



Understanding the Sunday Gospels

CYCLE A

by Father Conley Bertrand

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

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FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Gospel: Matthew 24:37-44

Advent is a word that means coming, the coming appearance of Jesus, in grace at Christmas and in glory at the end of the world.

“When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Savior’s first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for the second coming” (CCC 524).

What is the second coming? It is “the Parousia, the glorious return and appearance of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ as judge of the living and the dead at the end of time...when history and all creation will achieve their fulfillment” (CCC Glossary).

St. John describes Jesus’ coming in these words, “Behold, he is coming amid the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. All the peoples of the earth will lament him. Yes, Amen” (Rev 1:7).

St. Matthew tells us further that, at the Parousia, when Jesus arrives at the second coming, “all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming upon the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Mt 24:30). It is difficult for us to grasp fully the image of “power and great glory” that is being conveyed here. The supreme majesty of God will have a terrible impact on us. The holy and beloved disciple, John, passed out when he saw Jesus in his glory. He got knocked out of his wits!

Jesus explains what will happen at his coming to those who are right with God, those who do his will and are free from sin: “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43). We will be transfigured with God’s own glory.

“The Transfiguration [of Jesus on the mountain] gives us a foretaste of Christ’s glorious coming,

when he ‘will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body’ (Phil 3:21). The Transfiguration ‘is the sacrament of the second regeneration’: [that is]our own Resurrection” (CCC 556) St. Matthew’s gospel tells us that when “[Jesus] was transfigured before them, his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light” (Mt 17:20).

The book of Daniel describes the effects of the Parousia in these words: “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some shall live forever, others shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace. But the wise [those who live according to God’s word] shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament, [a brilliant sky] and those who lead the many to justice shall be brightly like the stars forever” [shining in God’s glory] (Dan 12:2-3).

As we are made aware and prepared for Jesus’ second coming through this liturgical season of Advent, we are also being prepared to celebrate Jesus’ first coming at Christmas. We need to deepen our conversion to God by a thorough examination of conscience and a good confession of sin in the sacrament of reconciliation. This sacrament is being made available to you in this parish before and after each Mass. I am waiting for you, to relieve you of the burden of sin. The Lord Jesus is full of compassion and mercy for us. He would very much like to see you prepare for his coming totally free from sin and filled with holy joy and expectation. We must entertain the hope of a new year of grace, when we will make new strides in holiness. We will strive to love God and neighbor more than we ever have before.

The Gospel takes us back to the days of Noah. Noah was a man who lived by faith; he was preserved from the destructive flood because of his obedience to God. But the rest of society proved itself insensitive and careless about God. Preoccupation with food, drink, and married life made people forget about the most important thing of all: eternal life.

Earthly life is meant to prepare for eternity—it is not meant to be an end in itself. Absorption in work, worry, and self-gratification impedes awareness of God and his coming. That is why Jesus tells us: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given you besides” (Mt 6:33). Give eternal life the importance it deserves; put God first in your life. Abstain from anything that will stain your conscience and interfere with heart-to-heart communion with God. God tells us what he told Abraham 1850 years before Christ: “Walk in my presence and be blameless” (Gen 17:1).

The people in Noah’s day were unprepared for the flood and the end of their earthly life. “So will it be also at the coming of the Son of Man.” We do not know when Jesus will return. We must remain prepared and ready for his appearance at any time—or get left behind. “Two men will be out in the field...[or] two women grinding at the mill ... one will be taken, and one will be left.” The one who is prepared will be taken into the kingdom; the other will be left behind, separated from the blessed, and bound for eternal pain of separation from the enjoyment of God. One is spiritually well disposed, the other is unfit for the kingdom of God. Externally, they appear to be similar, but God knows the heart of each.

It is in the context of the ordinary affairs of life: farm work, housework, and office work that God calls people and they respond: that is where eternal happiness or punishment is decided. To be saved, one simply has to be faithful to the Lord in the middle of ordinary everyday affairs.

We must remain alert and attentive to God and his will. “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Mt 26:41). We must give ourselves to constant prayer and communion with God through which we draw divine strength to resist the pull of temptation that tries to lure us away from fidelity to God.

“Therefore, stay awake!” Vigilance requires discipline through spirit assertiveness. “For you do not know on which day your Lord will come.”

Stay awake because of the uncertainty of the day. The important thing is not to be speculating about when these events will happen and what form they will take, but to live in such a way that they find us in the state of grace. Live each day as if it were the last. In what condition would you like your soul to be when the Lord appears to judge you? The thief in the night appears without warning. Therefore, be ready so you will not suffer loss--the loss of eternal salvation.

“Be prepared for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.” Maintain a clear conscience, free from the least sin; live in the presence of God, always intent on doing his will.

Let us rephrase the Gospel in other words: The flood is a symbol of judgment on the faithless, and deliverance for the faithful. A true disciple lives righteously, in constant readiness for the coming of the Son of Man. At the end of the age, there will be a sudden and final separation of the righteous from the unrighteous illustrated by two graphic pictures. Those taken represent the gathering of the elect (v.31); the ones left behind, those rejected.

The example of a thief breaking into a house (literally, “digging through” the mud walls) emphasizes that one never knows when the Parousia will happen—so constant readiness is essential (see the International Bible Commentary). Jesus’ emphasis is entirely on the suddenness and unexpectedness of the Parousia ... In this way, the kingdom is always imminent and the eschatological moment is always now. The same is true for our personal death. The practical conclusion from all this is perpetual vigilance. As in the days of Noah, (Gen 6:9--9:17)...judgment comes when people are least prepared.

Two people go about their ordinary affairs, to all appearances, entirely alike; yet one is marked for judgment and the other for glory; and when it comes, no one knows ... Jesus’ emphasis is on here-and-now readiness for God’s summons, whenever it comes (see *The Four Gospels*, Fr. Bruce Vawter, C. M.).

The second reading clarifies and completes the Gospel.

It is the hour now for you to awake from sleep." Sleep images the fact that many are oblivious to the supernatural and the life of a persons conscious relationship with God. We are called to live in communion with the living God. But many are asleep when it comes to a living relationship with God.

"The day is at hand." The day of the Lord is coming. We must live in the light of his presence.

"Let us then throw off the works of darkness." Put an end to sinful behavior. Get ready to meet God who condemns and punishes sinfulness.

"Put on the armor of light." We are at war with the forces of evil. We must clothe ourselves with the righteousness of God, God's own holiness—sanctifying grace. We must carry the shield of faith and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God (see Eph 6:14-17).

"Let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day ..." We must be on our best behavior as we do in the broad daylight. "Not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and lust, not in rivalry and jealousy." In other words, wild partying, excessive drinking of alcoholic beverages, and sexual indulgence and sinful works of darkness: they are evil; they will be punished and excluded, those who live that way, from the kingdom of God.

"But put on the Lord Jesus Christ." Behave as a child of God--like Jesus. Be able to say with St. Paul, "Yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me."

"And make no provisions for the desires of the flesh." Renounce sinful inclinations. Live by faith rather than by feeling. "Live by the spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh" (Gal 5:16).

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Gospel: Matthew 3:1-12

As we await the coming of the Messiah, the Church teaches us about him by presenting certain Old Testament passages from Isaiah that foretell his coming. Let us reflect upon the meaning of our first reading from the prophet Isaiah and try to implement it in our lives.

"On that day, a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse and from his roots a bud shall blossom." What does that mean? After the Babylonian exile, only a stump of the Davidic dynasty will remain; from it will arise the new shoot, the Messianic King.

"The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him". The life-giving breath of Yahweh will endow the Messiah with extraordinary gifts to enable him to accomplish his mission. He will be anointed with the Holy Spirit and the fullness of gifts, which he will shower upon the world. Here, we recall how the Holy Spirit came to rest upon Jesus in the form of a dove when he was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist.

The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are mentioned here by name: wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. Our translation mentions fear of the Lord twice. But the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate replace the first fear of the Lord with the gift of piety, for a total of seven.

"He shall judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the land's afflicted." Rather than by "appearance" and "hearsay", the Messiah will judge correctly, according to the truth. He will not be swayed by popular opinion or graft. The "poor" and "the land's afflicted", such as helpless infants in the womb, will receive their rights.

"Justice shall be the band around his waist"--he will do what is right before God. "And faithfulness a belt upon his hips"--he will be faithful to God by the consistent practice of virtue.

As a result of the abundance of grace, the Messiah will bring about harmony in creation again. Paradise will be restored. The reconciliation of opposites will be reinstated; the seemingly incompatible will be reconciled and dwell together in peace and concord: the wolf with the lamb, the leopard and kid, the calf and the young lion, the cow and the bear, the lion and the ox, the baby and the cobra, the child and the adder.

“There will be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain;” The mountain represents the kingdom of God in which all will dwell without conflict or discord. “For the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as water covers the sea.” In other words, the personal experiential knowledge of God’s indwelling presence is all satisfying and makes individual differences secondary, insignificant, and pale into nothingness. Thus, we are able to allow individual differences; we respect the other person and his individuality. We also accept and integrate our own weaknesses, scars, and defects of character. Accepting our imperfections and sins brings about humility and longsuffering; with patient endurance, we put up with unvirtuous traits we see in ourselves. Our weakness causes us to turn to God who completes us and makes up for our imperfections and sins by his compensating merciful presence. This is how the reconciliation of opposites and integration takes place within our persons. As a result, peace and communion with God flourish.

St. Therese is a perfect example of this approach in handling our weaknesses. Her little way of spiritual childhood teaches us to: 1. admit our weakness; 2. accept the truth about ourselves; 3. appeal to God for help; 4. await his saving grace as we strive with all our might to overcome our weaknesses.

What is true for personal integration by way of acceptance and fleeing to God to make up for our deficiency is also true for the integration and reconciliation in society. We accept others as they are as we look to God for the grace of tolerance

and patient endurance while we work to change things for the better.

As Psalm 72 predicts, King David’s son, the Messiah, will be endowed with the very righteousness of God. “Justice (that is righteousness) shall flower in his days!” The very holiness of God will flourish among us; through sanctifying grace, people will live in union with God and do what is right. Peace will abound.

“On that day, the root of Jesse (Jesse, the father of David from whom the Messiah sprang), set up as a signal for the nations, the Gentiles shall seek out, for his dwelling shall be glorious.” This is what we Gentiles are in the process of doing; we have come to see and be spiritually enriched with the gifts of the Messianic king, Jesus Christ our Lord. He is gloriously present in the Mass, so we can receive him in our very persons. And he dwells gloriously in the tabernacle, so he can continue to be with us. Isn’t it a marvelous experience to live in the fullness of time?

He is the one whom John the Baptist is pointing out in the Gospel. John tells us that the Messianic king is about to appear to give us his kingdom. We need to make fervent preparation to receive the holy one of God.

“John ... appeared, preaching in the desert ...” The desert is an environment free from the poison of secularism; it is free from enticements to immorality, luxury, noise, and distractions; thus our senses do not so easily impede communion with God. We all need to seek or make our own desert place in life. Where do you go for silence, solitude, and prayer?

John is saying: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” Repent means to have a change of heart. We must change from being turned to creatures for self-gratification, to God in praise of his glory. Repent: change your lifestyle: —separate yourself from a sinfully inclined secular world;—flee the attractions of this world for the spiritual world of God;—engage in spiritual exercises such as prayer and sacred reading.

“It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said: ‘A voice of one crying in the desert, Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.’” At last! The time of fulfillment has come. What the prophet had predicted centuries before Christ is about to take place. The time for the arrival of the Messiah is near.

“Prepare the way.” Renounce sin and self-centeredness. What does that mean for you personally? How do you need to change? Ask your spouse, child, or friend.

“John wore clothing made of camel’s hair and had a leather belt around his waist.” He wore a penitential garment like Elijah the prophet: uncomfortable clothing is one way to contradict the correct sinful passions and desires.

“His food was locusts and wild honey.” John also tamed his passions by eating very little. Fasting is a way of discipline that strengthens the spirit and weakens the sinful inclinations of the flesh. It frees us to put our attention on the indwelling God. Eating unappetizing food such as grasshoppers can also quench our voracious appetites.

“All ... were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.” The whole region is coming to John the Baptist to hear his preaching about the coming of the Messiah. He brings them to repentance. They express their sorrow for sin and their desire to change to a virtuous way of life by baptism in the Jordan River. This religious ritual symbolizes the purification taking place through sincere repentance. (It is not the Christian baptism, which confers the Holy Spirit and removes original sin.) John’s baptism is an external washing showing the purification that takes place in us when we have contrite hearts and confess our sins. John addresses the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptisms, as, “You brood of vipers!” These are deceitful and corrupt leaders of the people. Their pride, hypocrisy, and avarice are poisonous venom for society. “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance?”

They sense God’s coming anger in judgment. They must give evidence that they have turned away from sin with deep sorrow for offending God. They must do good works that indicate a change of heart, a life of faithfulness to God, obedience to his will, and love for his people through charitable assistance.

“And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’” Pride in a name, without personal virtue to show for it, is worthless. Fleshly descent does not guarantee a share in the blessings promised to the descendants of Abraham. “For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones.” God does not depend on a particular race to inspire faith in someone. We can give it to a Gentile as well as to a Jew.

“Even now the ax lies at the root of the tree.” Judgment and condemnation are close. They will soon take place. The Messiah is about to appear. “Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” The punishment of fire symbolizes intense pain caused by separation from God. Sinfulness is completely opposed to the all-holy God and can have no part with him. If love does not motivate conversion of life, perhaps the fear of punishment will.

“I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” The prayerful, penitential John is in touch with the very holiness of God and his Messiah: “the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:69). The humble John does not feel worthy even to be his slave.

“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Jesus’ baptism of blood on Calvary will bring about his glorification by the Holy Spirit. He will give us this same Holy Spirit who will purify and cleanse us from original sin as well as from personal sin.

“His winnowing fan is in his hand.” Judgment is about to take place: He will separate the good from the bad. “He will clear his threshing floor

and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” The good will be preserved from harm and given the happiness of heaven; but the evil will experience the undying pain of separation from God--and that is hell.

The Messiah will pass judgment and condemn sin through his word and the gift of his Spirit in his first coming. It will only be in his second coming that he will pass final judgment and condemnation on evildoers with eternal damnation and definitive separation from the people of God.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT **Gospel: Matthew 11:2-11**

This Sunday is known as “Gaudete” (the Latin word for “Rejoice”) Sunday. The entrance antiphon announces the theme of the Mass as “Rejoice in the Lord always”, and explains why: because “the Lord is near. God is lovingly present within our very hearts if we are in the state of grace; and we have free access to him simply by adverting to him in faith. We come into contact with him in loving remembrance. We enter into communion with him through personal love; we receive his outpoured love and return that love with affection. We maintain this mutual, interpersonal communion with him throughout the day as we go about doing his will in loving remembrance.

God himself is our joy. His nearness to us through his indwelling presence fills our whole person with heavenly happiness. Our joyful experience of the indwelling God reminds us of the words of Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity: “It seems to me that I have found my heaven here on earth, since heaven is God and God is in my soul.” The time for us to celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation, which makes all of this possible, is also very near.

The first reading expresses our theme of joy. Isaiah, the prophet who ministers to the people

of God from 742-687 B.C., foretells the liberation of the chosen people from the the Babylonian exile which lasted 60 years, from 598-538 B.C. This liberation is meaningful to us because it foreshadows our being set free from the slavery to sin by the coming of the Messiah.

In poetical imagery, the prophet foretells a new exodus and a new creation when God delivers his people in joy. “The desert ... will exult ... rejoice and bloom...with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song.” As God’s people, we will “see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God.” We will experience the presence of God for ourselves.

What encouragement we are given! What an amazing love God has for us! That he would become one of us in the Incarnation, save us from sin by his awesome passion and death, give himself to us in the Holy Eucharist, and continue to be so close to us as to live within our very hearts! What love he shows us! How encouraging to us in our land of exile! So, take courage: “Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak, say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you.” The Lord is near you to support you in all your trials, whether they are outside of you or inside, within your very ailing or oppressed person. He redeems you through your very sorrows and trials; through his own sufferings on earth he gives value to yours so that through them, “[you] are being transformed into his very image from glory to glory” (2 Cor 3:18).

Meanwhile, “Be patient [like] the farmer [who] waits for the precious fruit of the earth ... Do not complain, brothers and sisters...Take as an example of hardship and patience ... the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.”

We are already experiencing a foretaste of the Isaian prophecy: “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened”: We already see and experience for ourselves the new world of God and the beauty of his spiritual kingdom.

“The ears of the deaf be cleared:” Now we can hear the word of God. The sin and anger or lust that obstructed our hearing has been forgiven and removed. We can now understand the word of God.

“Then will the lame leap like a stag”: Our weakened moral condition has now been strengthened by the superabundant grace given us by Jesus’ coming made so near in the Eucharist and his indwelling presence. We leap with joy in being able to overcome our sinful addictions.

“Then the tongue of the mute will sing”: Now that we are filled with the joy of God in our hearts, we want to express it with song. We want to praise God in song for having redeemed us and for remaining so near to us in his joy-giving presence.

“Those whom the Lord has ransomed will return and enter Zion singing, crowned with everlasting joy; they will meet with joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning will flee.” The joy of being freed from sin by Jesus in his first coming in grace gives us a foretaste of the perfect joy and glory that will be given us in his second coming: Zion will become heaven.

The Gospel brings us into the very presence of Jesus who is fulfilling the Isaian prophecy. In it, Jesus the Messiah has arrived. His various miracles of healing demonstrate that the kingdom of God, and its transforming power, has arrived. We ourselves have experienced its healing power, for example, through the forgiveness of sins and the joy of living a virtuous life in the presence of God. But John the Baptist is no longer on the scene. He is in jail. “Herod [Antipas] was the one who had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother, Philip, whom he had murdered. John had said to Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’ Herodias harbored a grudge against him and wanted to kill him...” (Mk 6:17-19).

“When John ... heard in prison of the works of the Christ, he sent his disciple to Jesus with this question, ‘Are you the one who is to come,

or should we look for another.’” The term, “the one who is to come”, refers to the Messiah. This phrase is taken from the last of the prophets, Malachi, who said, “Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me. And suddenly there will come to the temple the Lord whom you seek, and the messenger of the covenant whom you desire. Yes, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts” (Mal 3:1). So the people understand this passage as referring to the Messiah; he is the “one who is to come” as the prophet announced.

John knew that Jesus was the Messiah. When he baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, “the heavens were opened [for him] and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove [and] coming upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’” (Mt 3:16-17). So why does John send his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come...”?

John’s message has been one of doom (Mt 3:7-12). The ax was at the root of the tree; the winnowing process was already beginning; the divine fire of cleansing judgment had begun to burn. Perhaps John was thinking: “When is Jesus going to go into action? When is he going to blast his enemies? When is the day of God’s divine retribution going to begin?” Jesus is not the kind of Messiah John expected him to be.

If Jesus is the Messiah, as John believes him to be, why is he, John, languishing in prison while tyrants like Herod Antipas are still free? When will the Messianic Kingdom be inaugurated, as it should, in a burst of power and with the terrible might of the wrath of God, crushing all opposition and establishing right order? The Baptist’s question, then, comes to this: “Since you are the Messiah, why are you not acting like the Messiah?” Perhaps John, in his lonely prison cell, just needs, anew, to hear Jesus’ confirmation of his belief in him as Messiah.

Another reason why John sends his disciples to Jesus is so that they can meet him in person and

see for themselves what he is like. Then they too will become his disciples, just as Andrew and John have. The answer Jesus gives John's disciples are the signs of the arrival of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God given by Isaiah in chapter 35, which we hear in our first reading. They present another aspect of the Messiah's ministry. They expand upon John's narrow view of on-coming judgment. He focuses on the Messiah as judge and punishment of evildoers. In reality, this will not occur until the Second coming. The Isaian passage focuses on the fact that the Messiah comes to enlighten the blind, heal the lame, cleanse the lepers, give hearing to the deaf, raise the dead to life, and bring good news to the poor. Jesus could be seen performing all of these different acts of compassion.

One would expect that raising the dead would be the high point in the list of blessings given by the Messiah. Instead, it is that "the poor have the good news proclaimed to them". The poor includes not only those who are financially or culturally deprived, but also all of human kind. All of us are poor in being and deprived in some fashion. We are all in need of the good news contained in the Gospel teaching of Jesus. We are all deprived and oppressed in some way or other. Jesus comes to redeem us from every adverse and debilitating situation in life. He experienced it all in his life; his sufferings reached a high point in his crucifixion and death; but he turned it all into the glory of the resurrection and life everlasting. Jesus is the model of what will happen to us if we accept God's will in the human condition the way He did. Through it all, we are being transformed into his very image from glory to glory.

Jesus concludes his message to John and his disciples with, "And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." John has not grasped the whole truth about Jesus. He preaches repentance to avoid the severe judgment of the coming Messiah. He misses the Isaian prophecies of the Servant of the Lord who comes to suffer for his people and take their sins upon himself (see Isaiah 52:13-53:12).

So Jesus says to John, "Maybe I am not doing the things you expected me to do. But the forces of evil are being defeated—not by irresistible power, but by merciful love. Sometimes a man can be offended at Jesus because Jesus contradicts his ideas of what religion should be. Jesus is saying, "Do not disbelieve because your expectations have not been met."

Once John's disciples leave Jesus begins to speak in praise of John the Baptist. In taking the trouble to go and see John, it is not to see "a reed swayed by the wind", that is, a weak and fickle, vacillating person, spineless as a reed swaying with every breeze; rather, they have come to see a highly disciplined, penitential ascetic dressed in camel's hair, sustained by a very meager diet.

John is a prophet, a man with a message from God, with courage to deliver that message; he is filled with God's wisdom and the unflinching courage to confront the evils of the day. That is why people flock to him. But John is even more than that. He is the precursor of the one who will bring in the new and final age. Jesus declares that John is nothing less than the divine herald whose duty and privilege it is to announce the coming of the Messiah. John is nothing less than the herald of God; and no man could have a greater task than that. John is the one, Jesus tells us, who fulfills the prophecy, "Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you."

It is significant that Jesus changes the quote from "me" (God is speaking of himself) to "you" to identify his (Jesus') own coming with that of "the Lord" in Malachi. That is why Jesus can say of John, "Among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist." John's mission is unique and incomparable; he brings the Old Testament to a close and introduces the new as he ushers in Jesus, the Messiah and the Son of God. His preaching prepares the people for Jesus.

And “yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” John’s preeminent greatness lies in his function of announcing the imminence of the kingdom. But to be in the kingdom is so great a privilege that the least who is in it is greater than the Baptist.

It is a testimony to the greatness and all importance of the kingdom that, since, however great his personal merits and his function, John the Baptist stands only on its threshold; the least in the kingdom is greater than he.

Jesus is contrasting the era of the Old Testament to that of the New: the era of the kingdom of God ushered in by Jesus immeasurably transcends that which precedes and prepares for it. We in the kingdom have been flooded with the grace of the paschal mystery, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the full revelation of the New Testament; we have been privileged to see the mystery of the Resurrection of Jesus and to know about the resurrection of the body and life everlasting; we have the dignity and the privilege of free access to the seven sacraments, especially that of the Holy Eucharist. The mercy of Jesus is readily available to us in the sacrament of Penance. John the Baptist does not even know about such spiritual riches in the kingdom of God, much less have access to them.

So you can begin to see the dignity and privilege that are ours in belonging to the kingdom of God given us by Jesus. John the Baptist dies a martyr before all of these become available. Yet John the Baptist is a great saint, much holier than we are.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT **Gospel: Matthew 1:18-24**

As we near the celebration of the actual birth of Jesus, the Gospel explains to us how he came to be.

“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.” Here, we are speaking of Jesus’ birth in time. As Son of God, he has 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 is more properly called Jesus, the Christ, which is the Greek word for the Anointed One; in Hebrew, the Messiah.

Jesus, the Christ, is born in time by means of a human mother. He wants 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 is engaged for about one year before the couple begins to live together. Engagement is a serious contract that ends in marriage. Unfaithfulness is equivalent to adultery; breaking the contract is considered divorce.

When Mary returns from her visit with her cousin, Elizabeth, after some three months of visitation, her pregnancy has 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) calls for death by stoning for adultery even if the couple has not yet begun to cohabit. And Joseph is a righteous man: he is obedient to the law. Yet no such sin can be proven

against Mary. St. Joseph solves 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 wants to put ‘[Mary] away privately,’ not because he is ignorant of the Virginal Conception and suspects her of adultery, but because he already knows she has conceived by the Holy Spirit and feels 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 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 Saward, 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 “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 links Jesus to David through his legal father, Joseph, because in Jewish law, ancestry is 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 has 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 Sam 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 his 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 is 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 follows 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. He 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 is an obedient man. He lives by faith—not by feeling. He accepts the explanation of the angel, no matter how unusual it is. He believes the message and cooperates with God’s plan, becoming a great saint in the process. As guardian of the Holy Family, he is perfected in virtue and becomes 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 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."

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, a

human being. The Virgin Mary gives him birth. He is born into our world as a little child. What does he look like? What does God's infinite perfection look like in a newborn baby? Can you experience God in his eyes and holy face? Does 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 can lift us up to a divine level of being. God became human so humans can start living the life of God.

By suffering and dying in our own human nature, Jesus destroys the sin that separates us from God. By rising from the dead and giving us his sanctifying grace, he gives 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 has 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 are 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 are titles given to kings when they are enthroned. But they are 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 ... gives 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 gives 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: Matthew 2:3-15, 19-23

Today is the feast of the Holy Family, the family of Joseph, Mary, and the Child Jesus. They model holiness in family life for us. Let us see how.

Joseph is the righteous head of the family. He does everything right in the sight of God. Joseph lives in the presence of God. He is in constant communication with him. He is single-heartedly devoted to God. He listens to God. He lets nothing come between God and him. He is open to God's inspirations and obeys him immediately—no matter how difficult: for example, he obeys the command to leave Bethlehem in the middle of the night for Egypt. This involves traveling unknown territory for about 300 miles, which is a journey of 10-12 days. Joseph asks no questions and demonstrates no resentment or complaint. He simply obeys. He relies on divine providence. He takes seriously his assignment of head of the Holy Family; he is protector and provider for Mary and the divine child. As soon as he is well settled in Egypt, God tells him to leave for the Holy Land again. Joseph obeys God—no matter how much sacrifice is required. Joseph does not live for pleasure as we often do; he lives to please God and do his will. He has a mission to fulfill and he accomplishes it. Is it not from Joseph that Jesus learned, "My meat is to do the will of him who sent me" (Jn 4:34)? Joseph does not make excuses or consider the task too difficult. His spiritual orientation makes it easier for him.

As Joseph nears the Holy Land again, God commands him to travel still further north where he settles in Nazareth in the region of Galilee.

What long-suffering and patient endurance Joseph demonstrates! Being head of the family is a call to holiness of life and great selflessness. There is no room for selfishness; openness to God's will expressed in life's changing situations

is required. Adamancy in clinging to pre-made plans and clinging to one's own will causes tension and obstructs God's will and plan. A self-willed person is forfeiting his call to holiness and detachment from the things of this world as well as his own self.

We also see Joseph leading the Holy Family to worship God on important feasts such as the Passover. He also fulfills another religious requirement that the child be presented in the temple in Jerusalem, which involves an 80-90 mile journey on a beast of burden.

Joseph is a very selfless man. He marries Mary as God tells him and protects her virginity with chaste love all the days of his life.

Joseph is a carpenter. Jesus works along his side. He teaches him how to work. Work is not below the dignity of the divine child. Work is valuable for spiritual formation. It is in this way that various virtues are developed. The mental and physical strength required to do a good job prepares Jesus for his future ministry. Learning to work at home prepares children for life in society.

Work requires self-discipline, self-mastery. It contributes towards a well-formed character, a strong, virtuous, self-possessed person. One who works learns to live in union with God so he can draw strength for the virtues; these are needed to accomplish challenging work and to do it well.

The first reading today tells us that it is God himself who gives the father authority over his family; he also gives the mother authority over her children. It is so important that the father exercises his authority and commands respect and obedience from his children. That is how the children learn discipline and responsibility. They learn to be accountable for fulfilling their tasks in life. When they fail, children must give an account of themselves. If they have been negligent, they are taken to task and required to make up for it. That is the truth of the matter. Anything less is not acceptable. In certain instances, a medicinal penalty may be imposed to teach responsible behavior to a child.

Children must also be taught to respect and honor their parents. They are the ones who have given them life and sustenance. They must be formed in obedience in the earliest years. Sometimes love is not enough to inspire obedience. Perhaps fear of punishment must be brought into the picture—even as Jesus did: for example, he says, "Fear him (God) who can destroy both body and soul in Gehenna" (Mt 10:28).

Listen to what the Bible has to say about rearing children and commanding respect from them. The following verses are from the 30th chapter of the book of Sirach:

30:1 "He who loves his son chastises him often..."

30:9 "Pamper your child and he will be a terror for you, indulge him and he will bring you grief.

30:11 "Give him not his own way in his youth, and close not your eyes to his follies.

30:12 "Bend him to the yoke when he is young, thrash his sides while he is still small, lest he become stubborn, disobey you, and leave you disconsolate.

30:13 "Discipline your son, make heavy his yoke, lest his folly humiliate you."

We observe the Holy Family to be very closely united. Although Mary is far advanced in her pregnancy, her great love for Joseph and the divine child will prompt her to make the long, hard journey with him to Bethlehem—some 80-90 miles away, on a beast of burden. How uncomfortable and painful that must have been! But love made it possible.

Mary and Joseph are inseparable: we see them together in Bethlehem, then in their escape with the child to Egypt; we also see them on their return journey to Judea and then on to Nazareth. We see these two journey together again to Jerusalem to present the Child Jesus in the temple in obedience to the Law.

Finally, we see the strong, chaste love holding Joseph and Mary together as they journey with Jesus to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. It is that strong, binding married love that fortifies them and gives them hope when Jesus

is left behind in Jerusalem; they return together searching for him. There is no mention of blaming one another; they respect each other too much for that. Their single quest is to find the child. Their combined effort is rewarded when Joseph and Mary find Jesus in the temple “in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Lk 2:46).

Here is a moment of misunderstanding and non- or miscommunication, Mary freely expresses their anxious concern. There is no hesitancy on her part to confront Jesus and ask for an explanation for his actions. It is in communicating respectfully with each other that we arrive at the truth and come to understand each other.

So Jesus explains his actions: “Why did you search for me? Did you not know I had to be in my Father’s house?” But they did not grasp what he said to them” (Lk 2:49-50).

Did Jesus believe that his mission in the apostolate had already begun? He is so preoccupied and absorbed in his dialogue with the teachers of the Law he missed the departing caravan. Was he to blame for that?

His explanation is accepted. “He went down with them, and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them (Lk 2:51). Though Jesus is God, he obeyed his parents. In their moment of tension and misunderstanding, the members of the Holy Family respectfully communicate with each other to solve their problem; they listen and accept each other. They work through their misunderstanding with trustful dialogue.

In the Gospel today, St. Matthew sees Jesus as a new Moses. Just as Moses had to flee from Egypt and the Pharaoh for his life (Ex 2:15), so must Jesus. Just as Pharaoh sought to kill the male children of the Israelites (Ex 1:15). so does Herod. But God’s protective hand spared both Moses and Jesus.

In a Passover narrative, Jacob-Israel is said to have been persecuted by Laban and forced to flee into Egypt. St. Matthew uses these traditions to affirm that Jesus, the new Moses and the new

Israel, recapitulates in himself the history of his people.

After the death of Herod, Joseph is told to take the Child Jesus out of Egypt and bring him back to the Holy Land. St. Matthew quotes the prophet Hosea, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” (Hos 11:1) to show that Jesus is the true Israel. The early life of Jesus becomes one with the history of Israel. Jesus is the true Israel. He fulfills the covenant relationship as God’s Son. Like Israel, God’s Son, Jesus the true Son, undergoes an exodus from Egypt, passes through the waters of the Jordan, and is tempted in the desert. But he remains faithful to God. The life of Jesus is a microcosm of Israel’s history. The coming of Christ is the second and real Exodus and the founding of the true chosen people. It makes us all children of God.

The Holy Family settled in the town of Nazareth to fulfill the words of the prophets, “He shall be called a Nazorean.” This is not a statement from any particular prophet, but expresses the general understanding the prophets have about the future Messiah. Matthew may be playing on the words of Isaiah 11:1, “But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom.”

The word for branch is nezer; Matthew may be playing on the word Nazorean and the nezer; he may be saying at one and the same time that Jesus is from Nazareth and that Jesus is the nezer, the promised Branch from the stock of Jesse, descendant of David, the promised anointed King of God.

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 has been chosen to be the mother of God made man and

because she is full of grace. Jesus makes her our mother, too. He says 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 has been preparing the chosen people, gracing holy men and women; prophets have spoken God’s word to ready the people. Finally, time has been brought to completion when Mary becomes 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 continues 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 is ascending to heaven, is 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” is 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 is born. The dark night of the world is illumined by the bright star seen by the magi, wise men who study the stars.

These wise men come to be pictured as kings (although the Gospel does not say they were). These are even given the names of Kaspar, Balthazar, and Melchior. These legendary figures are 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 is 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 prophesies these words eight centuries earlier, saying that

Bethlehem, the place where David is born, a ruler of the people will 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 misses the chance of a lifetime. Because his heart is hard and evil, he misses the chance to see God in the flesh. Then he tries to kill the newborn king—but he fails; 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 see the star, but Herod and his court are too blinded by selfish living to see it. The magi experience 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 miss the greatest event ever to happen in their midst: the mystery of the Incarnation of God. But they are 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 lose it, they seek spiritual counsel. After seeking, the light of the star can be seen again. “[T]he star that they have seen at its rising precedes them, until it comes and stops over the place where the child is. They are overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they see 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 have so longed.

Notice, the mother and the child are in a “house”. We can suppose, then, that this event

takes 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 has 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 yearn. 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 are baptized, the risen Christ, who is one with the Father in the Spirit, comes to live in us.

At the Last Supper, Jesus consoles his disciples by telling them that although those who live for the pleasures, power, and prestige of this world will no longer see him, he will reveal himself to them, his disciples. He further explains that this revelation will take place within the very heart of those who truly follow him and keep his word. He said that he will reveal himself to them through his loving presence within their own hearts. Listen to what he says, “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 is 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 will have found the place where God lives. We will 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: Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus began his public ministry when "he was about thirty years of age" (Lk 3:23). He conformed himself to the custom of the rabbis who did not carry out their function as teachers until they were thirty years old. Jesus prepared himself for his mission during his

hidden life. St. Luke tells us that during that time, "Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man" (Lk 2:52). He developed the virtues through hard work as a carpenter. The hidden life provided him with a contemplative atmosphere. There, his prayer life of Communion with the Father could thrive and deepen. There, he received profound insights into life for colorful and captivating preaching. There, he learned to relate harmoniously with other human beings. He also learned to handle difficult people and situations with fortitude and self-possession.

And now, the time had come for Jesus' inauguration into public ministry. He presented himself to John the Baptist at the Jordan "To be baptized by him". John was shocked! "I need to be baptized by you," he said, "and yet you are coming to me?"

As his kinsman, John probably knew Jesus personally. He would have experienced his holiness. Surely, Jesus' divinity must have shown through his humanity. He had no need for baptism--that was for sinners expressing a change of heart; the waters would express the cleansing effect of repentance. But Jesus had no sins to confess. He had no need to repent. He could truly say, "Can any of you charge me with sin" (Jn 8:46)?

So why did Jesus want to be baptized? Jesus was profoundly humble. He wanted to identify himself with sinners. Indeed, he wanted to take their sins upon himself by immersing himself in the same waters into which sinners were being plunged. This scene reminds us that Jesus' whole life in his incarnate state was one of abasement. And he continues to hide his glory in the Eucharistic bread. Jesus also needed to go into the waters so that he could make them holy. His holiness purified the waters so that they could take away our sins and make us holy.

Jesus replied to the resisting John the Baptist saying, "Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." In other words, Jesus wanted to carry out every detail of God's plan and will for him. In undergoing baptism, Jesus

cooperated with John in initiating the whole plan of God's righteousness.

Three times, the first reading announces God's servant "shall bring forth justice, [that is, righteousness] to the nations"; God called his servant to the victory of righteousness. Now, on this momentous occasion, Jesus' baptism would start this process of receiving and pouring out God's own righteousness upon those who wanted to receive it; this sanctifying spirit enabled us to live the very life of God!

Yes, the time has come! For, "[a]fter Jesus was baptized, he came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened for him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him." Jesus is that holy servant announced by the prophet, Isaiah, centuries before; he is now, before our very eyes, beginning to "bring forth justice, [that is, the very righteousness and holiness of God] to the nations." He would accomplish this through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who gives us a participation in God's own holiness.

The servant, Jesus, accomplishes all of this through love—"not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street". He does not use harsh tactics. He does not use force or violence. "A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench ..." He is merciful and compassionate. He approaches us with the delicacy and tenderness of grace; he draws us into conformity with God's will through love.

The heavens that Adam closed by his disobedience are now beginning to open through this new Adam's obedience and his beautiful, winning ways. When he will have finished his work as servant of the Lord by his passion, death, and resurrection, heaven will be completely open to receive us too.

But even now the waters of baptism are beginning to open the heavens for us. Jesus' baptism is opening a freeway of communication between God and us. We have free access to God now through faith and baptism. Faith expresses itself

through prayer. It is now so easy to reach God and enter into his presence. We simply have to open our heart to him in prayer—and we're there! The Holy Spirit came to rest on Jesus. He is endowed with the fullness of the Spirit. Thus anointed as the long-awaited Messiah and Christ, he becomes the source of the Holy Spirit for all of us. He gives us this same Holy Spirit at our baptism to make us children of God. This Holy Spirit flows from his open side each time we receive him in the Holy Eucharist. Moreover, Jesus comes to make his dwelling place within our very hearts; there, he continually pours out his Holy Spirit to sanctify us; Jesus invites us to live in continuous, loving communion with him through his Holy Spirit.

The dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit hovering above the waters in the process of bringing about a new creation, making us into children of God, transforming sinners into saints. The dove also images the love of God resting on Jesus. That spirit of love empowers Jesus for his mission of bringing about righteousness. As the first reading puts it, God says, "I have grasped you by the hand;" (symbolizing the strength that Jesus is receiving from God for his mission). "I formed you and set you as a covenant of the people;" (in other words, Jesus becomes an enduring love bond who unites God and his people in a holy partnership). He becomes "a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, (so that they can see the spiritual world of God) "to bring out prisoners from confinement" (to free people from the imprisonment of sin and selfishness); "and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness". (The interior light of God's grace lights up our inner being and frees us from the darkness of sin; it breaks sin's oppressive hold on us.) All of this is brought about by the righteousness of God working through his servant, Jesus.

The Gospel concludes with these words, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." God could not endure to remain silent any longer at the sight: Jesus emptied himself of all the glory that was his as Son of God as he identifies himself with us sinners. He is already anticipating the self-emptying of his passion and death when he

takes upon himself the sins of the whole world.

The Father is so proud of his Son he can keep quiet no longer. He must speak out and tell the world that this humble servant, who was just baptized and taken to be a sinner like the rest, is really God's own dear Son. It's as if he is saying to us, "Look at my boy; isn't he beautiful!"

In this theophany, or divine manifestation, the whole Trinity is revealed: The Father's voice is heard; Jesus is identified as his Beloved Son; and the presence of the Holy Spirit is revealed in the form of a dove.

At the same time, Jesus is identified as the servant of the Lord foretold by Isaiah. "Here is my servant," he said, "whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit." Jesus is identified simultaneously as Son of God and servant of the Lord. As servant, we are told the kind of Messiah Jesus is—not a conqueror by force, but one who suffers for the sins of his people and wins them over by love. As the second reading puts it, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him."

Now, endowed with that same Holy Spirit, we are called to go and do the same: we go about doing good; we create an atmosphere of love and peace around us. We confront resistance and ill will through patient endurance. Love knows how to wait and suffer for the good of the other. We know that suffering-love is redemptive. We know with certitude, that in the end, the love of the suffering servant will triumph.

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME **Gospel: John 1: 29-34**

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him—he is on the look out for the one who was coming: the Messiah (see Mal 3:1). John is aware of and sees the one who is greater than he: the one whose sandals he is unworthy to unfasten; the one who existed before him; the one who takes away the sins of the world.

Most of us are all wrapped up and preoccupied with ourselves; we are too narcissistic to be aware of and see the one who is coming toward us. The indwelling Jesus is always coming toward us in love to embrace us and live in loving communion with us. But we are unaware; instead, we are looking for the next available pleasure, which never really satisfies us.

We must be like John the Baptist and begin to live out of ourselves, on the alert for the one who is coming, the one who is greater than we are, who will give us true joy, and be the true love of our life.

Once John the Baptist sees Jesus, he continues to look upon him, and he calls upon others to do the same. The majesty of Jesus is entrancing. For the divine person that he is radiates the splendor of God. When John the Baptist tells his two disciples, Andrew and John, to look at Jesus, once they see him, they cannot take their eyes off him; they leave the great John the Baptist to go and stay with Jesus—and they in turn excitedly bring others to come and see him. These also are moved to stay with him (see Jn 1:35-51).

We, too, are called and urged to look upon Jesus who is still living among us in the Eucharist and in his indwelling presence.

When we look upon him in prayer, his gaze meets ours. In this way, we enter into a loving communion with him. Thus, he fills our shallow, empty, human lives with the depth and fullness of his divinity. We, also, like Saul, are privileged "to look upon the Just one" (Acts 22:14) after he rises from the dead.

The saints are very much aware of Jesus in his indwelling presence so that they can look upon him and love him there. For example, St. John of the Cross writes in his poem, "Living Flame of Love": "How gently and lovingly you awaken in my bosom, where you dwell secretly and alone! And in your sweet breathing, full of blessing and glory, how delicately you inspire my love!" We, too, are called to constantly look upon Jesus with a loving, contemplative gaze as we go about our

lives fulfilling the will of God. John the Baptist calls out to us: "Behold [that is, take a long look at), the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Daily, the Church repeats this urgent request at every Mass: Look at the Lamb of God, gaze upon him at length.

The one we look upon is the Lamb of God, the paschal lamb who sacrificed himself for us on the cross out of love for our salvation. He is that servant of the Lord mentioned in the first reading; Isaiah goes on to describe that servant as a meek lamb: "Like a lamb led to the slaughter...he was silent and opened not his mouth...he gives his life as an offering for sin...Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear" (Is 53:7, 10, 11; see Is 42: 1-4, 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13--53:12).

In effect, John the Baptist is saying that Jesus is that servant who is the Lamb of God. He points Jesus out as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" --sin is used in the singular to make it absolutely clear that every kind of sin is taken away. Jesus comes to take away original sin, which has been passed on to us from Adam, and all personal sin. Since Jesus is a divine person, his sacrificial death has infinite value; he takes away the sin of the whole world. Moreover, he gives us the power to overcome sin in our lives.

