.

“He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves, as well as money-changers seated there.” The temple was divided into several courts. The outermost court, open to Gentile pilgrims, was used for selling sacrificial animals and exchanging foreign currency. The yearly tax of a half-shekel, which every adult male Jew owed to the temple treasury, could only be paid in a special coin called “sanctuary money”. The pilgrims gave in exchange for the coin the Roman denarius and the drachma, which were regarded as “unclean” because of the emperor’s image and certain pagan symbols which were stamped on them.

The merchants were selling oxen, sheep, and doves in the court of the Gentiles; these were the three kinds of animals which the Jews ordinarily offered in sacrifice. These were for sale at the temple so that the pilgrims would not have the added expense of bringing them from afar.

Every Israelite had to offer as a Passover sacrifice an ox or sheep if he was wealthy, or two turtledoves or two pigeons if he was not (Lev 5:7). In addition, he had to pay a half-shekel every year if he was twenty or over.

But there were flagrant abuses: pilgrims who could ill afford it were being fleeced at an exorbitant rate by moneychangers. It was a rampant and shameless social injustice; and what was worse, it was being done in the name of religion. The poor and humble pilgrims were practically blackmailed into buying their victims from the temple booths if they wished to sacrifice at all.

The temple authorities and the Jewish traders were making the court of the Gentile into an

uproar and rabble where no man could pray. The lowing of the oxen, the bleating of the sheep, the cooing of the doves, the shouts of the hagglers, the rattle of the coins, the voices raised in bargaining disputes, all of the noise, bellowing, and manure combined to make the court of the Gentiles a place where no one could worship. The conduct of the temple court shut out the Gentile from the presence of God. Jesus was moved from the depths of his heart because seeking men were being shut out from the presence of God. Prophets had already fulminated against these abuses, which grew up with the tacit (silent) permission of the temple authorities who made money by permitting trading.

It was that which moved Jesus to flaring anger; it was impossible for him to stand by passively while the worshippers of Jerusalem were treated in this way. It was the exploitation of the pilgrims by conscienceless men which moved Jesus to immediate wrath. Jesus proceeded to act as he did because God's house was being desecrated.

“He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, and to those who sold doves he said, ‘Take these out of here, and stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.’” Jesus is described as taking action only against the sellers, not against the buyers. His reprimand is directed to the sellers of doves, who refuse to be dislodged by the whip. For John, the words of Jesus come from his consciousness of being the Son. The implication is that he is the unique Son of the Father; he testified to his special filial relationship to God.

The aggressive actions of Jesus are a prophetic sign of the temple's imminent destruction (Mk 13:1-2). The expulsion of oxen, sheep, and doves (2:14) from the precincts likewise signifies the termination of animal sacrifice in the temple (4:21-24).

In applying this to ourselves, we realize that our hearts may also be congested with foreign, worldly elements which desecrate God's indwelling

presence. Our hearts may become so cluttered with things and filled with noise that it is no longer a sanctuary where God lives. His sacred dwelling place is so profaned that he is forced to leave us. We displace and insult him by preferring finite, created things to him, our Creator. He cries out to us also, “Take these out of here, and stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.”

“His disciples recalled the words of scripture, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’” This is a quotation from Psalm 69:10; the psalm depicts the suffering of the righteous who are pained by the insults that sinners heap upon God. It was taken to refer to the Messiah. When the Messiah came he would be burned up with a zeal for the house of God. Jesus, burning with righteous indignation, is outraged that business dealings have taken the place of prayer in the temple courts.

The conviction that Jesus was the Messiah seized the minds of the disciples even more deeply and more definitely. This action befitted none but the Messiah, and they were surer than ever that Jesus was in fact the anointed one of God. But this burning intensity of zeal for the temple will destroy Jesus; the action of his cleansing the temple led to his death.

“At this the Jews answered and said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’” The prophets had protested against the secularization of the temple; they promised that in the days of the Messiah “All will be holy in Jerusalem and no merchant will be found in the temple” (Zech 14:21; see also Jer 7:11-15; Mal 3:1-3). That is why the temple authorities demand a proof, a sign that he was the Messiah, authorized by God to act with such forcefulness.