John describes Jesus as "a man coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me". John is conceived six months before Jesus who, therefore, is born after the John the Baptist. But Jesus ranks ahead of John because he is a divine person who existed from all eternity.

John says that he does not know Jesus is the Messiah. He may well have known him as his kinsman, but not as the one who would be the Messiah.

John "came baptizing with water that he [Jesus] might be made known to Israel". Through his preaching, John tells the people of the nearness of the Messiah. He prepares them for his arrival by preaching repentance. The people need a change of heart; they must stop sinning and begin to live virtuous lives; in this way, they will be ready

to receive the Messiah who is about to arrive to reward the good and punish the evil. John considers the appearance of the Messiah as the time of judgment.

God is the one who sends John to baptize the people. This external rite of washing is a sign of the purification from sin that is brought about by repentance. God also indicates to John the sign by which he will be able to recognize the Messiah. He will be the one on whom the Spirit will descend and remain. John actually sees the Holy Spirit descend and rest on Jesus in the form of a dove. The Holy Spirit is the personal love between the Father and the Son. The dove is an apt sign of this of God. The book in the Bible, called the Song of Songs, addresses one who is loved as a dove (see Sg 2:14). The Spirit of Love comes as a dove to rest and remain on Jesus. This is a sign to John the Baptist that Jesus is "the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit." John only baptizes with water; Jesus will plunge people into God through the Holy Spirit; he will saturate them with God and his many gifts.

This baptism in the Holy Spirit will have reminded the people of the sevenfold gift of the Spirit promised the Messianic King, "The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and the strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord, and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord ... [Then] the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord as water covers the sea" (Is 11:2, -3,9).

In other words, through the Messiah, everyone who is obedient and receptive to God will participate in this outpouring of the Holy Spirit given to the Messiah. Each will know God personally. As God has promised through the prophet, Joel, "I will pour out my spirit upon all mankind ... Even upon the servants and the handmaids, in those days, I will pour out my spirit" (Joel 3:1).

This was an electrifying moment. The time for the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit has now arrived. That Spirit comes to rest upon his humble servant, Jesus. It is through him that the Love of God will

be poured out upon the world.

This Jesus is actually God's Son as Messianic King—he is actually the divine Son of God who becomes incarnate! This Son is totally permeated with the Holy Spirit of God.

And baptism has immersed us in him who is saturated with the Holy Spirit. That is why the second reading can say, "You ... have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy ..." Baptism plunges us into Christ Jesus. We have but to open our hearts in receptivity, and he will pour that Spirit into us for holy living. For this to happen, our attitude must be like that of Jesus as described in today's psalm response, "[E]ars open to obedience you gave me ... Behold, I come. [T]o do your will, O my God, is my delight, and your law is within my heart" (Ps 40; see also Heb 10:5-7).

Jesus' whole desire is to do his Father's will. He expresses this desire and incorporates it in the prayer he teaches his disciples so it can become part of their lives: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10).

Jesus can truly say, "I always do what is pleasing to him" (Jn 8:29). That is the attitude we must have to receive Jesus' outpoured love in the Holy Spirit. To be consistently pleasing to God in this way indicates that his law is within our very heart; "the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:2) inclines and enables us to do God's will.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME **Gospel: Matthew 4:12-23**

"When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee."

You may remember that John was arrested and imprisoned in the dungeons of the Castle of Machaerus by Herod Antipas. John's crime is that he had publicly denounced Herod for seducing his brother's wife, and making her his own wife, after he has put away the wife he had. It is never safe to rebuke an eastern

despot and John's courage brings him, first imprisonment and then death.

Jesus marches into Galilee, the territory of King Herod who had just imprisoned John. Jesus is consciously taking John's fallen banner and continuing in the teeth of opposition. He is also moving to safer grounds. Jesus leaves Nazareth and takes up residence in the town of Capernaum. There is a kind of finality in that move. In that moment, Jesus leaves his home never again to return to live in it. He will now devote his life totally to proclaiming and establishing the Kingdom of God.

The territory referred to by Zebulun and Naphtali is invaded by the Assyrians in the period from 734 to 721 B.C. A portion of the Jewish population is deported and a sizable number of foreigners are placed in the region to colonize it. For this reason, it is referred to in the Bible henceforth as the "Galilee of the Gentiles".

The evangelist, inspired by God, sees Jesus' coming to Galilee as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. This land, devastated and abused in Isaiah's time, will be the first to receive the light of Christ's life and preaching. The messianic meaning of the prophecy is, therefore, clear.

"The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death light has arisen."

It is precisely to Jews living in the spiritual shadow-land, an earthly Sheol, that the eschatological light of Jesus the Messiah is now shining. Jesus' coming to Capernaum is the drawing of the end times in the Jewish land darkened by paganism.

"From that time on Jesus began to preach." That is the first way that Jesus begins to enlighten the people. Jesus himself is a light by his very being. Everything about him gives light to all who observe him: his devotion and fidelity to his Father; his childlike trust in him; his living in constant communion with the Father; his perfect obedience to the Father's will; his love for people

unto self-sacrifice; such behavior casts light on the way we must live.

Jesus is a “great light” to the world by his preaching. He unveils the invisible world to us; he reveals to us that there are three Persons in God; heaven and eternal life will be given to those who obey God; those who disobey God separate themselves from him in this life and will remain separated throughout eternity—unless they repent before they die. Jesus arose from the dead to assure us of the resurrection of the body and to give us his spirit to empower us to live lives worthy of eternal life. Jesus also enlightens us about the value of suffering. It is through his suffering and death that he saves the world. Jesus encourages us to accept God’s will as we live in a limited creation when things go wrong and we must suffer the consequences. He teaches us that patient endurance in trial is sanctifying and spiritually transforming. These are just some of the lights Jesus sheds on our dark world. And he makes us children of God and gives us the power to see the spiritual world as he sees it.

St. Matthew emphasizes the formal inauguration of Jesus’ ministry with the solemn phrase, “from that time on, Jesus began to preach”. The word “preach” stands for a herald’s proclamation from a king. The herald is the man who brings a message directly from the king. This word tells us of certain characteristics of the preaching of Jesus:

*The herald has in his voice a note of certainty.

*The herald has in his voice the note of authority. He speaks for the king; he lays down and announces the king’s laws, commands, and decisions.

*The herald’s message comes from a source beyond himself; it comes from the king. Preaching is the voice of God transmitted through one man to the people. It is with the voice of God that Jesus speaks to men.

Jesus’ proclamation is a repetition of John’s. Jesus, the herald, continues the work of John, the herald, and brings it to fulfillment. Their imperative moral cry was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The reason given for a need of a change of heart and direction is:

God is coming to assume his definitive rule over the world. That command had become urgently necessary because the reign of God is about to begin. Eternity has invaded time; God has invaded earth in Jesus Christ; and therefore, it is of paramount importance that people be receptive to him and God’s rule.

Jesus now begins recruiting his first disciples, three of whom will become part of his inner circle: Peter, James, and John. “As he was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea; they were fishermen. He said to them, ‘Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ At once they left their nets and followed him.”

Similarly, Jesus sees two other brothers, James and John, “in a boat with their father Zebedee ... He called them, and immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him.”

The emphasis is on the authority of Jesus who calls, and the immediate obedience of those called. The creative word of God simply meets them in their everyday world, lays hold of them, and changes their lives forever.

Contrary to the practice of a rabbi, Jesus chooses his disciples rather than the disciples choosing him. They follow not simply to listen and learn, but to take an active part: to be fishers of men. Just as they have gathered fish in their nets, so are they called to gather people into God’s kingdom. We are called to do the same.

Their immediate response to Jesus’ call indicates previous contact in which they’ve become familiar with Jesus. We read the exciting details of their first encounter with Jesus in John’s gospel, chapter one, verses thirty-five through fifty-one.

The very brief narrative of the call of the first disciples focuses on their unreserved discipleship. These are ordinary men--simple working people. They do not have much, but they give themselves to Jesus. They are giving him the most precious gift

of all. What Jesus needs are ordinary folks who will give themselves. He can do anything with people like that.

They are good fishermen. They possess those very qualities, which will turn them into good fishers of men. Here are some examples of these qualities:

+ The good fisherman must have patience. He must wait for the fish to take the bait. It is rare that preaching will see quick results. He must learn to wait.

+ He must have perseverance. He must learn never to be discouraged, but always try again.

+ He must have courage. He must be ready to face the fury of the sea and of the gale. The preacher is aware that there is always a danger in telling men the truth.

+ The good fisherman must have an eye for the right moment. He knows well that there are times when it is hopeless to fish. He knows when to cast and when not to cast. The good preacher chooses his moment. There are times when men will welcome the truth, and times when they will resent the truth.

Peter and Andrew “immediately” leave their nets and followed Jesus—so do James and John leave their boats and their father to follow him. God passes by and calls us. If we do not answer him immediately, he may continue on his way and we could lose sight of him. It would be sad if we were to fall behind because we wanted to follow him while still carrying many things that are only a dead weight and nuisance.

“[Jesus] went around all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom ...”

Jesus directs his message to those of the Jewish faith, for he teaches in their synagogues. The synagogue is the building where the Jews assemble for religious ceremonies on the Sabbath and other feast days (Sacrifices could be performed only in the temple of Jerusalem). The Jews receive their religious training in the synagogue. It is interesting to note that the first part of our Mass, the liturgy

of the word, is a continuation of the synagogue service. We simply add to it the liturgy of the Eucharist as Jesus did at the Last Supper.

“Proclaiming” in St. Matthew’s gospel always has as its object the kingdom of heaven (He avoids the direct mention of God out of reverence). The good news for Matthew is the good news of the kingdom. Both of these terms (proclaiming and good news) derive from the Isaian expression of the announcement of deliverance from exile and the restoration of the kingdom or reign of God.

Jesus went about “curing every disease and illness among the people”. Such cures are a sign of the presence of God and the arrival of his kingdom.

Healing is closely related to “proclaiming” in this gospel and is really part of proclaiming. The good news of the kingdom of God, therefore, is what brings restoration and healing, an integral part of the proclamation. Jesus brings healing and restoration to suffering people so that they can carry out their God-given purpose. There is no real distinction between spiritual and physical healing. With the arrival of the Kingdom in Jesus, as the first reading says, “Anguish has taken wing, dispelled is darkness ... The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...you have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing ... For the yoke that burdened them...you have smashed ...”

Thanks be to God!

THE PRESENTATION OF THE LORD

Gospel: Luke 2: 22-40

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 states that every first-born male belongs to God (Ex 13:2, 12-15). But he can be redeemed for five silver shekels (Num 1816). All of this takes place at the Temple in Jerusalem. We meditate on this event in the fourth Joyful Mystery of the Rosary. Jesus already belongs totally to God, his Father. But the Holy Family fulfills the law in obedience to God. This perfect obedience reminds us of Jesus' desire to be baptized by John, although he is 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 present the offering of the poor instead of a year old lamb: one bird is for a holocaust of adoration; the other is a sin offering (Lev 12:6-8, 5:7-10). They have no sin, but want 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 awaits with longing for the Messianic age, "the consolation of Israel". This is the time when many believe that God will deliver his people from Gentile or Roman rule. God, they hope, will reestablish the glorious kingdom of David in Jerusalem (Lk 1:71; 2:38). This understanding needs to be corrected and perfected with a more spiritual notion. Whatever the real truth is, Simeon experiences it in this exciting moment. At last it has come! It fulfills his whole life's waiting. "... the holy Spirit was upon him ...". He does not have to know the details.

The consolation he experiences in the Holy Spirit is 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 reveals in Simeon's heart that he will actually see

the Messiah. His dedication to worship the Lord in the temple in solitude and prayer disposes 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 awaits that graced moment. What he has been waiting for all these years is finally arriving. When Mary and Joseph come into the temple with the Child Jesus, the Holy Spirit enlightens the old man's understanding that this child is truly God's anointed one. There is something so very special about this child. The glory of God shines through his human features: the light in his eyes, the glow in his smile, the radiance of his being. And his parents are so filled with holy peace and joy.

Simeon can not resist the impulse to take the child in his arms and press him to his bosom. He receives a most powerful grace in this personal encounter with this infant Messiah, God's anointed one. That anointing spills over and graces the holy man with holy joy. So he breaks 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 has served God in the temple for so long, feels that he can now die in peace. All that holy longing he has experienced is now fulfilled. He is ready to die so that, at last, he can be with God who has 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 is nothing compared to that one heavenly smile she experienced in Mary. Simeon also feels that way, once he has come face to face with the divinity's radiating light in Jesus, the infant Savior.

Simeon feels like a watchman who has accomplished his task and can now be released from duty. He has actually experienced in his very person the salvation of God that is in the making for all peoples. That blessed meeting with the infant Savior gives 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 Jews--but through them, it will 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, will redound to the glory of those first chosen, the people of Israel. For it is from them that God's anointed has come and is 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 becomes the child's adopted father. They marvel over Simeon's recognition of this child as Messiah. How does Simeon know? They are in awe at the way God is revealing him. Mary and Joseph already know 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 can only marvel as the mystery of his Person is 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 blesses 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 exemplifies the truth by centering his life around God, the Father, and conforming his will to God's will. Jesus is obedient to this right order of truth even unto 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. Separation 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 experiences 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 stands beneath the cross and suffers 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 passes. ... 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 becomes 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 comes forward at that very time when Jesus is 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 the child presents to these two holy people that makes them realize in such a striking way that they have indeed come into the presence of God's anointed one! She can not but tell everyone she meets 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 has to flee to Egypt to escape the jealousy of Herod. St. Matthew explains that an angel warns Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt because the king is going to search for the child to destroy him (Mt 2:13-15). It is only after Herod dies that Joseph is again told by an angel to return to Israel. He is told to go to Galilee. So the Holy Family settles there in a town called Nazareth (Mt 2:19-23).

Actually that means that they are back home again. This is where they lived before leaving for Bethlehem to be enrolled (Lk 2:4-5). And there, too Jesus' hidden life begins—except for the episode of his being left behind and found by his parents after three days (Lk 2:41-52).

In that hidden life, Jesus grows up and learns to practice the virtues that build up his strong character in preparation for his public ministry. Jesus is 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, contributes to making Jesus into a strong man. That hidden life is also a contemplative one where Jesus can observe nature prayerfully and learn wisdom in the secrecy of his heart. He can draw from that experience of life the wisdom that he learns to preach vivid and impressive, easy-to-understand sermons. That is one of the reasons why the crowds are so astonished at his teaching (Mt 7:28).

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 5:13-16

"Jesus said to his disciples: 'You are the salt of the earth.'"

What does Jesus mean with that statement? We are familiar with the use of salt. We use it both as a flavor enhancer and as a preservative. People on a saltless diet complain about the difficulty of eating tasteless food. This helps us to understand what Jesus means when he says that we, his disciples, must give flavor to our environment, the society we live in.

We can also give flavor to our society by lifting its morals. As disciplined persons, we live by moral principles. We do not allow ourselves to be smothered or consumed by materialism or sensuality. We practice self-control when indulging our inclination toward the pleasurable. We are led by the Spirit of God to be self-disciplined and live by gospel values. As Jesus puts it, "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is

useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (NSRV, Jn 6:36).

We give flavor to our social environment by maintaining high moral standards. For example, we observe the Lord’s Day. We are faithful to Sunday Mass. We gather with the other faithful around the Risen Lord Jesus to worship the Father in the Eucharistic sacrifice. We abstain from shopping and unnecessary servile work on Sundays. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church says, “Every Christian should avoid making unnecessary demands on others that would hinder them from observing the Lord’s Day.” (2195) We lift others up by our example, and strengthen their resolve to live holy lives. Our virtuous living leaves them with a good taste; we stimulate their appetite for more.

Salt also acts as a preservative; it keeps food from spoiling. So, too, Jesus says, we must act as a preservative for our society. We accomplish this by living virtuous lives. For example, when we attend a social gathering with friends, we practice the virtue of temperance. We practice moderation in our intake of food and drink. We are in communion with our indwelling God and consciously go about doing his will. We maintain healthy bodies by eating the right foods in moderation, to keep ourselves energized and in maximum health. Others will see our good example and follow suit. When their excesses cause them health problems, they will look to us for counsel.

Similarly, we learn to partake sparingly of alcoholic drinks. Alcohol quickly diminishes reasoning and impedes self-control when we drink in excess. Over consumption caters to sense dominance and impedes spiritual vigilance. We easily lose our awareness of the indwelling presence of God. Our lower nature and appetites take over and cause us to sin with excessive words and inappropriate or immoral behavior.

All of these aberrations do not occur when we practice the virtue of sobriety. You can readily see how we can be like salt and act as a moral

preservative for society when we are careful to moderate our consumption of alcohol. Many peoples’ lives and health have been ruined by alcoholism; many have died and killed others by drunk driving. A true disciple of Jesus disciplines himself in right living. Some may choose to abstain from alcohol altogether.

We also affect others in a positive manner by our speech. We speak well of others. We avoid negative talk and gossip. We use only morally uplifting words. We try to spread good news. We are courteous and kind. Our whole being exudes love. Others want to be like us. We cause our social environment to change for the better. We act as a moral preservative.

In Jesus’ day, unlike ours, salt could lose its taste because it was imperfectly refined and chemically impure. So, too, it is with us, Jesus’ disciples, when our love for Jesus becomes adulterated with selfishness. We are no longer closely connected to him. Our lives are no longer centered around Jesus and his will. We no longer live in close communion with him. Therefore, we do not draw divine life and strength from him for holy living. We lose our power as a preservative for society. Instead, self-indulgence prevails. People lose respect for us. We do not even respect ourselves and live according to our dignity as children of God. We are a disgrace to our holy Catholic Church. We deserve to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

Jesus went on to say, “You are the light of the world.” A light is meant to shine, to illuminate the darkness. We have received the light of divine revelation from Jesus. We have been enlightened. MOreover, Jesus, who is “the light of life” (Jn 8:12), illuminates us from within by giving us a share in his own divine life: “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (Jn 1”4). We must share that light with others. For us to be able to do this, we must assimilate the light of truth. We do this by meditating on the word of God on a daily basis. Only then will it become meaningful to us and fully illuminate us so we can enlighten others.

We will find it very helpful to write out impressive passages from Holy Scripture so we can commit them to memory. We put this Bible passage in a frequented place so we can see it often. It will then become part of us. At opportune times, we will naturally want to share it with others. We will be a source of enlightenment to them both by our love for the word of God and by the particular passage we share with them. For example, Second Corinthians 4:17 says, "... this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison". This verse teaches us the positive, redemptive value of suffering. Learning it by heart will encourage us to bear with our trials patiently; we focus on the glory and spiritual transformation that is happening as we endure. We will also want to use this word to console others in their sufferings. We must love God's word like the psalmist who said, "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long ... How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way" (NRSV, Ps 119:97, 103-104).

The world is dependent, for its moral well-being, on our preservative influence. We disciples of Jesus have the social obligation of lighting the way to God by our words and example for a world in darkness. If we shirk this responsibility, we thwart our public purpose. We will be as useless as a light bulb that refuses to shine. It is good for nothing but to be thrown into the trash can. On the other hand, when we live in accord with our faith, with an irreproachable and upright conduct, we shine like bright stars in the world. Our light shines out in the midst of our work, our everyday activities, and our ordinary lives.

When Christians do not take Christ's teaching to the place where they live and work, human values themselves become tasteless, losing whatever higher meaning they have, and very often become corrupt. That is why it is again necessary to evangelize Europe and America. They are the result of accumulated omissions of so many Christians who have not been the salt and light that our Lord asked us to be.

The disciple must go against the tide of materialism and sensuality. We must take to heart St. Paul's plea, "I beg you to lead a life worthy of the vocation to which you have been called" (Eph 4:1). We must conduct ourselves, at every moment, as children of God. We must not allow ourselves to be swept along by the current of whatever is in vogue, for example, immodest dress styles. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. We must clothe them with modesty and dignity. This is another example of how we can carry out Jesus' command of being salt and light for our world, to preserve it from moral corruption and the darkness of sin and error.

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 5:17-37

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (17).

The Law and the Prophets are often used to mean the whole collection of the books of the OT as the expression is used here. Jesus states that it is not his mission to annul these books. Rather, he has come to fulfill them. Jesus affirms the eternal value of the Law which he completes and brings to perfection. The New Covenant brings the Old to a conclusion. The laws regulating sacrifices of the Old Law expire with the sacrifice of Jesus. The Ten Commandments and related moral laws are retained and refined.

"Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place" (18).

Jesus uses the word "Amen" to strongly affirm what he is going to say. The "smallest letter" ("iota") or the "smallest part of a letter" ("dot") will not pass from the Law, until all things have taken place. Jesus is saying that the Law will not pass until it is completed and perfected by the Messianic work of Jesus.

“Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (19).

Breaking or obeying the least of these commandments refers to the Law as perfected and completed by Jesus.

“I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (20).

The scribes and Pharisees keep the external letter of the Law, but their hearts remain un-submissive, which renders them unfit for the kingdom of God. The followers of Jesus must not only observe the external letter of the New Law, but the internal spirit as well. They must be pure of heart in doing God’s will. The grace of Jesus sanctifies the very heart of a person. It must be free from lust or possessiveness to enter the kingdom.

“You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, ‘Raqa,’ will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ will be liable to fiery Gehenna” (21-22).

Jesus speaks with authority to perfect the Old Law. He condemns not only killing, but also the anger that expresses hate leading to murder. He also condemns abusive language expressing hatred and disrespect of persons. Gehenna is a valley that serves as a garbage dump which is continually burning and an apt symbol of hell.

“Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand

you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny” (23-26).

As important as worship is—it must be postponed until reconciliation takes place. We must have good fraternal relationships to be well disposed to properly worship God. Reconciliation is urgent to avoid harsh judgment and imprisonment. Might paying the last penny and release imply purgatory and the need for purification for lesser sins?

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (27-28).

Jesus not only condemns adultery but the lust that leads to it as well.

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body go into Gehenna (29-30).

Jesus uses strong language, which is not to be taken literally for self-mutilation, in order to stress the need to avoid adultery at all costs. We must go to extreme measures to avoid sin and the eternal punishment to which it leads.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife must give her a bill of divorce.’ But I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

Jesus forbids divorce and remarriage. The only exception to divorce is when the marriage is unlawful in the first place.

“Again you have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘Do not take a false oath, but make

good to the Lord all that you vow.' But I say to you, do not swear at all; not by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is his footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make a single hair white or black. Let your 'Yes' mean 'Yes,' and your 'No' mean 'No.' Anything more is from the evil one (33-37).

Jesus forbids oaths for assuring truthfulness in ordinary daily dealings with each other. He demands truthfulness of his disciples. A simple true statement is all that is required for good private communication and understanding. This truthfulness makes oaths unnecessary in daily relating with each other. Public oaths, however, for the good of society, such as when assuming a public office, is good. In such instances the person is calling upon God to witness his sincerity and truthfulness in fulfilling his duties with the help of God.

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 5:38-48

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'(38).

This commandment is given to check unbridled vengeance. The punishment must not exceed the injury done (see Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21). This is a restriction on the practices of a primitive society when each one takes the law in his own hands. The injured person could inflict only an injury equal to the one suffered. Jesus rejects this law of exact retaliation or tit-for-tat.

"But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one to him as well" (39).

Jesus clarifies his teaching by his example. While he is on trial, one of the temple guards strikes him. He does not retaliate, but he does protest the unjust attack of his aggressor. In that sense, he

turns the other cheek (Jn 18:22-23). He does not strike back. When he is being arrested and Peter uses the sword to defend him, Jesus reprimands him. He allows himself to be arrested, although by a mere mention of the divine name, the soldiers helplessly fall back (Jn 18:4-11). Jesus calmly accepts Judas' betrayal with a kiss without any retaliatory words—only a loving remark (Mt 26:47-50). When Jesus' enemies pick up stones to throw at him, he simply hides and leaves the temple area (Jn 8:59). When his fellow Nazareans attempt to hurl him over the brow of the hill, he simply passes through the midst of them and walks away--without putting up a fight (Lk 4:28-30). Jesus chooses to absorb the hurt the others fling at him so that the evil will die there—in himself. He reflects the nature of God who is love by his loving behavior (1 Jn 4:16). As Jesus is being crucified he prays for those who are inflicting pain and death upon him. He excuses them to his Father saying, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34).

"If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well" (40).

The tunic is a long shirt worn next to the body. The cloak is a heavier outer garment that protects against cold and rain. These are the only two garments worn by the Palestinian peasant. One must go to extremes to avoid conflict and enmity. The cloak was precious in that it is used as a blanket to cover oneself at night. This is the only covering the poor have to sleep in. Yet Jesus says to give even that up to avoid fighting and lasting hard feelings so everyone can live in peace with himself and others.

"Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles" (41).

Roman soldiers have the right to force citizens into temporary service. An example of this is when Simon the Cyrenian is pressed into service to carry Jesus' cross (Mt 27:32). Jesus calls us to willing and generous service beyond the call of duty. Love must prevail and triumph at all times. We are thus made to overcome our selfish human natures and so grow in holiness and spirit dominance.

“Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow” (42).

We are called to be generous to those in need either to actually give or loan to someone. Self-denial will often be necessary to fulfill these needs. Our selfishness is constantly being challenged. We are called to love and we often fall short.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’ (43).

The saying “hate your enemy” is not stated as such in Scripture. The hatred of enemies comes quite naturally and that is the common understanding. Leviticus states, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18). But “Neighbor” is understood as one’s fellow countryman, and that is extended to include Gentile converts to Judaism. Psalm 139, however, speaks of hatred of enemies: “Do I not hate, Lord, those who hate you? Those who rise against you, do I not loathe? With fierce hatred I hate them, enemies I count as my own” (Ps 139:21-22).

“But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (44).

Loving one’s enemies in this passage means praying for them. That implies that we wish them well. We do not entertain hatred for them in our hearts. We see them as God’s misguided children and pray for their good. St. Luke’s gospel adds, “... love your enemies and do good to them, and lend expecting nothing back” (6:35). So both in our prayer and in our actions we are called to love our enemies. St. Paul expresses it this way, “... if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing, you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil with good” (Rom 12:20-21). As children of God, who is love, we are called to be like him. We must allow no one to keep us from loving—even those who persecute and mistreat us. We are thus being confronted to love still more.

“... that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and

the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust” (45).

Loving and doing good, to the bad as well as the good, shows that we are truly children of God and that we are born of him who loves all, the good and the bad.

“For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same?” (46).

Loving others who love us is a purely natural response on our part, and as a purely natural act is not meritorious—even sinners do that. We are called to live on a much higher level than that. Through faith we must operate supernaturally and draw divine love from God to be able to love the bad as well as the good.

“And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same?” (47)

Being friendly and extending friendly greetings are done by those who do not believe. That does not distinguish the children of God. But extending friendship and friendly greetings to those who are not one of us will be prompted by grace and supernatural love. By extending loving gestures to outsiders who may be non-lovers of God, we rise above the merely natural. We live on a supernatural plain and show ourselves to be children of our heavenly father.

“So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (48).

Jesus exhorts us to be as loving and merciful as our heavenly Father. He calls us to be perfect in love by loving those we perceive as unworthy of love, by loving even our enemies. This love is merciful; it overlooks sins and sinful attitudes and behavior. Overlooking or prescinding from actual sins against us, St. Luke’s parallel passage of that section of Jesus’ sermon reads, “Be merciful, just as also your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36). Mercy and forgiveness is love at its highest point.

**EIGHTH SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME
Gospel: Matthew 6:24-34**

“No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (24).

Mammon is an Aramaic word meaning wealth or property. It is personified as opposing to God. It is a false god that demands exclusive loyalty. Earthly possessions can demand so much attention that they take God’s place. They can absorb so much of our time, attention and energy that little or nothing remains for God. In the parable of the sower, Jesus tells us that “worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit” (Mt 13:22). There is a real need, therefore, to detach ourselves from money and possessions by giving some away so that we retain the upper hand over it: we must control it instead of it possessing and controlling us.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?”(25).

Worry tends to absorb all of our thoughts and energies. We become wholly taken up with an issue. This undue preoccupation takes us away from God to whom we ought to entrust our cares. We do well to have a holy concern about certain things, while retaining our communion with God. We commend the situation that troubles us to God and do whatever we can to fix the problem. In this way, instead of leaving God through worry, we remain in his presence and obtain his divine assistance to remedy the problem of concern. We must be convinced that God, who gives us our lives and bodies, will provide food, drink, and clothing to care for these. He is our heavenly Father who provides for us.

“Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they?” (26).

Jesus is a keen observer of nature. He notices how

well creatures are cared for by God. They do not worry about storing things away—yet God cares for all of their needs. If God cares for the animals, and we are much more important than they are, will he not all the more care for us human beings? So we must trust in God for our needs, as we do what we can to provide for ourselves without worrying.

“Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your life-span” (27)?

Worrying does not help the situation, and we do harm to ourselves, our emotions and our health. Our all-absorbing worry separates us from God. Worry will shorten our life-span instead of lengthening it.

“Why are you anxious about clothes? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin” (28).

Anxiety over clothing does not obtain it. Expressing our need to God is far more effective. Observe how he clothes the flowers. He will do the same for you—you are much more valuable to him than they are. They will live only a few days and perish. But you will live forever.

“But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them” (29).

Look how beautiful God clothes the flowers. Their “clothing” is even more beautiful than the regal King Solomon. God can do the same to clothe you if you trust him while doing what you can to provide for yourself without worry.

“If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith” (30)?

If God clothes the flowers and even the grass of the field with such beauty—even if they will soon perish—don’t you think he will take care of you whom he has created with an immortal soul? Put your faith in God for your needs, he is our heavenly Father whose love for us is greater than for his plants.

“So do not worry and say, ‘what are we to eat?’ or ‘what are we to drink?’ or ‘what are we to wear?’” (31).

Once more, Jesus stresses the fact that he does not want us to worry. Worry shows that we do not trust our heavenly Father. We act like non-believers. We are preoccupied with earthly things which we put before God. We must turn our concerns into petitions to God who will care for our needs. Convert your worry into a holy concern expressed in prayer. Remain united to God all the while through which you will draw strength to provide for your needs.

“All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all” (32).

Surely, you do not want to behave like a pagan! Remain in close union with your heavenly Father. Your love and trust in him will draw his attention to you. You can be sure that he will take care of you and your needs.

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides” (33).

Our primary concern must be for the spiritual kingdom that is far superior to these earthly concerns of ours. We must attend to make our conduct conform to God’s will and thus open ourselves to his sanctifying grace. God’s own holiness and righteousness will thus invade our hearts. If we seek to please God habitually in this way, he will take care of us—for we will be very pleasing to him and he will want to please us.

“Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil” (34). This is the third time in these few verses that Jesus forcefully tells us, “Do not worry”! Express your concerns to God instead. Stay closely connected to him and thus you will remain open to his reassuring presence. In this way he will see you through life’s burdens and responsibilities. Entrust your tomorrows to God. Let him be your first and main concern. Be attentive to always please him. Tackle life one day at a time. You have enough to deal with each particular day in which you are living.

Some scholars believe that the words “Sufficient for a day is its own evil” is a popular proverb that Jesus is quoting to make his point regarding not worrying about the future.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11

“Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.”

Jesus was sensitive to the movements and inspirations of the Holy Spirit within him. He was keenly aware of them and obeyed them. The Spirit had come to rest on him at his baptism. Now, he leads him into a desert retreat to prepare him for ministry. He needs to absorb God in solitude and prayer for his difficult task.

As children of God, we also need to be aware of the guidance of the Holy Spirit so we can respond to his inspirations. “For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” (Rom 8:14). For this, we need to lead an interior life of the heart. There, we live a life in habitual communion with the Lord.

Jesus relives Israel’s desert experience and proves himself to be the true Son of God. He shows us the proper way to respond to temptation and remain faithful to God.

Temptation is an invitation to sin. Our allegiance to God is tested in this way. It can be an occasion of spiritual growth. We need to be prepared for such testing by prayer and self-denial.

The devil is real. He tries to lead us into sin. He is jealous of God. He wants us to be unfaithful to him. In the desert of life, we are tried both by our inner weaknesses inclining us to sin and the encouragement of the devil. That is why we must often fortify ourselves through prayer and penance. “He fasted for forty days and forty nights.”

Jesus is like the great leaders of the past, Moses, and Elijah, who also fasted. Jesus can maintain such a long fast only through deep prayer sustained by God.

Fasting is a challenging discipline. It calls for spirit assertiveness, which disposes us for union with God. Fasting weakens our passions

gives us power over them. We subdue them into obedience, making way for the Spirit to rule our lives. By abstaining from food, we show God that we love him more than ourselves. The spiritual strength gained by ruling our bodies and its powers disposes us for prayer and communion with God.

THE FIRST TEMPTATION

“The tempter approached and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones become loaves of bread.’” The term “Son of God” refers to Jesus as Messiah—just as kings and Israel were considered sons of God.

Satan tries to get Jesus to use his miraculous powers for his own benefit, to provide for his own ordinary, material needs. Satan tries to get Jesus to use his miraculous powers to cater to his senses, for his own private purpose. He tries to incite Jesus to a self-assertive and unnecessary display of power.

Jesus replies, “It is written: ‘One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.’”

It is interesting to note how well Jesus knows the Scriptures. He can quote them from memory. He knows which Bible passage to use for a precise response to each temptation. We are called to learn and use the Scriptures in the same way. Jesus says, in so many words, obedience to God’s will, which keeps him united to God, is his primary way of drawing divine nourishment for his soul. That food is even more important than material food. He quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 for that purpose.

Notice, too, that unlike Eve, who considered the forbidden fruit with desire (in the first reading), Jesus refuses to even consider the temptation. His is an immediate refusal, an absolute “No!” He does not allow the consideration of the temptation to stir the passion of desire, which would have darkened his clarity of thought. Jesus is perfectly detached from everything but God’s will.

THE SECOND TEMPTATION

“Then the devil took him to the holy city, and made him stand on the parapet of the temple.” He says to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’” he continues, “With their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.”

Even the devil can quote Scripture. But that does not mean that he knows the Bible. He thwarts the meaning to fit his purpose, to try to get Jesus to fall for his temptation. The devil quotes Ps 91:11. In the original context, the psalmist is confident that God’s presence will protect his people in every dangerous situation. But the devil uses the passage to make Jesus overconfident and commit an act of imprudence and presumption. He tries to tempt Jesus to voluntarily put himself in danger and force God’s hand to save him. It is not right to put ourselves in unnecessary danger and expect God to intervene and save us. Divine protection and obedience to the divine will go hand in hand. Scripture says, “He who loves danger will perish in it” (Sir 3:25).

The tempter probes for the defects, which normally accompany human qualities, assuming that where he finds great trust in God, he will find presumption. He was also trying to get Jesus to achieve popular Messianic acclaim by means of a spectacular public display. He tempts Jesus with a shortcut to glory to bypass the arduous way of the cross. But the cross is the only way to glory. The wisdom of the cross consists in the spiritualizing effects of trial and suffering. In this way, it is the unique way to glory.

Jesus responds with a quote from Deuteronomy 6:16: “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord, your God to the test.’ In other words, God has already proven his love for us. Miracles must not be the condition for our trust in God. This would be testing God who has already proven himself. We insult him by putting him on the spot in this way. Instead, we need to recall his past favors and trust in his love for us.

THE THIRD TEMPTATION

“Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence, and he said to him, ‘All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me.’”

The devil now attempts to stir Jesus’ earthly ambition and his quest for political power. But he finds none. The temptation does not affect Jesus because his kingdom is not of this world. The devil tries to tempt Jesus to prefer power and wealth to the will and love of God. This temptation is to sacrifice God’s design of humble and suffering Messiah for a world empire. He attempts to tempt Jesus to attain easy glory by giving his soul to the devil. But he fails again. Jesus is being confronted with the option of pursuing his ends by the use of political power, in the manner that is expected of the Jewish Messiah. This, Jesus utterly rejects.

“At this Jesus said to him, ‘Get away Satan!’” He continued, “It is written, ‘The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.’” Again, Jesus knows the exact text to quote from Scripture. Here, he uses Deuteronomy 6:13. In these words, Jesus shows his total allegiance to God his Father, whom he loves with his whole heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Jesus passes the tests and fulfills the role of the true Israel. He is the New Israel, the beginning of the new people of God. We, his followers, must have a like fidelity to God.

“Then the devil left him and, behold, angels came and ministered to him.”

We are not told how they minister to Jesus. It is probably a matter of interior strengthening of spirit in the form of spiritual consolation and the communication of divine grace as a reward for Jesus’ fidelity. He receives new strength through his spirit to return to normal living again.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Gospel: Matthew 17:1-9

1. What is the meaning of the Transfiguration?
2. Why does Jesus take only three of his Apostles with him?
3. Why does Jesus seclude himself with the Apostles in this way?
4. Explain the meaning of the appearance of Moses and Elijah.
5. What are they talking about?
6. Show how the Gospel parallels the first reading.
7. Why does Peter want to build three tents?
8. Explain the meaning of the cloud.
9. What prompts the Father to speak in praise of Jesus and claim him as his Son?
10. Why does Jesus forbid the Apostles’ telling about his transfiguration to anyone?

“Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.”

Peter, James, and John are Jesus’ closest friends among his Apostles. They are the nucleus of the community he has formed. They are the only ones he will take with him at special moments, such as when he raises the twelve-year-old girl back to life (Mk 5:37). These special Apostle friends are the only ones he keeps really near him when he is experiencing his agony (Mt 26:36-37).

Realizing that his Passion and death will demoralize his Apostles, he takes them to see his transfiguration so they can glimpse the glory and majesty with which his human nature will be endowed in heaven. Jesus wants to prepare them by strengthening their faith in him.

Friendship is a means of bringing others to God. Otherwise, something is lacking in the relationship. Jesus shows how to use our influence to bring our friends closer to God. He shares his intimate spiritual life with them in confidence.

At the same time, Jesus receives support and life from these men for his challenging ministry.

The mountain is a place of revelation. It is near the clouds where God speaks to his people, such as he did on Mount Sinai.

Notice how Jesus and his friends seclude themselves; they go apart from others so they can give exclusive attention to God. It is during such moments that God reveals himself to us in prayer. We need to be in deep silence and solitude for us to be able to listen to God who speaks to us in the silence of our hearts. I hope that you set such times aside for yourself for intimacy with God.

“And he was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light.” St. Luke tells us that it is “while [Jesus] was praying that his clothing became dazzling white” (Lk 9:29). During prayer the indwelling presence of God surfaces and permeates our whole being to sanctify us. Prayer connects us to our light-source when we go deep within our hearts to meet God. This supposes that we have no serious sinful dispositions or attachments that interfere with our intimacy with God. The transfiguration experience of Jesus shows that he is in the presence of God and reflects his brilliance. “[Jesus] is the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being” (Heb 1:3). “God is light” (1 Jn 1:5). Seeing the divine glory that Jesus possesses will help the Apostles understand how that same glory will overcome his death and that of his disciples.

In the transfiguration, Jesus becomes a being of light; his human nature becomes luminous. No one sees Jesus at the moment of his rising from the dead; but the transfiguration gives us a preview of it. This passing moment of the transfiguration will be eternalized in the mystery of the resurrection. The transfiguration gives us a glimpse of the glorious life we are called to share as children of God. “[T]he righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43).

The transfiguration in which Jesus’ whole body is permeated with light reveals the deeper dimension of the holy Eucharist. The appearance of bread veils the presence of the glorified Christ. We are reminded of the resurrection scene when Jesus reveals himself to the two surprised disciples in the breaking of the bread (Lk 24:30-31). The transfigured Jesus shows us the reward that will be his and ours, if like him, we are faithful in carrying the cross.

“And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, conversing with him.”

Moses and Elijah are two most prominent representatives of the Old Testament—the Law and the Prophets. The Apostles must have been super-impressed to see Jesus speaking with these great figures of the Old Testament. In the mind of the Apostles, Jesus himself must be great to be in the company of such prominent men! The fact that they are in a friendly conversation shows that they are not in opposition to each other. The Gospel is not contrary to the Law and the Prophets, but fulfills them. In fact, Moses and Elijah now appear with Jesus as witnesses to the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets taking place in the person of Jesus as he appears in glory. The fact that Moses and Elijah fade away, with Jesus remaining, shows how he occupies the central position, and points out Jesus’ pre-eminence over them, and the superiority of the New Testament over the Old.

What is their conversation about? We must go to St. Luke’s gospel to find out. He tells us that they “spoke of his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem” (Lk 9:31). They are talking about Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension that would take place in Jerusalem. The word exodus also reminds us of the Israelite Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land.

The glory of the resurrection prefigured by the transfiguration will fulfill God’s promise to Abraham spoken about in the first reading. Like Abraham, Jesus must leave the land of his kinsfolk to a land God will show him. Jesus, like Abraham,

trusts his Father who will lead him to the land of promise. Through his passion and death, he will arrive at the glorious kingdom of God. He will thus open heaven, the glorious kingdom, for all who have faith and trust in God like Abraham. Indeed, “all the communities of the earth shall find blessing in [Abraham]” through his promised offspring, Jesus the Christ. In Jesus, God fulfills all his promises to Abraham. The second reading explains the blessing in these words, “our savior Christ Jesus ... destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel”.

“Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, ‘Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’”

This dazzling glimpse of divine glory is enough to send the Apostles into rapture; they are so happy that Peter cannot contain his desire to prolong this experience. Peter is reminded of the joyful feast of Tabernacles at harvest time. Booths or tents are set up on that occasion. This celebration and rejoicing before God looks forward in hope to the restoration of the kingdom. The three tents are on the assumption that Moses and Elijah have come to stay and to herald Jesus in the establishment of his glorious kingdom.

“While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud cast a shadow over them, then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”

In the Old Testament, the cloud covered the meeting tent, indicating the Lord’s presence in the midst of his people. The bright cloud signifies the brilliant presence of God, bringing light and brilliance into the kingdom. The Father’s voice is heard. He comes out of his eternal silence to acknowledge Jesus as his own dear Son with whom he is well pleased. The Father feels the need to identify Jesus as his divine Son. He is so humble, and has been speaking to Moses and Elijah about his passion and death as suffering servant. Just as the Father feels obligated to acknowledge Jesus as

his Son at his baptism, when he identifies himself with sinners, so now, too, the Father is moved to point out Jesus as his Son who, in his passion, will be seen to become sin for us (2 Cor 5:21).

Unlike Adam and Eve, who grasped at becoming divine, Jesus empties himself of the glory that is rightfully his as divine Son of God, to become our humble servant, to redeem us from sin: The words used by the Father echo those uttered by Isaiah regarding the servant of the Lord, “my chosen one with whom I am pleased” (Is 42:1).