Jesus refused to give the kind of spectacular sign the authorities asked for. Signs are for the well disposed to evoke or to confirm faith. He proceeded to give them a subtler sign, but one which was truly adequate for all believers.

“Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.’” Jesus, therefore, promises a sign which is that of his

risen body; for his body will be destroyed and in three days Jesus will raise himself. His statement is ambiguous since “destroy” and “raise up” can refer to a building as well as to the body of Jesus. It could, therefore, have been understood by the audience as a messianic claim to be the one who replaces the temple in three days, that is, in a short time (Hos 6:2). Besides, the Old Testament had foretold a rebuilding of the temple (Ez 40-46; Tob 13:10-12).

“The Jews said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?’” The Jews understand Jesus’ claim only on the natural level: how can he so quickly rebuild their beautiful buildings that had taken forty-six years to construct (from 20-19 B.C. to the current 28 A.D.)? Their misunderstanding will continue until his death trial when they will misrepresent him as having said, “I am able to destroy the temple...” The temple of which he spoke is not made by hands, for it is the Church made of believers, says St. Paul (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19-22; Confer Rev 21:22).

“But he was speaking about the temple of his body. Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken.” Throughout the whole scene John directs our attention from the Jerusalem temple to the new temple, which is the person of the glorified Jesus. He will become a new temple after his resurrection, when he draws disciples into a life of communion with himself and his Father (14:2-3).

After the resurrection, with the help of the Spirit who “brings to remembrance” the teaching of Jesus (14:26), disciples will interpret the words of Jesus with reference to his death and resurrection. Jesus, through his power as Son, will raise himself in three days from the dead and become a new temple insofar as through him believers enter into a living communion with the Father. Thus Jesus is the “place” of a new worship, and through faith in him, believers enter into a new relationship with God their Father (4:23-24; 14:2-3). Consequently,

the Incarnate Jesus, who clears out the temple, is a sign of a new temple who is the glorified Jesus: in other words, he is both the sign and the signified. However, only later will disciples come to understand the meaning of Jesus’ words and to see that his death and resurrection were confirmed by Scripture (Ps 16:10).

DECEMBER 8 – THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

“The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee call Nazareth.”

The village of Nazareth was situated in northern Palestine, in the region of Galilee. It was so insignificant as never to have been cited in the entire Old Testament. Nazareth’s sole claim to fame in history is as the residence of Mary and the Holy Family.

In keeping with the marriage customs of the time, Mary was probably a girl of some fourteen or fifteen years at the time of the annunciation. Her home was probably like most in this poor village, a cave dug into the side of a hill with perhaps a small extension to the front. There could have been a single door to the house, with a small opening on the side for ventilation. Light came from the open door or from a lamp consisting of a saucer of oil in which floated a wick. On the floor were perhaps a few mats, perhaps not even that. The floor itself was simply clay beaten hard by the many footsteps of the family.

Mary’s life was definitely a hidden one, leaving her intimate relationship with God undisturbed and free to grow and thrive.

“The angel ... was sent ... to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary.” The word used for virgin in Greek usually means a young girl of marriageable age. But St. Luke used the word *parthenos*, meaning virgin in the strict sense. St. Luke uses the word twice in the same sentence. We are reminded of the prophecy of Isaiah,

which says, “The virgin shall be with child, and bear a son ...” (Is 7:14). The prophet had used the word *alma* to mean a young unmarried woman in this passage. But when St. Matthew quoted it in his infancy narrative, he changed the word to *parthenos* as St. Luke did to indicate that Mary was a virgin in the strict sense. The virgin in Mary’s case implies that she had consecrated all of her love and affective powers to God. Her whole being was directed immediately toward loving God; her whole life was dedicated exclusively to God. It is the heavenly life already begun, as Jesus explained, “At the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels in heaven” (Mt 22:30).

The virgin was betrothed, promised in marriage, to Joseph. Espousal was a solemn engagement, a binding contract, among the Jews. It lasts one year. At the end of the year, the groom took the bride to his own house; then they became husband and wife.