In this passage, Jesus is also seen as the Great Prophet who is to succeed Moses. Jesus fulfills that role spoken of by Moses when he says, “A prophet like me will the Lord, your God, raise up for you from among your own kinsmen; to him you shall listen” (Deut 18:15).

And yet the Father’s voice makes it clear that Jesus is the revealed Son of God superceding Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah disappear. They have prepared the chosen people for Jesus the Messiah. Now Jesus alone remains. All eyes must be focused on him, the beloved Son of God. We must listen to him.

The Apostles are seriously affected by the Father’s voice commanding them to listen to Jesus. That thunder-like, awesome voice (see Jn 12:29) penetrates them through and through so that they are effectively graced to listen to Jesus without fail. That is known as a substantial word, a word of power, bestowing power upon the receivers of that word to carry out what it commands. St. John of the Cross, the great Carmelite mystic, tells us that these “substantial words produce vivid and substantial effects upon the soul; one of these words works greater good within the soul than all that the soul itself has done throughout its life.” (*Ascent, Book II, Chapter 31*).

“When the disciples heard this, they fell prostrate and were very much afraid.” We see the effects of that terrifying voice heard by the Apostles. We are reminded of the chosen people who have witnessed God speaking to Moses delivering the

Commandments. They say to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we shall die” (Ex 20:19).

“But Jesus came and touched them saying, ‘Rise, and do not be afraid.’ And when the disciples raised their eyes, they saw no one else but Jesus alone.”

The Old Testament witnesses graciously bow out before Jesus who now takes over as the revealer of the truth. He is the spokesman for the great king and stands with and for him in the divine nature. God speaks through him; Jesus images the Father. We are told quite directly by God, “Listen to him.” Jesus has the words of eternal life; no one goes to the Father except through him. He is “the way and the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6). Jesus is the one most worthy to be listened to. We must pay attention to him. We must set time aside each day to take his words in and ponder over them like Mary, his mother, did. We have only one life to live. How can we waste so much time listening to so many empty words that have nothing to do about our salvation? Like the apostles, we must raise our eyes above earthly things and see “no one else but Jesus alone”. We must remain interiorly focused on him. He is very near: he lives in our very heart. We must keep our contemplative gaze fixed on him.

“As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, ‘Do not tell the vision to anyone until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.’”

Jesus wants to avoid premature and mistaken Messianic enthusiasm. Such feverish excitement will impede Jesus’ work as a spiritual Messiah. Moreover, it is only after the resurrection that people will be able to understand the full import of the vision when they see the Son of Man coming into his kingdom.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Gospel: John 4:5-42

Jesus is “tired from his journey.” He is human like us and runs out of energy. He can identify with us when we are fatigued, exhausted after a long day’s work. We are in good company. It is a good feeling to know that we have given our all for God and for others out of love. Total self gift for love is a great grace and transforming. Such exhausting work done with the right attitude is very sanctifying and purifying. In this way, our passions are subdued so we can be free for communion with God.

“Jesus ... sat down there at the well.” He needs to rest, just like us. When we need to rest, we can unite ourselves with Jesus, the God-man. He is like us in everything but sin. He humbles himself to experience weakness and a need for rest. At the same time, he must be dehydrated in the extreme desert heat at high noon. The ordinary time for drawing water is either in the morning or in the evening when the heat has declined. Since Samaria (Sychar; the modern village of Askar), which is a considerable distance and has a copious spring of its own, the woman most probably has come from the fields. Some believe, however, that her coming at midday is explained by her desire, as a notorious sinner, not to have to meet other women.

When the woman of Samaria comes to draw water, she meets up with Jesus sitting at the well. “Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’” Jesus is actually physically thirsty, so he asks the woman for a drink. But he is also thirsty for each person, in the sense that he desires to be in intimate, personal, spiritual communion with each of us. When Jesus says, “I thirst”, dying on the cross (Jn 19:28), he is expressing his extreme physical thirst, as well as his intense thirst for a loving relationship with each human being and his desire to give them supreme, eternal life, beginning here on earth. That is why he goes through such extreme suffering, to rescue people from the grips of sin and evil.

The Samaritan woman is surprised that Jesus speaks to her. There is a long history of hatred and enmity between Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans are a mixed race derived from former Jews intermarrying with imported Assyrians. Their religion is also heretical. They believe only in the first five books of the Bible and worship on Mt. Gerazim instead of on the one designated temple in Jerusalem. But Jesus is above these national antipathies and prejudices. His thirst for bringing the truth and divine life to each person causes him to transcend such human obstacles.

The Jews consider the Samaritans ritually unclean so they will not drink from the same cup. That is why the Samaritan woman says to Jesus, “How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” The fact that Jesus addresses her at all is an added reason for surprise. Jewish custom is strict in regard to a man conversing with a woman in public—that is not allowed. A rabbi will not speak in public even with his own wife.

Jesus answers and says, “If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

From the thought of national hatreds, and from regarding him simply as a Jew, Jesus raises the mind of the woman to God’s love and to the gift of the Spirit, which he will give. He asks for a drink, but he can give her “living water”— not stagnant water from a cistern but bubbling water from a spring signifying by its freshness a living and life-giving energy.

“The gift of God” is Jesus himself. “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” (Jn 3:16). The first reading states, “Strike the rock, and the water will flow from it for the people to drink.” St. Paul tells us that “the rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4).

St. John explains elsewhere what Jesus means by “living water”. “Jesus stood up and exclaimed, ‘Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says, ‘Rivers

of living water will flow from within him.’ He says this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive” (Jn 7:37-39).

For St. John, salvation is to be sought only in Jesus, his revelation and the divine life which he communicates through the Holy Spirit.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reflects on the phrase, “If you knew the gift of God” in these words: “The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God’s desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him” (2560).

The Catechism also comments on the words, “You would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’ Paradoxically our prayer of petition is a response to the plea of the living God ... Prayer is the response of faith to the free promise of salvation and also a response of love to the thirst of the only Son of God” (2561).

Finally, we read in the Catechism, “The Holy Spirit is the living water ‘welling up to eternal life’ in the heart that prays. It is he who teaches us to accept it at its source: Christ” (2652).

In the words of the second reading today, “... the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

The Samaritan woman is not thinking on the same level as Jesus. He is thinking on a spiritual level, while she remains on a material level. When he speaks of living water, he is thinking of the Holy Spirit and the grace, through which he gives us, enabling us to participate in the divine life. The woman interprets “living water” to mean flowing water. Therefore, she wonders how he will draw this water from a cistern 100 feet deep and he does not even have a bucket.

She wonders whether Jesus might be greater than their forefather Jacob. The woman is unconsciously stating a truth. In St. John’s Gospel,

people often assert in a superficial way what is true in a much more profound sense. Yes, indeed, Jesus is far greater than Jacob: he is the Messiah and Son of God!

Jesus responds with, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst: the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Our spiritual nature thirsts for God; he alone can satisfy its thirst. Once we have drunk of the Holy Spirit of God that Jesus gives us, our deepest yearnings are satisfied. Moreover, the water Jesus speaks of refers to the Holy Spirit issuing from the glorified Christ who is one with the Father dwelling in our heart. The mystical experience of the Holy Spirit sweetly anointing our innermost being is like water springing up toward heaven, enabling us to touch the divine and giving us a foretaste of the eternal life of God himself. He gives us a participation in supreme life, the eternal life, the very life of the Blessed Trinity. That is what Jesus is thirsting to give the Samaritan woman and each of us.

But the Samaritan woman is not able to grasp what Jesus is saying. She is still thinking in terms of avoiding physical thirst and the never-ending task of having to draw and haul water to be able to drink. She is not able to rise above her earthly way of thinking. She must have some serious block to her ascent to the level of spirit. So Jesus, in his divine mind, helps her to see what it is by telling her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

But she answers, “I do not have a husband.” So Jesus explains to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I do not have a husband.’ For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true.” He delicately avoids the harsher term of “shacking up” with man number six.

Now we see why the woman’s severe thirst for the spirit has driven her to the well at high noon. She is dying of thirst; she has deprived her soul of the living water of the Spirit through sensual

selfish living. She has been going in the wrong direction, to empty cisterns, to quench her thirst. Only the Spirit, whose only source is Jesus, can satisfy her spiritual thirst.

And already, in her conversation with Jesus, she is beginning to drink of the Spirit and slake her thirst. She now seeks more from Jesus whom she recognizes as a prophet--since he reveals to the woman her state of soul, her whole past life. Her conversation becomes more elevated. She wonders about the proper place of worship. Jesus explains to her that although salvation comes from the Jews, the hour is coming and is now here (with his arrival as Messiah) that people will “worship the Father neither on this mountain [Gerazim] nor in Jerusalem.” Rather, “true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth.”

In these end times, with Jesus’ coming glorification, temporal institutions like the Temple will be replaced by Jesus himself, who will become the new Temple of God (compare Jn 2:19-21) into which all true believers will be incorporated and united in a living temple of God. It is the Spirit given by the glorified Jesus that will animate the worship that replaces worship at the temple in Jerusalem and Mt. Garazim.

Notice that it is a question of worshiping the Father in Spirit. God can be worshiped as Father only by those who possess the Spirit that makes them God’s children (see Rom 8:15-16), the Spirit by which God begets them from above (Jn 3:5). This Spirit raises people above the earthly level, the level of flesh, and enables them to worship God properly. The Spirit of truth will direct our entire life and being toward God who deserves our all. The Spirit unites us to the living God around whom our lives revolve in obedience, reverence, and love. Informed by the Holy Spirit, we are able to return love for Love as we live in communion with the Blessed Trinity dwelling in us as his living temples. In this way, we worship God “in Spirit and truth.” “The Father seeks such people to worship him.”

At this moment, the Samaritan woman expresses her belief in the coming Messiah. And to our surprise, now that this sinful woman has been freed from her sins through her grace-filled conversation with Jesus, he reveals to her that he is the Messiah! Jesus is free to make such a revelation in Samaria because belief in the Messiah there is not contaminated with a nationalistic and political understanding. The Lord is anxious to reveal himself to us if only we can dispose ourselves properly through purity of heart and self-gift. Go to visit with Jesus and converse with him on a regular basis and he will reveal himself to you.

When the disciples returned from shopping for food, “The woman left her water jar and went into the town.” Now that she has found the source of living water in Jesus and the graced refreshment of the Spirit derived from visiting and conversing with him, the Samaritan woman discovers something far better than earthly water. Something far greater now occupies her mind and heart. In a sense, she has no more need for the old water jar. So she leaves it behind.

In her excitement and joy, she says to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have done. Could he possibly be the Christ?”

A very mixed up person in life, so healed and integrated with her encounter and conversation with Jesus, she becomes a fearless apostle and instrumental in bringing the whole town to belief in Jesus! She does not doubt that Jesus is the Messiah, but she invites the inhabitants of Sychar to come and see for themselves. Meanwhile, the disciples bring Jesus something to eat. But he says, “I have food to eat of which you do not know.” Then he explains further, “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work.” Jesus’ hunger has vanished before a deeper desire: his Father’s work is the supreme satisfaction of all his desires--it is his food.

Jesus begins to rejoice with his disciples over his successful evangelization of the Samaritan woman who brings her fellow townsmen to meet Jesus.

As he can see them coming, their white garments blend with the white wheat ready for the harvest. The seed that he has sowed is already bearing fruit. In this harvest, there is no interval at all from sowing to reaping, but the reaper overtakes the sower and both rejoice together. Now the disciples can reap what they have not worked for in ministering to the Samaritans. “Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in [Jesus] because of the word of the woman who testified, ‘He told me everything I have done.’”

At the invitation of the Samaritans, Jesus stays two days with them. “Many more began to believe in him because of the word, and they said to the woman, ‘We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world.’”

It is amazing to see this story, this drama unfold. How quietly and masterfully Jesus opens this wayward woman into faith and enthusiasm for the experience of the living water she has found in Jesus. Indeed, he is the Messiah, the anointed one. He can well identify himself, for she has experienced for herself that he is the source of the Spirit, the living water she has received from him.

At first, she only sees him as a “Jew” who is thirsty. But Jesus’ demeanor and words bring her to address him with a respectful “Sir”, “Kyrie” (which one day will become Lord). But as they progress in their dialogue, she is so taken aback and impressed with his invasive knowledge of her sinful past, she begins to address Jesus as “prophet”. And as she continues to hear him explain about worshiping the Father in Spirit and truth, she becomes convinced and begins to believe in Jesus as “the Christ”, the anointed one, the Messiah. Once she gets to know Jesus in such depth, she becomes firmly committed to him and begins to proclaim him to all she knows, so they too can get to know him and become his disciples. It is through prayerful dialogue with Jesus that we also will come to know him and become his disciples and committed followers and proclaimers.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Gospel: John 9:1-41

In the Gospel today, Jesus demonstrates the truth he claims to be, that is, the light of the world. The Gospel is really a drama of the triumph of light over darkness.

* While the former blind man is gradually having his eyes opened to the truth about Jesus, the Pharisees are becoming obdurate in their failure to see or admit the truth.

*The Gospel is the story of a man who sat in darkness and was brought to see the light, not only physically but spiritually; it is the tale of those who think they see, but are blinding themselves to the light and plunging themselves into darkness.

* The revelation of the true light unfolds for the man born blind whose eyes Jesus opens. At first, he sees Jesus simply as a man who helps and heals him (v.11). He is convinced that such a man cannot be a sinner if he does such a work—he is a prophet (v.17). With greater confidence, the healed man argues with those who deny the fact that such a prophet must come from God (v.33). Now he is forced to a decision: remain secure in the synagogue, or reach out to faith yet dim—though now he can see—in the Son of Man (v.35). Thus the story of an earthly healing of a man's sight is a parable of a spiritual pilgrimage to unshakable faith. It is indeed a marvel (v. 30). The blind man comes through to Jesus against every natural obstacle: his own puzzlement, his parents' cowardly fear of getting involved, his religious leaders' unfair advantage of him in an argument from authority and precedent, and the threat of excommunication. The moral is clear: only those are blind who will not to see (see *The Interpreter's Commentary*, Abingdon Press, N.Y.).

Now let us look at the text more closely. Jesus' disciples want to know who has sinned, the man born blind or his parents. They are voicing a belief that every affliction is the punishment for

either the person afflicted or the parents. Jesus says that neither he nor his parents have sinned. There is no direct connection between personal sin and the man's blindness.

"It is so that the works of God might be made visible through him." In other words, the man's blindness becomes an occasion for God to work a miracle through Jesus—to show that he is the light of the world.

Jesus is sent by the Father. He and we must do good while we're still alive. We must lose no time. "Night, [which symbolizes death] is coming when no one can work." Jesus is already thinking of his coming death.

"While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Without Jesus' person and revelation, the world is in darkness. He enlightens us about the meaning of life. In the miracle he is about to perform, Jesus demonstrates that he is the light of the world.

Jesus' mixing his saliva with earth reminds us of the creation of man. Anointing the blind man's eyes reminds us of the anointing at baptism. So does his ordering the man to go and wash in the pool. A new creation is about to happen here. The meaning of baptism is brought out when we are born of water and the Spirit; we begin to see and experience the kingdom of God—even as the man born blind is about to experience.

The name of the pool called Siloam means "sent". It represents Jesus who is sent by the Father. The symbolism St. John the Evangelist sees here is that the man is going to wash himself in Christ. That is what happens at baptism; we are plunged into Christ and immersed in him. Consequently we remain united to him. And in this union we receive the grace to see and believe that Jesus is divine. We are born in original sin, blind, unable to see the kingdom of God. Baptism makes us new creatures, children of God, with new, supernatural powers, capable of knowing, "seeing" God and his kingdom.

In the following scenes, we see contrasted the humility of the man born blind with the prideful arrogance of the Pharisees. Three times, the former blind man, who is truly gaining knowledge, humbly confesses his ignorance.

1. He says, “I don’t know,” when asked where Jesus is.
2. When prompted by the Pharisees to call Jesus a sinner, the former blind man says, “If he is a sinner, I do not know.”
3. When asked by Jesus whether he believes in the Son of Man, the man born blind says, “Who is he, sir ...?”

Three times, the Pharisees, who are really plunging into abysmal ignorance of Jesus, make confident statements about what they know.

1. They say of Jesus, “This man is not from God.
2. “We know that this man is a sinner.”
3. “We know that God spoke to Moses.”

The Pharisees can not believe that Jesus is from God “because he does not keep the Sabbath.” They say this because Jesus has kneaded the clay with his saliva to make mud and smeared it on the man’s eyes. And that is supposed to be violating the Sabbath.

But Jesus has often taught that the observance of the law of the Sabbath rest is compatible with the duty to do good (Mt 12:3-8; Mk 2:28; Lk 6:5). Charity, the good of others, takes precedence over all the other commandments.

But the Pharisees do not want to see God’s hand in something which simply can not be done without divine power. The Pharisees’ mistaken and overly rigid interpretation of how certain precepts should be kept leads them to forget the essence of the Law—love of God and love of neighbor.

To avoid accepting Jesus’ divinity, the Pharisees reject the only possible correct interpretation of the miracle; whereas the blind man, like unprejudiced people open to the truth, finds solid grounds in the miracle for confessing that Jesus works through the power of God.

The words, “Give God the praise!” or “Give glory to God”, is an oath formula. It is an exhortation for people to tell the truth. That is precisely what the man born blind is doing: giving glory to God. By telling the truth, he is actually giving the glory that the Jews are denying to God.

The Pharisees are not looking for the truth. They want to intimidate the man to get him to withdraw his statement. They try to pressure him by warning him: “We know this man is a sinner.” They want him to deny what has taken place, which is not to praise God, but to blaspheme against God.

By his fearless testimony, the man born blind exemplifies how we ought to react when confronted by hostile authorities. He proves, with irrefutable logic, that Jesus can be no sinner, but must be from God. “God does not listen to sinners, but if one is devout and does his will, he listens to him. It is unheard of that anyone has ever opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything.” As a result of his testimony, the Pharisees “threw him out”.

Excommunication is a dire penalty in the tightly knit communities of that day; it can affect a man’s social and economic existence as well as his religious identity.

“When Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, he found him.”

In contrast to the Pharisees who drive the man out, Jesus seeks him out. This illustrates Jesus’ promise, “anyone who comes to me, I will never drive out” (Jn 6:37). Jesus proceeds to reward the man with a further revelation of himself. Jesus asks the man born blind, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” This title is Jesus’ favorite to designate himself as Messiah. It comes from the Book of Daniel (7:13-14); it expresses the notion that he is a lowly human being; and yet he is “coming on the clouds of heaven”: in other words, he is divine; and receives “dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of

every language serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion ...”

Jesus then identifies himself to the man as that glorious Son of Man, the Messiah, who has just healed him of his blindness. The man born blind would have heard of this passage describing the Messiah. The moment Jesus identifies himself, the man prostrates himself in adoration.

Then Jesus proceeds to say, “I came into the world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind.”

Jesus’ very coming and appearance among us brings about judgment in that some will be for him and some against him. The humble, who serve God, who seek the truth and want to do his will, are going to side with Jesus. The proud and self-centered, who seek only themselves, and who use religion for self-advancement, are going to be against Jesus. For he exposes their hidden agenda.

So Jesus comes so that “those who do not see”, but who sincerely seek the truth to serve God, “might see”. But his coming will cause “those who do see [to] become blind”.

In other words, those who complacently trust in their own light and understanding will refuse to cede to Jesus’ brighter light because it is too self-incriminating. His truth attacks their self-centeredness. His light exposes their darkness, their insincerity, the evil in their hearts. Thus, they side against him; conceit in their own “wisdom” causes them to reject the truth of Jesus; they resist his revealing, bright light of truth. Their limited vision causes them to shut Jesus, the light, out. They refuse to believe and thus receive his incriminating light.

The Pharisees know the truth, they “see” but they refuse to admit it. Their sin is refusing to accept the truth; it is willful blindness. They will not admit it. They refuse to accept the evidence. They only see what they want to see and exclude the evidence that contradict their limited view.

Their pride and self-sufficiency blind them to further truth. Their limited sight or light, gotten from the Law and their misinterpretation of it, blind them to “the true light, which enlightens everyone” (Jn 1:9). The Pharisees falsely believe that they already possess the light, which causes them to reject “the true light”. They resist the truth and become hardened in their sin.

The Pharisees think that they are the ones who “see”; they believe that they understand the Law and boast of it; as they say, “We know ...” But in the presence of the fullness of the “light of the world”, they are incapable of receiving it; the sick eyes of their soul are incapable of receiving or looking at the bright light of truth coming from Jesus, the light of the world.

Let us hope that we are not so fixed on our own limited view of things that we refuse to open up to the light that comes from Jesus and his Church.

St. John analyzes why people, like the Pharisees, refuse to accept the light of truth in this way. “And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed” (Jn 3:19-20).

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Gospel: Jn 11:1-45

Lazarus, Mary, and Martha were close friends of Jesus. He loved to go there to be with them (compare Lk 10:38-42; Jn 12:1-11). Bethany, the village where they live, is only two miles from Jerusalem. Jesus stays there during holy week.

Mary is exceedingly grateful that Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead. As an expression of her extreme and loving gratitude, “Mary took a liter of costly perfumed oil made from genuine aromatic nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair” during a banquet held

for Jesus; “the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil” (Jn 12:3), an apt symbol for the grateful love that issues from Mary’s heart and that of her brother and sister. It is about his anointing that today’s Gospel is referring.

Lazarus’ sisters sends word to Jesus, “Master, the one you love is ill.”

Here, we are made aware of what a loving person Jesus is; he has a special and holy affection for Lazarus, as he also has for his sisters. St. John tells us quite plainly, “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” Lazarus represents every believer who loves and is loved by Jesus, whom the Lord will raise up on the last day.

Jesus responds with, “This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

In other words, the miracle of raising Lazarus will give glory to God and Jesus. That miracle will also lead to Jesus’ death and glorification in the resurrection. Jesus will give glory to the Father by enduring suffering in submissiveness to his will; the Father will sustain Jesus in virtue as he goes through his passion and thus give Jesus glory. Moreover, the glorified Christ will pour his Spirit upon believers and make them children of God to give him glory.

But Jesus “remained for two days in the place where he was.” We would rush to our friend’s side to see what we could do. But Jesus allows his friend to suffer and even experience death. God allows us to suffer for a higher purpose. We seek earthly, temporal happiness. But the Lord wants to give us immortality and glory through the spiritualization effected by patient endurance of trial.

When Jesus says, “Let us go back to Judea,” the disciples are afraid. They say, “Rabbi, the Jews were just trying to stone you, and you want to go back there?” Jesus explains, “Are there not twelve hours in a day? If one walks during the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if one walks at night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.”

The people of that time divided the natural day into twelve hours of equal length. Just as man needs the sunlight if he is to walk in safety, so does Jesus for the accomplishment of his mission. As long as it is daytime for him—and the length of his day is fixed in advance by the will of the Father—he has nothing to fear. The Father will protect him from harm. So Jesus will walk along and do his work until the darkness comes, which will be the hour of his enemies. Jesus knows that his life and destiny are in the care of his loving Father. Nothing can happen to him until the evening of the Passion. Therefore, he will continue his ministry before the coming of night and darkness; the time for this is determined by God, not by man.

Then Jesus says, “Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him.”

This is Jesus’ way of saying that Lazarus has died, but he will give him back his life. It is as easy for Jesus to awaken a person from the dead as it is for us to awaken one from sleep. It is noteworthy that the word for “sleep” comes from a Greek verb from which we get our word “cemetery”, which means dormitory; it is a place where the dead are sleeping until Jesus comes to awaken them.

But the disciples are on a different level than Jesus, as usual. So they respond, “Master, if he is asleep, he will be saved.” They understood Jesus literally, for the healthful sleep of convalescence. “So then Jesus said to them clearly, ‘Lazarus has died. And I am glad for you that I was not there, that you may believe.’” In other words, the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead will lead the disciples to believe in Jesus.

But Thomas says, “Let us also go to die with him.” The disciple understands that they are going into danger, for the leaders of the people want to kill Jesus. Thomas wishes to die with Christ. And yet he flees the scene when Jesus is arrested. We too must pray for the grace to die with Christ, that is, to die to our selfish, sinful desires and habits—so we can live the resurrected life of the spirit with Jesus.

“When Jesus arrived, he found Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.”

There is a belief that the soul remains near the body of the deceased, but departs after 3 days. Resuscitation now seems impossible. By waiting four days after death, Jesus wishes to remove all doubt that Lazarus is really dead.

Burial takes place as soon as possible since there is no way of preventing the rapid decomposition of the body. That is why the mourning rite lasts seven days after death.

“When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him ...”

Jesus is coming toward us too; we must always be in movement toward him also.

Martha says to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Mary, her sister, expresses the same regret when she comes on the scene. As if to say, “But now it is too late. Nothing can be done. Death cannot be overcome.”

Although Martha seems to express a vague hope when she says, “But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you.” Jesus says to her, “Your brother will rise.” But Martha responds with, “I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day.”

Jesus’ answer promising resurrection is misunderstood to refer to the end of the world. Martha’s profession of faith in the final resurrection is a religious tenet of Judaism that has been growing in clearness since the Maccabean persecutions which takes place in the second century before Christ (see Mac 12:43 ff).

Martha does not yet believe in Jesus’ power to give life. She does not understand that he is Life Itself. So Jesus explains to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

The source of the resurrection stands before Martha. It is he who will raise the dead on the last day because he is the very life of God come into the world; and for the believer, this selfsame eternal life is already a present reality (compare Jn 6:40, 54). Jesus is about to signify what he has uttered by raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus is the resurrection because of his victory over death; he is the cause of the resurrection of all people. The miracle he works in raising Lazarus is a sign of Christ’s power to give life to all people. And so, by faith in Jesus Christ, who arose first from among the dead, the Christian is sure that he too will rise one day like Jesus.

Therefore, for the believer, death is not the end; it is simply the step to eternal life, a change of dwelling place. The Preface of Christian Death in the Roman Missal says, “Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death, we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven.”

By saying that he is life, Jesus is referring not only to that life which begins beyond the grave, but also the supernatural life which grace brings to the soul of man when he is still a wayfarer on this earth (see *Navarre Bible*).

We do not have to wait until the last day to enter into the fullness of life. Jesus is that life. Faith enables us to enter into him and it.

The believer never really dies; physical death does not destroy the life of the spirit, the eternal life we already enjoy on earth: to know God and his Son personally, experientially through a living union with divinity (see Jn 17:3). The gift of life that conquers death is a present reality in Jesus. He has the power to give this life now. This is the highest life that it is possible to attain on earth; we must strive to dispose ourselves for this life through holy living.

Martha responds to Jesus’ words with, “Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.”

Martha's sister, Mary, comes to meet Jesus in response to his request. "She rose quickly and went to him." That is how we should respond. The Lord wants to be with us when we are in trouble. He wants to console and help us.

Mary expresses her regret that Jesus does not arrive in time to keep her brother from dying. She and those who are with her begin to weep. As a result, Jesus "became perturbed and deeply troubled." He is coming face to face with the realm of Satan represented by death. Perhaps he is reminded of his own death. He is aware that this miracle he is about to perform will precipitate his own passion and death.

Jesus wants to know where his friend Lazarus has been laid. When he came to the tomb, "Jesus wept." He knows what it's like to lose a dear friend. He understands our pain of loss. He himself experiences the sadness that prompts abundant tears. The people remark, "See how he loved him." That shows us how he feels about us too.

Again Jesus is deeply moved by what he has seen and experienced. He says, "Take away the stone." Martha protests, "Lord, by now there will be a stench; he has been dead for four days." But Jesus says to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?"

To "see the glory of God" is to experience the sensible manifestation of his presence. In the signs which Jesus works, his disciples see his glory, for they reveal his divinity. The power of God, which rules over death and decay, is to be made visible now. In addition, it indicates that Jesus is indeed empowered by God to raise the dead.

After the stone is removed, "Jesus raised his eyes and said, 'Father, I thank you for hearing me; but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me.'"

Because the Son lives completely in union with the Father, whose will he knows and carries out, his prayer is always sure of being heard. It is because he is one with God, he prays, and because

he prays, he is one with God. The raising of his eyes to heaven also indicates Jesus' inner union with the Father (compare Jn 17:1). He who has come down from heaven is in constant contact with heaven. Jesus does not make the prayer for his own sake, but for the sake of the people standing around, so that they will understand the miracle as God's testimony to his mission. People will really understand that Jesus has been sent by the Father. The bystanders are meant to hear his words and like Mary, be exhorted to faith.

If prayer is a form of union with God, then Jesus in John's gospel is always praying, for he and the Father are one. The life of Jesus is a perpetual "your will be done", because Jesus does nothing on his own. His very food is to do the will of the Father. His is a supreme confidence in the Father because he always does what is pleasing to the Father. He knows that whatever he asks is according to the Father's will and that, therefore, he is heard. He demands this same confidence in the prayer of his followers (see Jn 14:12-13; 15:16; 16:23, 26). The crowd can see his prayerful attitude as he raises his eyes to the Father, and thus the prayer leads them to believe in the source of his power.

Jesus "cried out in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'" The dead man comes out, tied hand and foot with burial bands, and his face is wrapped in a cloth. We see here the power of Jesus' word to give life and our need to listen to that word and obey it. Jesus calls with a loud voice which expresses his majesty and power and which is needed to raise the dead Lazarus. Jesus' shout brings life to Lazarus; the crowd's shout on Good Friday brings death to Jesus. Let us hope that our voice, like Jesus', is life-giving.

Jesus' raising of Lazarus to life is a miracle that surpasses any possibility of rational explanation. This is the supreme miracle of the public life, the one which manifests the glory of God most signally on account of its circumstances. It effects a new creation.

Jesus calls Lazarus by name. Although he is really dead, he has not thereby lost his personal identity: people who are physically dead continue to exist, but they have a different mode of existence; they are disembodied spirits; they have changed from mortal life to eternal life. That is why Jesus states that God is not God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive (see Mt 22:32; Lk 20:38).

What is crucial in Jesus' raising Lazarus to life is that Jesus has given physical life as a sign of his power to give eternal life on this earth; it is a pledge that on the last day, he will raise the dead.

By this miracle, Jesus demonstrates that he can make good on his promise, "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, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of the condemnation" (Jn 5:28-29).

"So Jesus said to them, 'untie him and let him go.'"

This practical direction shows the reality of the miracle. Jesus' powerful words not only bring Lazarus back to life; it also transports him out of the tomb in a double miracle.

No wonder many who are present "began to believe in [Jesus]."

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION

Gospel: Matthew 26:14--27:66

The first reading is the third of the four "Servant of the Lord" oracles of Isaiah. The servant listens to God and obeys his call. He willingly submits to insults and beatings. He endures having his beard plucked, which is a grave insult, and spitting in his face as well. But God sustains him so that he is able to face opposition with a determination that will enable him to persevere through severe persecution. How perfectly Jesus fulfills the role of the suffering servant as we see him go through his passion.

The second reading expresses how Jesus empties himself of the glory that is his as Son of God; by becoming human, he embraces the state of servant-hood; he humbles himself and becomes obedient even to the point of death, even death on a cross. As a result, God exalts him and glorifies him, restoring his divine status.

The account of the Passion begins with Judas selling Jesus for the price of a slave: thirty pieces of silver. Apparently, he is disenchanted with Jesus. That is not the kind of Messiah he is looking for. He also seems to have been blinded to Jesus' true worth by his love for money. He steals contributions from the moneybag he holds (Jn 12:6).

When Jesus announces, "... one of you will betray me," the disciples "... began to say to him one after another, 'Surely it is not I, Lord'"

There is always that possibility; human nature is weak; we ourselves could very well betray Jesus.

Jesus said, "He who has dipped his hand into the dish with me is the one who will betray me." One who is enjoying fellowship with Jesus will betray him—even one who partakes of the sacrificial banquet with the Lord. The treachery of betrayal is such a shocking contrast to the unity of love of brotherhood they are experiencing. And yet, even though the rest of us will also betray Jesus through some sin or other, he proceeds to celebrate his passion, death, and resurrection in a new Passover meal so that he can remain with us and nourish us with himself. He wants to continue to befriend us even when we show ourselves to be unworthy of his friendship. But that is the only way he can raise us to a new level of holiness, by such close association with him in the Holy Eucharist.

Jesus says, "Take and eat; this is my body." What a marvelous mystery, that he continues to be present among us, healing the wounds of sin, making us holy, transforming us into himself!

Jesus also says, taking the cup of wine, "Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the

covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Jesus anticipates the shedding of his blood on Calvary in the mystery of the Last Supper. His blood is poured out to unite God and his people in an enduring love relationship. The sins of the repentant are forgiven and they are made one with God again. Jesus cherishes innocence so much: it restores the divine image fully in us; it opens us completely to God so that we can share the divine life more abundantly; we can live in the divine presence in a continuous communion of love.

Jesus tells his Apostles that he will “drink this fruit of the vine” with them again when he will have established the kingdom of his Father. He will be reunited with them after the resurrection and share the paschal supper with them again. For then, they will recognize him in the breaking of the bread (Lk 24:35); they really eat and drink with him after he rises from the dead (Acts 10:41). We also, are privileged, at each Mass, to share this sacred meal with Jesus. What an awe-inspiring mystery!

At the conclusion of the Passover supper, Jesus and the Apostles sing a hymn called the “Hallel”, which means, “Praise”. It consists of Psalms 113-118. Song enables us to verbalize our pent-up heart sentiments so that we can give still greater glory to God for his goodness to us.

Jesus tells the Apostles ahead of time that their faith in him will be shaken. They will desert him and be scattered even as the prophet Zechariah foretells (13:7). When the shepherd is killed, the sheep are scattered. But after he is risen, he will await them in Galilee; there they will see him as the risen Lord.

Peter hastens to assert himself in disagreement saying, “Though all may have their faith in you shaken, mine will never be.” Jesus corrects his over-self-confidence, assuring him that “... this very night before the cock crows [before dawn], you will deny me three times.” But Peter refuses to defer to Jesus’ foreknowledge. He adamantly

insists, “Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you.”

It is only after his pitiable failure that Peter will come to realize that man’s resolution is not sufficient unless he relies on the help of God.

Jesus brings his Apostles to the garden of Gethsemane, which means “the olive press”. He tells them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.”

Perhaps they would not be able to take what is about to happen. Jesus takes only the three who have witnessed his transfiguration in preparation for this moment, Peter, James, and John. Jesus feels the need for the support of his closest friends.

He says to them, “My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch with me.”

Anyone who experiences severe depression should know that they are in good company. We pray that they may unite themselves to Jesus so that he may sustain and console them. Their acceptance of such a trial with Jesus will help make up for the sins of the world. St. Luke tells us that Jesus “...was in such agony and he prayed so fervently that his sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground” (Lk 22:44). We note that prayer is such a part of Jesus; he continues to pray even more fervently during his agony. Prayer keeps him united to his Father who strengthened him to endure even such an extreme trial. We pray for the grace to persevere in prayer when our turn comes.

Jesus’ words, “Remain here and keep watch with me”, remind us of his presence in the Blessed Sacrament. He invites us to go and be with him and unite ourselves in prayer with him in the mystery of his agony.

The Gospel tells us that Jesus “... advanced a little and fell prostrate in prayer”, indicating perhaps his utter desolation or extreme anguish of mind. He prays, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will.”

Jesus' human nature cringes and vehemently recoils at the thought of his impending crucifixion. Nature struggles with all its might to escape such intense suffering. Jesus has to superimpose his will to overcome nature's severe repugnance for the Passion so that God's will would prevail.

But Jesus is all alone in this struggle as far as the Apostles are concerned. We can believe, however, that Mary, his mother, would have been intuitive to what is happening and is united with Jesus in prayer.

"When he returned to his disciples, he found them asleep." The disciples are unable to keep their eyes open. Men rise and retire early in the ancient world. But the surrounding darkness may also symbolize the powers of evil that are at work so that Jesus is bereft of any support or consolation. The evil one wants Jesus totally for himself so he can break him and rebel against his Father's will. This is the supreme "opportunity" he is waiting for since he has failed to conquer Jesus in his temptations after his long desert fast (Lk 4:1-13); (compare Revised Standard Version).

Jesus chides the Apostles' wish, "So you could not keep watch with me for one hour?" He goes on to exhort them and us, "Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test (the great eschatological test). The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Prayer unites us to God who quickens and strengthens our spirit so that we can prevail over the weakness of the flesh.

When Jesus finishes praying, he is ready to do his Father's will. He arises and goes to meet those who are coming to arrest him.

It is necessary for Judas to get very near Jesus to identify him—for it is dark and they have only the light of the full moon and torches with which to see. But for him to use a sign of friendship, the kiss, to betray Jesus is supreme treachery. Yet Jesus continues to relate to Judas in a gentle, friendly manner; he still calls him "Friend".

Peter "struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his ear" (Jn 18:10). Then Jesus says to him, "Put

your sword back into its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." Jesus will have no part with violence. St. Luke tells us "... he touched the servant's ear and healed him" (Lk 22:51).

Jesus explains that he could have called on his Father to be protected by twelve legions of angels. But he is freely surrendering himself in obedience to his Father's will. "[T]he world must know that I love the Father and that I do just as the Father has commanded me" (Jn 14:31).

"Then all the disciples left him and fled." Jesus is totally abandoned by his friends; he faces his enemies all alone.

Jesus remains silent before the false witnesses and their lies. "Then the high priest said to him, 'I order you to tell us under oath before the living God whether you are the [Christ], the Son of God.' (Son of God was a synonym for Messiah.)

Jesus replied with, "You have said so. But I tell you: From now on you will see 'the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power' [meaning God] and 'coming on the clouds of heaven.'"

Jesus admits messiahship, and then asserts his divinity in the words of Daniel's prophesy (7:13-14). Jesus will be glorified in the mystery of the resurrection and share in the divinity with his Father.

"Then the high priest tore his robes..." as a sign of grief for a grievous violation of the Law, saying, "He has blasphemed!"—meaning: Jesus insulted God by claiming to be equal to God.

Then they began to mistreat Jesus: "[T]hey spat in his face and struck him, saying, 'Prophesy for us, Messiah: who is it that struck you?'"

As Jesus predicted, Peter denied being with Jesus or ever knowing him, cursing and swearing. "And immediately a cock crowed." Then Peter remembered what Jesus had told him. "He went out and began to weep bitterly." Peter learned, through experience, not to be overconfident. He needed to depend on God's grace to be virtuous.

Jesus had made that very clear when he said, "... without me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).

When Judas realized the enormity of his crime in "seeing that Jesus had been condemned," he "deeply regretted what he had done ... 'I have sinned in betraying innocent blood' ... Flinging the money into the temple, he departed and went off and hanged himself."

What a sad ending for one who had been given the opportunity to be one of Jesus' chosen friends. Somehow, his worldly aspirations prevented him from attaining a personal and spiritual knowledge of Jesus. Ambition apparently impeded a heart-to-heart knowledge of the God-Man and the spiritual enrichment that comes with such knowledge, causing worldly goods to pale into insignificance.

As Jesus stood before the governor, Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

Jesus said, "You say so."

Jesus did not like the term of king. He neither accepts nor denies the charge. The charge of claiming the kingship of the Jews was a charge of treason against the authority of Rome. Jesus often remained silent, as various charges were made against him. As the servant of the Lord in Isaiah, he "opened not his mouth" (Is 53:7).

When given a choice between Jesus and a notorious prisoner called Barabbas, "The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas but to destroy Jesus." So the crowd asked Pilate to release Barabbas rather than Jesus. Barabbas means "son of the father". He is chosen in preference of Jesus, the true Son of the Father.

Pilate "... washed his hands in the sight of the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood.'" Pilate tried to remain neutral. But by refusing to take a stand, he allowed evil to win the day. He was guilty for refusing to stand up for the truth; he allowed "the just one" to be condemned.

The people responded with, "His blood be upon us and upon our children."

In other words, they accepted the responsibility for Jesus' death. At the same time, their statement expresses the redemption present in the shedding of Jesus' blood.

"After [Pilate] had Jesus scourged, he handed him over to be crucified." Then the soldiers had their fun at the expense of Jesus "They stripped off his clothes and threw a scarlet military cloak about him. Weaving a crown out of thorns, they placed it on his head, and a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They spat upon him and took the reed and kept striking him on the head."

Jesus is acclaimed as king at the time when he fulfills his kingly duty, which is to save his people by his own suffering and death.

Then they led Jesus off to crucify him. They forced a Cyrenian named Simon to carry Jesus' cross. Jesus was apparently too weak to finish the journey. This incident calls us to carry the cross of Jesus. We are given an opportunity to be sanctified by it and cooperate with Jesus in redeeming the world.

"And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of the Skull) they gave Jesus wine to drink mixed with gall (see Ps 69:22). But when he had tasted it, he refused to drink." This drink contained a narcotic to lessen the pain. But Jesus wanted to suffer the full rigor of his Passion. So "he refused to drink". In fulfillment of Psalm 22:19, "they divided his garments by casting lots ...". "And they placed over his head the written charge against him: This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." That is the charge that incurred crucifixion. But it is also the royal title of God in whose Name and behalf David and his dynasty exercised power.

Among the taunts with which Jesus was mocked was, "He saved others; he cannot save himself."

That is the way of love, completely forgetful of self, its energies are spent for others with none remaining for oneself; Jesus is totally consumed by love for his Father and his people. Since he cannot save himself, he will be saved by Love.

“So he is king of Israel! Let him come down from the cross now ...”

Jesus proves himself to be Messiah and king of love by remaining on the cross and by enduring their taunts and insults. Love wants to suffer everything until the end, including death itself, so the loved ones can be redeemed to the fullest.

“From noon onward, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,” symbolizing that God had allowed the darkness of evil to unleash its powers to the fullest.

“And about three o’clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice ... ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” This is the beginning of Psalm 22:2. In this way Jesus expresses the utter desolation he is experiencing—he seems to be abandoned even by God. The psalm is the cry of agony of the righteous one who later receives divine vindication, and praises God for it (Ps 22:22-31). This psalm confirms Jesus’ understanding of his role as suffering servant, who will triumph in his death by accomplishing the forgiveness of sins.

“Immediately one of them ran to get a sponge; he soaked it in wine [fulfilling Psalm 69:22], and putting it on a reed, gave it to him to drink ... But Jesus cried out again in a loud voice, and gave up his spirit.”

We have come face-to face with the death of God who had become man to teach us love. There was no bitterness in him. Everything about him was love. He loved to the end. He proved that even in his incarnate state, “God is love” (1 Jn 4:16).

Nature went into convulsions at the death of the Son of God. “The earth quaked, rocks were split, tombs were opened ... The centurion and the men with him ... feared greatly when they saw the earthquake and all that was happening, and they said, ‘Truly, this was the Son of God!’”

Among the things that happened at Jesus’ death, “The veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom” (Mk 15:38), indicating that the way to God is now opened to all people. “[T]he bodies of many saints who had fallen asleep were raised. And coming forth from their tombs after

his resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many.”

The resurrection of Jesus was too great an event to be limited to Jesus. Easter Sunday affected many others who rose from the opened tombs to testify to the reality of eternal life, giving us a foretaste of the general resurrection.

Jesus’ body had been so abused and wounded, he died the same day that he was crucified. Crucifixion was usually a slow death which lasted two or three days. So Pilate allowed the body of Jesus to be taken down. “Joseph wrapped it in clean linen [what is now known as the shroud] and laid it in his new tomb that he had hewn in the rock. Then he rolled a huge stone across the entrance to the tomb and departed.” The chief priests and the Pharisees obtained permission from Pilate to seal and guard the tomb. Death is usually so final, the Apostles forgot about Jesus’ promise to rise from the dead. But Jesus’ enemies remembered. So they took action to prevent the Apostles from stealing Jesus’ body. But that was the furthest thing from their minds! They were so stunned, they could not even think of such an idea. They definitely had no such plans! In fact, when Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb, she thought that someone had removed Jesus’ dead body. She was not thinking of the resurrection at all! Only God came up with that idea and brought it to fruition.

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 are spared. The people of God are 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 is fulfilled and replaced by a new

Passover: Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. Jesus anticipates this new Passover at his Last Supper by a new ceremony when he changes bread and wine into his Body and Blood. He then empowers and commands 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 expresses what Jesus does at the Last Supper. The Holy Spirit preserves 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 symbolizes. Both becoming human and returning to God by way of suffering and death involve 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 loves his own till the very last moment of his life. This expression also means Jesus loves his followers, including us, to

a supreme degree, to the utmost. He will show them the depth of his love. As the rest of this passage shows, St. John has in mind the washing of the disciples' feet, which is a symbol of Jesus' sacrificial death. He will give himself totally. He goes as far as he can possibly go. We recall, too, that on this night and through this meal, Jesus, out of love for us, perpetuates his holy presence among us; he also leaves us his paschal mystery, making its redemptive power present and available to us. This night and this supper are caught up in a suspended and unforgettable, eternalized moment of time when divine love defies all earthly perimeters and limitations. He breaks out of all boundaries in his loving self-gift and brings 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 arises "... 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 changes and transfigures 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 says, "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 typifies Jesus' whole life

of ministering to others. ... Service is a concrete sign of Jesus' humiliation in his incarnate state. He empties himself. He is 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 symbolizes. It is not clear at the time that Jesus' life of service culminating in his sacrificial death is being shown here.

Peter says to Jesus, "You will never wash my feet." It just does 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 explains later (Jn 15:3) that his words have had a cleansing effect on the Apostles. They are clean of heart; no sin remains 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 says, "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 does not melt the hardened heart of Judas, whom Jesus has 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).

GOOD FRIDAY

Gospel: John 18: 1--19:42

"Judas got a band of soldiers and guards from the chief priests and Pharisees and went there [in the garden] with lanterns, torches, and weapons."

They do not accept the light of the world, Jesus, so they need artificial lights. Judas has gone out at night. They are darkness, possessed by evil. In heaven, the blessed will need no lamps (Rev 21:22).

When they say they were looking for Jesus, he says to them, "I AM." When he says to them, "I AM", they turn away and fall to the ground. Jesus has God's power over the forces of darkness. When he utters the divine name to express his identity, they fall prostrate before their king. He could have resisted their arrest if he wanted to. Jesus is master of his own fate. He willingly permits his arrest.

Jesus tells them, "If you are looking for me, let these men go." Jesus is concerned about his disciples; he protects them with the divine name as he has said (see Jn 17:12). When Peter attempts to defend Jesus with the sword, Jesus orders him, "Put your sword into its scabbard. Shall I not drink the cup that the Father gave me?" Jesus freely surrenders himself in obedience to his Father. He does his Father's will rather than his own. Jesus is the king in John's gospel who puts others on trial throughout. He questions them. For example, he asks the high priest, "Why ask me?" and to Pilate, "Do you say this on your own or have others told you about me?"

Jesus also confronts one of the temple guards who strikes him. "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?"

Jesus stands before his questioners and denies nothing. Peter, however, denies everything. Jesus responds with, "I AM"; Peter responds with, "I am not," when he is questioned.

The Jews "... did not enter the praetorium, in order not to be defiled so that they could eat the Passover." But they see nothing wrong in killing the innocent Son of God. They fear that ritual impurity will prevent their eating the Passover lamb, but unwittingly, they are delivering up to death him who is the Lamb of God and thus are making possible the true Passover.

The Jews answer Pilate at the suggestion that they judge him according to their law. But they answer, "'We do not have the right to execute anyone,' in order that the word of Jesus might be fulfilled that

he said indicating the kind of death he would die."

The Jews want to disgrace Jesus by having him die the Roman way, crucifixion. But Jesus is master over his life and death. And crucifixion is the form of death he predicted and chose for himself (12:32-33). His elevation on the cross will not be a disgrace but will be a step upward to his return to his Father. The "Jews" are putting Jesus to death on a cross to prevent all men from coming to believe in him (11:48), but ironically, they're lifting him up so that he can draw all men to himself (12:32).

When asked whether he is king of the Jews, Jesus answers Pilate with, "Do you say this on your own or have others told you about me?" Jesus, the accused criminal, asks questions as if he is the judge; and from the first words of Jesus, it is the prefect who is on trial.

Jesus says to Pilate, "My kingdom does not belong to this world." Like Jesus himself, his kingdom comes from above. It belongs to the realm of the spirit rather than the realm of the flesh.

So Pilate says to Jesus, "Then you are a king?" The word king is not Jesus' preference. It is too easily misunderstood. So Jesus explains, "I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Those who belong to God have an affinity to the truth; others cannot hear it. They reject it because it goes against their selfish lives and everything they stand for. The world hates Jesus because of the evidence he brings against it (7:7).

Pilate says to the Jews, "I find no guilt in him. But you have a custom that I release one prisoner to you at Passover. Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" Pilate tries to find a way out. He tries to remain neutral. But indecisiveness leads to tragedy. He ends up serving the world and choosing it. It takes great strength to resist evil; it takes determination and positive resistance.

"They cried out again, 'Not this one but Barabbas!' Now Barabbas was a revolutionary."

The “Jews” have presented Jesus as a revolutionary, a would-be-king. but now the sham becomes evident. Even though Pilate finds Jesus innocent, the “Jews” would prefer the release of one who is truly a revolutionary.

Pilate is turning away from the truth. He does not accept the challenge to listen to the voice of Jesus. Now he must listen to the voice of the “Jews” as they demand the release of a bandit.

“Then Pilate took Jesus and had him scourged.”

Pilate hopes this will satisfy them. By this move, he attempts to persuade the “Jews” that Jesus is too helpless to be a threat. Pilate is making Jesus an example of Roman brutality in order to anger the people and arouse them to ask for Jesus’ release.

Pilate is still trying to find a way out. He does not want to condemn Jesus. But his will is too weak for him to take a stand for truth and justice. “Once more Pilate goes out and says to them, ‘Look, I am bringing him out to you, so that you may know that I find no guilt in him.’ So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple cloak [the imperial color]. And he said to them, ‘Behold, the man!’”

What a pitiful sight Jesus is to look at: crowned with thorns, blood streaming down his face, his whole body all bloodied up and covered with gaping wounds from head to foot because of the scourging. Pilate is trying to draw on their pity. But he finds none! They shout instead, “Crucify him, crucify him!”

Pilate again states, “I find no guilt in him.” but at the same time indulgently tells them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him.” What a contradiction! He is innocent, so indulge yourselves and kill him!

The Jews answer, “We have a law, and according to the law he ought to die ...” The Jews not only turn away from the light, they want to extinguish it! When Jesus does not answer Pilate’s question,

“Where are you from?” Pilate says to him, “do you not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?”

Jesus answers him, “You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above. For this reason the one who handed me over to you has the greater sin.”

What is Jesus saying? Pilate is acting against Jesus weakly and unwillingly; but the one who has handed Jesus over is acting deliberately. Therefore, he has “the greater sin”.

Only John among the evangelists tells us that “Standing by the cross of Jesus was his mother ...” The fact that she is standing by the cross tells us what a strong woman she is. No wonder one of her titles is “Queen of Martyrs”. Her love would have her right next to Jesus to support him in his agony as he would fight asphyxiation hanging on the cross.

But Jesus is concerned about his mother. Who will take care of her when he is gone? She has no other children ... “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.”

John, the disciple whom Jesus loves, represents all of us children of God. Jesus tells us that Mary is our mother in grace. She gives us birth standing under the cross suffering with Jesus as mother of Jesus who is head of his body, the Church. Mary is therefore mother also of all the members of the body who are united to Jesus the head. She is mother of the whole Church, head and members. We too, like John, must take Mary, our mother, into our home. We must relate to her as to our mother with whom we live. We care for each other; we depend on each other; we love each other.

While hanging on the cross in his extreme thirst, dehydrated as he is from loss of blood and fluids,

Jesus says, "I thirst." but that is also an expression of another thirst he has--for souls. We are reminded of the woman at the well to whom he expresses his need for a drink of water. But his thirst for the salvation of this woman is so great, he forgets about his thirst for water. His great desire is to save her from sin so she can be given divine life. That is his great desire, his thirst. And now he is dying of thirst. He is giving his life, pouring it out in sacrifice for the salvation of souls, of people. He is dying to give them divine life, the life of grace. He is dying to save them from eternal damnation, from the serious sins that separate them from the God-life. His thirst expresses his overwhelming desire, his ineffable love for his human brothers and sisters for whom he is dying to give eternal life.

"When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, 'it is finished.' And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit."

Jesus hands over the Holy Spirit to those at the foot of the cross, in particular, to his mother who symbolizes the Church, the new people of God, and to the beloved disciple who symbolizes the Christians (compare 7:39; 20:22).

"But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs [to cause the crucified to die more quickly], but one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out."

The soldier's lance thrust is meant to demonstrate that Jesus is truly dead; but this affirmation of death is paradoxically the beginning of life, for from the dead God-Man, there flows living water that will be the source of life for all who believe in him in imitation of the Beloved disciple (see John 7:37-39; see also *The Gospel According to John*, by Fr. Raymond E. Brown, S.S. for many of the above insights).

The fact that Jesus' bones are not broken like the other two men who are crucified with him, reminds St. John of the paschal lamb and the stipulation in the law, "You shall not break any

of its bones" (Ex 12:46). The application of these words to Jesus on the cross shows that the Paschal lamb is a prophetic type of Christ, immolated to free God's people from the bondage of sin. Jesus is that Paschal Lamb.

"And again another passage says: 'They will look upon him whom they have pierced.'"

Those who gaze upon Jesus hanging on the cross fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah 12:10 where he says, "I will pour out ... a spirit of grace and petition; and they shall look on him whom they have thrust through, and they shall mourn for him as one mourns for an only son, and they shall grieve over him as one grieves over a firstborn."

How many have gazed upon Jesus as they see him hanging on the crucifix all over the world for over two centuries now! The image of Jesus crucified has sanctified many a saint and sinner. The more we look upon him, the more we draw divine life from him, the more we see the meaning of true love, the more we see the devastating effects of sin, the more we come to love Jesus, the more bonded to him we become. His image becomes seared on our heart where we can look upon him continuously, ceaselessly until we become one with him in love. We become like St. Paul who is called to "look upon the Righteous One" (Acts 22:14). We too are meant to fulfill the prophecy that the beloved disciple quotes because it is such a lived reality for him, who gaze upon Jesus crucified, whose image he keeps in his heart all his life until he is prompted to share it with us: "they will look upon him whom they have pierced."

EASTER VIGIL

Gospel: Matthew 28:1-10

"... the first of the week [Sunday] was dawning." — the dawning day signals to us that a spiritual and supernatural dawning will also soon be taking place. The disciples will slowly come to realize the mystery of the resurrection of Jesus.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary come to see the tomb. St. John's Gospel speaks of Jesus' "Mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas" (Jn 19:25); St. Mark (15:40) and St. Matthew (27:56) refer to her as "Mary, the mother of James and Joseph". These are two among the so-called brothers of Jesus. Love for Jesus brings these holy women to the tomb.

"There was a great earthquake" reminding us of the end times and the power and presence of God. The Gospel explains: "for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven". We are given a sense of the earth-shaking power of God present in the angel. He "approached, rolled back the stone, and sat on it".

The stone blocking the tomb, once a victory symbol of death, is now rolled back, becoming the symbol of victory over death. For the angel, by his action, shows that Jesus is no longer there; the tomb is empty; Jesus has already risen.

The angel's "appearance was like lightning and his clothing was white as snow". We are reminded of the appearance of Jesus in the mystery of his transfiguration when he gives us a preview of his resurrection. The angel is endowed with God's glorious presence and power; he also is a heavenly being in glory living in the presence of God.

"The guards were shaken with fear of him, and became like dead men."

Angels are heavenly beings, worlds apart from us. They are pure spirits endowed with divine power. Their very appearance is sufficient to cause strong men to faint with awe and fear. Yet these are God's servants and our friends, such as our guardian angels.

"Then the angel said to the women in reply, 'Do not be afraid! I know that you are seeking Jesus the crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said.'"

The women show themselves to be Jesus' friends. Like Mary, his mother, who has lost him in the

temple and is seeking him, so the holy women are seeking Jesus the crucified. Love issues into desire, which prompts us to seek for the one we love. Seeking requires effort, which spiritualizes us and disposes us to see and experience the spiritual world.

After the angel shows the women the place where Jesus lay, he tells them, "Go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.'"

The realization of Jesus' resurrection and presence among us is not for our private keeping; we must share this knowledge with others so their joy may also be full. The earthly joys we experience are so inferior to the heavenly joy of knowing and experiencing Jesus glorified.

But in order to be able to "see" Jesus, we must go with the other disciples to Galilee. In other words, we must make an effort to reach Jesus; we must be interested enough to take the trouble to "travel" to meet him where he is waiting for us. Without this effort, we remain indisposed to experience the spiritual reality that the risen Jesus is.

The effort referred to here is discussed in today's epistle. St. Paul, speaks about crucifying the old self, doing away with the sinful body "that we might no longer be in slavery to sin." We must die with Christ to be able to live with him. That is the effort we must make to be able to see Jesus who awaits us as risen Lord in Galilee.

The women "went away quickly from the tomb" in their excitement. They are filled with awe and "overjoyed". "They ran to announce this to his disciples." The realization of the resurrection has already filled them with supernatural energy and enthusiasm. These women are the first evangelizers. They bring the good news of the resurrection to the men. And on their way there, "Jesus met them ... and greeted them." The women did not keep the good news of Jesus' resurrection to themselves. They acted upon this knowledge. They made an effort to respond to God. Typically,

God makes the first move and awaits our response. Our effort in responding to him prepares us for a new self-gift and revelation on his part. Jesus did this when he met and greeted the women. They approached, embraced his feet, and did him homage.”

The experience of Jesus, the glorified God-Man, drew them to him. They respectfully embraced him—his feet, and worshipped him, God incarnate among us.

This same Jesus is still currently living among us in the Holy Eucharist where we too can go and give him homage as he awaits us in the tabernacles of our churches. Moreover, he will share his divinity with us under the appearances of bread and wine. He wants to nourish us and raise us up to a new level of being.

Jesus himself repeats the angelic message to the women, “Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

Now that you understand what that means, you also go to “Galilee”; Jesus awaits you there; you too will have the privilege of seeing him, and of being with him, your glorious, risen Lord.

EASTER SUNDAY: THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD Gospel: John 20:1-9

All of nature rejoices with us as we celebrate Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. In him, we see our greatest enemies: suffering, death, and sin overcome. We need no longer live in fear; death is no longer master; it has become the doorway to eternal life; through it, we pass out of this world to the Father and supreme life. Through Jesus’ passion, we have come to see the meaning of suffering. It’s purpose is to purify, spiritualize, and transform us ever more perfectly into the image of God. Through it, we are increasingly opened to the divine. Jesus’ suffering and death have destroyed our sin. He has forgiven us all. His love for us is stronger than sin. He has more than made up for them.

All of nature is springing to life with our risen Lord. The seeds have broken their tombs and are budding forth in brilliant colors. The chicks and birds have burst through their casket-like eggs to sing and fly high into the sky. Caterpillars have been marvelously transformed into flying butterflies feeding on honey-dripped flowers. All of creation has suddenly come alive, awakening from the death of winter by the glorious and resurrected Son of God.

But I must confess, when I come upon this particular Gospel each Easter Sunday, I always feel disappointment that the Gospel does not present to me my risen Lord. Instead, I am presented with an empty tomb! I want more ... especially on Easter Sunday morning!

But over the years, I have come to understand that the Church presents the resurrection scenes in the sequence that they originally occurred. It takes some time for the human psyche to adjust and dispose itself to see the risen Lord in the spiritual transformation he has undergone through the resurrection. There is a gradual dawning of the realization of the resurrection; the mystery is unveiled only bit by bit. It follows the pattern of the spiritual life, which is a progressive discovery of the risen Lord within us, dwelling in the center of our soul. That’s the way faith works: God reveals himself little by little to those who seek him. As the prophet Jeremiah says, “When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, you will find me with you, says the Lord” (Jer 29:13-14).

In this Gospel, it is Mary of Magdala who goes seeking Jesus “on the first day of the week”, Easter Sunday. (That is why the Sabbath was switched from Saturday to Sunday: because the Lord rose from the dead on that day and entered into his heavenly rest with the Father after his work of redemption.) She “came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark ...” this darkness symbolizes the unenlightened state of the disciples—they have not yet awakened to faith in their risen Lord.

But when Mary comes to the tomb, she “saw the stone removed from the tomb”. It is removed so the disciples can see that the Lord is no longer in it. He has risen. “So she ran and went to Simion Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved.” Already we can feel the excitement and consternation causing Mary to run. She is already energized by her experience, even of the empty tomb. For it has become the antechamber to the passageway to eternal life.

She says to them, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they put him.” Mary thinks that someone has taken the body, i.e. stolen it. The empty tomb comes to her as a complete surprise—despite Jesus’ predicting on three different occasions that he will rise from the dead after being crucified. Resurrection is initially the furthest idea from the disciples’ minds.

“So Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb.” And here we can tell that we are being given an eyewitness account. “They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first.”

It is believed that John ran faster, not only because he is younger, but also because he has loved more. John is known as the disciple Jesus loves in a special way and John’s love for Jesus is greater than the rest. So he is able to run faster on the wings of love.

“He bent down and saw the burial cloths there, but did not go in,” perhaps out of deference to the older, Peter, head of the apostolic band.

“When Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, and the cloth that covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place.”

If the body has been stolen, the thieves would have taken the cloths along with it. It might also be that the cloths are shaped in such a fashion that the beholders will be given an understanding that the Lord has risen out of them. The burial cloths are left behind to symbolize that Jesus will

not use them again. Whereas, Lazarus comes out of the tomb with them to symbolize that he will need them again.

“Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed.”

The disciple who is bound closest to Jesus in love is the quickest to run toward him and the first to believe in him. The virtue of love gives the Beloved disciple the power to be united to Jesus and the ability to know him in his resurrection. “Happy are those who have not seen [the risen Lord] and yet have believed” (Jn 20:29). The Beloved disciple believes in the risen Jesus without having seen him. The sign of the burial cloths is sufficient to trigger faith that Jesus has risen.

“They did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead.”

But this should not come to us as a surprise. The disciples need the Holy Spirit to raise them to a supernatural way of understanding. Only he can enlighten the Church regarding the divine mysteries. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are necessary to enable us to perceive on a divine level.

We rejoice that we are further advanced in our knowledge of the risen Jesus than the Apostles’ first visit to the empty tomb. For we ourselves have encountered the risen Christ as he dwells in our heart. Before he goes to his death, Jesus promises, “I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice and no one will take your joy away from you” (Jn 16:22). Jesus keeps his word on Easter Sunday morning. What a consolation to us all, especially those who have lost loved ones in death.

Moreover, like the Apostles, we are those “who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead”, as the first reading puts it. Jesus continues to live with us in the mystery of the Holy Eucharist. Furthermore, when we are baptized, he begins to live in us. We can know him as risen Lord. He has raised us up with himself. We already live by

his life. This gives us knowledge of him. As Jesus himself expresses it, “On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you” (Jn 14:20). In this way, we can live in continuous companionship and communion with our risen Lord. We are already being given a foretaste of heaven, of eternal life.

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Gospel: John 20:19-31

Sometimes people say that no one ever comes back from the dead to tell us about it. Today’s Gospel corrects this statement.

“On the first day of the week [Easter Sunday], when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews...”

The news of the empty tomb and calumny that the body has been stolen by disciples of Jesus (Mt 28:13) is, no doubt, circulating in Jerusalem. The disciples are afraid of being arrested and falsely accused, so they hide behind closed doors.

“Jesus came and stood in their midst.” His risen body is so spiritualized that it takes on the qualities of spirit. Thus, he can pass through the closed doors. St. Paul tells us that the risen body has the following qualities: incorruptible, glorious, powerful, and spiritual (1 Cor 15:42-44). These supernatural qualities of the risen body will also be ours. St. Paul explains, “Just as we have borne the image of the earthly one [Adam], we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one [Christ]” (1 Cor 15:49). Our human nature will be divinized, also, through a like resurrection when Jesus returns at his second coming.

Now that the disciples have been mentally disposed through the experience of the empty tomb with the burial cloths left behind, and Mary of Magdala has announced that she has seen the Lord (Jn 10:1-18), they are sufficiently prepared for Jesus to appear to them. How amazed they are to see Jesus standing in front of them! Three

days before, they had seen him crucified, die, and buried. What a sight to behold: an entirely new being! St. Mark tells us that Jesus “appeared in another form” (Mk 16:12). Mary of Magdala does not recognize him until he calls her by name (Jn 20:16); the two disciples with whom Jesus walks on the road to Emmaus do not recognize him even when they are face-to-face with him at table—until “he took bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him ...” (Lk 24:30-31).

Jesus greets his disciples with “Peace be with you.” With this familiar friendly greeting, he assures them that they have nothing to fear. He has forgiven all. He knows they are sorry for their abandoning him. He understands their frailty. They gain self-knowledge from the experience. There is no need to say more.

Now that they have been made one with God again, he confers his own divine peace upon them. They experience the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Micah, “he shall be peace” (Mic 5:4), “the peace of God that surpasses all understanding” (Phil 4:7). From this experience of peace, they know something of the nature of God; they get a glimpse, or rather, a foretaste of heavenly life.

Jesus then “showed them his hands and his side”. He needs to identify himself as their beloved Master whom they have seen crucified. Although the risen body is spiritual, it is nonetheless tangible and viewable. What a marvel to behold: the risen body is both corporeal and spiritual at the same time!

Pope John Paul II gives another reason why Jesus keeps his wounds. He says, “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 as Apostles and those whom he

continually chooses and sends forth.” (*On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*).

“The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.” The disciples are in anguish when Jesus tells them of his departure. He proceeds, however, to console them saying, “But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you” (Jn 16:42). Now they are being inebriated with Jesus’ own heavenly joy, coming right from the Father and communicated by the Holy Spirit. Joy is one of the first fruits of the Holy Spirit (see Gal 5:22). The Acts of the Apostles tells us, “The disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit” (13:52). As a result of Philip’s ministry in Samaria, we read, “There was great joy in that city (8:8). Even after being flogged for speaking in the name of Jesus, the Apostles continue to be filled with joy; “they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name” (5:41). Clearly, this heavenly joy does not depend on sensible pleasures--it comes straight from the risen Christ in whose presence they live. They are firmly attached to the vine as Jesus had told them, “Remain in me, as I remain in you” (Jn 15:4). As a result, the disciples continue to be filled with joy even after Jesus’ [physical presence is no longer visible. Whereas previously, the Apostles are saddened at Jesus’ departure, “they returned to Jerusalem with great joy” when he is taken up to heaven (see Lk 24:51-52).

Jesus proceeds to bestow his peace upon the Apostles again, reassuring them once more that they have nothing to fear from the divine manifestation that they are witnessing. Now that they have been forgiven, they are re-integrated and disposed to receive a new gift.

Jesus says to the disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” You may remember the angel telling Joseph to name the child “Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). His very name means “Yahweh saves”. Jesus’ primary mission, then, is to save people from sin--that is why the Father sent Jesus. Now, he is sending the

Apostles to continue his mission. “And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” Just as in the first creation God breathed a living spirit into man, so now in the new creation, Jesus breathes his own Holy Spirit into the disciples.

Pentecost is the official and public descent of the Spirit for directing the Church’s mission in the world. For John, the gift of the Spirit flows from the glorification of Jesus, his return to the Father. A real gift of the Spirit to the Apostles is involved here. Through the resurrection, Jesus has become a life-giving spirit (1 Cor 15:45). He shares this sanctifying, creative Spirit with the Apostles so that they, in turn, may communicate it to others. In fact, each of us has received the Holy Spirit through baptism. The other sacraments, especially confirmation, strengthen and increase the gift so that we, in turn, can sanctify others by our very presence, words, and example. In this way, we affect others with that Spirit of holiness.

Jesus goes on to specify for the Apostles the special power he is giving them. There may have been other disciples present as St. Luke tells us when he says, “the eleven gathered together and those with them” (Lk 24:33). But the focus is on the Eleven, and the words that Jesus speaks are addressed to them.

Having breathed the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, Jesus goes on to explain its significance: “whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

Jesus is passing on to the Apostles, as they will pass it on to their successors, the power to forgive sins (compare 1 Tim 4:14; 1 Tim 1:6). This power is administered in various ways in the Church. For example, Peter exhorts those who listen to his Pentecost sermon with: “Repent and be baptized ... for the forgiveness of sins...” (Acts 2:38). St. James writes that the sick should summon the presbyters of the Church to pray over and anoint them; “If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another ...” (Jms 5:14-16). The Council of Trent defines that

this power to forgive sins is exercised also in the sacrament of penance (compare Mt 16:19; 18:18).

What a wonderful gift to the Church! It has the mission to continue Jesus' ministry of forgiving, of taking away the guilt and burden of sin. We have the psychological need to confess our sins, to get it out of our system (compare Ps 32:1-5). We have sinned against God and his Church represented by the priest. We need to admit our sins and our sorrow for them.

But we also need to hear from God's official representative that we are forgiven and absolved from our sin. This Easter Sunday sacrament of Penance is such a consoling boon for the people of God! The merciful Christ is still present in his Church, personally conferring forgiveness in the sacrament. There we encounter our risen Lord so he can take all our sins away. Jesus administers his power over sin through his Apostles and their successors. Just as he can use bread and wine to communicate himself to us, so too, he can use men to communicate grace and forgiveness.

The Apostle, Thomas, is not with the others when Jesus appears to them. "So the other disciples said to him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.'" Thomas shows us how absenting ourselves from the worshipping community is a dangerous act. Jesus reveals himself to us when we go to meet him in the "breaking of the bread". Thomas loses faith when he isolates and separates himself from the faith community. The world is in darkness about about spiritual realities. Association with a faithless world soon blinds us to the supreme truth of God and the resurrection of his Christ. We cannot survive very long without the faith community gathered around Jesus who promises to meet with us when we come together in his name (Mt 18:20).

The Holy Spirit teaches the early Church how to keep the faith alive and growing as we see in the first reading. "They devoted themselves to the

teaching of the apostles and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers." Some even meet daily in the temple area and in their homes (Acts 2:46). The epistle to the Hebrews calls us to the assembly saying, "We must consider how to arouse one another to love and good works. We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another ..." (Heb 10:24-25).

"Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them."

Every Sunday is a little Easter; we must celebrate Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection in the manner Jesus directs us at the Last Supper when he anticipates this mystery. He wants to make it present for us for all times—so he can be with us. The habit of meeting together on the first day of the week has already begun. This time, Thomas joined the others.

"Jesus came ... and stood in their midst and said, 'Peace be with you.'" Jesus reassures the group, each time, that they have nothing to fear about his majestic presence.

He then invites Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe." Where is Jesus when Thomas has expressed his serious doubt about Jesus' resurrection? How is it that Jesus has heard him? Jesus is with the Father and invisibly present with Thomas. He is not far away. He is personally present to Thomas, but Thomas is not with him.

"Thomas answered [Jesus] and said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'"

Thomas is so shocked at the appearance of our glorious risen Lord; he does not need to investigate his wounds as Jesus invites him. At least nothing hints to that effect. Jesus refers to Thomas' believing because he sees him—he says nothing about his touching him.

The astonished Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" The greatest doubter, faced with the

sheer evidence of truth, asserts more strongly than anyone has ever before that Jesus is Yahweh God. Thomas makes clear that one may address Jesus in the same language in which Israel addresses Yahweh. Nothing more profound could be said about Jesus.

Thomas asserts definitive certitude in the divinity of Jesus. Many use his expression, "My Lord and my God!" to express their faith in the divinity of Jesus during the elevation of the host and chalice at the consecration of the Mass.

Thomas has remained in his stubborn disbelief for a full week. His reluctance to believe and the way it ends, with all of his doubts completely shattered and annihilated, are of greater advantage to strengthen the faith than the more ready faith of all the believing Apostles. Besides, his perception of the divinity in the risen Jesus is the fullest and most explicit of all recorded in the Gospels. Thomas has demanded physical proof of the resurrection. And he receives it. Thus, he renders the service of forever refuting any explanation of the resurrection appearances as auto-suggestion or hallucination. In this context, we might also remember how Jesus eats with the Apostles after he has risen from the dead (Lk 24:38-43).

"Jesus said to [Thomas], 'Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.'"

How can Jesus say that we are even more blessed than those who have seen him? Their faith is based on passing, external appearance. Our faith is based on the indwelling presence of the risen Jesus revealing himself to us. St. John tells us that "whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony within himself" (1 Jn 5:10). We believe because of the certitude coming from the experiential knowledge of God revealing himself in our hearts. Faith is the testimony of God revealing himself.

The written and unwritten signs of Jesus are meant to bring us to faith in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God. "Through this belief [we] may have life in his

name." Faith connects us to God through his Christ and Son. In this connectedness, we have an unending flow of divine life permeating and sanctifying our whole persons. Faith is perfected through the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding; these supernatural powers enable us to know God by spiritual intuition. We can savor our union with him and enjoy his presence. Jesus says that we are particularly "blessed" to believe without seeing him with our bodily eyes. The supernatural powers that give us spiritual sight make it possible for us to have a more elevated, superior knowledge of our glorified Lord from whom we continually draw divine life.

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 use 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 means 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 has sent him to accomplish as the Father has 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 knows that his hour has arrived. He freely accepts it for love. Love for the Father and us takes him beyond the experience of suffering; that love sustains 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 enables Jesus to endure great suffering. That is possible because Jesus is 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 makes Jesus live his whole life to please his Father and to serve others. His love for others goes to the extreme of love for his enemies, even unto death. He dies 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 expresses that love unto death by washing the feet of his disciples. He says, “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).

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Gospel: Luke 24:13-35

The Gospel scene today takes place on Easter Sunday, the first day of the week. In this episode, among the many that take place on this day, we see the meaning of the Mass unfold.

Like the two disciples, we come together, and Jesus joins himself to us. We do not realize that it is he who is present. But he consoles our hearts through the explanation of the Scriptures. For example, he helps us realize the value of suffering

in our lives. Then Jesus manifests himself to us in the Eucharist., in the “breaking of the bread”. Invigorated with this divine encounter, and enlightened about the transforming effects of accepted suffering, we hasten to make the good news known to others. Our encounter with the risen Lord adds a new dimension to our lives. Our human nature has been ennobled, enriched and raised to a new level. We participate in the very life of God. Ours is both a human and divine life. Without this elevating, sanctifying grace, we fall short of that quality of divine life and its all-pervading joy that we are meant to have as children of God. Our humanity, in God’s plan, is meant to be complemented by the divine. Without it, something is missing. We are incomplete. Human happiness alone runs shallow and short.

Let us now look more closely at the Gospel text. We notice that the two disciples are traveling as a pair, according to the manner Jesus has originally instructed them (Lk 10:1). There is a value in this. Jesus promises that whenever two or three gather in his name, he is in their midst (Mt 18:20). Did he join himself and eventually reveal himself to them to assure us that he fulfills his promise when we meet in his name?

When we are with another who is likewise seeking first the kingdom of God and its holiness, as Jesus has told us to do (Mt 6:33), we find encouragement, support, and spiritual enrichment. We need to foster spiritual friendships, surrounded as we are by a secular society. It is difficult to survive and grow in God’s grace without such mutual assistance. Do you have such a spiritual friend? Scripture teaches us, “a faithful friend is a sturdy shelter; he who finds one finds a treasure ... For he who fears God behaves accordingly, and his friend will be like himself” (Sir 6:14, 17). “A brother is a better defense than a strong city, and a friend is like the bars of a castle” (Prov 18:19).

These two disciples need each other as they experience Jesus’ tragic end in crucifixion. Their hopes for him and themselves are dashed. “Jesus himself drew near and walked with them” as they

are conversing about the events of Good Friday on their way to the village of Emmaus. But they do not recognize that it is Jesus. That is not surprising since Jesus’ bodily form has been so spiritualized in the process of resurrection. He is completely changed (see Mk 16:12).

In order to enter into their discussion, Jesus asks them a question. He wants to see in what state of mind they are in. That is a good way for us to enter into dialogue with people. It gives us an opportunity to bring spiritual content into the discussion. If we insert spirituality gently, humbly, and wisely, people will not object. Instead, they will be grateful to us. But do we have any spiritual content to share? That comes from reading and reflecting on the word of God.

Once the two disciples have expressed their dismay and explain about the empty tomb and the vision of angels, Jesus begins to instruct them. First of all, he chides them for not believing the prophets. Isaiah, particularly, in his four suffering servant songs, foretells how the servant of Yahweh will suffer for his people (see Is 42:1-4; 49: 1-7; 50:4-11; 52: 13-53:12). He will take their sins upon himself and suffer for them so that they can be healed of their sins. The prophet mentions, quite specifically, “... because he surrendered himself to death and was counted among the wicked; and he shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses” (Is 53:12).

Besides the stress placed on the sufferings of the servant, the prophet also speaks about the “reward” and “recompense” he receives from God; he is “made glorious in the sight of the Lord, and my God is now my strength!” God will make his servant “a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” The prophet goes on to say, “When kings see you, they shall stand up, and princes shall prostrate themselves because of the Lord who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen you” (Is 49:4-7). Finally the prophet of the Suffering Servant tells us, “If he gives his life as an offering for sin, he shall see his descendants in a long life... Because of his

affliction he shall see the light in fullness of days ...Therefore I will give him his portion among the great, and he shall divide the spoils with the mighty..." (Is 53:10-12).

But perhaps only Mary, the Mother of Jesus, would have understood all of these words, and that is why she would have been able to stand under the cross, strong woman that she is, and suffer with Jesus. She would have believed these prophecies are referring to him and that he would ultimately triumph.

If we understand the prophecy concerning the Suffering Servant, we can see why Jesus would ask, "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" That is exactly what Isaiah is saying will happen to the Servant!

This statement also helps us to value suffering and trial in our own lives. Seeing that Jesus himself is made "perfect through suffering" (Heb 2:10), we are given the courage to endure like him. We need the virtue of fortitude to be able to endure patiently; love is made to grow stronger as we adhere to the divine will through long-suffering. The fire of pain that shoots through our whole being burns out and purifies our disordered passions and desires. We are purified and spiritualized through the experience. That is why St. Peter can say, "Whoever suffers in the flesh has broken with sin" (1 Pt 4:1). This helps us to understand why Pope John Paul II tells us: "Christ retains in his risen body the marks of the wounds of the cross...through the resurrection, he manifests the victorious power of suffering" (*The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*; no. 25).

It is through suffering, accepted with love, that Jesus saves the whole world from sin and damnation. We pray that this knowledge of the supreme value of suffering will encourage us to practice patient endurance in times of trial.

Psalm 16, our psalm response today, also reveals

that God "will not abandon your soul to the nether world nor will you suffer your faithful one to undergo corruption. You will show me the path to life, abounding joy in your presence, the delights at your right hand forever." It tells of the resurrection of the Messiah, who is Jesus.

The two disciples are so encouraged and consoled by Jesus' words, they want him to remain with them the rest of the evening. When Jesus "gave the impression that he was going further...they urged him, 'Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over.'" Is that how you spend your evenings in the company of Jesus? Do you invite him to sit at table with you or even to **stay** with you, never to leave you? Jesus will accede to your request even as he does to theirs. "He went in to stay with them."

Until now, the two disciples do not recognize Jesus. But when "he took bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them ... their eyes were opened and they recognized him." The breaking of the bread is a sign that awakens their faith. It reminds them of Jesus at the Last Supper. The risen Jesus can only be recognized by the eyes of faith. Faith is one of the powers of sanctifying grace that elevates and enlightens our intellects to see on a supernatural level. Through its power, perfected by the gifts of wisdom and understanding, we too can come to know the risen Jesus.

These same actions of taking the bread, saying the blessing, breaking it, and giving it takes place

during the Eucharistic liturgy. Our faith is stirred too, so that we can "see" the risen Jesus present in our midst. Jesus promises that he will share this meal with us "new in the kingdom of [his] Father" (Mt 26:29). We are those who eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead (Acts 10:41).

Here, we also see the reward of hospitality. The two disciples take that stranger into their home to share a meal with him. To their surprise, that stranger is really Jesus himself in disguise.

“But he vanished from their sight” once they recognized him. Why does he not stay with them? He has made his point. They now know Jesus is alive, risen from the dead. Their hearts are consoled and enlightened through his explanation of the Scriptures. Now that the disciples have recognized Jesus “in the breaking of the bread”, which is a symbol of the Eucharist, there is no more need for him to remain. They know where to find him again: in the Holy Eucharist.

But where does Jesus go? He is with the Father. He appears to show his disciples that he is alive and has truly risen; he disappears to bring his disciples to the Father, where he lives. And he promises that he and the Father (with the Holy Spirit) will come to live in our heart (see Jn 14:23, 15-17). That is why Jesus can say, “Remain in me as I remain in you” (Jn 15:4). Jesus’ presence in us is invisible, but it can be known through faith perfected by the gifts of the Holy Spirit and purity of heart. Jesus also remains with us in the Holy Eucharist under the appearance of bread and wine. In the Mass, Jesus speaks to us in his word, and through the homily, he “open[s] the Scriptures to us” so that we, also, find “our hearts burning within us”.

But if this is true, why do some find the Mass dull and boring? They tell us that they get nothing out of it. The Mass is primarily a faith event. Those who live on the level of the flesh are indisposed to experience spiritual realities. They are like the blind who are incapable of seeing the objects surrounding them.

Experiencing the joy of communion with Jesus and his life-giving Spirit requires that we be spiritually well disposed. Those who live according to the flesh and who come to Mass looking for sense stirring entertainment will not find fulfillment (see Gal 5:16-26; Rom 8:5-8, 12-13). In short, to be able to experience the delights of God through living in communion with him, we must live in conformity with his will by obedience to his word; we must live in single-hearted devotion to God. That is what

Jesus means when he says, “Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God” (Mt 5:8). That is how we can experience him and his consolations, “hearts burning within us” in the Mass.

“So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem.” The disciples have urged Jesus to stay with them because it is getting late. But now they are so full of joy and excitement through their invigorating encounter with Jesus they set out for the seven-mile journey to Jerusalem. They can’t wait till morning to share their experience of meeting the risen Lord. The experience of his divinity is uplifting and rejuvenating. They are given wings to fly to meet the others and share their joy. In Jerusalem, “they found gathered together the eleven and those with them who were saying, ‘The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!’”

It is encouraging to know that Jesus does not discard Simon Peter as unworthy because he both fled as a coward and, furthermore, denied that he even knew him--as much as three times in succession. Jesus readily forgives Simon Peter, and now that he has returned to his better self, he must strengthen his brothers (Lk 22:31-32).

We, too, must be wisened through our falls; we must know that we are thoroughly forgiven; we, too, are called to prove our love for Jesus by works of love (compare Jn 21:15-17).

Then the two disciples proceed to share their own experience of the risen Jesus “and how he has been made known to them in the breaking of the bread”.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Gospel: John 10:1-10

In the Gospel today, Jesus contrasts his leadership style with those of the Pharisees. In the preceding chapter, you may remember how the Pharisees have mistreated the man born blind. They treat him harshly because he witnesses the truth that Jesus has cured him and that he is from God. The Pharisees are too self-centered to accept the truth of Jesus being sent from God and

having the power to cure the man born blind. They fail to twist his mind into denying it, so they angrily throw the man out of the synagogue. The Pharisees are misleading the people; they are using them for their own selfish purposes. That is why Jesus calls them thieves and robbers.

They do not enter legitimately into the sheep enclosure. They do not have the good and holy qualities required to lead the people to God. In order to be properly equipped to lead God's people, one must go through Christ, who is the gate of the sheepfold. The true shepherd must have the same attitudes and dispositions that Jesus possesses. He must be ready to sacrifice himself for them; he lays his life down in service and self-gift.

Many years before, God calls the prophet, Ezekiel, to reprimand the leaders of the people as bad shepherds who fatten themselves at the cost of the sheep. The sheep are left wandering as prey to predators. He says, "You did not strengthen the weak nor heal the sick nor bind up the injured. You did not bring back the strayed nor seek the lost, but you lorded it over them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and became food for all the wild beasts ..." God goes on to say, "I swear I am coming against these shepherds. I will claim my sheep from them and put a stop to their shepherding my sheep so that they may no longer pasture themselves. I will save my sheep, that they may no longer be food for their mouths. ...I myself will look after and tend my sheep ... I will rescue them ... In good pastures will I pasture them ... I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest, says the Lord God. The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal ... shepherding them rightly" (Ez 34:1-17).

Jesus fulfills God's promise and comes to us as the Good Shepherd. God himself becomes human in Jesus to lead us to holiness of life. He exemplifies the holy leadership qualities every leader ought to have, whether one is a priest, a father or mother of a family, or whatever leadership position one is in. That is why we must read and reflect on

Jesus' life in the Gospels; and we must live in his presence to draw light and strength for good leadership.

"The sheep hear his voice"— We are attentive to Jesus who lives in our hearts. He speaks to us in the silence of our conscience. He inspires us to do good and avoid evil in specific ways. Throughout the day, as we go about doing his will, we live in loving communion with him. We receive and return his love. He also speaks to us in the Holy Scriptures and through the teaching authority of his holy Catholic Church. We also know that it is his will that we fulfill our duties of state.

"The shepherd calls his own sheep by name." Jesus knows us individually, as persons. He respects our uniqueness, our personal value. He wants to be in a relationship with us, a relationship of love and companionship. He calls each of us in the depths of our heart for love. He calls us continuously throughout the day—for love.