“The virgin’s name was Mary.” In Hebrew, Mary’s name is Miriam, which means “the exalted one”.

Joseph, Mary’s fiancé, was of “the house of David”. Mary also is believed to be of the family of David. The book of Numbers says, “This is what the Lord commands with regard to the daughters. ... They may marry anyone they please, provided they marry into a clan of their ancestral tribe ...” (Num 36:6). Thus both Mary and Joseph were from the family of David. But it was important that Joseph also be “of the house of David”: following Jewish custom, Joseph’s legal fatherhood was equivalent to natural fatherhood in matters of inheritance. Joseph thus confers the privilege of a Davidic descendant upon Jesus. In this way, God’s promise to David of raising up an heir to “make his royal throne firm forever” can be fulfilled (see 2 Sam 7:12-13).

The angel said to Mary, “Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.” “Hail” is a common greeting, which literally means “Rejoice!” This greeting crowns the theme of joy and gladness that punctuates St. Luke’s Infancy Narrative. The call to

rejoice echoes Old Testament passages that address daughter Zion. In the prophets this refers to Mother Jerusalem, whose faithful children will rejoice in the Messianic age because God has chosen to dwell in their midst. Mary, chosen to be the virgin Mother of the Messiah, is greeted with the same summons because she is the embodiment of faithful Israel and the most privileged recipient of God’s Messianic blessings.

The angel’s greeting, “full of grace”, means that Mary is the object of God’s grace and favor. The Greek word means “most favored one”. This title not only preserves all that “full of grace” might imply of personal sanctity, but also points to the reason for that fullness; for the favor that will make of Mary the “Favored One” par excellence is the Messianic motherhood, the divine maternity.

The titles “full of grace” and “most favored one” indicate that Mary is the object of God’s grace and favor from the beginning. She has been chosen for a long time past, making her a vessel who has been and is now filled with divine life. God endowed Mary with an abundance of grace to prepare her for the vocation of divine motherhood, and to make her a sterling example of Christian holiness. The angel’s addressing Mary as “most favored one” points in the direction of Mary’s Immaculate Conception. St. Luke’s Annunciation Narrative is an important indicator of Mary’s lifelong holiness. God is her “Savior” (1:47) in the most perfect way possible: he sanctified Mary in the first instance of her conception and preserved her entirely from sin and even from the inclination toward sin that we experience.

Mary, more than any other human being in the Bible, is the recipient of the most impressive salutations (see Lk 1:28, 30, 35, 42-49; 2:19 ff, 34). In her, more than in anyone else, God’s Messianic fulfillment is achieved. As such, she has received more, from and through God’s anticipation of Jesus’ redemptive work, than anyone else in the Old or New Testament.

“The Lord is with you,” means God will aid

Mary in carrying out the role for which he has chosen her to be, mother of the Messiah. These consoling words are a guarantee that the promise will be efficacious; the divine purpose will be accomplished. Mary is assured of this; she will not be alone; God will be present working through and with her.

“But [Mary] was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.” Mary is naturally disturbed and surprised to hear herself called God’s favored one; she had as yet no idea of why she should be called this. There was also that initial fear which a person normally experiences when God gives him or her a special calling. The fact that Mary felt this fear is a perfectly natural reaction in the face of the supernatural and in the presence of an angel.

“Then the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God.’” God’s divine graciousness has endowed Mary with a supernatural quality making her pleasing in his sight. God has favored Mary to the full, above and before all other creatures. She was the closest of all creatures to God because of the all-important roll given her as Mother of the Messiah. Moreover, her humility, her joy in God, her love for others, her fortitude and plentitude of virtues demonstrate how well she has responded to her graced and favored condition.

The angel goes on to declare to Mary, “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus.” He is explaining to her why she is so favored by God. God’s plan for her is to become the Mother of the Messiah. She is about to conceive a son whom she is to name Jesus meaning “Yahweh saves.” The Gospel of St. Matthew explains, “You are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). By this time, Mary would have recalled the text from Isaiah which says, “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us!’” (Mt 1:25; Is 7:14). She would have realized her involvement in becoming Mother of the Messiah.