"He walks ahead of them." Jesus sets the example for us. He teaches us by doing. He shows us how to love and serve; he teaches us how to forgive; how to suffer patiently. As the second reading puts it; "When he was insulted, he returned no insult. When he suffered, he did not threaten ... He himself bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."

"The sheep follow him because they recognize his voice." The people of God follow Jesus because he is the truth for which they have an affinity. They are drawn to him because he is the truth and speaks the truth.

Here Jesus is speaking of those who follow a well-formed conscience. They live in fellowship with God and follow his inspirations. As Jesus says, "Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me" (Jn 6:45). Since they cooperate with God's grace, they are drawn to Jesus and his words. Those who live selfish lives are not attending to Jesus' interior voice. Instead, they follow the dictates of their disordered self-

love. They go against the teachings of the Church through which Jesus speaks. They are slaves to their own passions and desires. They live according to the flesh instead of the spirit.

On the other hand, if they would live according to the truth proclaimed by Jesus and his Church, they would be set free. As Jesus says, "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:31-33)

"But they will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers." The faithful followers of Jesus have an affinity to truth. They have a sense of what is correct teaching as proclaimed by Jesus and his Church. They immediately know what is false teaching. They will not follow such unorthodoxy. They will not cling to such a leader.

"Although Jesus used this figure of speech, the Pharisees did not realize what he was trying to tell them." And that is precisely the point that Jesus is making! Since the Pharisees are not Jesus' sheep, they do not understand the good shepherd's voice. They are too concerned about trying to trap him in his speech or find fault with him. Their self-centered lives leave them indisposed for the truth Jesus teaches. They are the opposite of what he stands for.

"So Jesus says again ... I am the gate for the sheep." We must go through Jesus to reach the Father where we will find divine nourishment for our spiritual nature.

"I am the way ..." Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6). We have been baptized into Christ (Rom 6:3). It is through union with him that we are brought into the presence of the Father.

St. Paul tells us that all of us who are baptized into Christ have clothed ourselves with Christ (see Gal 3:27). That means we must manifest his behavior and acquire his virtuous ways. In this way, we will be disposed to live in the presence of the Father with Jesus.

"All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them." Jesus is speaking of the religious leaders of his day such as the chief priests and the Pharisees. The people are turned off by their bad example; they will not listen to them, because they are not leading them to God.

Jesus repeats himself, "I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

We note that this is an "I am" statement, that is, Jesus is God; He is Yahweh God of the Old Testament who has come to shepherd his sheep in person. He is the only source of salvation; the one way to the Father. As he will say later, "The Father and I are one" (Jn 10:30). They are one being, one God. Jesus is one with the Father; he is divine. He brings us into communion with God; he gives us divine nourishment.

In this holy union with him, he saves us from sin. He gives us eternal life. We are given a foretaste of heavenly communion with God. In this delightful union, we are strengthened against evil. Our commitment to Jesus becomes more absolute. The evil one is unable to snatch us from his hand (see Jn 10:28).

"A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy." The true shepherd exists and exercises his authority solely for the good of his subjects--as any good mother and father of a family would know. While, selfish leaders think of their subjects only in terms of what profit they can make for themselves, how they can best use their positions of authority for their own enrichment to the detriment of those they rule.

"I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly." Jesus gives us a share in the very being of God. The supernatural life he gives is a participation in the divine life of the Holy Trinity. In this way, through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we can experience the supreme life of God himself and "be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:19). "From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace" (Jn 1:16).

But in order to be able to enjoy this superabundant divine life, we must dispose ourselves to experience it. We must live according to God's will as taught by the holy Gospels and the New Testament. There, we learn how to be pure of heart and live to be pleasing to God. The word of God teaches and empowers us to live according to the spirit of prayer, the word of God, receiving the Holy Eucharist, and the support of a small fervent faith community (see Acts 2:42). We must, in the words of the first reading, "Save [ourselves] from this corrupt generation." We must turn to God with our whole hearts and stop living such self-centered lives; we must start living for God instead of self-gratification.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Gospel: John 14:1-12

As Jesus speaks a word of consolation to the Apostles, he speaks to us also. "Do not let your hearts be troubled." These are part of Jesus' farewell address to the Apostles at the Last Supper. The Apostles are saddened: Jesus tells them that he will soon leave them (Jn 13:33); one of them will betray him (Jn 13:21); even Peter will deny him three times (Jn 13:38). So Jesus tries to console his friends; the Gospel section today is part of his address in an attempt to relieve the Apostles' grief and consternation. Jesus says, "You have faith in God; have faith also in me."

Faith is our stability. It unites us to God who is our divine, sturdy and unshakable foundation on which we stand; faith connects us to eternity itself and the God of peace who lives above death and the loss of loved ones. Faith anchors us in the eternal, unchanging now and forever of God. The same faith that connects us to God also keeps us united to Jesus, for he and the Father are one (Jn 10:30); they possess the same divine nature.

The Apostles are not losing their good friend and Master. His departure is only for a little while; he will not leave them orphans; he will come back to them; they will see him again (Jn 14:18-19).

Jesus continues to reassure the Apostles in this way: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places ... I am going to prepare a place for you."

Jesus is going to the Father to prepare a place for the Apostles and us to live with him. If we read John's gospel carefully, we realize that the Father's "house" is Jesus himself. Let me explain. In the Gospel today, Jesus says, "the Father is in me ... the Father ... dwells in me."

Remember how Jesus refers to himself as the temple of God--He says, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up ... he was speaking about the temple of his body ... when he was raised from the dead ..." (Jn 2:19, 21-22). Baptism has joined us to Christ. St. Paul says, "All of you...were baptized into Christ ... you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27, 28). We have become members of Jesus' glorified body: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ" (1 Cor 6:15)? That also means that, with Jesus, we become God's dwelling place. St. Paul explains: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the spirit of God dwells in you? ... the temple of God, which you are, is holy" (1 Cor 3:16, 17). St. John tells us quite explicitly that Jesus and the

Father will come and make each of us their dwelling place. Jesus explains: "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him" (Jn 14:23).

So when Jesus says that he is going to "prepare a place" for us, he means this: by his suffering, death, and resurrection, his own body will become the new temple of God for us to dwell in. In this way we can be united to him to become a living temple or dwelling place for God with him. The second reading today advises: "let yourselves be built into a spiritual house."

But if each of us is to become a habitable place for God to live in, he must also prepare us through purification and holiness of life (see Lk 24:26). Like Jesus, we must learn to do the Father's will and obey his word (see Lk 22:42).

Jesus explains that we will happily realize the reality of his and the Father's indwelling: "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 has just explained that the Holy Spirit would also dwell in us. He says, "You will know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you" (Jn 14:17). All of this wonderful reality is known as "realized eschatology": the heavenly life has already begun in our lived experience here and now.

Jesus will also return to them at the time of their individual deaths, and then again at the second coming. But Thomas says in desperation: "Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" Thomas' sentiment expresses how forlorn, sad, and lonely the Apostles already feel. So Jesus explains to them, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus is the unique WAY to the Father. Last Sunday, Jesus said, "I am the gate." He is the only entrance and avenue to the Father. We must pass through him in order to reach the Father. He is the path we must take to go to the Father.

Jesus is the way to the Father because he is THE TRUTH; he is the revelation of the Father; he reveals to us who the Father is, the all-holy God, and how we must live holy lives—so different from this sinful world we live in, in order to reach the Father and to live in his company. Jesus' very person expresses the Supreme Reality of the Godhead. There is nothing truer. Jesus is the way because he is THE LIFE. He shares the divine nature and eternal life with the Father. He is the very life, the eternal life, which the Father gives us. Since Jesus lives in the Father and the Father lives in him, he is the divine life communicated to us.

Jesus continues: "If you know me, then you will also know my Father." Jesus and the Father are one: to know Jesus is to know the Father. He reflects the Father in his incarnate state. That is why he has become human to reveal the Father to us.

To know Jesus totally is to know him both as human and divine. To know him only in his human nature is to stop short of knowing Jesus completely--for he is divine, one God with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. This knowledge is given to us through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which perfects the virtue of faith that is engrafted into our intellects. These gifts and power enable us to know on a supernatural level. We are thus able to know Jesus as divine through a heart-to-heart knowledge, which is beyond our intellect alone. Even after two or three years of intimate association with Jesus, the Apostles still do not know Jesus on a supernatural level. This will only come after the resurrection when they have been transformed through suffering, and receive the Holy Spirit, enabling and disposing them to see or know Jesus in his divinity. Thomas will best express their experiential knowledge when he addresses Jesus as "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28).

Jesus says to Thomas in the Gospel today, "From now on you do know him and have seen him." Here, I believe, Jesus is anticipating that moment in his hour after the resurrection when the Apostles will come to experience Jesus as divine. That moment is so close that Jesus can speak of it as already accomplished.

Philip says to Jesus, "Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us." Philip is thinking of an astonishing manifestation of God such as has taken place on Mt. Sinai, or as Isaiah has experienced in a terrifying vision (see Exodus 19 or Isaiah 6). But Philip is misunderstanding what Jesus is saying.

So Jesus explains, "Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" Philip has not yet reached that stage of spiritual development to enable him to experience the divinity of Jesus. He will have to suffer in Jesus' passion for that and become completely committed to Jesus by losing himself.

Jesus' works show that the Father speaks and acts in Jesus. For example, his powerful word that raises Lazarus from the dead exemplifies Jesus' union with the Father. Neither Jesus' words nor his deeds are his own. They reveal that the Father and the Son are one. The Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father.

That is why Jesus can say, "The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works." Then Jesus repeats his statement to show us its importance: "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else, believe because of the works themselves." The Father does Jesus' works because he is constantly in Jesus who lives in communion with him.

Jesus concludes our Gospel today with: "Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father."

Faith unites the believer to God and Jesus through their Holy Spirit, giving him or her the power and holiness to witness the works of God. Through faith, we open our hearts to receive God's self-gift and the personal dynamism that it brings.

What can Jesus mean when he says that the believer will do even greater works than the ones he has done? Surely, no apostolic miracle surpasses the raising of Lazarus. So what does Jesus mean by greater works? The "works" of Jesus are much more than his miracles. They include all of his apostolic endeavors. Jesus has relatively few followers during his public life. The completion of his mission on earth in his resurrection and glorification have to take place before his claims and doctrines can be accepted by the multitudes. The spiritual results to be achieved by the Apostles and the Church are to be greater than when Jesus lived in Palestine. Jesus' ministry is sharply circumscribed by that small country and the short time he has lived. But in the Church, his words will be heard throughout the gentile world. And the power unleashed by the risen Jesus through the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost will be unlimited.

For example, three thousand are converted as a result of Peter's inspired sermon on Pentecost Sunday. The marvelous interior transformation of souls through the communication of the Holy Spirit continues to this day. See the spiritual wonders he accomplishes in the lives of the saints such as in Teresa of Calcutta and John Paul II. And the Church has spread throughout the world. The tiny mustard seed Jesus has planted has demonstrated its inner force by extending its branches to the furthest corners of the globe. Truly, the power of Jesus, active in his followers, has manifested even greater works than Jesus in his earthly ministry.

Just think of the billions of people who have heard the word of God and learned about our holy faith through the media on the occasion of the death of John Paul II and the election and installment of Benedict XVI.

All of this is accomplished in Jesus' disciples because, as he says, "I am going to the Father." Jesus is going to the Father through his passion, death, and resurrection. Now that he has been glorified and has become a life-giving spirit, he empowers his disciples with a divine impulse and the dynamism of the Holy Spirit to accomplish marvelous results in their apostolic activity beyond that of Jesus himself during his earthly ministry.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Gospel: John 14:15-21

Jesus continues to prepare his disciples for his departure at the Last Supper: he says to them, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Obedience and submission of our will to Jesus is proof of our love for him. Surrendering our will and freedom to him is the most precious gift we can give him as a sign of our love. We no longer do our own will; we conform our will to his; we do what pleases him instead of ourselves. In this way, we overcome our selfish tendencies. As Jesus submits his will to the Father, we submit ours to him.

Jesus' "commandments" are not simply moral precepts: they involve a whole way of life in loving union with him; we are faithful to Jesus' words, which call us to love, poverty of spirit, and purity of heart; we fulfill all the demands his words make on our Christian existence. Jesus expects his disciples to remain close to him in love and faithfulness. We must love God with our whole heart and love one another as he loved us.

Sometimes people say, "I love God. I just don't go to Church." But Jesus himself kept the third commandment, which says, "Keep holy the Lord's Day." (see Lk 4:16). And he commands us to "Do this in memory of me", that is, celebrate the paschal mystery on the Lord's Day. To willfully disobey him in these matters is seriously sinful. These are acts contrary to love; they separate us from God. Such actions show that a person does not love God: "If you love me," Jesus says today, "you will keep my commandments."

But if we keep his commandments, he says, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always." An advocate is one who is called to be at our side to speak in our behalf and to defend us. Jesus speaks of "another Advocate", for Jesus himself is the first advocate. He explains that the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of truth" is the other Advocate to guide, protect, and plead our cause; the Spirit intercedes for us with signs too deep for words (see Rom 8:27). The Spirit bears witness to the truth and guides the disciples to all truth; he keeps them from the spirit of error. He teaches the disciples and calls to mind what Jesus has taught. He bears witness to Jesus and proves the world guilty. He is given to the disciples to strengthen their faith as they struggle against the world. The Spirit of truth fills the disciples inwardly and is a lasting help to them. He gives them constant inner strength from his permanent presence with and in the disciples.

But "the world cannot accept" the Spirit of truth "because it neither sees nor knows him". The world is led by the "prince of this world" (Jn 14:30)

who is "a liar and the father of lies" and because Jesus speaks the truth, the world is incapable of accepting it (see Jn 8:44-45). Jesus tells those who live according to the standards of the world: "Whoever belongs to God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not listen, because you do not belong to God" (Jn 8:47). On the other hand, "Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to [Jesus]" (Jn 6:45). They accept his Spirit of truth.

The "world", throughout the Last Supper discourse, signifies the hostile, unbelieving world that is opposed to God and Jesus--Jesus is not speaking of the created world which God loves so much (Jn 3:16).

St. John's Gospel gives us another reason why the world cannot accept the Spirit of truth: "The light came into the world but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed" (Jn 3:19-20). Jesus is that light who exposes the world's sins; that is why it will not accept him and his Spirit of truth. Jesus says that the world cannot accept the Spirit of truth "because it neither sees nor knows him."

The world lives only on the natural level, according to the flesh and its evil tendencies. It can only see external objects with the eyes of the body. Therefore, it cannot see the Spirit, which has no body. It can only be seen or known spiritually, with the powers of the graced soul perfected with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

St. Paul explains the matter in this way: "No one knows what pertains to God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the things freely given us by God. "Now the natural person does not accept what pertains to the Spirit of God, for to him it is foolishness, and he cannot understand it, because it is judged spiritually" (1 Cor 2:11-12, 14-15).

In contrast, Jesus tells his faithful disciples: "But

you know him [the Spirit of truth], because he remains with you, and will be in you.” The disciples know him because he lives in them; they experience his presence as he operates in their delicate consciences, guiding and inspiring them to live according to God’s will. By doing God’s will, expressed by the truth of God’s word, the true disciples are united to God through love. In this union of love, the gift of wisdom enables them to know God personally by sharing his very being, which is love. St. John explains our ability to know the indwelling Spirit in this way: “Everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love” (1 Jn 4:7-8). Our lives of love show that we are connected to God by continuously being born of him. Sharing his being, which is love, enables us to know him experientially (see Jn 4:16; 3:2).

Jesus assures his disciples: “I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.” The disciples are only apparently made orphans or left desolate. In reality, they are shortly to experience a new community with Jesus that is deeper and more spiritual than in the past. The death of Jesus can be understood as no more than a brief and unimportant interruption (“a little while”) in the disciples’ community with him. Jesus says, “In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live and you will live.” The world will not see Jesus any more because it has only carnal eyes; it does not possess the spiritual powers to see or know Jesus in his resurrected state. That requires faith and submission to God and to truth.

But the disciples will see or know Jesus because of their communion with him in love and because they possess the power of faith and the gifts of the Spirit that it provides. They will share the life of the resurrection with Jesus through the gift of the Holy Spirit. He is the communication of Jesus’ glorious, risen life. Since the disciples share the very life of Jesus in his glorified state, they are able to see, that is, know him in a spiritual manner; for

through grace and purity of heart, they enjoy a spirit-to-spirit communion with him. Jesus says, “On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you.” “On that day” refers to the time after the resurrection. It is that period of Christian existence made possible by the hour of Jesus.

The disciples will realize or know through experience the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son in their hearts. They will participate in the divine life to such an extent that they will know, spiritually, Jesus’ dwelling within them, and that they are living in him. Their commingled lives will enable them to know, from experience, their own mutual indwelling with Jesus and the Father. Our transformation into God-likeness is that real and grand! Sanctifying grace and its powers really deify us and make us children of God.

Jesus explains how we dispose ourselves for this mystical knowledge, saying, “Whoever has my commandments and observes them is the one who loves me.” Personal knowledge of Jesus assumes that we keep his commands, that is, live the Gospel life of love and purity of heart. That means that we live on the level of spirit rather than the level of unredeemed flesh, Christ-centered rather than self-centered. We submit our will and desires to God’s will; we love God with our whole heart. In this way, we live in union with Jesus and know him.

Jesus continues, “And whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him.” One of the results of interpersonal communion among friends is self-revelation. Union, in love, produces personal mutual knowledge. When asked how is it that he will reveal himself to the disciples and not to the world, Jesus explains that it is because his self-disclosure will take place within our very person through love. Through the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:15-17), the Father and the Son come to the disciple, who truly loves them, to make their home in him

or her (Jn 14:23). The worldling is not able to be privy to God's self-revelation because his self-centered and carnal heart is incapable of receiving it; such a person is spiritually indisposed. God is spirit (Jn 4:24) and only those who live on the level of spirit can know God on that level. Religious experiences that produce good feelings may be comforting and self-satisfying, but they are inferior and cannot give the kind of deep, personal knowledge of God, which can be known only on the level of spirit. We pray for the grace to live on the level of spirit by conforming our lives to God's will as revealed by his word. Through spirit assertiveness, we overcome the selfish tendencies of unredeemed flesh so we can live in union and communion with the divine.

ASCENSION OF THE LORD (7TH)

Gospel: Matthew 28:16-20

Jesus promises 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 fill Elizabeth with grace and sanctify 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 requires 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 are 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 have been 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 experience the presence and power of the kingdom of God. They are 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 says, '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.

**PENTECOST SUNDAY
(VIGIL AND DAY)
Gospel: Jn 20: 19-23**

Since we have already explained the Gospel of Pentecost Sunday when it occurred on the 2nd Sunday of Easter, we will only offer a few comments on it. The Feast of Pentecost is so spiritually rich, our Mother, the Church presents us with two sets of readings--one for the vigil and the other for the Mass during the day of the feast. We will attempt to glean some pertinent insights for the feast from each of the two sets of readings. The sin of the first man continues to increase as Cain attacks and killed his brother Abel out of envy. The book of Genesis makes this sad comment, "When the Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how no desire that his heart conceived was ever anything but evil, he regretted that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was grieved" (Gen 6:5-6).

Sin alienates man from God and his fellow man. Adam attempts to be equal to God. The first reading of the vigil shows pride raising its evil head again: "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so make a name for ourselves ..." In his egotistic prideful self-exaltation, man attempts to make a name for himself. Like Adam, who does not need God to tell him what is good or bad—he wants to decide that for himself—so his children exclude God as they strike out on their own; they too, like God, will touch the heavens in the sky with their own constructed skyscraper. They don't need God. They can do it on their own.

But "... the Lord confused [their] speech ... [and] scattered them all over the earth." God has created humans for communion with each other through interpersonal communication. But egotism and pride separate us from each other and God; such self-centeredness prevents us from listening to each other and understanding each other's needs; we miscommunicate and misunderstand each other causing confusion and animosity. We are

driven apart and alienated from each other. The ultimate cause of this is man's revolt against God in a false independence.

As a result of our estrangement from God, the second reading of the vigil says, "...all creation is groaning in labor pains ..." Man misuses and abuses creation and thus prevents it from attaining the purpose for which it was created. "... we ourselves...also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." We are longing for something better ... a deeper, happier life. We already have the "firstfruits of the Spirit" giving us a foretaste and pledge of the fullness of life that awaits us in heaven. We await it with longing—full of expectation. We suffer the limitations of this imperfect world with patient endurance.

"The Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for 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. We normally use the medium of thoughts, images, and words to communicate with God in prayer. Our human spirit needs to be completed by the Divine Spirit for prayer to reach its fullness. This is what happens in contemplative prayer. The Holy Spirit enters our hearts and connects them immediately to God. We are thus able to communicate with him heart to heart, spirit to Spirit; then two hearts and spirits become one; prayer becomes wordless communion; the Holy Spirit "intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will"; there is no longer any need for words, thoughts, and images. Prayer becomes direct communion with God.

The Gospel of the vigil completes this picture. "... Jesus stands up and exclaims, 'Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture says: Rivers of living water will flow within him.'" The "rivers of living water: that flow within" the believer is the Holy Spirit who is issuing from the deepest center of a person, whose faith is being expressed in prayerful receptivity.

The Holy Spirit awakens from his inmost dwelling place in us as he is spirited from the Father and the Son in an upward surge that lifts us up to God and floods our whole being with his presence. He fills our whole person with infused knowledge and love of God so that we may "... know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge ..." and "... be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:19).

Jesus is the source of living water, the Holy Spirit, flowing from his pierced side is poured out of his glorified body. We who thirst for holiness (Mt 5:6), who experience an immense desire for God and his divine life, come to Jesus in faith. We drink the living water, the Holy Spirit, through prayer. God tells us in Psalm 81:11, "...open wide your mouth that I may fill it." The more we love God and do his will, the wider we can open the mouth of our soul, the more disposed we are to receive his outpoured love in the Holy Spirit. Jesus proclaims his message to the people during the celebration of the feast of Tabernacles. A golden pitcher of water drawn from the spring at Siloam is poured into the ground in a silver funnel after the priests circle seven times around the altar. They pray for rain as they sing, "With joy you will draw water from the spirings of salvation ..." (Is 12:3). It is at this moment that Jesus proclaims himself to be the unique source of living water, the Holy Spirit. The people's prayer for water in this ceremony is answered in an unexpected way. The prophet Ezekiel says, "...I saw water flowing out from ... the temple ..." (Ez 47:1). These waters produce abundant life (Ez 47:7-12). Jesus is that new temple of God that he promises to raise up after it has been destroyed (Jn 2: 19-22). This same life-giving water, the Holy Spirit, which flows from Jesus now, will become the waters of glory in heaven. St. John tells us in Revelation, "Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, sparkling like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ..." (Rev 22:1). This life-giving water is the Holy Spirit who is the personal Love between the Father and the Son.

If water symbolizes the life-giving qualities of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of the vigil, we see other symbolical expressions of him in the readings of the day. In the Gospel, Jesus breathes upon the Apostles as a sign that he is giving them the Holy Spirit. We are reminded of Adam when God breathed life into him (Gen 2:7). Breath is a sign of life. Jesus has become a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor 15:45). He now breathes new life of the resurrection into the Apostles as he gives them the Holy Spirit.

The first reading says that the Holy Spirit comes from the sky as a noise like a strong driving wind. A storm wind, such as a hurricane or a tornado, comes with the terrible noise of destructive force. But this wind, representing the Holy Spirit, comes from heaven to destroy evil in us and to give us divine life. This divine wind fills the entire house in which the disciples are gathered. This signifies that the Holy Spirit fills the whole Church with his presence. He is like an oxygen-filled breeze that rejuvenates us as we experience its gentle touch caressing our face. The Holy Spirit is like a strong wind at sea whose driving force, is caught by the sails of prayer, carries us effortlessly in the presence of God until we reach the shores of eternity.

Again, the Holy Spirit appears to them like "tongues as of fire". Tongues convey the idea of speech. The Spirit empowers the disciples to speak fervently about God. He enables them to witness the reality of God. The fire symbolizes purification as well as warmth. Fire also expresses zeal and intense spiritual activity. Fire speaks to us of the flames of love; the Holy Spirit sets us on fire with the love of God and love for his people. "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. ..." It is through him that the Father and Son come to dwell in us. Thus, we become temples or dwelling places of God. He wants to be our constant companion. We must frequently advert to his presence in us and keep him company.

He does not come to us alone: He is one with the Father and the Son—he is their own Eternal Love.

We image the Holy Spirit each time we meet one another in holy love. When two of us meet in Christian love, it is like the Father and the Son who are united in the Love of the Holy Spirit.

The "... tongues of fire ... parted and came to rest on each of [the disciples]" gathered together in the upper room. "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues ... each one heard them speaking in his own language." Each foreigner heard one or another of the Apostles speaking his language.

The Spirit causes the Apostles to speak; they are understood by the multilingual audience. Here, the gift of the Spirit is a remedy for the confusion of languages at Babel and the resulting scattering of the human race (Gen 11:1-9). In the new age inaugurated by the coming of the Spirit, the good news proclaimed by the Apostles can be understood and received by people of every nation on earth, who are consequently drawn into unity. Pentecost is the inauguration of a mission that will cross all language barriers.

Pentecost is a Greek word that means fifty. It is a feast that is celebrated in the Old Testament fifty days after Passover in thanksgiving for the wheat harvest. It is also a feast of thanksgiving for the gift of the Law given Moses on Mount Sinai. Fifty days after Passover, Moses went up the mountain and was given the Ten Commandments. Peals of thunder and lightning flashes are the signs of God's presence; the loud noise and flames and the trembling mountain made the people realize that God is present (Ex 19).

A similar manifestation of God occurs on this new Pentecost and the giving of the New Law, "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus ..." (Rom 8:2). The noise of the wind and the tongues of fire and the Apostles' burning zeal leave no doubt that the Spirit promised by Jesus has descended on the Church fifty days after the New Passover, Jesus' resurrection.

The Holy Spirit is absolutely necessary to enable us to believe and to live out our faith. As the

second reading puts it today, "... no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit." He is the one who gives us the light to see and state our conviction and our believe that Jesus is God. It is the Holy Spirit who makes us children of God: "... you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, 'Abba, Father!'" The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God ..." (Rom 8:15-16). The Holy Spirit enables us to experience ourselves as children of God; he moves us to act upon this experience and call God "Father".

The Holy Spirit is very near us. We can know him because he remains with us and is in us (see Jn 14: 17). The second reading today also explains that the Holy Spirit gives us "... different kinds of spiritual gifts ... different forms of service ... [and] workings ...". The Spirit is the source of all these gifts. He unites us all in the one body of Christ with a love and holy concern for each other "... that there may be no division in the body ..." (1 Cor 12:25). The gifts that the Holy Spirit gives us are meant for the common good of all rather than for individual selfish purposes.

THE MOST HOLY TRINITY

Gospel: Jn 3:16-18

Love prompts self-disclosure. We tend to reveal our inmost thoughts and sentiments to the persons we love.

God begins revealing himself to the people he loves from the beginning. The first reading today tells us, "Having come down in a cloud, the LORD stood with [Moses] there [on Mount Sainai] and proclaimed his name, 'LORD'". (The word "LORD" here is our rendition of the word "Yahweh".)

"The LORD, the LORD, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity." God reveals himself as merciful, gracious, kind, and faithful. He also reveals himself as the one and only God whom we must love with all our heart (see Deut 6:45). In an environment of polytheism, where people believe in many gods, it is necessary for God to stress that there is only

one God. The people have to get accustomed to that idea first before God can reveal more about himself. Later, when the second Person of the Blessed Trinity becomes human, God will be able to explain that there are three Persons in one God.

When Jesus becomes man, he often refers to God as his Father. For example, he prays, “I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth...” (Mt 11:25). Jesus also speaks of himself as Son of God. For example, he prays, “... Father, the hour has come. Give glory to your son, so that your son may glorify you ...” (Jn 17:1). Jesus explains that he shares the divine nature with the Father. He says, “The Father and I are one”, that is, one being. Thus he can also say, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt 28:18). And the Father acknowledges Jesus to be his Son. For example, at Jesus’ baptism he openly proclaims, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17). Jesus also speaks of a third Person in God, the Holy Spirit, whom He and the Father will send. “When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father, He will testify to me” (Jn 15:26).

It is because these three Persons are equally God that Jesus commands his Apostles to make disciples and baptize them “... in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit ...” (Mt 28:19). This means that baptism plunges us into the divinity, into the divine nature, and unites us to all three Persons: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is a call to live in the company of and in the communion with the Blessed Trinity. God reveals his inner life to us so that we can relate interpersonally with him. We are called to be aware of our intimate union with God and to respond to his love-initiative. Jesus explains that He will “give” the Holy Spirit to us after He is glorified. He says we will know this Spirit of truth: “...you know it,” He says, “because it remains with you, and will be in you” (Jn 14:17).

Jesus goes on to explain that He will reveal himself to us, his disciples. He says that He will accomplish this self-revelation through his indwelling presence in us with the Father. Listen to Jesus’ words: “Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him” (Jn 14:23).

We are called to live an interior life with the Blessed Trinity. That is why He reveals himself to us, and comes to live in our very heart. We must respond to his love by adverting to his presence and returning his love. We show him our love by doing his will and by establishing a personal relationship with him. We think of him often and converse with him throughout the day. We praise and thank him as well as express our love and needs. We are attentive to his presence and inspirations in the core of our being. We set time aside to be alone with him to receive and give him our love. We look upon him in his indwelling presence, as we remain united to him in love. Thus, He sustains us in virtuous living by the power of his presence.

Our awareness of the presence of the Blessed Trinity in each other will tend to foster mutual respect. This awareness will also help us to realize our dignity as children of God. God’s presence as He is in himself, as a Trinity of Persons dwelling in us, is what is known as Uncreated Grace. Created, or sanctifying grace, flows from his presence in the center of our soul to sanctify our whole person. We are thus given a participation in the life of the three divine Persons. As the Epistle of Peter tells us, we are given a “... share in the divine nature...” (2 Pt 1:4). Through sanctifying grace, we have the ability to know God personally and to return his love through the Holy Spirit.

The second reading appropriately urges, “Mend your ways. ...” We must improve, correct, and reform our lives to be able to live in intimate communion with the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity who dwell in us. “... encourage one another ...” We are all closely united to one

another by grace. We all share the divine life. We must help and inspire each other to live according to our dignity as dwelling places of God. As living tabernacles of God, we cannot live in sin.

“... agree with one another ...” We must learn to live in harmony, in mutual respect for the dignity of each person in whom the three divine Persons live. “... live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you.” Living in harmony with God and each other opens us to the outpoured love of the Blessed Trinity living in us; our whole being will be flooded with their peace. Because of the indwelling Trinity, St. Paul can say, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” In other words, as children of the same family of God, some form of affectionate greeting, when we meet, is appropriate. “All the holy ones greet you.” Sanctifying grace flowing from the indwelling Trinity sanctifies us. Union with the three divine Persons makes us holy. St. Paul’s closing greeting, which we use as a form of greeting and blessing at Mass, invokes all three Persons of the Trinity: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God [the Father] and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

Jesus won this unmerited grace and favor for us through his suffering and death. All of this comes to us because of God the Father’s infinite love for us. The Holy Spirit who unites us directly to God and to one another brings about the communion of fellowship with God and one another.

The Gospel tells us that it is God’s unfathomable love that set this whole redemptive mission in motion. The magnificent Father gives us his all and his most precious and beloved Son. He gives his Son who, for love of us, embraces human poverty and all of its weaknesses. His Son gives himself up in crucifixion and death to show us the evil of sin and his boundless love.

We are to receive the Father’s precious gift by believing in him. Faith, or believing, is opening our heart to receive God’s self-gift in his Son Jesus. The Father and Son are united as one in their mutual Love, the Holy Spirit. By opening

our heart to receive them through faith, we are given eternal life. Faith enables us to begin living eternal life even now. For, eternal life is to know God personally by being united to him and sharing his divine life (see Jn 17:3). The Father’s great desire is to share his divine life and love with us through his Son, communicated to us through the Holy Spirit.

God does not wish to condemn the world, but to save it from self-destruction. He wants to give this straying world his own eternal life. “Whoever believes in him will not be condemned ...,” because the believer receives the Father’s Son whose Spirit and gifts enlighten and strengthen him. Thus, he is able to live in union with God through obedience to his word and will. Such a believer lives in close friendship with God. He is already beginning to live the eternal life of heaven by grace.

“... but whoever does not believe has already been condemned ...” Just as eternal life already begins in this world for the person who has decided for Christ, so does the unbeliever already stand judged and condemned. Everyone must make a decision regarding the acceptance or rejection of the light, which emanates from Jesus.

The Son has not been sent to judge the world, but he still says, “I came into this world for judgment ...” (Jn 9:39). Judgment or condemnation is far from being the purpose of the Incarnation. But the coming of Jesus is and ever will be the occasion of judgment in view of the decision with which man is forced. One must choose whether to accept or reject the way, the truth, and the life that has been revealed to him by the Son. In making this decision, man judges himself. The last judgment is nothing but the divine acknowledgement of the condition brought about by human decision.

One may ask, “But why do people refuse to believe or accept Jesus and the light of his truth?” St. John’s Gospel answers the question in this way; “... the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things

hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. But whoever loves the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God” (Jn 3:19-21). Such a person does not come to Jesus in faith, because he wants to continue his selfish, sinful way of living. This kind of living makes a person indisposed for communion with God.

God is the Supreme Being and center of the universe. But man in his arrogance wants to make himself the center. Such pride separates him from God. Man feeds into his self-centeredness by self-indulgence and doing his own will instead of God’s. In this way, he caters to his own mortality and corruptibility. Jesus shows himself to be the way to God and eternal life by revealing the truth in his Gospel of how we must live to be disposed for God; He also gives us the very life of God enabling us to live holy lives centered around God. But the selfish person does not want to give up his self-centeredness and self-indulgence. Therefore, he does not accept Jesus and his Gospel. As a result, he condemns himself to separation from the supreme life of God-centered, spiritual living-both now and forever.

THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF JESUS

Gospel: Jn 6:51-58

“...I am the living bread that came down from heaven...” (Jn 6:51).

In saying, “I am”, Jesus is uttering the divine name; He is proclaiming his divinity; He is one with the Father in possessing the divine nature (Jn 10:30). As such, He is divine nourishment for us. When we receive the Holy Eucharist, we receive the divine Jesus in person under the form of bread. It is his way of nourishing us with the divine substance that is his. The soul is so precious and is endowed with such dignity as the image of God; nothing less than God himself can be its food.

The Eucharistic bread Jesus gives us is alive; it is

his glorified flesh, saturated with the Father’s divinity, which also belongs to Jesus by nature. For He is the God-man who gives himself to us so we can assimilate the holy virtues of his divinized humanity that comes to us as spiritual food.

The miraculous food Jesus gives us is the consecrated bread in the Mass that is changed through transubstantiation. The substance of the bread becomes the substance of Jesus’ resurrected body to nourish our spiritual nature. The appearance of bread remains, but its inner substance has been changed into the risen Jesus. He is overflowing with the supreme heavenly life of God.

We normally become what we eat. This heavenly Bread communicates to us its own divine qualities so that we can become alive with God’s own holiness. He gradually transforms us into himself. He transmits his own love for the Father and for others to us so we too can become love.

“... whoever eats this bread will live forever ...” (6:51). The Eucharist is the food of immortality. Because of sin, it is necessary for us to experience physical death. But Jesus says, “... whoever believes has eternal life” (6:47). Therefore, whoever maintains this life of God by eating “... this ... bread that comes down from heaven... [does] not die” (6:50). Such a person will pass through physical death without being harmed by it. The eternal life already possessed by the person will remain intact, untouched by death. The Eucharist preserves us through death into eternity. The person who lives on Christ’s glorified Body-Person preserves the eternal life received in baptism. The tomb then becomes an antechamber to entry into the fullness of eternal life already begun on earth.

“... and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world” (6:51). On the authority of Jesus, expressed and given at the Last Supper, and by the power of the Holy Spirit given to the Apostles and their successors, simple bread is transformed into the Body-Person of Jesus. It is the glorified Body of Jesus that is transformed by the resurrection that we receive.

Those who refuse to believe, along with Judas (6:64), wrongfully think Jesus is referring to his mere human flesh. But he explains, “It is the Spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail” (6:63). Through the resurrection, Jesus becomes “... a life giving Spirit” (1 Cor 15:45). His spiritualized resurrected Body communicates the very life of God to those who receive him worthily. Unbelievers like Judas are unable to transcend their carnal-mindedness to understand such spiritual matters. They need to trust Jesus and His word. As the God-Man, He can devise a way to remain with us and nourish us with the substance of his divinity, and it is amazing in what a simple, ingenious way He accomplishes this mystery! He takes ordinary food, simple bread, and changes it into himself so that He can nourish us supernaturally with his own Spirit-Life. His true followers accept this stupendous mystery in all simplicity—because it is Jesus who promises and accomplishes it.

“The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat’” (6:52)? Typically, Jesus is speaking on the level of spirit, while his listeners are hearing and thinking on the level of flesh. They are like the Samaritan woman who interprets Jesus’ “living water” as mere flowing water rather than the Holy Spirit who will forever quench her thirst by becoming in her “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:10, 14). This earthly way of understanding Jesus’ words and images to convey spiritual realities is a typical occurrence. Only those who know Jesus on a deeper level understand or believe that He can do what He says. Jesus is talking about his spiritualized, resurrected body—not his flesh in its earthly, untransformed state. If the people will put their trust in Jesus, that he can do what he says, even if they do not understand how, they will come to discern what he is trying to explain. But they do not trust his genuineness, his trustworthiness. Consequently, they refuse to believe Jesus, even as some disbelieve the reality of his statement to this very day. So rather than take back what He has said or explain that they

have misinterpreted the meaning of his words, Jesus simply insists that they accept the truth; He demands faith in himself even if they can not understand how He will accomplish this mystery. And so, “Jesus says to them, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you’” (6:53). When Jesus refers to himself as “Son of Man” He is alerting his audience to Daniel’s prophecy about the Messiah’s glorification (Dan 7:13-14). God will give life to his people through his Messiah whom He will glorify with his Spirit; He himself will become the source of divine life for all the people after He has been glorified (Jn 7:38-39). Jesus is trying to convey to his people that they must receive him in his glorified state in the way He will determine and require for them to have life. They must have faith in him that He can accomplish it. They must assimilate his glorious self and the divine life in him as their daily food. He wants to be their “daily bread” (Mt 5:11), intimately involved in their everyday lives. He wants to be their food in person as well as their intimate friend. It is only at the Last Supper that He will finally reveal how He will accomplish this mystery. He does it by changing the bread and cup of wine that He holds in his hands into his body and blood, anticipating his self-gift to us in his passion, death, and resurrection. But for now, He simply wants his disciples to believe in his word, and trust in him. For He has proven himself worthy of trust. His miracles and truthfulness prove him trustworthy and credible. Without receiving the glorified body-person of Jesus, we cannot receive the divine life that his spiritualized flesh attained. We are bereft of this divine life communicated to us as grace in the Eucharist.

Jesus continues to stress the need to receive his self-gift in the Eucharist. “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day” (Jn 6:54). Jesus is determined to convince us of the value of receiving him in the Holy Eucharist. He explains that by taking him into ourselves as food and drink, we already begin to live the eternal life of

heaven. That means we are brought into the life of the Trinity: In this mystery, the Father gives himself and his divine life to the Son; and the Son receives and reciprocates his self-gift to the Father in Eucharistic gratitude. The two are eternally joined together in their mutual Love, which is the Holy Spirit. So the Eucharist brings us into this Supreme Life of the Eternal, Personal Knowledge and Love in mutual self-gift within the Godhead. We are called to enter into that sublime life of the Trinity through a reciprocal self-gift to God in purity of heart. The Father gives himself to us through his Beloved Son by means of the Holy Spirit in the Holy Eucharist. By reciprocating through our own self-gift, we dispose ourselves to accept Jesus' invitation to begin living the eternal life of the Blessed Trinity (see Jn 17:3).

As a result of our participation in the very life of Jesus, which is the eternal life already begun on earth, we too, like Jesus, defy death. Physical death is necessary to put an end to our earthly exile and our being deprived of face-to-face, person-to-person, intimate knowledge of God. Our untransformed flesh and its evil tendencies must happily come to an end. So often, our unpurified body overwhelms our will and its good desires and leads us to sin. Death will put an end to our unredeemed body and its sinful tendencies for total devotion and worship of God. Just as Jesus' body is raised on the third day, so too, our bodies will be raised on the last day to be glorified like Jesus. "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Mt 13:43).

Then Jesus proceeds to explain the reason for these good effects in receiving him: "For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink" (Jn 6:55). Eternal life and resurrection of the body on the last day is possible because of the true, spiritual, immortal, and eternal life that Jesus gives us in the Holy Eucharist. The divine life of the children of God received at baptism must be nourished. It is sustained by assimilating the glorious life of the risen Jesus. We receive him under the form of the bread and wine that is transformed during

the consecration of the Mass by the Holy Spirit. By apostolic succession in the laying on of hands, the priest, acting on the command of Jesus to "Do this in memory of me" (1 Cor 11:24), receives the power to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. The appearance remains the same after the utterance of the words, "This is my body ... this is my blood," but the substance of the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus. In this way, Jesus gives himself to us as spiritual food and drink for our spiritual lives.

His divine nature provides spiritual nourishment for our soul, which is living the life of God through grace. Jesus calls his flesh and blood true food and drink because they actually provide spiritual sustenance for our spiritual nature. Assimilating Jesus as our food under the form of bread and wine reminds us of the scroll that the prophet Ezekiel is commanded to eat. By digesting the contents of the scroll, the prophet is nourished by the word of God so he can speak it to the people (Ez 3:1-3). Taking in Jesus in the form of consecrated bread and wine sustains us and enables us to grow into the likeness of Jesus and become like him. Such sustenance and growth parallels what natural food and drink does for us.

Food also provides us with energy for wellbeing and action. The good effects of receiving the body and blood of Jesus can be compared to the mysterious food and drink given to the discouraged and fearful Elijah fleeing Jezebel. "He got up, ate and drank, then strengthened by that food, he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb" (1 Kng 19:1-8).

Jesus continues to explain the effects of the Eucharist: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him" (Jn 6: 56). Even after the physical presence of Jesus under the appearance of bread and wine disappears because of the digestive process, the unitive effects of the Eucharist remain. Holy Communion brings about a lasting union between the person and Jesus. A new degree of

love-union perdures. Jesus' visit has a lasting effect on our person; we cannot forget him. A residue of his love and virtuous qualities stays with us. It tends to bring about an enduring interpersonal communion between him and us. Jesus' desire is that we remain in him as He remains in us (Jn 15:4).

Baptism brings us into a holy union with Jesus. We are baptized into Christ (Rom 6:3). Our union with him through sanctifying grace continues even if we are not aware of it. Receiving the Eucharist increases that union and awakens consciousness of it. Jesus' love for us, upon receiving him, stirs reciprocal love in us. We are drawn to return love for Love. Even after some time passes, after our reception of his Body and Blood, the memory of his presence and love lingers in us. This loving memory stirs unitive, loving acts and deeds. Through the Eucharist, Jesus brings about his desire that we remain in loving union with him throughout the day.

“God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29). When we receive Holy Communion, we are plunged into the divine Jesus. When an iron rod is thrust into fire, it takes on the qualities of fire; it is so thoroughly permeated with the qualities of fire that it can be said to become fire. That is what happens to us when we are plunged into Jesus in receiving the Holy Eucharist. He communicates to us his own divine perfections and virtues with which his sacred humanity is endowed. Moreover, as hard metal softens and melts in the fire and is permanently changed into a new form, so too, Jesus molds us into his likeness; we, too, begin to remain in loving union with him as He remains in us. We become like him. He communicates his own loving disposition and virtuous qualities to us. He changes us into himself as we increasingly surrender to him and his will. We are melted into union with him. Jesus comes to us in his saving presence to pervade our whole being with his healing, nourishing, soothing, purifying, and strengthening powers (virtues). Our whole being is penetrated by his goodness to imbue us with his own benevolence. He thoroughly saturates us

with his divine presence. The species of bread and wine give us the sacred humanity of Jesus united to his divinity. That divinity and Person of Jesus lights up our whole person as a light illuminates a room. Jesus' presence fills our spirits as perfume fills the air with its fragrance, as cool water fills a lake, as air and its life-giving oxygen fills our lungs to enliven and invigorate us, as melodious music sweetens the surrounding atmosphere with its pleasing sound.

Jesus' Eucharistic discourse continues: “Just as the living Father sent me, and I have life because of the Father, so also that one who feeds on me will have life because of me” (Jn 6:57). Jesus receives his being eternally from the Father who begets him and gives him divine life. The divine life of the Father is communicated to us through the Son. Through his incarnation, Jesus assumes our human nature. This human nature of Jesus is transformed in the mystery of the resurrection. His human nature is deified. Even his human flesh is divinized. It is his glorified flesh that we receive in communion through which He transmits to us the divine life. We participate in the divine nature through sanctifying grace communicated in the Holy Eucharist. This holy transfusion is accomplished through the Holy Spirit. We receive it through faith, which opens us to his divine outpouring. What wonders take place in the secrecy of our hearts! The divine life is being poured into our open hearts through the Holy Eucharist, which is nothing less than the divine Jesus himself. Here we assume that we have placed no barriers between him and us. We are free from sinful attachments that close our hearts to full receptivity of this divine life that is being freely given to us.

“This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever” (Jn 6:58). We must consume Jesus himself to assimilate his divine life. He is our bread in a general sense. But He becomes our bread of nourishment more specifically in the Eucharist. He who comes from the Father in heaven transforms common

bread into himself to nourish us with divine life. This life becomes our own, the very life of God, which enables us to live forever. The ancestors of the Jewish audience that Jesus is addressing ate manna in the desert (Jn 6:49). But this is a natural phenomenon that God uses to nourish his people in the desert until they reach the Promised Land. However, it only provides subsistence for their natural lives while on their journey to the Promised Land. It does not give them divine life like the Eucharistic bread Jesus promises to give them. This heavenly bread gives eternal life to those who receive it with faith. Through faith, we draw divine life from Jesus' glorified body. As he passed through death to enter into the glory of God the Father, so do we who receive the eternal life, which Jesus gives us in the Eucharistic bread.

Death is mere sloughing off of the body that has become too feeble or damaged to maintain natural life. It's like a reptile that sheds its old skin because it has outgrown it. It passes on to a new and better form more suitable for its new existence. The body is like a booster rocket that is dropped off and left behind. It has served its purpose in life. It is no longer needed. The spirit is set free and made lighter so that it can enter into a new sphere of being in the heavenly realms. Death does not destroy our identity as persons. We retain our self-consciousness as disembodied spirits. The eternal life given us by the Eucharist remains intact as we pass through death of the body to enter into the fullness of life with God. The corruptible body is useless in heaven. We need a new set of senses to perceive and enjoy the spiritual delights that await us. We have fruition of these through the spirit, just as when we enjoy spirit-to-Spirit communion with God during prayer. at the end of the world in its present form, God will give us new spiritualized bodies endowed with spiritual powers capable of savoring the supernatural joys He has prepared for us. St. Paul tells us that these resurrected bodies will take on the qualities of spirit: incorruptible, glorious, powerful, and spiritual (see 1 Cor 15:42-44). We will undergo a kind of metamorphosis kindred to

that of a caterpillar when it becomes a butterfly, with all kinds of new unprecedented powers.

REFLECTIONS ON THE AFTERMATH OF JESUS' EUCHARISTIC DISCOURSE

John 6:59-69

"Then many of his disciples who were listening said, 'This saying is hard; who can accept it'" (Jn 6:60).

These disciples are thinking on a natural level. They are thinking in terms of cannibalism. No wonder they find Jesus' statement so difficult to accept; "Surely," they are thinking, "He must be going crazy!" But Jesus has proven himself to be a sane and truthful Person; his many miracles demonstrate his closeness to God. They need to trust him and put their faith in his Person even if they do not understand him. Those who accept Jesus' word and remain with him, come to understand how He will give them his flesh to eat and blood to drink at the Last Supper. He changes the bread and wine into his Body and Blood. He anticipates his suffering, death, and resurrection and tells his Apostles to "do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19). In this way, they will continue to "proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes" (1 Cor 11:26). Jesus wants his saving sacrificial death to be made present among his followers to sanctify them. And at the same time, he provides a way for them to communicate with him by receiving the fruit of his sacrifice: his glorified body and blood. He takes the bread, broken to show his death, and the wine, poured out to show the shedding of his blood, and transforms them into his own Body and Blood. He solves the mystery of how his disciples will come to eat and drink him.

"Since Jesus knows that his disciples are murmuring about this, he says to them, 'Does this shock you? What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?'" (Jn 6:61-62). Perhaps the miracle of Jesus' resurrection and ascension will make the murmurers think twice about Jesus' words. They need to start thinking

on a higher spiritual level. Again, Jesus' use of the term, "Son of Man", should have alerted his audience to the prophecy of Daniel: He has seen "one like a son of man coming on the clouds of heaven ..." (Dan 7:3). Jesus intimates that He is the one who fulfills this prophecy.

Jesus continues his attempts to raise the disciples' thinking to a higher level, saying, "It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (Jn 6:63). It is very difficult for earthlings to rise above earthly concepts. They have to make the transition from simple human flesh and blood to the divinized and glorified Body and Blood of Jesus. But at this point, it is beyond them. They will have to accept it on sheer faith. Only the resurrection-ascension mystery, in combination with Jesus' words at the Last Supper, will shed light on the mystery. Then, they will be able to receive the life-giving Spirit of Jesus as they communicate with him in his Eucharistic presence. Jesus' glorified body is saturated with the Holy Spirit. Jesus is not speaking of his untransformed body. Simple human flesh is not what He is talking about. He is speaking about his divinized, risen body, through which He will nourish us with himself in Person.

"But there are some of you who do not believe.' Jesus knows from the beginning the ones who will not believe and the one who will betray him" (Jn 6:64). Judas is one of those who will not believe because he is living on the level of flesh. He has fastened himself to the earth by his love for money. St. John tells us, "he was a thief and held the money bag and used to steal the contributions" (Jn 12:6). Bound by sense-life, he is incapable of rising to the level of spirit. We, too, must be on guard lest our earthly attachments prevent us from living on the level of spirit, where God lives. Thus, for example, our prayer lives will be darkened by our living on the level of sense, and limited by our living on the level of self. Our communion will be hindered.

Living on the level of flesh leads to betrayal of Jesus. We become coarse and insensitive to him

who is perceivable on the level of spirit. Jesus explains, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father" (Jn 6:65). Belief in Jesus and his teaching about receiving his Body and Blood is a supernatural matter. Only grace can enable us to believe this. "Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me" (Jn 6:45). God speaks to our hearts. If we listen and follow his inspirations, He will "draw" us to Jesus (Jn 6:44). We will come to know him personally and believe in him. We readily accept, with joy, his self-gift to us under the form of bread and wine. We believe in his real presence in the Eucharistic species. Unbelief indicates a refusal to comply with the promptings of grace given by the Father. We must pray for the grace to respond lovingly to God's grace. It is a gift becoming us to come to Jesus in faith.

"As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him" (Jn 6:66). Sadly, these disciples have not reached full spiritual maturity. They are bound by their limited human understanding of Jesus. They can not transcend their earth-bound thinking. We are reminded of St. Paul's words, "Now the natural person does not accept what pertains to the Spirit of God, for to him it is foolishness, and he cannot understand it, because it is judged spiritually" (1 Cor 2:14).

"Jesus then says to the Twelve, 'Do you also want to leave?'" Clearly, it is not a question of misunderstanding what Jesus has been saying. They are leaving because they think that Jesus' insistence that they eat his body and drink his blood is absurd. Jesus means what He says. He does not correct their understanding as He has on other occasions. For example, when Jesus says, "Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him" (Jn 11:11), the disciples understand him literally. So Jesus corrects their flawed understanding. He really means that Lazarus has died (Jn 11:13-14). But in the case of the Eucharist, Jesus is speaking literally. Rather

than tell them they have misunderstood him, Jesus stands by his teaching regarding their need to eat his flesh and drink his blood. “Jesus then says to the Twelve, ‘Do you also want to leave?’” (Jn 6:67). The test of faith has arrived. They either trust Jesus totally, or not at all. They accept only that which they understand. That is not faith. They will not take that leap of faith, into the blinding light, where God takes us beyond our limited intellects into the infinite and unknown. Faith accepts the fact that God is greater than we are. The spiritual world consists of a vastness beyond even our imagination. It completely transcends our power of thought. Only faith can adequately apprehend and contain it. So Simon Peter expresses that faith and says, “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 6:68-69). Jesus is taking the disciples into the world of God. No one else has ever done that. Peter understands that only Jesus can do this. There is no one else to go to. Jesus alone has the words of eternal life, and that includes the necessity of eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

Peter is ready to go all the way. He trusts Jesus completely. He has experienced enough of Jesus to realize that He deserves his complete trust. He has just recently seen Jesus multiply five loaves and two fish to feed thousands of people (Jn 6:1-15). He has seen Jesus walking on water, and He has even given Peter himself power to do the same (Jn 6:16-21). Moreover, Peter will have remembered the stupendous miraculous catch of fish in plain daylight when he had just experienced utter failure catching anything at all after fishing all night long—yes, Jesus is believable—He promises and has accomplished the impossible. Peter realizes that Jesus deserves his absolute trust. He believes Jesus with his whole heart, without any reservation. Holy Thursday night and the Paschal Mystery, the Passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, will bring it all together and make everything intelligible.

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 is 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 rise majestically before them, it is a place of great natural beauty. Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They reply, “Some say John the Baptist.” You will remember that Herod Antipas and his court believe that Jesus is John the Baptist risen from the dead (Mt 14:1-2). Others believe that Jesus is Elijah because he is expected to return to prepare the people for the Messiah. Still others believe that Jesus is 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 are thinking, Jesus might be some other prophet. Such is the popular opinion, what we call today, the majority opinion—and they are 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 says 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 says 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” is a title used by the prophet Hosea (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 concludes 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 is not from the human reasoning of “flesh and blood” that Simon has come to acknowledge Jesus’ Messiah-ship 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 has taught and 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 Johah. 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 gives his disciple, Simon bar Jona, the Aramaic name Kepha (Jn 1:42), the name by which he is commonly known in the Apostolic Church. The Greek Petros, from whence our “Peter” comes, 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 is 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 confirms his promise to Peter. Jesus reveals himself to the seven disciples who have gone fishing. Again, He singles Peter out from among them; and after asking him three times, “Do you love me?”, Jesus proceeds 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, He looks at him and says, ‘You are Simon the Son of John; you will be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter)” (Jn 1:42). And now Jesus expresses fully what He has in mind for Peter from the moment He meets him. St. Leo the Great writes, “it is as if our Lord has 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 has 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 changes Abram's name to Abraham to signify his becoming the father of many nations (Gen 17:5); God also changes Jacob's name to Israel because he has contended with divine and human beings and has 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, rejecting 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 14:7-10), (see *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 new chosen people, which He is setting up on earth to carry on his work. It is to be made up of all races from all parts of the world. As its mission is to bring the message of salvation to all people, it is to go on until the end of time. Jesus promises 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 are 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 is 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, 20:13ff). Against all of this, the power of the Church will be able to withstand and prevail.

Jesus goes 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 imply 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 is a symbol of leadership and authority; it is 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 18:18, but to Peter alone are accorded the revelation, the role of rock, and especially the keys. The Church can 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 provides 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 will be inspired and ratified in heaven, Jesus gives him the power of freedom from error when officially teaching the universal Church. In other words, Peter receives the primacy in the Church and gift of infallibility in his official teaching on matters of faith and morals.

As the Church is to continue long after Peter has died, it is rightly understood from the beginning that the privileges given to him, and which are necessary for the successful mission of the Church, are 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 defines this dogma and it has recently been reconfirmed in the Second Vatican Council. In giving these powers to Peter and to his lawful successors, Jesus is planning for our needs. In order to preserve and safeguard the right conduct of all its members, he provides a central seat of authoritative power in the Church. Through the gift of infallibility, he assures us that

whatever we are commanded to believe (faith) and do (morals) will always be what He and his heavenly Father want us to believe and do (see *The Sunday Readings*, by Fr. Kevin O’Sullivan, OFM).

After Jesus finishes speaking to Peter, “he strictly orders his disciples to tell no one that He is the Christ.” Jesus imposes silence on the Apostles because of the people’s misconception about his role as Messiah. They will want to make him king and overthrow the Roman government that is ruling them. Jesus would also be hindered in his spiritual work.

It is for these reasons that Jesus, from that time on, begins 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).

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mt 11: 25-30

The Gospel today begins with, “At that time ...” According to St. Matthew, Jesus has just recently experienced rejection by the people of Capernaum. But intimacy with his Father enables him to transcend this painful moment in his life. Rather than focus on the disappointment that He feels, He turns his attention to the result of the mission to be accomplished by the returning seventy-two disciples. They report to Jesus, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us because of your name.” In other words, as the kingdom of God is gradually being established, evil in all its forms is being defeated; the dominion of Satan over humanity is coming to an end. St. Luke tells us, “At that very moment [Jesus] rejoiced [in] the Holy Spirit” (Lk 10:21). He experiences pure joy in God; we are reminded of his own mother’s response of praise upon recognizing

marvelous deeds: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior” (Lk 1:46-47). Rather than glory in ourselves when we experience success, the attitude of Jesus and Mary teaches us to rejoice in God.

St. Matthew tells us that “Jesus exclaimed: ‘I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth ...’” Jesus immediately goes to the source of the success of his disciples’ mission—his heavenly Father, to give him thanks and praise. He is free from a self-centeredness that ends up in self-exaltation or pride. Jesus lives in continuous communion with his Father. The success of his returning missionaries leads him to break out in spontaneous praise of his Father. Jesus’ long periods of formal prayer dispose him to live in the presence of his Father and in continuous communion with him (see Mk 1:35; Lk 6:12). Jesus’ love for his Father stands out in these six verses as He mentions his name five different times. His Father is “Lord of heaven and earth”—his Dad is all-powerful and can do anything. He does all things well, such as when He hides the truths about the kingdom from those who are conceited. And Jesus refers to him as “my Father”. He is justly proud of being the only Son of such a Father, who, in his great love for his Son, has given everything over to him.

What are “these things” that the Father has “hidden” from the “wise and the learned” They are the revelation of the mysteries of the kingdom and even the Messianic King himself. The “wise and the learned” are those who rely on their own judgment and who think they know it all. They are indisposed to receive the revelation of the kingdom. The supernatural outlook that is required for receptivity is always connected with humility. A humble person, who gives himself little importance, sees; a person who is self-centered fails to see supernatural realities. The Father hides these truths from those who in their arrogance and pride refuse to repent. These are the religious leaders, experts in the external letter of the Law, the scribes and Pharisees.

The message of Jesus is not grasped by the worldly wise; it is known only by revelation to those who are well disposed. It is these “little ones” to whom the mysteries of the kingdom are revealed. These are the lowly disciples who are receptive to Jesus’ teachings like little children. Jesus’ message is grasped only by a few disciples who are drawn from the peasant and working classes. Only the simple accept the insights granted by the Father.

“Yes, Father,” Jesus says, “such has been your gracious will.” Jesus’ primary concern is his Father’s will. In this case it is to reveal the kingdom to these lowly disciples. We are reminded of the occasion of his baptism when John is resisting Jesus’ request that John baptize him. But Jesus explains that this is the Father’s plan. And Jesus is determined that every single detail of the Father’s will shall be fulfilled. Jesus continues to rave about his magnificent Father. He says, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father.” The Father’s love prompts him to put himself and all of his divine perfections into his Son; He is therefore equal to the Father; He possesses the divinity in all of its fullness with the Father. As Jesus says in John’s Gospel, “Everything that the Father has is mine ...” (Jn 16:15).

Jesus then proceeds to reveal the depths of his Person, saying, “No one knows the Son except the Father ...” The bold statement that only the Father is adequate to know the Son puts both on the transcendent plane. And it is only by the revelation of the Father that the true identity of the Son can be recognized.

At the same time, “... no one knows the Father except the Son ...”. Because the Son is equal to the Father and knows his inner depths, He alone is capable of revealing the Father. He enjoys a relationship with the Father that no one else has. Jesus can speak of all mysteries because He is the Son and perfect reflection of the Father (Heb 1:3); there is perfect reciprocity of knowledge between him and the Father. Here, Jesus formally reveals his divinity. This personal knowledge between the Father and the Son implies oneness of nature;

both share the same divine nature. It, therefore, belongs to the very nature of Jesus to possess a transcendent, divine sonship, which infinitely exceeds that adoptive sonship he grants as a grace to his disciples.

It is precisely to a share in his relationship with the Father that Jesus invites his disciples. He gives them a participation in that knowledge. That is what he is saying in the words, "... anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him" — they also come to know the Father and relate to him personally. St. John tells us that such personal intimacy with the Father is the beginning of eternal life (see Jn 17:3). But this revelation on the part of Jesus is not only a one sided matter. We, the recipients, must be humble, loving, and pure of heart to be sufficiently well disposed to be able to receive such an intimate communication. We must labor to overcome all selfishness, pride, and self-centeredness; we must detach from all that is not God's will for us and be humble servants who love God and his people in order to be worthy of God's self-revelation.

Jesus calls out to us and says, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest." Jesus invites us to come to him. We have free access to him through faith (Rom 5:1-2). We accomplish this through prayer. Last week, we learned from the Epistle to the Romans that we were "baptized into Christ Jesus"; we live in him and He lives in us (Jn 14:20). We contact him living in the center of our soul through prayer. We can also meet him in the Holy Eucharist. In either case, we can enjoy intimate interpersonal communion with the divine Jesus. His grace renews us; rejuvenates us; elevates us; gives us rest: He satisfies our deepest longings; He alone can fulfill our need for endless, all-satisfying love. Jesus is inviting those who "labor and are burdened". We all come under that category at some time or other. But at the time, he is speaking to those who are laden with the Pharisees' many additional requirements to fulfill the Law. The Pharisees weigh them down with an endless series

of petty regulations that bring no peace to their souls. The people find the Law, as it is expounded by the scribes and Pharisees, too difficult to keep. Jesus goes on to invite these burdened people to, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves." The yoke of the Law is too heavy for anyone to keep. Jesus' yoke, in contrast, is suited to the people's needs; and his burden, a faithful relationship with God, is light. For Jesus himself is afflicted and lowly in heart, as the servant of the Lord describes in Isaiah. Jesus thus expresses solidarity with the faithful.

The yoke and the burden of Jesus are submission to the reign of God. This imposes no further burden on those who accept it; rather it makes it easier for them to bear the burdens they already have. The revelation in the kingdom and the knowledge of the Father relieve burdens and weariness and make it easier to live under God's will. For example, the understanding of the purifying value of the cross makes the carrying of it lighter. We see the great good that comes from it: the salvation of the world. Jesus shows us by example the redemptive value of suffering: through it, he redeems the world and achieves glorification for himself. It is no longer a question of "offering it up" when we suffer in lonely solitude, but of hanging side by side with Jesus on the cross for the salvation of the world and our own.

Jesus invites people of good will to place themselves in his school, to become his disciples: what is appealing about being in his school is that He is "meek and humble of heart"; He has nothing of the harshness and pride of the Pharisees. Jesus makes the burdens of life lighter. He frees us from the heavy burden of sin. Isaiah tells us, "Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured ... But he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins. Upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed ... the Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all" (Is 53:4-6). Thus, Jesus frees us from the heaviest burden of all—the weight of our sins that

are crushing us. Having become light-hearted, then, we can bear normal burdens of life with joy. Moreover, we understand their meaning; there is a purpose for them. We can then bear them with love—love for Jesus who accompanies us in carrying the cross, and who gives us the grace to make it easier to carry it, and to see its transforming power.

Jesus couples his “Take my yoke upon you” with “and learn from me”. The yoke of obedience to Jesus and his new law, the Gospel, dispose us to “learn from” Jesus. This humble attitude unites us to Jesus and allows us to live in his company, to be in communion with him and the Father. And in this union, Jesus communicates to us his own virtues and dispositions. He gives us an experiential knowledge of himself. Such infused knowledge inclines us to want to become more and more like Jesus. This humble disposition of acceptance of God’s will and self-effacement purify the sinful self that rebels against God in its prideful arrogance and disobedience. We learn the meekness of Jesus, who is perfectly obedient to the Father, through accepting the yoke of the Gospel. The rebellious tendency in our wounded human nature is controlled by the virtue of meekness. It is a strength that enables us, like Jesus, to practice self-mastery over our aggressive passions. This virtue of meekness turns our angry and rebellious spirit into a sweet disposition of meekly accepting the burdens life places upon us to bear. In such submissiveness and self-effacement, we are thus opened to the Father’s generous gift of himself to us like Jesus. Receptive to his will to purify our fallen human nature in this way, the Father can then pour himself and the riches of his grace into our whole person, as He does with Jesus. Our humility does away with pride and makes us like Jesus. Becoming one with him, we both “learn from” him, and come to know him personally. In this union with Jesus, we find sublime rest in him—in his heart. Our deepest yearnings and desires, at last, attain perfect satisfaction and are put to rest. We need look no further, for we have found the

one we have been created for who gives us infinite contentment. Our search for happiness can now cease, for we have found the one who brings us to completion. We have found nothing less than total satisfaction in the love and knowledge of the divine for which we are created. Our limited human nature is brought to completion by the infinite and the divine.

The Gospel ends with Jesus’ words, “For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.” The unique yoke Jesus makes for us fits us perfectly. It does not blister or chafe us, and its size and weight are tailored just for us. Thus, we can draw the plow of life in perfect contentment. One with the Master and graced with every need, life and its burdens are a happy lot. Resting in the love of the divine Jesus makes all the difference in the world. What is once a burden and sheer drudgery becomes a joy. Thanks be to God for such a stupendously marvelous grace.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mt 13: 1-23

Jesus teaches the crowd standing on the shore while he is seated in a boat. Teaching in this sitting position is the posture of one who speaks with authority.

Jesus speaks to them in parables. By means of parables, Jesus uses ordinary things and happenings in our world to explain spiritual realities and mysteries of the kingdom of God. He compares certain features of the kingdom of God to the most ordinary things of daily life. In this way, he sheds light on the deepest supernatural mysteries. It is quite usual for parables to be presented as a kind of puzzle to gain the listener’s attention, excite his curiosity, and fix the parable in his memory. The parable’s enigmatic character is admirably suited to pique the people’s curiosity; and good will will lead them to further inquiry. The disciple has the task of investigating the

meaning of the parable. The listener is challenged to enter into an active search for discovering deeper spiritual meaning in the simpler realities described. If people are well disposed toward Jesus, the enigmatic or obscure, mysterious nature of the parable will stimulate their interest; and Jesus will later give his inquiring disciples a fuller explanation of its meaning; but there is no point in doing this if people are not interested or ready to listen.

In general, the first part of this parable (13:3-8) is telling us that the kingdom of God will arrive in spite of obstacles; it is as infallible as the growth of the harvest, which reaches maturity and even richness in spite of what seems to be nearly insuperable difficulties. The message of the parable is also that despite some failures, the sower's work ultimately succeeds for the most part. The sign of success is the fruit-bearing of the recipients. The parable gives hope and encouragement. The incredible success of the crop, up to one hundredfold yield, manifests the eventual triumph of the kingdom even amidst the opposition that Jesus and his disciples have begun to experience. Jesus ends the parable with, "Whoever has ears ought to hear." The word "hear" reminds us of the first word of the great commandment of love which the pious Jew recites twice each day; it is called the "Shema", the first word for "Hear, O Israel" (Deut 6:4-5). Jesus is urging us with these concluding words to his parable to listen attentively, deeply, with understanding, so that we can be that "rich soil", totally receptive to his word. In response to the disciples' inquiry as to why Jesus speaks in parables, he says, "Because knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted." In other words, the "knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom" is granted to those who are well disposed: those who are interested and open to Jesus and his words; they ask Jesus to explain what is not clear; they are searching for God and the truth. The others are not interested; they are too immersed in themselves and in

worldly living. They are closed to the spiritual message of the kingdom; they do not thirst or seek for something higher. The fact that knowledge is given to the disciples and withheld from others is not due to God's refusal to give, but to their refusal to receive.

Jesus explains further, "To anyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away." In other words, "anyone who has" or receives and is open to the message of the kingdom will receive more and more grace; "anyone who has not" or refuses and is closed to the message of the kingdom will lose what he has. In the case of the Jews, they will lose the revelation leading to the reception of the Messiah; for it is meant to lead to the reception of the Messiah, Jesus, and the spiritual kingdom he will establish. For them, that revelation will remain unfulfilled because they reject the spiritual Messiah which brings it to completion. God gives grace, and we freely respond to that grace. The result is that those who respond to grace generously receive additional grace and grow steadily in grace and holiness; whereas those who reject God's gifts become closed up within themselves; through their selfishness and attachment to sin, they eventually lose God's grace entirely.

Jesus concludes his answer to the disciples question with a quotation from the prophet Isaiah (6:9-10): Jesus introduces this quote with, "This is why I speak to them in parables, because 'they look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand.' Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says: 'You shall indeed hear but not understand, you shall indeed look but never see. Gross is the heart of this people, they will hardly hear with their ears, they have closed their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and be converted and I heal them.'" The original context of this passage concerns the prophet Isaiah's call to speak to the people for God. The truth that the nation will remain impenitent is vividly foretold,

as if its obstinacy will be caused, instead of merely occasioned, by the prophet's warning. It is God's will that Isaiah's preaching will bring about repentance. His mercy compels him to offer his grace to the people; yet God knows that it will be rejected because of their hardened hearts. What happens in Isaiah's time is now being repeated. God's intention is for their repentance, but the result is the same as in Isaiah's time: God's word is met with opposition and hostility.

"Gross is the heart of this people": their hearts are too sluggish and dull to understand or receive God's word; they are too materialistic, sensual and dull to understand or receive God's word; they are too materialistic, sensual, and proud to perceive or appreciate the spiritual realities of the kingdom. "They have closed their eyes, lest they see ..." Their response to the word of God is obstinate, willful resistance. They cannot be budged from their self-centered, egotistic position. But Jesus is consoled by the receptive disposition of his disciples. He was encouraged to say, "But blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears, because they hear." Jesus praises the disciples for their docility to grace, their openness to recognize him as the Messiah and their whole-hearted acceptance of his teaching. they are experiencing a wonderful moment in the history of salvation--a moment that prophets and holy people have been awaiting for centuries. At last the time has come, and his disciples are privileged to witness and receive it with joy.

Again Jesus begins his explanation of the parable with, "Hear then the parable of the sower." As if to say, "There is an important lesson to learn here, so be particularly attentive. Listen carefully to what I have to say." The point of the first part of the parable (13:3-8) is that, in spite of some failure because of opposition and indifference, the message of Jesus about the coming of the kingdom will have enormous success. But in the explanation of the parable (13:18-23), the emphasis is on the various types of soil on which the seed falls, that is, on the dispositions with which the preaching of Jesus is received.

There are four types of recipients envisaged: First, those who do not accept the word of the kingdom: "... the one who hears the word of the kingdom without understanding it, and the evil one comes and steals away what was sown in his heart." Here we see that the recipient does not apply himself to grasp the meaning of the word; there is no interest in its spiritual import. Moreover, the devil intervenes to remove any memory of the saving word. And there is not effort to plant the word anew.

The second type of recipient is the one who believes for a while but falls away because of hardship or persecution. "The seed sown on rocky ground is the one who hears the word and receives it at once with joy. But he has no root and lasts only for a time. When some tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away." Such a person is lacking in determination and fortitude; he is weak in commitment; he does not seek the higher realities of the spirit; he does not see the promise of the higher, spiritual joys of the kingdom that come through union with God. The third type of recipient is the one who believes but in whom the word is choked by preoccupation with this world and the seduction of riches. This refers to the "seed sown among thorns ... the one who hears the word, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit." Such a person is so taken up with this world he does not allow the word of God to grow; the implanted word is overcome and smothered by earthly concerns. He will have to give the kingdom of God priority through devoting time to spiritual exercises such as reading and meditating on the word of God. Then the Holy Spirit would teach him self-mastery to moderate his indulgence in the things of this world so as to remain spiritually free for communion with God.

The fourth type of recipient of the word is the one who responds to the word and produces fruit abundantly. This refers to "the seed sown on rich soil...the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold." Even the rich soil has various

degrees of receptivity. Some cultivate the word better than others. The treasure that the kingdom is, and its eternal value proclaimed by the word, is perceived and responded to differently by each individual—some more, some less.

Nevertheless, the innate power of the word will produce fruit. Our business is to foster that word as best we can. We must devote all our energies to nurture that word and make it grow to full maturity. We must cooperate with the power that is in God's word to produce holiness of life.

God tells us today in the first reading, "... my word ... shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it." What an encouraging word! Despite all the obstacles in and around us, God's word will achieve its end; our sanctification. So we must implant that word daily into our heart; we must ponder over it like Mary (Lk 2:19, 51), assimilate its content, and allow it to rule our lives as it enlightens and inclines us to do God's will.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mt 13: 24-43

Jesus continues to use parables to teach the people. He uses things of everyday life that they are familiar with to bring out a truth or some aspect of the kingdom of God. The comparison of the kingdom with something we know in ordinary life, like yeast, enables us to understand something of the mystery of the kingdom of God.

Today's Gospel presents us with three such parables. In the first, someone sows good seed in his field. But an enemy comes and sows weeds. The weeds cannot be uprooted without harming the wheat. The solution to the problem is to allow both wheat and weeds to grow together until harvest time. The weeds will then be collected in bundles for burning; then the wheat will be gathered into the barn. This parable helps us to

understand that the kingdom of God on earth contains both good and bad people. We must not be surprised then, when we see people who do evil in the Church. Jesus has to put up with Judas among the twelve. Our free will and sinfully inclined passions can lead us astray. The devil can easily tempt us to choose evil. But God is merciful and gives us time to repent, to change for the better. As our responsorial psalm (86) says, "You O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and fidelity." And the first reading says, "But though you are master of might, you judge with clemency, and with lenience you govern us...you gave your children good ground for hope that you would permit repentance for their sins."

Meanwhile, the good people are given an opportunity for long suffering. They are sanctified through patient endurance. Thus they are strengthened in virtue. Love is made to grow in us as we tolerate their vices (as well as those in ourselves). We pray and suffer for those who are in the grips of evil, hoping for their conversion. In the kingdom of God on earth, the Church, both good and bad exist side by side. Scandals in the Church should not surprise us. That is what Jesus tells us to expect. This mingling of the good and bad will continue till the very end of the world. Only then will the good be separated from the bad; the good will go to heaven, and the unrepentant bad will go to hell. If you do not tend to your garden and uproot the weeds, the grass will take over. So, too, if you do not tend the garden of your soul, vice will take over your life. Effort is needed to cultivate the moral virtue of temperance. Otherwise, self-indulgence will weaken your character and degrade it; disordered self-love will bring you to ruin. Vigilance and discipline are needed to keep the enemy from serving bad ideas in your mind; these incline human nature toward evil. Be careful what you look at on TV or the computer. Immoral ideas can easily and quickly infiltrate your person with evil and lead you into sin and habitual vice. If you

become hardened in this state, you could end up being separated from God permanently and burned with the weeds!

In the second parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a tiny mustard seed that grows into a large shrub in which birds come to dwell. In other words, the kingdom of God is starting off as a tiny seed; but it will grow to be very large. Jesus and his small band of disciples are a very small beginning. But they grow into what is now the universal Church in which the nations of the world come to dwell. So, too, the grace of God begins in an insignificant way in each of us at baptism. But the grace of the kingdom gradually grows in us and takes over the whole of our persons. The tiny seed of divine life develops into a full-fledged saint. We must cultivate that seed daily so that it will thrive and quickly reach the full maturity of holiness.

In the third parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to yeast that is mixed with a large amount of wheat flour. The yeast permeates the whole batch of flour and causes it to rise into delicious leavened bread. This demonstrates the transforming power of the grace of the kingdom of God. Through baptism, the Blessed Trinity comes to dwell in the center of our persons and diffuses sanctifying grace in us. This grace gradually changes us for the better, unto holiness of life—if we foster it through prayer, the word of God, and the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist.

Our own holiness affects our society as leaven affects dough. We make it better and endow it with Gospel principles by our example and words. Jesus' preaching in parables is the fulfillment of prophecy. Psalm 78:2 is quoted to bring out the truthfulness of Scripture: "I will open my mouth in parables; I will announce what has lain hidden from the foundation of the world." The Old Testament finds its fulfillment in Jesus' preaching. In revealing the kingdom, Jesus unveils mysteries and truths hidden and unknown up until that moment in sacred history. This is a precious moment, and we are living in these end times to enjoy it.

After speaking to the crowd, Jesus dismisses them and goes into the house. There, his disciples approach him and ask him to explain the first parable, the parable of the weeds in the field. In Jesus' explanation, we see that the parable has allegorical elements. Instead of one main point as in a parable, in the allegory, each detail signifies some reality in the kingdom of God.

In his explanation, Jesus says that the "man who sowed good seed in the field" is the Son of Man, which is his favorite title for himself. It comes from the book of Daniel: when "one like a son of man coming on the clouds of heaven ... reached the Ancient One... [he] received dominion, glory, and kingship ..." (Dan 7:13-14). In other words, it refers to Jesus in his glorified state. And this parable with the details of an allegory presents Jesus as the judge who separates the good from the bad at the end of the world. The good seed of the word of God that falls on rich soil produces righteous "children of the kingdom" among the people of the world. But those who reject the word of God and followed their own wills are compared to weeds and have become "children of the evil one". Human nature, tinged as it is with its inclination to sin, is also influenced by the devil. He stirs the passions, all the more, towards evil doing. The devil is definitely our enemy and that of the Son of Man. The harvest comes at the end of the age and of the world when the separation and rooting out of all evildoers will take place. In this scene, the harvesters are the angels who are God's messengers and servants; they are pure spirits who chose to obey God from the beginning; they are unlike Satan and the other devils, who proudly refuse to submit to God and rebel against him. The angels are good spirits who serve God and who are our guardians and friends.

The weeds that the angels collect and which are burned up with fire at the end of the world are "all who cause others to sin and all evildoers." They reject God and refuse to live by the truth of his Gospel, which puts God at the center of our lives and shows us how to live according to his will.

Instead, those represented by the weeds choose to reject the truth and make themselves, like the devils, the center of existence; they retain their choice to remain separated from God. Therefore, for all eternity, if they die unrepentant, their excruciating pain will be to suffer the loss of God for whom they were created and for whom their whole being craves. So their deepest yearnings for their creator, who alone can satisfy all their longings, will never be satisfied. That is the chief fire that will constantly burn in the core of their being and which will never be extinguished. The angels will throw all evildoers “into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth”. Grief and anguish at their loss will prevail. Their pain will be unending. The Catechism speaks of the “unquenchable fire” mentioned by Jesus, reserved for those who, to the end of their lives, refuse to believe and be converted; angels will gather and throw all evildoers into the furnace of fire; and Jesus will “pronounce the condemnation: ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire!’” (1034). But on the other hand, “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father”. They will share the glory of Jesus demonstrated on the mount of transfiguration when “his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light” (Mt 17:2). As Jesus says, “And I have given them the glory you gave me” (Jn 17:22).

St. John of the Cross describes for us what this glory is like as experienced by the saints in highest union with God. He says, “The soul now feels that it is all inflamed in the divine union, and that its palate is all bathed in glory and love, that in the most intimate part of its substance it is flooded with no less than rivers of glory, abounding in delights, and that from its bosom flow rivers of living waters (Jn 7:38), which the Son of God declares will rise up in such souls ...The flame of love is ... the Holy Spirit. The soul feels him within itself not only as a fire which consumes and transforms it, but as a fire that burns and flares within it ... and that flame, everytime it flares up, bathes the soul in glory and refreshes it with

the quality of divine life. Such is the activity of the Holy Spirit in the soul transformed in love: the interior acts he produces shoot up flames for they are acts of inflamed love, in which the will of the soul united with that flame, made one with it, loves most sublimely.” (Living Flame of Love, S.1, N.1,3). This description gives us an inkling of what the life of glory is all about. It gives us some idea of the meaning of Jesus’ words, “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” In heaven, we who die in God’s grace will experience and reflect the very life, holiness, and happiness of God himself. That is why Jesus ends his talk with, “Whoever has ears ought to hear.” In other words, it is supremely important that we hear and carry out his message; he is preparing us for eternal life. If we follow his teaching, we will attain eternal glory and happiness. If we do not, we will spend eternity in anguish, pain, and misery: a living death that will never end.

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mt 13: 44-52 or 13: 44-46

In the Gospel today, Jesus continues to describe the nature of the kingdom of God. He tells us what it is by the use of parables: in this way, he compares things we are familiar with to bring out some aspect of the mystery of the kingdom of heaven come down to earth.

In the first parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a hidden treasure which someone accidentally discovers. It contains untold riches—spiritual riches. Its value is of inestimable worth; it is precious beyond compare; it is worth more than anything in this world—in fact, more than the whole world--because it is eternal.

The kingdom of heaven is God himself who gives himself to us through his Beloved Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The discovery of the kingdom of God is a gift of God. He lets himself be found in us. He reveals himself as dwelling

within us (Lk 17:21); Jn 14:23). The supreme joy experienced at the discovery of God living in our hearts shows that the kingdom he gives us far exceeds anything this earthly existence has to offer; this joy takes hold of our heart and frees us from attachments to this world; thus, it enables us to give up anything and everything for it. The experience of God within us is the great joy that touches the inner core of our being. God himself is our joy. This experience empowers and moves us to get rid of everything that stands in the way of our experiencing it more completely and continuously.

It is the discovery of God in Jesus and the joy experienced in this find that moves the disciples to leave everything for him. When we discover this hidden treasure, we let nothing come between him and us. We order our lives around him and give him first priority. We give up anything we love unduly rather than allow sin to come between us. God becomes our greatest love. We love him more than anything or anyone, including ourselves. We deprive ourselves for love of him. The kingdom of God is priceless; its value is supreme; it is more precious than anything else. It is God himself, and the spiritual riches that accompany his coming, that moves us to center our whole lives around him and count everything else as second rate.

Having discovered the kingdom of God moves us to invest all of our possessions and energies to attain it more securely and completely. The kingdom of God is a spiritual reality as God himself is. If at first God touches our senses to make us aware of his presence in us, we come to understand that it is through spiritual exercises that we steep ourselves more deeply into this divine reality of the kingdom of God established in us. We foster this union with God through prayer: we keep in contact with God throughout the day. We set time aside to be alone with him in prayer; we pray the rosary as a means of meditating on the mysteries of Jesus' life; we also use the word of God to pray over; we make holy hours; we go to

Mass where we meet Jesus in person and receive him in the Holy Eucharist. And in daily life we maintain our union with God through adhering to his will in all things. We are careful to be obedient to his word and to be pleasing to him. We do not want self-love to separate us from him. In this way, we give over everything, including ourselves, to be able to possess the kingdom of God, that it might become totally operative in us, which is God and the actualization of his spiritual gifts in us.

In the second parable, we have a person who is "searching for fine pearls". When he finds the "pearl of great price", he gives up everything he has and buys it. Here, too, the kingdom of heaven is seen as exceedingly valuable. (Incidentally, Matthew, out of a keen reverence for God's name, prefers to use "the kingdom of heaven" instead of "the kingdom of God". But it means the same.) The pearl is a highly prized gem of exquisite beauty. It reflects the glory of God in nature and tells us something about the kingdom of God in us. In this case, however, the merchant is "searching for fine pearls". It's like us: we are always searching for something better. Life as we know it is imperfect. The world we live in with all its external attractions still does not touch the core of our being. The things we enjoy in this world cannot fill the spiritual void in us. Only God can do that, and since he is infinite Spirit, our search leads us to the kingdom of God. Our efforts in looking for spiritual fulfillment actually spiritualize us and dispose us to see the kingdom of God in us. Living our faith life opens us to experience and find the kingdom of heaven within us. The joyful fulfillment we find in it alerts us to its supreme value. So we put everything into acquiring it for ourselves. Whereas we are dissatisfied with the shallowness and emptiness of earthly joys apart from God, now we find the fullness of life we are looking for. Once we have discovered that real, profound, all-pervading and lasting joy is in the kingdom where we attain God himself, we engage in spiritual activity to go deeper within ourselves, to immerse ourselves in the indwelling God.

We engage in prayer, Scripture reading and reflection, daily Mass, meditating on the mysteries in Jesus' life by reciting the rosary, and associate with spiritual friends. We try to reinforce our spiritual quest from all sides. In a true sense, we expend all our energies to possess the kingdom of heaven, which is so close to us, yet so far if we are ill-disposed for it.