Another passage that Mary would have remembered was, “The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst [literally, in your womb]... Fear not, O Zion... The Lord, your God, is in your midst [in your womb], a mighty Savior; he will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love ...” (Zeph 3:15-17).

The angel reveals further that “He [her son] will be great and will be Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary’s son will be great because he is divine, a greatness he will not lose when he takes on the lowliness of human nature. The angel also reveals that Jesus will be king of the Davidic dynasty in keeping with his promise; his kingdom will last forever, for his humanity will remain forever joined to his divinity.

The “Most High” is a title for God commonly used by St. Luke. Mary’s future son is described with language ordinarily reserved for God’s redeeming presence among his people. He, in fact, will truly be Son of God.

The throne of David his father will be given to Mary’s son. This is a reference to God’s Messianic promise to David, which was given through the prophet Nathan. (This was what we read about in the first reading in 2 Samuel 7.) Since the monarchy came to an end, Israel had been waiting for its restoration under the Lord’s anointed, the Messiah. He would in a special sense be called “Son of the Most High”. The angel is now explaining to Mary that she is now being involved in this event, the fulfillment of God’s promise to send a Messiah who will occupy the throne of his father David.

“He will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” The “house of Jacob” is a traditional Old Testament term for the kingdom of Israel. The angel is revealing to Mary that Jesus, her Son, is this anointed Davidic ruler who will re-gather the tribes of Israel with

all the nations into his glorious kingdom (compare Acts 15:13-18). Exactly what that all meant in practice, only time would reveal; so much mystery and the darkness of faith would still await Mary to bring her to perfection. How is it that “he will rule ... forever”? The paschal mystery was still hidden from Mary; she would have to go through the dark night of Calvary before Jesus would be immortalized through his glorious resurrection. Only then could Mary and we understand how this prophecy could be realized and Jesus would rule forever, “and of his kingdom there will be no end”.

Here, Mary would have remembered the words of the prophet Daniel, “One like a son of man ... received dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away, his kingship shall not be destroyed” (Dan 7:13-14).

“But Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?’” It would be better if this passage read, “How will this be ...?” Mary is not questioning God’s ability to give her a son; but she is enquiring as to how such a plan will unfold. Her saying, “I have no relations with a man” refers to her virginal state. Her concern is that she is a virgin at present and that she intends to remain one in the future. The announcement of a miraculous conception thus causes Mary to wonder aloud how God will bless her with a son and yet preserve her virginal purity. Her words are inexplicable otherwise.

Mary believed the angel’s words—she did not doubt as Zechariah had done (1:18). Her question, “How will this be?” expresses her readiness to obey the will of God even though at first sight it implied a contradiction: on the one hand she was convinced that God wished her to remain a virgin; on the other, here was God also announcing that she would become a mother. Then the angel Gabriel announced God’s mysterious design, and what had been impossible, according to the laws of nature, is explained by a unique intervention on the part of God.

Mary’s resolution to remain a virgin was certainly something very unusual. However, in the Old Testament, there were some who, in keeping with God’s plan, did remain celibate: for example, Jeremiah, Elijah, Elisha, and John the Baptist. The Blessed Virgin, who received a very special inspiration of the Holy Spirit to practice virginity, is a first fruit of the New Testament, which will establish the excellence of virginity.

“And the angel said to her in reply, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.’ The Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High—God himself—will produce this seemingly impossible result. This power is attributed to the Holy Spirit of God. That Spirit hovered over the waters of creation (Gen 1:2) and now hovers over Mary to bring perfection to humanity, which otherwise would remain in a chaotic state.

“The power of the Most High will overshadow you” indicates that the conception of Jesus within the womb of Mary will be entirely supernatural, the result of God’s creative work within her. The shadow is a symbol of the presence of God. When Israel was journeying through the wilderness, the glory of God filled the Tabernacle and a cloud covered the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 40:34-36). The angel mentions the Holy Spirit, the Most High, and the Son of God, offering Mary a glimpse of the Trinity.

“Therefore,” the angel continues, “the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.” Mary’s virginal conception leaves no doubt that Jesus is God’s son—the child who will be born will not be the son of any human father; he will be conceived by the power of God alone and will, therefore, be the Son of God.