The third parable likens the kingdom of heaven to "a net thrown into the sea which collects fish of every kind". The good are kept but the bad are thrown away. At the end of the world, "angels will go out and separate the righteous from the wicked. These they will throw into the fiery furnace where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth." Here we see, as in the parable of the wheat and weeds, that the kingdom of heaven, the Church, is a mixture of good and bad people. There is always that hope that the evil people will experience a change of heart and become good. God is merciful and gives them time to see for themselves the evil of sin. He gives them the grace to see and convert themselves. Meanwhile, the righteous people are made to grow in holiness through love and patient endurance. Tolerance and prayer, as well as good example may win the evildoers over to the good life of the children of God. Meanwhile, don't be surprised when scandals occur in the Church. Jesus says that's how it will be. Separation between the good and bad people will only take place at the very end of this age. The good will be rewarded with heaven. The bad will be punished and condemned to hell. They will experience grief and anguish as they are banished from God for whom they were created and for whom their whole being craves. It is in this deprivation that the main punishment of hell consists: the pain and unhappiness of never being with the one for whom we are created. Is this the pain that is symbolized by being thrown into the "fiery furnace"? The lifestyle they choose of separation from God through mortal sin is what keeps them so miserable and unhappy in the first place. Their previous life on earth is truly a foretaste of hell. It is a state they freely choose.

They close themselves off from God. That is how they will spend their eternity— in the misery of self, never able to experience the joy and supreme good of God.

After Jesus finishes explaining the kingdom of heaven in parables, he asks his disciples if they understand what he has said. They say, "yes". Then he explains to them that they are scribes: people who study the Scriptures and explain them to others. "The scribe ... instructed in the kingdom of heaven" knows both the teaching of Jesus (the new) and the Law and prophets (the old); he provides in his own teaching both the new and the old. He draws from the Old Testament to explain how it is fulfilled in the New. The disciples of Jesus are scribes who study and transmit ongoing interpretations of the Scriptures through Sacred Tradition. They bring out new realities from the treasury of the Law, the prophets, wisdom literature, and the Gospels. They show from the Old Testament Scriptures how Jesus is their fulfillment. The disciples of Jesus have at their disposal all the wealth of the Old Testament as well as the perfection of the New. This picture of a scribe who becomes a disciple sums up the whole ideal of St. Matthew the evangelist and may be a self-portrait. Parents and religious teachers who have a good grasp of Christian doctrine may also be considered scribes. They are familiar with both the Old Testament and the New; they pass on this knowledge to their children and pupils.

The word of God enlightens every age and situation. All of us are called to be scribes who enrich our lives from reading and reflecting on the treasure of the Scriptures; we can then share its riches with others.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mt 14: 13-21

"When Jesus heard of the death of John the Baptist, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself."

The death of John the Baptist for witnessing the truth to Herod must have made Jesus think of his own impending death. He needs time to grieve and reflect upon the beheading of his own great and dear cousin John, his precursor. Jesus also wants to get away from the territory of Herod's jurisdiction. He desires to be alone with his Father to pray and receive new strength to continue his ministry. He teaches us by his example to seek silence and solitude so we can give exclusive love and attention to God, receive divine consolation and assistance, and be rejuvenated by him.

But Jesus is not able to find the privacy and solitude he desires. The crowd sees where he is going so they go ahead of him on foot and arrive before him. So when Jesus disembarked and "saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them and he cured their sick." There is no selfishness in him. He gives up doing what He wants to do so He can minister to the people. God's will for him is his sustenance. He has a heart for others' needs. He sacrifices himself for them. His loving heart is moved to compassion for them. He proceeds to cure their sick. Jesus' presence in the desert turns it into a Garden of Eden for these people. He will minister to us also if we seek him out in solitude. Do you ever try to be alone with your Lord?

When it is evening the disciples ask Jesus to dismiss the crowd so they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves. But Jesus tells the Apostles to give them food. "Five loaves and two fish are all we have here," they reply. "Bring them here to me," Jesus tells them. Then Jesus orders the crowd to sit down on the grass. It appears that Jesus wishes to give the impression of a formal meal; and in the same spirit, he invokes a blessing like the father of a family. Our Lord repeats this action just one year later at the Last Supper. The ceremony seems to be deliberately symbolic of the Holy Eucharist.

"Taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds. They all ate and were satisfied ..." Five loaves and two fish would not have been enough for Jesus and the twelve, and yet Jesus takes these few loaves and fish and proceeds to feed the five thousand men, not counting women and children.

First of all, he looks up to heaven as a sign of his intimacy and dependence on his heavenly Father. Then he says the blessing, which means He blesses God: in other words, He praises and thanks God, his Father, for his gifts. Then Jesus proceeds to break the loaves. Perhaps it is at this moment the multiplication begins to take place, and maybe continues even as the Apostles are distributing the food. God is the source of our food and drink. We also must not forget to give thanks to God every time we eat. We must not be afraid or ashamed to praise and thank God even in public. Besides, it is an opportunity to witness our faith in God's goodness to us.

At the time of Christ, the Messiah is awaited as the last and greatest of the prophets (Jn 1:21, 25) in accordance with God's promise to Moses to raise up a prophet like him (Deut 18:18). Many of the wonders of the Exodus are to be repeated, especially that of the miraculous feeding with manna (Jn 6:30-31). The miracle of the loaves is modeled most closely after Elisha's miraculous feeding in the second book of Kings 4:42-44. Only the numbers are different. Jesus is much greater than Elisha. Elisha fed one hundred men with twenty loaves. Jesus fed five thousand-plus with five loaves and there is plenty left over.

The evangelists also bring out the continuity between this messianic feeding and the Eucharist by their use of the same words: blessed, broke, gave to the disciples. Each word occurs in almost identical form at the account of the Last Supper. St. Matthew emphasizes the disciples' part in the distribution; already they are Jesus' ministers,

bringing the bread of life to the people. As in the desert, Jesus employs only the Apostles to distribute the bread to the people, so He now entrusts the power of consecration only to priests. For the first time, the Apostles take an active part in the miracle, as his instruments, and thus prefigure their sacred duties with regard to the Holy Eucharist. Further reflection on the distribution by the Apostles brings out that ministers can never fill the people's hearts unless Jesus first fills their own; and what He has given to the disciples, they must give to the multitude. And, blessed be God, no matter how great the multitude is, there is enough for all, enough for each. The food is multiplied in the distribution of it. Thus grace grows by being acted upon; and, while other things perish in the using, spiritual gifts increase by the using. The blessing of God can make a little go a long way. Those who have but little must relieve others out of that little when the necessity is urgent; and that is the way to make more, to cause it to increase.

“They picked up the fragments left over—twelve wicker baskets full.” The disciples collect the fragments, one basket for each. The fragments far exceed the amount first placed at Jesus' disposal. This is a symbol of divine liberality. The command given by our Lord himself to gather up the fragments (Jn 6:12) makes clear how careful we should be to avoid wasting the gifts of God. The prodigality of God's gifts does not excuse human waste. One basket containing five loaves and two fish, with Jesus' blessing, feeds over five thousand people: and yet twelve baskets remain over and above what is needed. Thus, what the boy gives (Jn 6:9) he has again, and a great deal more with it. This shows that the provision Jesus makes for those who give of themselves and what little they have is not bare and scanty, but rich and plenteous; an overflowing fullness. In multiplying the loaves and fish, Jesus is not simply satisfying the need to feed hungry people; He is celebrating the kingdom of God coming to the powerless and afflicted. The incident is related less for the

element of the miraculous than as a symbol and an anticipation of the Eucharist and of the messianic banquet. The association with the Eucharist is more explicit in John 6, where the multiplication of the loaves is followed by Jesus' Eucharistic discourse. It is a messianic sign and symbol that will find its fulfillment in the true messianic banquet, the Eucharist.

The miracle of the loaves takes us back to Moses and the manna, and onward to Jesus' Eucharistic life in the Church. Just as Jesus does later, at the Last Supper, so now He looks up to heaven, gives thanks, blesses the bread, breaks and gives it. He feeds more than five thousand people miraculously. Today, He feeds the millions of communicants who approach the Holy Table by the miracle of consecration; and He gives them his body that is broken for us on the cross and rises again, concealed under the appearance of bread.

In the Gospel miracle today, Jesus relieves the distress of the hungry people by calling upon his omnipotent power to supply them with bodily food. In the Eucharist, Jesus calls upon his omnipotence to relieve the spiritual hunger and thirst of famished souls with an endless supply of heavenly manna, his own Body and Blood. Through its life-giving qualities, the Bread of Life renews in people the power to do good and avoid evil, and to complete their journey across the wilderness of life to our heavenly home. With the strength that comes from the Eucharist, as the second reading puts it, “What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution ... or peril ... No, in these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life ... nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

God, our Father, nourishes his children in body and soul. That is why we can look to him with confidence to fulfill all our needs, and say in our Psalm response, “The eyes of all look hopefully

to you, and you give them their food in due season; you open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Ps 145). Now we can better understand and want to respond to the first reading. Four times consecutively the Lord urges us to “come!” “Come, without paying and without cost ... why spend your money for what is not bread; your wages for what fails to satisfy? Heed me, and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare. Come to me heedfully, listen, that you may have life. I will renew with you the everlasting covenant” (see Mt 26:28; 1 Cor 11:25). He does this in every Mass.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Gospel: Mt 14: 22-33

Jesus’ attempt to find solitude and prayer in the Gospel last week is thwarted by the needy crowd. Now that he has finished ministering to them, “Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and precede him to the other side” of the lake “while he dismissed the crowds”. He does not linger any longer than necessary. He still feels the need for solitude and prayer.

Sometimes it takes great effort to find the time to be alone with God and pray. We will find the time only if we make the time for it. For that to happen, prayer must become a priority in our lives. It is our lifeline. This is where we get our strength to be virtuous. Prayer keeps us connected to God. (It will also keep your blood pressure down!) So Jesus “went up on the mountain by himself to pray”— all alone. There, he can become absorbed in prayer; he gives exclusive attention to God. He allows his heart—indeed, his whole being—to be invaded by God. In this way, Jesus’ energies are restored; He is filled with light and strength to continue his ministry. God can do the same for us if we open ourselves to him in prayer such as on a day of recollection or an hour of prayer.

The mountain is a traditional meeting place with God. It brings people away from the noise and

busyness of the world and closer to God in his spiritual and heavenly realm. We see this exemplified in the first reading. Elijah is told to “stand on the mountain before the Lord; the Lord will be passing by.” We can say that the mountain symbolizes the high point or peak of the soul which is spirit. That is where God sustains us in life and meets us in prayer.

Originally, God manifested himself on Mount Horeb (Sinai) with “peals of thunder and lightning and, a heavy cloud ... the Lord came down upon it in fire... the whole mountain trembled violently ...” (Ex 19:16-19). The people have no doubt that God is present and is worthy of reverence and worship. But now the “strong and heavy wind, the earthquake and fire” are reduced to mere precursors of God’s mysterious presence. He signifies his presence by “a tiny whispering sound”. The gentle whisper of a breeze symbolizes the spiritual nature of God. When Elijah hears this sound, he “hid his face in his cloak”. God is met and known in the deep center of the soul called spirit. He is not encountered through our bodily senses. That is why “Elijah hid his face in his cloak”. We must close off our senses in silence and solitude so they will not interfere with our meeting God in the silent depths of our heart. This is the kind of prayer that Jesus is engaged in most of the night. But He becomes aware of the Apostles’ struggle against the wind and the waves. So, between three and six in the morning “he came toward them walking on the sea. When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified.” Jesus’ appearance to the disciples is described in terms of a divine theophany. The fear and terror they experience are the invariable reactions to a divine visitation. This scene in today’s Gospel is a kind of parable in action. The wind and the waves represent the hostile forces of the world. The boat represents the Church besieged by its various enemies. Jesus is interceding for the Church and keeps watch over her. He comes to her in times of need to assist her. He stills the raging sea by his divine authority. As Psalm 89:10 says, “You rule the raging sea; you

still its swelling waves.” St. Mark tells us that the Apostles are astounded at seeing Jesus walking on the waters, for they have not understood about the multiplication of the loaves. They are blind because their sight has not yet been illumined by faith to see the divinity in Jesus. Jesus sees the Church struggling with difficulties, but allows her to wrestle with obstacles so that she will be strengthened in the process. We experience our weaknesses and are made to realize how much we depend on Jesus to keep from sinking. We cannot afford to be separated from him. We cannot survive the storms of life without his supporting hand. He is the only one who can keep us from being engulfed by the waters and troubles of life. As we feel ourselves being beaten by the wind and waves, Jesus, who is near and concerned, says to us, “Take courage; it is I; do not be afraid.” We can have confidence and trust in his divine protection. He allows us to go through various trying experiences to give us self-knowledge and to strengthen us in patient endurance.

When Peter realizes it is Jesus walking on the water, his love for Jesus prompts him to go to him. So he called out to Jesus, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water. He says, ‘Come.’ Peter gets out of the boat and begins to walk on water toward Jesus.” We see symbolized here a faith that is bold, stepping out into the unknown, yet vulnerable. Peter’s special leadership role is also brought out, his gift of faith and Jesus’ special protection. We are reminded of Peter’s charismatic gift of recognizing Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God (Mt 16:16), instead of being an ordinary human being as the rest of society thinks him to be; we also think of Peter’s belief in Jesus as the living bread come down from heaven, contrary to the many who walk away in disbelief (see Jn 6:51, 60, 64, 66-69). Peter’s faith sets him apart from these others. But the only reason Peter understands these exalted spiritual truths is because a special charismatic grace of insight is given him as Vicar of Christ on earth. All of this is impossible on a merely human level—so, too, walking on water.

“But when he saw how strong the wind was he became frightened; and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’” Jesus’ call and Peter’s walk on the sea show him as the representative of the Twelve, participating in Jesus’ mysterious power. When distracted by the wind, he begins to sink. This episode of faltering is symbolic of Peter’s denial of Jesus during his Passion (Mt 26:69-75). At the same time, it represents any Christian’s way of walking to Christ amidst a storm: we are supported by the Lord’s power and sink on account of our own shaken faith. We are expected to identify with Peter crying out: “Lord, save me!” When faith is strong, it keeps us united to Jesus who fills our virtues with his own divine strength. Thus, we are endowed with the power of God himself to bear with the evils at hand and to overcome any testing. Our trials have to do not only with suffering, but also resisting the pleasurable that would lead us astray. The Gospel tells us, “Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught [Peter], and said to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’” A strong faith keeps us totally focused on Jesus. In this way, we draw continuous strength from him to live on the level of spirit above the waves of the enticements of worldly allurements. A weak faith lacks the virtues and discipline needed to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus (Heb 12:2). Peter stops looking at Jesus and begins to notice the difficulties around him. Seeing that the wind is so strong, he becomes fearful. He forgets for a moment that the strength holding him up on the water does not depend on circumstances, but on his connectedness to Jesus. Peter begins to sink, not because of the waves, but because he loses his focus on Jesus.

In moments of weakness, when we see ourselves sinking, we should look to Jesus’ firm hand to steady ourselves. In our prayer, we can cry out to him, “Lord, save me!” Sometimes we may stop looking at Jesus and pay more attention to things that separate us from him. These things may endanger our faith and cause us to drown if we do not react promptly. When we feel ourselves weakening in this way, if we examine ourselves,

we will notice that—perhaps for some time—our life of piety has become lax, our prayer is less frequent or more distracted; we have been lacking in self-discipline. We have been unduly self-indulgent toward the pleasurable; we do not struggle against our passions as before. We fail to do a good day's work. We spend too much time watching television or the Internet—in short, we have been neglecting our spiritual life. We need to return to spiritual reading and prayer, spending time being alone with God, receiving the sacrament of Penance and Jesus in the Holy Eucharist; we need to associate with friends who will help us return to living a spiritual life; then we will again be able to walk upon the perilous waters of the world.

“After they got into the boat, the wind died down. Those who were in the boat did him homage, saying, ‘Truly, you are the Son of God.’” If you are experiencing a storm in your life, know that Jesus has the power to calm that storm. He, and the grace of his presence, make all the difference in the world: the difference between sinking and walking on the water; the difference between being beaten by the wind and the waves and experiencing a great calm. The contrast experienced by the disciples makes them realize, without a shadow of a doubt, that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. You too can experience the same in your life. But first you must call upon him in faith and entrust your life completely to him.

**TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME
Gospel: Mt 15:21-28**

“At that time, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.”

Tyre and Sidon are Phoenician cities on the Mediterranean coast in present day Lebanon. In Jesus' time they are outside the territory of Herod Antipas. Jesus withdraws to this area to escape persecution from Herod and from the Jewish authorities and to concentrate on

training his Apostles. Most of the inhabitants of the district of Tyre and Sidon are pagans.

“And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out, ‘Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon.’” The Canaanites, you may remember, are a sinful race in the Old Testament; they embody all that is wicked and godless, a race that is to be exterminated. This woman is a descendant of these people.

But she, a Gentile, comes to Jesus in great need, and she has faith in Jesus as the Messiah whom she calls “Son of David”. She cries out to him, “Have pity on me, Lord.” She knows how to touch Jesus' compassionate heart. And she has a real need: her daughter is “tormented by a demon”.

Jesus is very much aware of the existence of the devil. He himself has had personal encounters with him. The devil tempts him in the desert three consecutive times. Jesus is more powerful than the devil. He can not tempt Jesus to sin or to veer one bit from his Father's will. But he knows how the devil can torment people with his temptations and his evil presence. He is quick to notice our dominant weakness. Our human weaknesses are difficult enough to overcome. But the devil makes the matter worse. He is an expert at enticing us to sin by his false promises of endless happiness to be derived from forbidden pleasures. Then after the fall, like the woman's daughter, he torments his victims with remorse of conscience and divine punishments and the despair of unforgiveness. The devil's presence and temptation in the Garden of Eden is typical of human life. Sts. Teresa and John of the Cross tell us how frequently the devil intervenes in our lives, perhaps we can say, especially in our prayer lives, when we are trying to love God and get close to him. So this Gentile woman who is pleading for her daughter has a genuine need for Jesus' help. Her plea of “Have pity on me, Lord” must have touched him. When you cry out for mercy at the beginning of Mass, is it the expression of a conscious, serious need? “But Jesus did not say a word in answer to her.” Jesus is

seeking privacy; now he is confronted by a needy intruder—and a Gentile at that! What does he do? Engage in active ministry again; exert his power to free this pagan woman's daughter? But that can be very draining (see Mk 5:30). The human nature of Jesus seems to be struggling to know his Father's will. We are reminded of Jesus' silence as He is trying to understand what He should do when presented with the woman caught in adultery, whether she should be stoned or released (Jn 8:1-11). While He is deliberating whether He should do anything for this Gentile woman standing before him, "Jesus' disciples came and asked him, 'Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us!'" The persistence of this pagan woman reminds us of the widow who kept entreating the callous judge for her rights. He gives-in to her because she is wearing him out (Lk 18:1-5).

The woman in today's Gospel actually wears the Apostles out by her pleading. So they begin to intercede with Jesus for her. Whereas before Jesus remains silent, now, through their intercession, he is prompted to speak. Here we see the value of asking other people to pray for us, and our needs. We see in this case the power of intercessory prayer. The Apostles are saying in effect, "Give her what she wants and get rid of her!" But Jesus responds only to express his concern: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus is sent by the Father to minister to the Jews, the people of God, through whom salvation will be given to the whole world. But first his mission is limited to Israel, which sorely needs his attention because it is made up of lost sheep (9:36). Jesus' earthly ministry is restricted in principle to Israel. Later on he will charge the Apostles to preach the Gospel to pagan Gentiles (Mt 28:19). St. Paul, in his missionary journeys, also adopts the policy of preaching in the first instance to the Jews (Acts 13:46).

But the woman remains undaunted, courageously resolute in her purpose. We must pray for the same

determination in our prayer of petition before the Lord. It is easy to become discouraged when our prayer is not answered soon. "But the woman came and did Jesus homage, saying, 'Lord, help me.'" She respectfully approaches Jesus and humbly asks him again, "Lord, help me." The fact that Jesus begins to talk to her explaining that God's plan is that he minister to the Jews first (and then later, after the resurrection, to the Gentiles), must have given her hope. At least He is talking to her, explaining his hesitancy. But even with her plea for help, Jesus presents his reluctance once more with the words, "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." The Canaanite woman's faith and humility are being tested to the ultimate degree. Can they survive?

The Jews often refer to pagans as "Gentile dogs". It is a form of contempt for non-believers. But the word that is used for dog here is a diminutive word referring to household pets such as a puppy. And there is something in a puppy that is lovable and beautiful.

Moreover, the tone and the look with which a thing is said make all the difference. A word which seems harsh can be said with a disarming smile. We can call someone a rascal with a smile and a tone which take all the sting out of it, and fill it with affection. We can be quite sure that the smile on Jesus' face and the compassion in his eyes robbed the words of all insult and bitterness.

The woman's humility is not insulted. She takes the saying in stride and counters unperturbedly with, "Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters." The woman answers Jesus' reason for refusal with another statement, which shows that the granting of her petition will not in any way interfere with or impede his primary task, his mission to his Father's chosen people.

One Bible commentary comments on Jesus' conversation with the woman in these words: "The dialogue [between Jesus and the woman] is an instance of the kind of wit that was admired

in the near East ... it is the ability to match riddle with riddle, to cap one wise saying with another, to match insult with insult, or—as here—to turn insult into a commitment. There is nothing unrealistic about the exchange at all; Jesus would not have been a genuine Palestinian if he had not occasionally engaged in a duel of wit...it is a scene of peasant good humor.” (*Jerome Biblical Commentary*)

“Then Jesus said to her in reply, ‘O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And the woman’s daughter was healed from that hour.” See the power of faith expressed in this woman’s conversation with Jesus. Faith connected her to his divinity and drew divine power to cast out the demon in her daughter. Faith gives us, also, the power to overcome the demons in our lives. This Gospel account demonstrates the power of faith and how we can exercise it.

Like this Canaanite woman, our faith is expressed in conversation with Jesus through prayer. Faith gives us free access to our risen Lord (Rom 5:2; Eph 3:12). Through faith, we enter into his presence and look upon him; we speak to him while He listens to us; He speaks to us while we listen to him. We spend time each day in interpersonal communion with him. We are spiritually enriched, transformed and empowered to overcome the demons in our lives.

Jesus is even more available to us than He was to the Canaanite woman. Through his resurrection and glorification, He is one with the Father in being present to us. “I am always with you,” He says (Mt 28:20). He invites us to come to him: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28).

**TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME
Gospel: Lk 11:1-13**

“Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi”, named in honor of Caesar Augustus by Philip the tetrarch.

It is 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 rise majestically before them, it is a place of great natural beauty. It is undoubtedly for solitude and retreat that Jesus has brought his disciples there, and it is unlikely that they entered the pagan city itself. St. Luke notes that Jesus is at prayer before the important interchange that is to follow (Lk 9:18).

Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They reply, “Some say John the Baptist.” You will remember that Herod Antipas and his court believe that Jesus is John the Baptist risen from the dead (Mt 14:1-2). Others believe that Jesus is Elijah because He was expected to return to prepare the people for the Messiah. Still others believe that Jesus is 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 is the popular opinion, what we would call today, the majority opinion—and they are 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 says 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 says 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” is a title used by the prophet Hosea (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 attach to the title “Messiah”, the Christ, when confessing their resurrected Lord and Savior. As an example of this faith, Peter concludes 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 is not from the human reasoning of “flesh and blood” that Simon has 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 teaches 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 gives his disciple, Simon bar Jona, the Aramaic name Kepha (Jn 1:42), the name by which he is 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 is 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 confirms his promise to Peter. Jesus reveals himself to the seven disciples who have gone fishing. Again, He singles Peter out from among them; and after asking him three times, “Do you love me?” Jesus proceeds 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 expresses fully what He has in mind for Peter from 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 has 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 changes Jacob's name to Israel because he has contended with divine and human beings and has prevailed (Gen 32:29). God alone gives such a mission and the name which 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 is to be made up of all races from all parts of the world. As its mission is to bring the message of salvation to all people, it is to go on until the end of time.

Jesus promises 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 is 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 (1Cor 15:26; Rev 6:8, 20:13ff). Against all of this, the power of the Church will be able to withstand and prevail.

Jesus goes 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 first reading). This idea serves as a bridge from the rock metaphor to the more direct definition of Peter's powers. The key is a symbol of leadership and authority; it is 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 18:18, but to Peter alone are accorded the revelation, the role of rock, and especially the keys.

The Church can 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 will be inspired and ratified in heaven, Jesus gives him the power of freedom from error when officially teaching the universal Church. In other words, Peter receives the primacy in the Church and gift of infallibility in his official teaching on matters of faith and morals.

As the Church is to continue long after Peter has died, it is rightly understood from the beginning that the privileges given to him, and which are necessary for the successful mission of the Church, are 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 has recently been reconfirmed in the Second Vatican Council. In giving these powers to Peter and to his lawful successors, Jesus is planning for our needs. In order to preserve and safeguard the right conduct of all its members, he provides a central seat of authoritative power in the Church. Through the gift of infallibility, he assures us that whatever we are commanded to believe (faith) and do (morals) will always be what he and his heavenly Father want us to believe and do (see *The Sunday Readings*, by Fr. Kevin O'Sullivan, OFM).

After Jesus finishes speaking to Peter, "he strictly ordered his disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ." Jesus imposes 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 is ruling them. Jesus would also be hindered in his spiritual work.

It is for these reasons that Jesus, from that time on, begins 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).

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mt 16:21-27

"[From that time on,] Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priest, and the scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised."

The words, “From that time on” mark a new phase of the Gospel; from now until the end of the book there will be a new emphasis on the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus and on his teaching on the subject.

Peter has just expressed his and the Apostles’ faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Now Jesus must correct the popular misconceptions about the Messiah. At this crucial moment he tells them for the first time of his coming passion: he is not only the glorious Messiah, the triumphant liberator of Jewish dreams; he is also the Suffering Servant. Within the next few days, this teaching method will be pursued in a similar situation: the glorious transfiguration will be followed by an injunction to silence and a prediction of the Passion (17:1-12). It is Jesus’ way of preparing the Apostles and bracing their faith for his approaching crisis of suffering, death, and resurrection. A third prediction will follow (20:17-19).

The titles “Messiah” and “Son of God” are far removed from the notion of suffering and death. And although the predictions are accompanied by a prophecy of resurrection, the Apostles are so overwhelmed by the prediction of the Passion and death; they overlook the vague and remote promise of resurrection.

Jesus knows of his forthcoming passion, death, and resurrection; and he forewarns his disciples. But some scholars believe that the clarity of the predictions we now read are the product of the disciples’ post resurrection understanding. They are much more detailed and specific. That would be one explanation as to why the disciples were so surprised when the passion did occur. On the other hand, perhaps the notion of the triumphant and victorious Messiah was too strong to allow the disciples to hear or accept Jesus’ warning. And death was such a final reality, the idea of Jesus’ rising to a glorious new life after such a horrible end would have been unthinkable. We can understand why the disciples are so slow to believe that Jesus has risen and is really alive.

After hearing Jesus predict his passion and death, “Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, ‘God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you.’” In spite of Peter’s recognition of Jesus as the Christ, he still holds firmly to the notion of an exclusively glorious Messiah. He seems to suppose that Jesus is envisaging the possibility of failure. Hence his usage of the soothing “God forbid”, literally, “May God be propitious to you.” Peter’s attitude is one of genial condescension, an attempt to raise the sagging spirits of his Master who is taking a far too pessimistic view of his prospects.

Jesus’ reaction, in turn, is a violent one: “He turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do’” Without realizing it, Peter is playing the part of Satan, tempting him to follow the easy, human path of an earthly Messiah rather than adhere to the lonely course on which He has set himself, the course of total sacrifice of self. How little Peter still knows of his Master, and to what he has committed himself in becoming his disciple.

He whom Jesus destines to be the foundation stone of his church puts himself in his road as a stumbling block in front of Jesus instead of an obedient disciple following behind him. The incident reveals the instability of the human heart, which in less than an hour passes from the glow of the spirit to the weakness of the flesh.

We are reminded of Peter walking on the water and then in the next moment sinking into its depths. Peter becomes an obstacle to the path traced by the Father and willingly taken by the Son; Jesus orders him out of the way. Peter cannot appreciate God’s ways. He is unwittingly playing the part of their great adversary. Through him, Satan, who has left Jesus only “for a time” (Lk 4:13), renews the original temptation (Mt 4:1-11).

Peter’s refusal to accept Jesus’ predicted suffering and death is seen as a satanic attempt to deflect Jesus from his God-appointed course; and he is

addressed in terms that recall Jesus' dismissal of the devil in the temptation account: "Get away, Satan!" (4:10). To oppose the divine will is to be the agent of Satan; to be on the side of man, as opposed to that of God, is to be on the side of Satan.

Peter has been addressed as "Satan" because he opposes Jesus' obedience to the will of God, which will involve him in suffering and death as the way to glory. The ignorance of Peter is not just ignorance about the future of Jesus: it reveals that he is ignorant about the future of the disciples' sufferings and so about his own future also.

Jesus now begins to explain to his disciples what it means to follow him. "Then Jesus says to his disciples, 'Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.'" If we wish to come after him as his pupils, and enter with him into the glory of the age to come, we must follow him in his obedience to the will of God; and this means following him in his passion. A readiness to follow Jesus, even to giving up one's life for him, is the condition for true discipleship; this will be repaid by him at the final judgment.

To deny someone is to disown him (see Mt 10:33; 26:34-35). To deny oneself is to disown oneself as the center of one's existence. We deny disordered self-love so that God can reign supreme in our lives. In this way we carry out the great commandment to love God with our whole heart (Deut 6:5). We prevent the selfish, wayward self from usurping God's place. (In this sense, the self is nothing; it has no claims and no value.) It is easy to follow the selfish desires of our wounded human nature: we over-indulge in various pleasures or flee the difficulties in carrying out our responsibilities. Jesus calls us to disown and deny these selfish inclinations so that we can follow God's will by practicing the virtues, such as temperance in moderating pleasure and fortitude in practicing patient endurance. This requires spirit assertiveness. In this way we remain disposed to retain our union

with God who is Spirit. And through love and obedience, we live in communion with him.

A further thought may help to disown and deny ourselves. St. Paul states, "You are not your own. For you have been purchased at a price" (1 Cor 6:19-20). "You [belong] to Christ" (1 Cor 3:23). "Do not become slaves to human beings" (1 Cor 7:23) or to your own sinfully inclined human nature. We must follow the example of Jesus: "He emptied himself" (Phil 2:7).

"Whoever wishes to come after me must ... take up his cross, and follow me." Jesus is the way as well as the truth and the life (see Jn 14:6). What He went through in his human nature, we also must go through. He shows us the way to transformation in God-likeness. That is the truth of the matter. That is how we enter into the fullness of divine life insofar as is possible for humans.

Pope John Paul II said that the reason Jesus retained his wounds after the resurrection is to show the victorious power of suffering (see *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering* No. 25). His glory was attained through human suffering. His human nature achieved glorification through the sufferings he endured. We, too, must take up our cross in daily life by practicing self-denial as well as by accepting the cross of human sufferings that come our way as life unfolds for us. On the one hand, St. Paul says, "Now those who belong to Christ [Jesus] have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal 5:24); on the other hand, St. Peter says, "Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you ... But rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly" (1 Pt 4:12-13). We actively take up the cross by denying ourselves; or we passively accept the cross imposed by the human condition in which we exist.

Jesus goes on to say, "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Whoever tries to save his

natural life by avoiding martyrdom will lose his spiritual, supernatural life. But whoever gives up his life in martyrdom for love of Jesus will have it restored to him in the resurrection. Saving your life through self-indulgence will bring about personal disintegration. Losing your life through self-denial will bring about self-realization in its fullness, purified and elevated to a divine level. Life in the flesh must die so that life in the spirit can live and be freed to reach its fullness in Christ, our Risen Lord.

In the words of St. Paul, "A person will reap only what he sows, because the one who sows for his flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows for the spirit will reap eternal life from the spirit" (Gal 6:7-8). Effort is required, but we will get what we put into life. Following the line of least resistance, and giving in to human nature's desire for pleasurable living, brings about dissipation of the spirit and that which is highest in us. At the same time, the most noble is enslaved by the lowest and basest. But if we put out effort through spirit assertiveness to follow the promptings of the Spirit, we subdue the base desires of the flesh and begin to live the higher life of the spirit and participate in the joy of God.

We continue with the words of Jesus, "What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life?" Acquiring great wealth and gaining material possessions do not satisfy our spiritual nature. All of these acquisitions will be left behind at death. Acquiring these requires much attention and expenditure of energies. The stress in obtaining them and the fear of losing them cause anxiety and tension. These lead to self-destruction. The luxury of acquired wealth and the licentiousness and desire for pleasures it awakens tend to draw people into self-absorption. The spiritual and the eternal are forgotten. When the end of life comes, there is absolutely no preparedness for eternal life. The person is bankrupt of all virtue and spirituality and that which endures through death and eternity.

"What can one give in exchange for his life?" A man's life is more valuable to him than anything else. It participates in the eternity of God; the life of the spiritual soul is indestructible and perdures through eternity. The life and soul of a human being is more precious than the whole created physical world. It is therefore worth a person's losing any and everything, if by this means he saves his life and soul. The paradox here is that a person must lose his life in order to gain it.

The reason why the disciples must act in this way is because Jesus, who speaks of himself here as the Son of Man, is coming in glory. "For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father's glory, and then he will repay all according to his conduct." The angels will separate the good from the bad and cast evildoers "into the fiery furnace" (Mt 13:49-50), which symbolizes the pain of eternal separation from God.

And what will happen to the good, those who were faithful in obedience to God? St. Paul tells us: "Behold, I tell you a mystery ... We will all be changed, in an instant, in the blink of an eye ... the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For that which is corruptible must clothe itself with incorruptibility, and that which is mortal must clothe itself with immortality ... then the word that is written shall come about: 'Death is swallowed up in victory'" (1 Cor 15:51-54) ... "Thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thes 4:17).

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mt 18:15-20

Today, we are being told that in our love for one another, we may be called to confront someone for the wrong he or she is doing. The commandment to love one another includes such tough love.

In the first reading God warns us: "If ... you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked from his way, the wicked shall die for his guilt, but I will

hold you responsible for his death. But if you warn the wicked, trying to turn him from his way, and he refuses to turn from his way, he shall die for his guilt, but you shall save yourself.”

The admonition from the first reading helps us to understand our duty to correct one another. The Gospel tells us that we must take unchristian behavior to task: “If your brother sins [the better manuscripts do not have ‘against you’] go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.” Even if the sin is not against you, you may be called to remonstrate the person who is doing wrong, for example, a close relative or friend of yours. Any individual member of the community should try to “gain” the offending person, the stray sheep; and this is done privately, so that the person is not humiliated. This duty of seeking the straying Christian is to be exercised with discretion. The sinner must be won back to God as sweetly as possible. Every effort is to be made to bring the erring person to repentance.

For example, a person dear to you may be living together with someone before marriage. Another may be addicted to gambling with its serious negative side effects on the family. Still another may have stopped going to Sunday Mass. You may know someone who over indulges in alcohol or drugs or habitual uncontrolled anger, or who uses God’s name in vain ... You must do your best to persuade them to see and stop their wrongdoing.

It is a good rule not to speak of the person’s fault to others. We must take care not to ruin others’ reputation. That can be a grave sin on our part. In that case, we might be as much of a sinner as the person we are criticizing—we would be committing the sin of detraction. By speaking privately to the person at fault, we would safeguard his reputation and at the same time seek his salvation.

“If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.” He will appreciate and thank you for your genuine concern. You will save him from sin and help him attain eternal salvation. St. James

tells us, “If anyone among you should stray from the truth and someone bring him back, he should know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” (Jms 5:19-20).

Confrontation is a difficult task. There is the fear of being rejected and our attempt at helping may fail. We are afraid of being disliked and misunderstood. But fraternal charity demands that we act.

We must help each other grow in virtue and overcome evil. For this purpose, St. Paul advises us, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another...” (Col 3:16). “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17).

The word of God is powerful. It will help us present the truth clearly to the offender and convict him or her of their sinful behavior. “Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb 4:12). We would do well to dedicate ourselves to reading and learning the holy word of God for our sake and that of others.

The Gospel for today continues, “If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’” The book of Deuteronomy says, “one witness alone shall not take the stand against a man in regard to any crime or any offense of which he may be guilty; a judicial fact shall be established only on the testimony of two or three witnesses” (Deut 19:15).

If the individual approach proves to be ineffective, and the fault in question is a serious one, we are directed to get one or two other people to help us. Perhaps the extra person’s influence will convince the sinner to stop.

But “If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church.” Failure to heed this more solemn demands that

the process be brought before the Church represented by its leaders.

The examples we gave earlier of various private sins would not require us to go this far. The sin would have to be notorious and of a public nature for that. For example, many years ago a couple of white people attacked a religion teacher and was preventing certain black children from participation in their church in Erath. The Church through its authority, Bishop Jeanmard, warned them not to impede these good people from practicing their faith at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church.

The Gospel of today says, “If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.” If the sinner does not accept the solemn warning and correction by the Church, he should be excommunicated, that is, separated from communion with the Church and its sacraments. The person is expelled from membership in the Church. St. Paul used this method of expulsion against an offender in Corinth (1 Cor 5:1-5).

That is what Bishop Jeanmard had to resort to with the two people who were adamant in their disobedience to his warning: he excommunicated them. Happily, this shocked them into realizing the seriousness of their sin—so they repented and were reconciled to the Church.

Just as the observant Jew avoided the company of Gentile and tax collectors, so must the congregation of Christian disciples separate itself from the arrogantly sinful member who refuses to repent even when convicted of his sin by the whole church. Such a one is to be set outside the fellowship of the community.

Our Gospel continues, “Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” The Church has the power to make decisions binding believers to obey them; it also has the power to make decisions that remove

obligations. The Church’s judgment will be ratified in heaven, that is, by God. The decision of the Church in its authority will be the decision of God: as He inspires them in making the decision, so He will also honor it; and Jesus himself will be with them, guiding them and directing them. These are not simply man-made rules—they are inspired by God. As St. Peter put it, “It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities ...” (Acts 15:28).

The context of this Gospel is saying that the local church headed by the bishop has the authority to make binding ecclesiastical laws as well as dissolve them; the case at hand involved an excommunication. (This would also explain how it is that some dioceses transfer certain liturgical feasts to Sundays and others keep them on the day of the feast.)

But when the chastised sinner has been humbled and returns to the Church, he must be welcomed into communion again. It is sufficient that the punishment has attained its end; and the offender must be forgiven and comforted. Those who, upon their repentance, are received by the Church into communion again may take comfort in their absolution in heaven, if their hearts are upright with God.

The authority to bind and loose is given to the Church through its leaders in today’s Gospel; but to Peter alone are accorded the revelation, the role of the rock foundation, and especially the keys of authority over the whole Church.

Today’s Gospel ends with, “Again, amen, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” The reason why the Father’s help is certain is based on a general principle: the Beloved Son himself, whom the Father always hears (Jn 11:42) is mystically present in the tiniest gathering convoked to do him honor.

The presence of Jesus guarantees the efficacy of the prayer. Jesus' presence among his people to lead and guide them provides divine assurance that the concerns on which two or three agree are motivated by the will of their heavenly Father. That is an important point: for a petition to be granted, it must be according to God's will. Scripture says, "if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us" (1 Jn 5:14).

Jesus promises the special blessing of his presence when two or more gather together to pray in his name. That is why, he says, "if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father." It takes only two people gathered in faith and love to attract Jesus to be present among them. A couple or a family assembled in prayer is given more power and influence with God than isolated individuals. This is so because their love attracts Jesus to come and be among them. He inspires their prayer and intercedes for them; in this way, their prayer is more powerful and efficacious.

We can see why family prayer is so powerful. It is also an effective way to teach the children and lead them to open their hearts to God. Their faith is increased and they are given an experience of God when they are young and innocent. Such a holy experience will exert a powerful influence to bring them back to prayer and God if ever they stray and lose his presence through sin.

In this light you must consider gathering your family to pray together morning and evening prayer, at meal time, visits with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and while traveling together, asking God's protection and blessing on your trip whether near or far.

EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

Gospel: Jn 3:13-17

"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. The word "believe" is mentioned five times. It is first mentioned in this very first verse, "Everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." 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 profoundest 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 is 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.

“Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” Believing in Jesus or in his name, that is, in his divine Person, unites us to him; thus united to him, we share his divine, eternal life; we, then, are saved from perishing; for he has OVERCOME DEATH. Moreover, his life empowers us to live according to God’s will, according to the truth enunciated by God’s word; thus living as God’s children in loving intimacy and obedience to our Father, we are cherished by God—not condemned.

Willful unbelief is its own condemnation because it rejects the only source of salvation. Jesus is the one mediator between human beings and God. We must be connected to him through faith by which we draw divine life from him. He is the only one who can unite us to God, the Father, and the eternal life. If we refuse to accept Jesus’ Person and his words of revelation through faith, we condemn ourselves to perish.

The person who does not believe is not condemned to death by God subsequent to his unbelief; for God has indeed offered him eternal life; he is condemned already in his unbelief. The perishing of the unbeliever is not a punishment for unbelief inflicted by a ruthless God; it is the self-determined end of a person who does not believe.

Jesus was sent into the world to bring it eternal life; willful unbelief makes him the occasion of

condemnation; the unbeliever passes judgment on himself. Just as eternal life already begins in this world for the person who has decided for Christ, so does the unbeliever already stand separated from God and condemned.

Judgment takes place here and now; it is determined by faith or unbelief in Jesus. God for his part has no desire to judge, but only to save. Judgment is only due to the refusal of people to believe in the Son of God. Judgment is only the dark, reverse side of God’s act of love and redemption when unbelief draws down judgment upon itself: unbelief becomes self-condemnation. Judgment has taken place by the very act of non-belief. Whether and how long a person remains in the sphere of death and condemnation depends on himself. Perhaps intercessory prayer will give him the light to see and the strength to repent and accept salvation through faith.

The decision taken by the unbeliever will be formally ratified before the eyes of the world, at the last judgment by the Son of Man; or, as Jesus put it, “The word that I spoke...will condemn him on the last day” (Jn 12:48). The present judgment does not deprive a person’s further capacity to make a decision—but it can lead to the “hardening” of his heart.

The last judgment is nothing but the divine acknowledgment of the condition brought about by human decision; it will be the disclosure of an existence long vowed to destruction, already a victim of death. The unbeliever pronounces the final verdict on himself by his present decision.

“And this is the verdict (judgment), that light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil.” St. John, then, goes on to explain why people prefer darkness to light: “For everyone who does wicked things hates the light, so that his works might not be exposed.” Evil is symbolized by darkness. Jesus, the light, has come into the world. But the darkness will not receive it. This very refusal constitutes judgment.

Jesus' presence in the world provokes men to judge themselves by deciding either for Jesus or against him. Evildoers are disbelievers. Do-ers who do good works believe: they are drawn to Christ, while evildoers are repelled. They do not want their malice to be exposed, nor will they cease their sinning.