The prophet Daniel tells us that the Messianic times will be marked by the anointing of “a most holy” one (Dan 9:24). Jesus’ humanity was anointed by the divinity at his conception. This signals the inauguration of the Messianic age. The Holy One will be Son of God in an entirely new sense because he will be conceived by the power of God alone.

“And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God.” Elizabeth is Mary’s relative, but we do not know to what degree—it is not stated.

The sign given to Mary in confirmation of the angel’s announcement to her is the pregnancy of her aged relative, Elizabeth. If a woman past the childbearing age could become pregnant, why, the angel implies, should there be doubt about Mary becoming pregnant as a virgin? “For nothing will be impossible for God.” The angel Gabriel insists that God can surmount every obstacle to motherhood, including the infertility of Elizabeth and the virginity of Mary. Mary, unlike Zechariah, had not asked for a sign or a proof from the angel, but she was given one anyway.

“Mary said,” in response to the angel, “Behold,

I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.” Now that Mary knows the divine purpose, she accepts God’s will and plan unhesitatingly and with perfect simplicity. Mary freely and actively embraces God’s invitation to bear the Messiah. The Greek expression denotes more than mere passive acceptance, indicating that she wishes or desires to fulfill God’s will in her life. Unlike Zechariah she welcomes the angel’s words uninhibited by doubt. She humbly accepts God’s will for her and considers herself as God’s handmaid and servant. Gladly, she will do whatever God wants of her. And she persevered in doing his will to the very end, even to “standing by the cross of Jesus” as he was being crucified (Jn 19:25). By her obedience, she undid what Eve had done by her disobedience. Thus Mary became the New Eve, “the mother of all the living” (Gen 3:20) in grace, in cooperation with the New Adam, the Messiah (see Rom 5:17-19; 1 Cor 15:20-22, 45-49).

THE APPENDIX

EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Luke 6:39-45

We begin this passage with, “Can a blind person guide a blind person?” The answer is “no”! They will both fall into a pit. In other words, Jesus’ disciples must become enlightened by Jesus in order to be able to lead others. He must remove his own blindness or ignorance about the spiritual life of the Kingdom in order to be able to teach and lead others. He must also become aware of his own sins and selfish habits to be able to see clearly the faults of others to be able to help them.

Jesus’ disciples must learn from him and become like him to be effective leaders and teachers in the Kingdom. Jesus is divine yet he humbly walks the way of humans. Even when the disciples become fully enlightened, they must be humble like their master and not lord it over others, or think themselves better or superior to those they minister.

A true disciple of Jesus must be conscious of his own lowliness and sinfulness. He must be aware of his own lack of virtue and generosity. He will realize how imperfect he is when he compares himself to Jesus’ sinlessness and generous love for others.

A true disciple examines himself, is aware of dominant faults, and works at overcoming them. In that way he avoids seeing the defects of character in his neighbor while ignoring his own, or even being totally unaware that his sinful attitudes are even worse than those of his neighbor. He must first correct his own sinful habits before he will be in a position to help others correct theirs. The difficulty he experiences in the reformation

of his own life will establish him in compassion and knowledge to be able to show commiseration for others. Humbled by self-knowledge he will approach the wounded with delicacy and compassion, realizing that he is himself wounded and in need of a deeper conversion.

A person who is being enlightened by Jesus and works with himself in cooperation with God’s grace to overcome his sinful tendencies begins to live a virtuous life. The fruits of his life are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal 5: 22-23). He is like a good tree that bears good fruit. That is how you can tell a good person from an evil one: these salient virtues are absent in the latter. Instead, he will produce certain vices or evil habits. St. Paul calls them works of the flesh, such as fornication, impurity, jealousy, anger, quarrels, selfishness, drunkenness ... (See Gal 5:19-21).

You can tell who a person is simply by observing his speech: “from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks”. Coarse speech and vulgarity will reveal one’s heart and mind. Harshness and unkindness show how shallow his love is. Impatience and anger demonstrate his lack of fortitude and so his defective union with God. These various vices are expressed in a person’s words charged with various emotions.

Calling upon God’s name in prayer is needful. This supposes that we try to do his will. Otherwise, our words mean nothing and are ineffective.

Listening to Jesus’ words must lead us to carry them out. Such efforts build moral strength in us. It is like building our house on a rock foundation. The trials of life cannot destroy it. It is important, therefore, that we meditate on God’s word daily. That word will prompt us to carry it out in our daily lives through the practice of virtue. But a casual listening, without the intent of carrying it out through virtuous living, will be ineffective. Our moral character will remain weak. We will be unable to resist the temptations of life. This will bring about our spiritual ruin.

**NINTH SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME
Gospel: Luke 7: 1-10**

Jesus spends much of his time teaching. His very nature is to reveal the truth: “I am the Truth,” he says (Jn 14:6). There is urgency within his very being to speak the words of eternal life. The people who live in darkness have such a need to hear his enlightening words—just as we do. After he finishes his teaching he goes to Capernaum.

There is a centurion there, a military officer commanding a hundred men; he is probably in the service of Herod Antipas. This centurion has a valuable slave who is about to die. He hears about Jesus. (Let us hope that we do our part also to make him known.) The centurion sends a delegation of Jewish elders to ask him to come and save the life of his slave. These men intercede for the centurion to strongly urge Jesus to come to the aid of this deserving man. He has even built the synagogue for them—he has such a deep respect for the Jewish faith and nation.

So Jesus goes with them. We see here the power of intercessory prayer. When Jesus is only a short distance from the centurion’s house, he sends friends to express to Jesus that he does not feel worthy to have him enter under his roof. He is truly a humble man; he may have also been aware that it is considered unclean for a Jew to enter the house of a Gentile. He explains to Jesus through his friends that he does not feel worthy to come to Jesus himself. This good man believes in the power of Jesus’ word; he has only to say it and his servant will be healed. The centurion is familiar with ordering his soldiers and they obey him. He believes that Jesus has the authority to command the illness of his slave to leave and it will depart.

Jesus is astonished at the man’s faith—a faith greater than any he has experienced in Israel. When the messengers return to the house, they find the slave completely healed. Here we see the power of faith and how it causes the slave to be

cured at a distance. This is what our faith does for us on a spiritual level when we go to receive Jesus in the Eucharist. We are reminded to have that same kind of humble faith when we pray, “Lord I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.”

**TENTH SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME
Gospel: Luke 7: 11-17**

The *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible* tells us that Nain is a “small Galilean village about six miles southeast of Nazareth”. Jesus is being accompanied by his disciples and a large crowd. As he draws near the gate of the city he meets a funeral procession. The only son of a widowed mother is being carried out for burial. At the sight, Jesus’ heart is moved with pity. In losing her son, she is facing great hardship. He would have been her only means of support as she grows older, for her husband has already died. Now she would depend on the charity of others to survive (see Deut 26:12). There is no social security otherwise. Besides the loss of her son, this mother has other reasons to mourn and shed tears. Jesus is saddened to experience her plight. Anticipating what he will do, he tells her not to weep. He then touches the stretcher on which the dead man is being carried. The bearers then come to a stop. Jesus then commands the young man to arise. The dead man suddenly sits up and begins to speak! Jesus then gives him to his mother. The people are astonished and filled with reverence for God.

Jesus does not become unclean by touching the bier; instead, he communicates life by his touch and life-giving word. This helps us to understand how important it is to draw near to Jesus and listen to his word.

We can see why St. Luke calls Jesus “Lord” in verse 13. This is the Old Testament Greek word to translate God’s personal name, “Yahweh”. Through this miracle, the creative life-giving

power in Jesus is clearly seen.

The people praise God in their amazement and exclaimed that “A great prophet has arisen in our midst”. This episode parallels Elijah’s resuscitation of the widow’s son in 1 Kings 17:17-24: the words, “gave him to his mother,” are quoted from this incident. We can see why the people see Jesus as a great prophet; a new Elijah has appeared in their midst. Because of such a miracle, Jesus’ reputation quickly spreads throughout the surrounding area.

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