Jesus brings out what a man really is and the real nature of his life. Jesus is a penetrating light that provokes judgment by making it apparent what a man is. The one who turns away is not an occasional sinner, but one who "practices wickedness"; it is not that he cannot see the light, but that he hates the light ... it is a question of radical evil.

The judgment takes place wherever people prefer darkness to light and do not believe in the Son of God. They have placed themselves on the side of the "prince of this world" on whom judgment has been passed by the death and victory of Jesus on the cross.

The purpose of this passage is to display the personal responsibility of unbelievers and the horror of their act in its true colors.

The passage explains why Jesus who brings salvation is confronted with so much unbelief; it also calls for the holiness of life without which no one comes to the light. It also explains how in spite of all God's efforts to save, especially through the love of his Son, people could still close their hearts to the light. God, for his part, has done everything to save people from darkness through Jesus' words and works. Their inexplicable "hatred" rises up from the abyss of a heart darkened by sin. It is the consequence of a total perversion and moral corruption.

When Jesus and the light of his revelation fall upon unbelievers, they themselves are unmasked for what they are, and not just their works. Thus their "hatred" has a psychological explanation and is also rooted in a profounder level of their being; it comes from a general attitude for which

they are themselves responsible and which is totally corrupted. This is why they do not come to the light, which is John's synonym for "believing". "But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God." Those who perform morally good acts according to God's will are drawn to believe in Jesus. Such living according to the truth is totally opposed to the lie, falsehood and wretchedness, which come from the devil. Those who are loyal to God and strive to do his will have the disposition which also enables them to hear and accept the words of God's envoy. His words are the truth which comes from God. The truth is present in Jesus, but only those are open to it who are "of the truth" and act accordingly.

Their works are done in God in that they are in accordance with God and his will. These works are true and in conformity with God's nature. There is a kinship between the children of God and the Son of God sent as revealer and redeemer; there is also an intrinsic relationship between moral behavior and faith (see Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John*, Herder and Herder, 1965).

Jesus is God's light sent to the world to show human beings how they may walk in him, "the way, the truth, and the life" in order to reach God. Those who reject him choose to remain in darkness rather than face the challenge of changing their evil ways. By so doing, they pronounce their own judgment and condemnation. Conversely, those who accept Jesus and walk with him or come into the light are not judged. They show by their deeds that they are indeed born of God.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mt 20: 1-16a

In general, the parable of today's Gospel may be explained in this way: This parable is addressed to the Jewish people, whom God called at an early hour, centuries ago. Now the

Gentiles are also being called—with an equal right to form part of the new people of God, the Church. In both cases, it is a matter of gratuitous, unmerited invitation; therefore, those who were the “first” to receive the call have no grounds for complaining when God calls the “last” and gives them the same reward: membership of this people. At first sight the laborers of the first hour seem to have a genuine grievance—because they do not realize that to have a job in the Lord’s vineyard, his kingdom, is a divine gift. Jesus leaves us in no doubt that although He calls us to follow different ways, all receive the same reward: heaven (see *Navarre Bible*).

More particularly, “Jesus told his disciples this parable” in order to explain some aspect of the kingdom of God. He said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard.”

It was customary for workers to assemble at daybreak in the squares and towns, where farmers and vinegrowers would hire them for a day’s work. They usually worked from 6 AM until 6 PM, from sunup until sundown.

“After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.” He makes a contract with the first men he hires to work the full day for a denarius. A denarius was a silver coin bearing an image of Caesar Augustus; it was worth about 20 cents. That was considered generous for a full day’s work.

The landowner was in a hurry to harvest his crop before the rain came. So he went out to hire more workers at 9 AM, at noon, at 3 PM, and finally at 5 PM. He tells them, “I will give you what is just.” He does not specify how much as he has done with those at dawn.

The landowner asked the ones he hired at 5 PM, “Why do you stand here idle all day? You too go into my vineyard.” The landowner represents God who is concerned about those who are idle in the kingdom of God. Have you been idle? Are you concerned about your eternal salvation?

What are you doing about it? Do you frequently examine your conscience and are careful to avoid sin in your life? Are you always trying to do God’s will? Do you go to confession often to receive forgiveness and grace from Jesus to overcome your weaknesses? Do you immediately tell God you’re sorry as soon as you do wrong? What are your dominant faults? Are you trying to overcome them? Do you work at prayer and daily meditate on the word of God? Are you a laborer in the kingdom of God? Or do you stand idle all day? The word of God says, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12).

The owner tells his foreman to call the workers together and to first pay the ones who have worked only one hour. This was done so that the full-day workers would see those who have worked only one hour getting a full day’s pay. Had they been paid first, they would have gone off and not noticed what happened.

“When those who had started about five o’clock came, each received the usual daily wage.” They received much more than they deserved. In strict justice, the fewer hours a man worked, the less pay he should have received. These worked only an hour.

Those who have toiled since dawn now expect to receive more since it seems to them that generosity should be extended to them in like proportion. To their astonishment and chagrin, all received the same. That they grumbled is understandable, especially to anyone who has worked under the hot Palestinian sun. But the contract they had agreed upon had now been fulfilled. There is no question of anyone having a claim in justice to anything further. No objection whatever can be made against God’s justice. What it amounts to, then, is that the other workers feel sad that the owner has seen fit to deal more kindly with the latecomers than their selfish natures deem proper. Their dissatisfaction might seem reasonable—but it is not for what they received: that is what they had agreed upon. They are dissatisfied because the others received as much as they did. That is

why they are rebuked: they are envious, saddened at seeing the other's good. And the employer insists on his right to be generous. By giving to one, he takes nothing away from the other. That is how God acts. Into his kingdom, he brings latecomers—sinners and pagans. Those who were called first, the Jewish people beginning with Abraham, have no right to be offended. The gratuitous, supernatural character of the Christian vocation is stressed.

The parable points out that an early call has no relevance to standing in the kingdom of God. Whenever one is admitted to full participation, the kingdom does not become the property of those who first sought admission, even if they are its officers. Jesus had given newcomers, the Gentiles, as much as the Patriarchs and Prophets. All will be admitted, and on the same terms.

The setting in the ministry of Jesus for this parable is probably his controversy with the Pharisees over his treatment of the tax collectors and sinners; he admits them to his fellowship; he eats and drinks with them; he invites them into the kingdom because God, who has sent him, is generous with his forgiveness and mercy. Those who complain in the parable are the Pharisees. They are like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son; they claim more from the father because of their good works. God's mercy, revealed in Jesus' fellowship with the sinners, is inexplicable to the Pharisees, but it is undeniable that God is free to do as he wishes.

For St. Matthew, the vineyard is the Christian community, and those who join it late will be treated as equal in privilege with those who join it early. The parable simply illustrates the teaching that the gift of eternal life is not the reward of human merit, but the free gift of divine grace.

All who respond to the call of Jesus at whatever time, first or last, will be the same in respect to inheriting the benefits of the kingdom, which is the gift of God. Some are called to begin work when they are very young, others in middle age, still others in old age. There is hope for old

sinners. True repentance is never too late. Though there are degrees of glory in heaven, yet it will be to all a complete happiness. In heaven, every vessel will be full, brimful, though every vessel is not all the same size. Some will be happier than others. That will depend on the degree of charity we will have attained when we die. The greater our love for God and his children, the greater our happiness in heaven will be. It may well be that those who entered the Church later in life will outstrip in love those who entered earlier.

A day of work in the vineyard may be compared to our lifetime. It is a short time; the reward is for eternity; the work is but for a day. We have but a little time to work.

The day's wage for every person is God's grace, a gift, an eternity of heaven. The gift will always be infinitely greater than whatever anyone has done in life.

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mt 21: 28-32

Jesus uses the story in the Gospel today of how two sons respond to their father's bidding to show that obedience to God is only evident in action, not mere words. He points out to the chief priests and the elders of the people that tax collectors and prostitutes, those they regard as hopelessly excluded from the kingdom of God, are the ones who will enter it before them. The leaders' rejection of John's baptism puts them in the category of the second son—the one who said he could go to work in the vineyard but did not. In calling people to repent, John is acting by God's authority in the way of righteousness; yet the religious leaders still reject his message. St. John the Baptist has shown the way to sanctification by proclaiming the imminence of the kingdom of God and by preaching conversion. The scribes and Pharisees would not believe him, yet they boast of their faithfulness to God's teaching. They are like the son who says, "I will go," and then does not go; the tax

collectors and prostitutes, who repent and correct the course of their lives, will enter the kingdom before them: they are like the son who says, "I will not," but then does go. Our Lord stresses that penance and conversion can set people on the road to holiness even if they have been living apart from God for a long time.

The first reading today assures us that "if the [sinner turns] from the wickedness he has committed [and] does what is right and just, he shall preserve his life..." He will regain his union with God and begin to live the life of grace.

The temporary refusal of the first son was blameworthy, but is forgiven because of his subsequent change of mind. The prompt yes of the second is worthless because of his failure to put it into execution.

The leaders give the correct answer but refuse to see any lesson for themselves in it. Jesus brings out the lesson. He tells the leaders that these very sinners will be sharers in God's kingdom, while their own false pride will not let them share in it.

Jesus turns his question regarding the two sons to those who are presumably his critics: which of the two sons did the will of his father? The critics, perhaps unwittingly, condemn themselves in their answer: the first son who changed his mind and went to work.

Jesus' response goes to the heart of his Gospel message. What God calls for is repentance on the part of those who are in need of his grace and are willing to acknowledge their need. The proud, self-righteous, "religious" people do not know of their own need and refuse the message.

The religious leaders have refused to repent. The cloak of religious respectability means nothing in God's sight, unless a person is genuinely repentant as these other poor sinners are.

The parable sets before us a picture of two very imperfect sets of people of whom one set is nonetheless better than the other. Neither son in

in the story is the kind of son to bring full joy to his father. Both were unsatisfactory; but the one who in the end obeyed is incalculably better than the other. The ideal son would be the son who accepts the father's orders with obedience and respect and who unquestioningly and fully carries them out.

Jesus warns us against the so called "justice" of the scribes and Pharisees; they have the mistaken belief that mere external keeping of the Law is sufficient. But Jesus insists that true holiness demands an internal keeping of the Law as well. That means that our hearts and wills must be in conformity with God's will. It is not enough to fulfill the external letter of the Law while our heart is not in it; the core and love of the person is somewhere else—it is not with God. And the great commandment calls us to love God with our whole heart. But we are too full of ourselves; we are preoccupied with our own plans and our will to succeed or the attainment of our pleasures to be concerned about God's will and plans for us. We are very much unlike the ideal son, Jesus, who "emptied himself" of his own agenda as the second reading explains; "he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross". We are also urged, "Have ... the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus."

Jesus' main concern was to please his Father: as he said, "I always do what is pleasing to him" (Jn 8:29). He truly loves God with his whole heart. He is intimately united to his Father. He indicates this by saying, "The Father and I are one" (Jn 10:30). Jesus expresses this oneness in being with the Father by always doing his will. This union of wills is what sustains him. He says, "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me" (Jn 4:34). He expresses his desire for us to adhere to God's will in life by including it in the Lord's prayer. We pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10). Conformity of wills is our means of remaining united to God, even as it was for Jesus. In order to allow the Father's will to prevail in us, like Jesus, we must empty ourselves of our own

will and all self-importance. That requires humility and a sense of our own lowliness: we come from nothing and have offended God. We really have no rights as far as deserts go. Our privileges are all undeserved. Therefore, we ought not to be angered or saddened when we are overlooked or when bad things happen to us. We deserve it all. If we can accept God's providential will that allows us to come upon adversity and conform to his will, the longsuffering with which we endure it will purify and sanctify us. We will not complain or rebel. We will be true sons like Jesus the suffering Servant: "Though he was harshly treated, he submitted and opened not his mouth; like a lamb led to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearers, he was silent and opened not his mouth" (Is 53:7).

The virtue of obedience inclines us to let go of our own will and preference and choose God's will. In this way we unite ourselves to God. Obedience subordinates our will directly to the will of God. The commanding faculty of the will thus subordinates all our other faculties to the divine will. By freely choosing to submit ourselves to God's will we offer in homage to God what we hold most dear: we offer him the pleasing sacrifice of our freedom, our will. We thus enter into communion with God by such conformity of wills. Like Jesus we say, "Not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). Obedience unites the best that is in us, our will, to that of God.

Since the will is the master faculty, which commands all others, by uniting it to God, we unite to him all the powers of the soul.

The sacrifice of our will through obedience is greater than the sacrifice of external goods and bodily pleasures. Obedience is the highest sacrifice we can make. As Samuel tells Saul, "Obedience is better than sacrifice" (1 Sm 15:22).

Obedience constitutes a most abiding and lasting union: it causes us to abide in God as he abides in us, since we will what he wills.

Through obedience, self-will and self-sufficiency

are ever being immolated and laid as victims upon an altar. Our will is no longer our own but God's will.

Such an attitude is that of a true son or daughter—ours must always be a total "yes!" to God's will and joyfully carried out. We must be like Jesus. As St. Paul explained to the Corinthians, "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ ... was not 'yes' and 'no', but [only] 'yes' has been in him" (2 Cor 1:19). As Jesus himself put it, "I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me" (Jn 6:38).

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mt 21: 33-43

In general, we may summarize today's Gospel parable in this way: Jesus is speaking to the chief priests and elders of the people; he shows them that even though they were God's chosen people in the past, they have forfeited any claim to the new kingdom of God because of their disloyalty and disobedience to him. They are given a vineyard to cultivate, but they claim it as their own; they not only refuse to give any return to the true owner, but murder the owner's son when he is sent to reason with them. The Jews are chosen by God to prepare the world for the coming of Christ; they not only fail in their appointed task, but they put Jesus to death when he comes; they thus exclude themselves from his new kingdom, the Church, where they will be replaced by Gentile nations (see the Sunday Readings). Jesus entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him."Looking at the Gospel in greater detail, we see that it contains the elements of an allegory: particular details have a specific meaning: The landowner represents God; the vineyard represents the nation of Israel; it is an image of God's kingdom on earth as it is often presented in the Old Testament (compare Isaiah 5:1-7 in the first reading).

The tenants represent the religious leaders of Israel; the servants represent the prophets sent by God who were so often rejected and killed. The son, who comes last, is non-other than Jesus himself. Here, in a vivid story, Jesus sets out at one and the same time the history and the doom of Israel.

The chief priests and Pharisees know well what Jesus means by the parable. Every detail is founded on what those who hear it know to be familiar fact.

Jesus compares Israel to a choice vineyard, specially fenced, with a watchtower, where a keeper is on the lookout to protect it from thieves, wild boars, and foxes. God has spared no effort to cultivate and embellish his vineyard; he does everything necessary to make it fertile and productive.

The tenants to whom God has given the care of his people are the priests, scribes, and elders. The landowner's absence makes it clear that God really does entrust Israel to its leaders, hence they are responsible for it and he demands an account from them. We, too, are accountable to God for our responsibilities.

The plotting of the tenants is not so outlandish. Palestine is a troubled place with little luxury; it is, therefore, very familiar with absentee landlords; they let out their estates and are interested only in collecting the rental at the right time. The rent might be paid in money, a fixed amount of fruit, or and agreed percentage of the crop. Tenants would at times forcibly take over the land they worked; they regarded the produce of the land as belonging to a distant owner. The more distant the owner, the greater their temptation and chance of In such a situation, even the seemingly stupid idea expressed by the tenants that by killing the owner's heir they will "inherit" his vineyard makes some kind of sense.

The owner used to send his servants from time to time to collect the fruit: this was the mission of the prophets. The second dispatch of servants to claim what is owed to the owner—who meets the same fate as the first—refers to the way God's prophets were ill-treated by the kings and priests of Israel (Mt 23:37, Acts 7:52, Heb 11:36-38).

Finally God sends his Son to them, thinking that they will have more respect for him; here we can see the difference between Jesus and the prophets, who were servants, not "the Son": the parable indicates singular, transcendental sonship, expressing the divinity of Jesus.

The malicious purpose of the tenants in murdering the son and heir to keep the inheritance for themselves is the madness of the leaders in expecting to become undisputed masters of Israel by putting Jesus to death (Mt 12:14; 26:4). Their ambition blinds them to the punishment that awaits them. Then they "cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him": a reference to Jesus' crucifixion, which took place outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Jesus prophesies the punishment God will inflict on the evildoers: he will put them to death and rent the vineyard to others. This is a very significant prophecy: St. Peter later repeats it to the Sanhedrin: "[This is] the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the [head of the corner]" (Acts 4:11; 1 Pt 2:4). The stone is Jesus of Nazareth, but the architects of Israel, who build up and rule the people, have chosen not to use it in the building. Because of their unfaithfulness, the kingdom of God will be turned over to another people, the Gentiles, who will give God the fruit he expects his vineyard to yield (see Mt 3:8-10).

The picture of the rejected stone which became the cornerstone came from Psalm 118:22. By the resurrection, God has vindicated his chosen stone, Jesus, and made him the keystone of a new structure, the new people of God. That means that he is the source of strength, stability, and

unity among the various races who would form his new kingdom.

It may be that some reject Jesus as the Christ and refuse him; they seek to eliminate him; but they will yet find that the Christ they reject is the most important person in the world: he is the Son of God, The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Jesus' death and resurrection is the turning point which ushers in the new age of the Church.

The imagery and thrust of the parable has shifted: the vineyard no longer symbolizes Israel, but the kingdom of God already present and given to Israel in the Old Testament; but now it is transferred to the new people made up of Jews and Gentiles, the Church.

In St. Matthew, the kingdom of God is in process. Present in the Old Testament, it is transferred to the Church; but it will come in full glory only at the end of the age.

There are two leading thoughts that come to the mind of any true believer on hearing this parable: the infinite goodness, patience, and mercy of God in his dealings with human beings; and the unsounded depths of wickedness and ingratitude to which they can sink. To his chosen people of the Old Testament, God has given a fertile and fully equipped vineyard: his revelation, his protection, a homeland of their own in Canaan—and all this in order to prepare them for the future Messiah; he will bring them to an eternal home in God's own kingdom. All he asks in return is their cooperation.

But they have other plans; they want their kingdom on earth. Yet God is patient with them; again and again he pardons their infidelities. He sends them prophet after prophet to recall them to their senses; but they maltreat these messengers of God and refused to heed their warnings.

Then "the fullness of time" comes and he sends his divine Son on earth in human form. He takes his human nature from one of their race, lives among them and preaches his gospel of love and

peace to them. He tries to soften their hearts, and make them the final offer of the Father's mercy and pardon. But instead of accepting God's offer of mercy, the chief priests and elders only make it an occasion of an even greater sin. To their crimes of infidelity and injustice, they add the murder of God's Messiah and Son.

In God's plan of love and mercy, the tragedy of Calvary turns out to be the great triumph of failure. That death brought life to the world and opened the gates of God's eternal kingdom for all nations and races. The Gentiles rally around the standard of Christ. A new vineyard is set up in which all people can work for their Father in heaven and for their own eternal interests.

We Christians today are the successors of the first Gentile followers of Jesus. We, too, have been called to work in God's vineyard. Are we working honestly and devotedly? Are we producing the grapes and vine of holiness that our divine Master expects of us? If our answer is, "Yes, I am living a true Christian life; I am working for God's honor and glory, and for my eternal salvation," then we can say a heartfelt "thank you" to our merciful Father; and we ask him to keep us ever on this right path. But if our answer is, "No", then let us pay heed to today's lesson. What happened to the chief priests and elders can and will happen to us if we continue in our infidelity and disobedience. But we can still put ourselves right with God. We must do it now! Tomorrow may be too late (see the Sunday Readings).

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mt 22: 1-14

Jesus told parables to describe or explain the kingdom of God. Today's parable has allegorical details: The king is God; the wedding feast is the happiness of the messianic age and the joy of those who live intimately with God in the kingdom, which the Messiah is establishing; the king's son is Jesus who is the Messiah; those sent with invitations are the

prophets and apostles; those invited and who ignore them or do violence to them are the Jews, especially their leaders; the burning of the city is the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans; those called from the streets and country roads are the sinners and gentiles, people from all nations; towards the end of the parable, a new parable is intertwined so that the scene changes to that of the last judgment, which we will explain later.

Let us now look at and reflect upon at greater length certain aspects of the parable. We notice that the kingdom of heaven is described as a wedding banquet, a feast. Joyful wedding celebrations are the imagery used by the prophets to describe the future messianic kingdom. This kingdom begins on earth with God's presence among his people; but it passes from this world into heavenly glory. We already have a foretaste of heavenly joy by experiencing God's presence with us, and living in the holy Eucharist. For example, the prophet Isaiah tells us in the first reading, "On this mountain (the heavenly Jerusalem, which represents the Church, the beginning of the messianic kingdom), the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples a feast of rich food and choice wines (here we may see the spiritual richness of the Eucharistic Bread and wine), juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines. On this mountain he will destroy ... death forever (through the resurrection). The Lord God will wipe away the tears from every face (because death and separation from loved ones will be overcome) ... 'Behold our God, to whom we looked to save us! (Even now we can look at God in his indwelling presence, united to each of us; we also have the divine Jesus in his Eucharistic presence.) This is the Lord for whom we looked; let us rejoice and be glad that he has saved us!' For the hand of the Lord (his glorious power) will rest on this mountain" (Mount Sion on which the heavenly Jerusalem is built)."

The joyful image of a marriage feast reminds us that the invitation of God is to a feast as joyous as

a wedding feast (not a funeral!) His invitation is to joy. To think of Christianity as a gloomy giving up of everything which brings laughter and sunshine and happy fellowship is to mistake its whole nature. It is to joy that the Christian is invited; and it is joy he misses if he refuses the invitation.

Jesus has come to inaugurate the kingdom, but many of those who had previously been invited to participate in this celebration have rejected the invitation. The chosen people do not listen to the prophets. Others, like John the Baptist, are sent to express the urgency to accept God's invitation for "everything is ready". But again those invited prove to be more interested in their own pursuits. Others insult the prophets and kill them. The king, in anger, sends his troops and burns the city; this is an unmistakable allusion to the coming of the Roman troops, who are viewed as the instruments of God's judgment on the nation of Israel; they destroy the city of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

We are told that those invited "ignored the invitation and went away, one to his farm, another to his business." This part of the parable reminds us that the things which make men deaf to the invitation of Jesus are not necessarily bad in themselves. One man goes to his farm, another to his business. They do not go off on a wild carousal or an immoral adventure. They go off on, in itself, the excellent task of efficiently administering their business life. It is easy for a man to be so busy with the things of time that he forgets the things of eternity; to be so preoccupied with the things which are seen that he forgets the things that are unseen; to hear so insistently the claims of the world that he cannot hear the soft invitation of the voice of God. The tragedy of life is that it is so often the second bests which shut out the bests, that it is things which are good in themselves which shut out the things that are supreme. A man can be so busy making a living that he fails that he fails to make a life; he can be so busy with the administration and the organization of life that he forgets life itself.

St. Matthew presents the kingdom in its double aspect: already present, something that can be entered here and now (verse 1-10); and something that will be possessed only by those who can stand the scrutiny of the last judgment (11-14). The parable is not only a statement of God's judgment on Israel, but a warning to St. Matthew's church and all of us.

Since the chosen people contemptuously refuse to accept the invitation to the wedding feast of the kingdom of God, He sends his servants into the main roads to invite to the feast whoever they can find—"bad and good alike"—until the hall is filled with guests. These are the sinful outcasts and the Gentiles. The celebration must go on: the kingdom of heaven is arriving.

The image of the king coming in to meet the guests presents us with a new scene: that of the final judgment when Jesus will return in glory as our supreme judge. "He saw a man there not dressed in a wedding garment." Here we are reminded that both good and bad are brought into the wedding feast; the man not properly dressed represents the bad who refuse to repent. This is a new parable, but one closely connected to the first insofar as there are bad and good among those called from the main roads. The second parable explains what will happen to the bad who are called and remain bad.

The wedding garment represents those who are clothed in God's righteousness; they are in the state of sanctifying grace and are God's friends; endowed with such abundant life, they overflow with good works; they exude God's love, joy, and peace; they attract people to the kingdom of God with their words and works of generous, humble service. These persons have undergone a change of heart and mind, and are truly repentant.

The king says to the man, "My friend, how is it that you came in here without a wedding garment?" The only demand made is that he should be well prepared and repent in order to enter the kingdom. This repentance expresses itself in a life of good works. The man tries to

enter ill-disposed, without this new life, and therefore he is condemned. He is not willing to change. Those united to the celebration must give evidence of their reformed lives. The people of Israel had always regarded themselves as God's elect, but Jesus points out that it is those who respond in faithfulness to the call who are chosen. Fitness for the kingdom is needed; the lack of such fitness is obviously culpable. It's like one of us attempting to receive Jesus in the Eucharistic banquet in the state of mortal sin—trying to take part without the wedding garment that manifests a reformed life, a life lived according to God's word and will.

But the man is "reduced to silence." The guilty man has no defense; his guilt is evident and inexcusable. The call of the Church given to the Gentiles is a tremendous privilege. Even if most of them are bad, entirely unworthy of such an honor, they could make themselves worthy by appealing to God; they could all easily obtain the wedding garment, the necessary grace, to make them acceptable to the Lord; but some fail in this. The mention of one unworthy person is taken to represent all who are not repentant.

"Then the king says to his attendants, 'Bind his hands and feet, and cast him into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.'" The binding of the hands and feet signifies that there is no escape from the sentence of the king. The exterior darkness and the weeping and gnashing of teeth indicate the loss of happiness and the pain of separation from God and the joy of the celebrating community.

"Many are invited, but few are chosen." Everyone is invited to enter the kingdom, but few dispose themselves for it; they fail to cooperate with grace; thus, through their own fault, they are excluded from the banquet of heaven. They may slip by undetected in the Eucharistic banquet, but they are known by God and will be excluded from the wedding feast of heaven by the majestic Christ when he returns in glory.

The celebration of the wedding between God and all of us who have accepted the invitation is an ongoing constant reality. Our union with God in love and ongoing interpersonal communion is that joyful celebration.

Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door [of your heart] 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). The heavenly Bridegroom continually appeals to us, his Bride, the Church. We must be attentive like the true Bride who says, “I heard my lover knocking: ‘Open to me, my sister, my beloved, my dove, my perfect one!’” (Sg 5:2). We continually receive and return his affection. We express our love also by doing his will all day long.

There are no good excuses for missing the Lord’s banquet, the celebration of the wedding feast—neither farm, nor business, nor any other occupation. The excuses people give in the parable are essentially the same sort of excuses people have today. The problem lies in our giving priority to earthly realities over eternal realities. This rejection—which is an exclusion from God’s kingdom—is unalterable beyond death because previously there has been on the part of those invited a decisive negative response. They will have renounced their salvation in favor of other things they freely opted for and desired to possess more than the kingdom of God. How dismaying it is to find so many people rejecting intimacy with God and eternal salvation for the sake of worldly interests!

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mt 22: 1-14

“The Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech.”

Jesus had been pointing out their disobedience and their wickedness in the parables of the two sons, the wicked tenants of the vineyard, and the insulting guests who refused to take part in the wedding feast for the king’s son. These proud leaders of the people are embarrassed

and enraged at having their sinfulness exposed. “We’ve got to get rid of this guy!” they thought.

Thus, “They sent their disciples to [Jesus], with the Herodians ...” He had gotten the best of them and they want to retaliate.

The Pharisees and Herodians join forces to plot against Jesus. The Herodians are supporters of the regime of Herod and his dynasty: they are quite well disposed to Roman rule and, as far as religious matters are concerned, they hold the same kind of materialistic ideas as the Sadducees. The Pharisees are zealous keepers of the Law; they are anti-Roman and regard the Herodians as usurpers. It is difficult to imagine any two groups more at odds with each other: their amazing pack shows how much they hate Jesus.

They begin with a flattering introduction and go on to a test question to see whether Jesus will declare himself on the side of the zealots who refuse to pay, or on the side of those who collaborate with the Romans. It’s really a drama—which side is Jesus going to take?

They open the debate with a compliment calculated to disarm. “Teacher,” they say, “we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. [They really say a mouthful here. They are really on target. The Gospel is really trying to make us live on our deepest level—according to the spirit, which opens us to the divine, so we can be disposed to live in union with God. The media caters to the flesh. The Gospel caters to the spirit.] And you are not concerned with anyone’s opinion, for you do not regard a person’s status.” [We are often influenced by what people say or think of us: “human respect”. Jesus is anchored in truth and transcends human opinion. He operates from his deep center, far above the influence of human pressure.] They insist upon the master’s well-known independence of thought and outspoken expression—even against the person of the ruling power. For example, some Pharisees come to Jesus and say, “Go away,

leave this area because Herod wants to kill you.' He replies, 'Go and tell that fox, I cast out demons and I perform healings today and tomorrow ... yet I must continue on my way today, tomorrow, and the following day.'" (Lk 13:31-32.)

The flattering words in which Jesus is addressed suggest that he was expected to speak boldly and to take the zealot position of not paying the tax; this would render him liable to arrest.

"Tell us, then," they say, "what is your opinion: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?" The spies pretend to be honestly troubled with doubts as to whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar; whether such tribute go counter to their traditions and the Law of Moses. The question is, without doubt, a genuine case of conscience for many God-fearing Jews. In paying the tax to Rome and thereby acknowledging its government over the Jewish people, is one then denying the God who alone is ruler and Lord of Israel? Jesus is being presented with a very live issue; it is truly a moral problem that Jesus' enemies exploit.

The dilemma is a real one. But their main intention is to use the issue to get Jesus in trouble. Only with an astute mind and the gift of council will he be able to get out of it. A simple reply that the tribute is lawful would be odious to most of the people. A simple denial of its legality would make him liable to denunciation to the Romans for sedition.

The Gospel text says, "Knowing their malice, Jesus said, 'Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?'" They came to him with praise and flattery, but their intention are really to do him in: to disgrace him in the presence of the bystanders, and to get him in trouble with the authorities. Ever since that time, a hypocrite has come to be a synonym for Pharisee in all languages; they pretend outwardly to be strictly religious, but in their hearts they lack a true religious spirit—they are full of lust, greed, and pride. They are lacking in the love of God and neighbor (see Mt 23:25-27). Jesus spends all of Chapter 23 in St. Matthew's

gospel pointing out and trying to change them from their sinful way. But they will not budge—they only get angrier.

Jesus goes on to say, "Show me the coin that pays the census tax.' Then they handed him the Roman coin. He said to them, 'Whose image is this and whose inscription?' They replied, 'Caesar's.'" Jesus calls for the actual coin, the denarius, for his answer. This coin has a portrait of the emperor Tiberius (A.D. 14-37), and this inscription in an abbreviated form; "Ti[berius] Caesar Divi Aug[usti] F[ilus] Augustus"; "Tiberius Caesar August Son of the divine Augustus"

The coin provides an answer to the question. It belongs to Caesar, and it is within his power to demand it. Plainly the coin comes from Caesar; it is right that it should be returned to him. These civil transactions are on one plane, God's rights on another. There is no inevitable clash, provided that the civil demands do not encroach upon the duties of man to God.

Effectively Jesus' answer evades the question rather than solves it. He does not appeal to right, but simply to the de facto existence of Caesar's power symbolized by Caesar's coinage. Whether Caesar has a right to rule is not touched by the answer.

In practice, Jesus' questioners acknowledge the authority and accept the benefits of Roman government of which this coin is a symbol. Hence it is permissible; indeed, it is a duty for them to pay that government the tribute of their obedience and of their property so long as this does not encroach on what they owe to the overriding authority of God.

The state authorities have a right to the obedience and cooperation in all things that tend to the material welfare of the state, provided always the spiritual welfare of the members is not impeded by the ruler's demands.

Jesus reaffirms the duty of all of us to obey civil authority. As ordinary citizens, Christians have

the “obligation of rendering to the state whatever material and personal services are required for the common good” (*Gaudium et Spes* n. 75).

St. Paul states quite clearly our need to obey civil authority in these words, “Let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority opposes what God has appointed, and those who oppose it will bring judgment upon themselves” (Rom 13:1-2).

What makes Jesus’ reply particularly clever is the fact that a Pharisee must have considered a Roman coin contrary to the Law because of the image of Caesar on it, and yet it belongs to Caesar and must be paid back. His additional response: “and [give] to God the things that are God’s” implies that just as the coin carries the emperor’s image and must be returned, the human being carries God’s image and therefore belongs to God. It also must be returned to him. Jesus’ questioners are really impressed with his answer. We read, “When they heard this, they were amazed, and leaving him they went away” (Mt 22:22).

Jesus raises the debate to a new level. Those who have hypocritically asked about tax in respect to its relation to the law of God should be concerned rather with repaying God with the good deeds that are his due. (We recall here the parable of the vineyard and how Jesus said to the leaders of the Jewish people, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit” (Mt 21:43). They had strayed away from God; they were not true to him; they had forfeited their role and were going to be replaced by a people who would bear fruit for the kingdom of God.

In Jesus’ saying, “Then repay...to God what belongs to God” we may ask, “What belongs to God?” St. Paul asks, “What do you possess that you have not received?” (1 Cor 4:7)

Everything we have and are, are gifts from God. We owe God continual gratitude for all his gifts.

We would be insulting God if we would become so absorbed in his gifts in self-gratification that we would stop short of giving God thanks. Our whole lives must be a continual thanksgiving to God for his endless gifts. We must keep our hearts free from possessiveness so that our enjoying God’s gifts redound in ceaseless thanksgiving. In this way, God’s gifts move us to live in continuous communion with him. Here we see the importance of having a grateful attitude. A spirit of gratitude will keep us connected to God; it will prevent us from becoming absorbed in the creatures that we enjoy.

We also give to God through his Church, his kingdom on earth. We give a certain percentage of our earning; according to Scriptural tradition, we are usually advised to give ten percent to the Church for its many needs. We also give back to God in the form of alms to the needy. Giving away what is on loan to us from God gives us power over what we own so that we do not become its slaves. In this way we keep our nose above the flood waters of avarice. Greed for wealth will quickly drown spirituality. The discipline of giving keeps us on the level of spirit, opened to communion with God.

Our time or our talents are also gifts from God, which we must return through various kinds of service to the Church, God’s kingdom on earth. The prophet Isaiah tells us, “All the earth is filled with [God’s] glory!” (Is 6:3) St. Paul tells us that we “exist for the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:12); “he destined us for adoption to himself ... for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved” (Eph 1:5-6). All of this is saying that we must praise and give glory to God as we experience his power and majesty in creation. “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps 19:2). We join all of creation and stand out of ourselves in a kind of ecstasy to be caught up in glorifying God for his marvelous works in nature. “The voice of the Lord strikes with fiery flame ... The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forest bare. All in his palace say, ‘Glory!’” (Ps 29:7, 9).

Even in the midst of the hurricane we are caught up with all of nature in giving praise and glory to God in our experience of his majestic power. God deserves our giving him glory; it belongs to him.

But we also praise the glory of his grace of adoption granted us in his beloved Son. We marvel at our being children of God. We have the Spirit of his Son in our hearts, crying out “Abba, Father” (Gal 4:6). We have been given the privilege of participating in the very life of God! We cannot but give glory to God for this and “praise the glory of his grace” of adoption. We must awaken in awareness, and, through purity of heart, enter into the praise of the glory of his majestic presence, a presence that we experience both within ourselves and in all of creation.

THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Gospel: Mt 22: 34-40

In the Gospel scene today, we again find the Pharisees and Sadducees gathered together to test Jesus. He was continually being hounded by them. They oppose him in every way they can, because they are not right with God; their thinking is wrong and they misinterpret the Scriptures; they are caught up in interpreting the letter of the Law rather than the spirit; they use religion for their own selfish purposes. As much as they try to corner Jesus and embarrass him by catching him off guard or finding him ignorant, they never succeed. Because Jesus, the God-Man, is the Truth, steeped in infinite knowledge, and because he himself is the Supreme Reality, God himself. We pursue Jesus not to trap him, but to learn from him, because he is “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (Jn 14:6) who brings us into communion with the Father.

The one chosen to test Jesus is “a scholar of the law”. That is the same thing as saying he is a “scribe”: a professionally trained theologian whose main source of knowledge is the Law of Moses.

“Teacher,” he says, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?” The intention of this legal expert is to engage Jesus in a dispute, common among the rabbis, over the “greatest commandment”. He seeks to lead Jesus into making a statement on the basis of which he and the Pharisees can accuse him of abolishing the Law or to expose his ignorance in its regard.

As the rabbis analyze the Law, it is made up of 613 distinct commandments, 248 of them positive (the “do’s”), and 365 negative (the don’t’s”). They distinguish between great commandments and small, and even very great and very small.

Knowing Jesus’ claim to sovereignty over the Law, the lawyer or scribe hopes to trap him in a damaging statement. In response, Jesus says, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment.” And without a moment’s pause, Jesus adds: “The second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus begins to answer his questioner with a quotation from Deuteronomy 6:5. That verse is part of the Shema, the basic and essential creed of Judaism; every Jewish service opens with it; it is the first text which every Jewish child commits to memory. This profession of faith is recited by every male Jew morning, noon, and night. The first two verses of the Shema read, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut 6:4-5). (The whole Shema continues through verse 9.)

Our whole being is created by God; he continues to sustain it each moment; we owe it all to him—every moment of our existence, every breath, every heartbeat. Therefore, it is right that we should love God with our whole being. We must love God with all our heart: the heart is the center of knowing and willing as well as feeling; we also love God with all our soul: the soul is the principle

of our whole life and energies. All of these faculties and energies we expend with all our strength toward the love of God. That means we pour out our whole being in love directly toward God. Do you find yourself loving God that way? We also express that love through the medium of doing his will in every day life. We remain faithful to God by obeying his commandments and carrying out his will in our state of life. We also do his will by accepting the cross of suffering in its various forms in the human condition; we surrender to God's will in patient endurance. Love for God pervades our mind and our will as well as our actions as we go about pleasing God throughout our lives. Am I speaking about you here? Do you find yourself loving God in that way? I hope so. In this way our whole being is filled with the love of God, bringing us to the full realization of our baptismal grace of immersion in God.

Having answered that the first and greatest commandment is from the Shema (Deut 6:4-9), Jesus adds and easily connects Leviticus 19:18 to it as being "like" the first. The two commandments are inseparable, for one cannot love God without loving every person as a child of God. These two commandments focus on a loving relationship as the basis for interpreting the law and the prophets.

The fact that Jesus speaks of the second commandment and joins the love of neighbor to the love of God without being asked shows his unwillingness to separate the two. Love of God and love of neighbor are parent and child. The two commandments are alike because true love of neighbor is but an overflow of true love of God. As Jesus is the first to present the two precepts as one, so he is the first to give the widest meaning to the word "neighbor". The neighbor is anyone in need; and everyone is in need of our love if not also of our service.

Placing Leviticus 19:18 (love of neighbor) next to Deuteronomy 6:5 (love of God) means that they are on the same level and makes them equally "heavy". This is something entirely new. There is no parallel in Jewish literature of

placing these two commandments together so that they become effectively one.

The greatest and most important commandment in all of divine revelation is that we love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength. This means that we are called to love God above everyone and everything else—even above ourselves. We allow no selfish desire or sin to come before God's will. God has first place in our lives. For he is our supreme good, the one who created us and constantly sustains us in existence. "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). He is the life of our life, the soul of our soul. He provides for us from moment to moment. God is the one who redeems us. His infinite love surrounds and penetrates us and continues to save and free us even now. He is worthy of our greatest love. That is why we are commanded to love him. Doesn't that make sense to you?

The second commandment is like the first; it is of the same order and importance; it commands us to love our neighbor as our self. Everything that God has ever said in divine revelation can thus be summed up in the word of love: love of God and neighbor. The same love is directed to both God and fellow man and woman. For example, the first three of the Ten Commandments are directed to the love of God; the last seven are directed to the love of neighbor. The two loves are so closely related that they perfect each other. Growth in love for God brings with it a greater love for neighbor. On the other hand, Scripture says, "If we love one another, God dwells in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us" (1 Jn 4:12). Divine love in us grows stronger and matures through our love for others. The two are so connected that love for the unseen God is proven by loving our neighbor who we can see. It is impossible to love God and be unconcerned for others at the same time. A person who closes his heart to one in need has also closed his heart to God. Jesus says that whatever we do for others, we actually do for him (Mt 25:40). True love for

God expresses itself in deeds of love for others. This love is so important that should someone hold something against us, we first need to make up with him or her before we can be properly disposed to express our love for God in worship (Mt 5:23-24).

We are called to love others first, the way God loves us (1 Jn 4:10-11). This is how we return God's love for us and gratefully share it with others. Jesus told St. Catherine of Sienna, "I have placed you in the midst of your fellows so that you may do to them what you cannot do to me, that is to say, that you love your neighbor of free grace without expecting any return from him, and what you do to him I count as done to me." Jesus asks us to do the same. The only adequate way of relating to another person is with love (John Paul II).

In saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself", Jesus establishes as the guideline for our love of neighbor the love each of us has for ourself. This presupposes that we love ourself. That means that we can accept ourself as we are—with our gifts and talents as well as our limitations, defects, and failures. We are patient with ourself; we are not harsh with ourself or condemning when we see ourself as imperfect, make mistakes, or fall into sin. We appreciate our frailty and treat ourself with delicacy and gentleness. Is that how you are? We know that God loves us anyhow. He accepts us as we are as he helps us to become better. We need to feel this way about ourself if we are to accept others as they are, be patient with them, and keep on loving them despite certain qualities we may dislike in them. One reason why people criticize and judge others harshly is that they do not accept themselves or have compassion for their own weaknesses, faults, and sins. We also need to feel good about ourself so that we can actually be ourself. Then we will be able to forget ourself. We will be free to become sensitive to the needs of others and proceed to tend to them. So, to be able to love others, we must first love ourself as well as have sense of our own self-worth.

The Gospel closes with these words, "The whole law and the prophets depend ('hang') on these two commandments." The whole of divine revelation hangs upon these two commandments of love of God and neighbor. In Jewish usage, commandments were said to "hang on" a particular passage of Scripture in the sense that they could be shown to be derived from or implied in that passage. Therefore, the whole will of God in Scripture is derived from and summed up in the double command of love. In short, what God wills is love. All individual commands and obligations must be measured against and judged by the rule of love. Love is the most excellent way of all (1Cor 12:31; 13:13). It animates and gives value to the whole of revelation; it is the root and spring of all other duties, the compendium of the whole Bible. All hang on these two great commandments of love. "Love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom 13:10) and "the bond of perfection" (Col 3:14).

ALL SOULS

Gospel: Jn 6: 37-40

"Jesus entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him."

The Father gives Jesus disciples to follow and be formed by him. Jesus explains 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 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 explains: "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 14). 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 his death. 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 spiritualizes 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 sakes 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.

DEDICATION OF THE LATERAN BASILICA

Gospel: Jn 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 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 80 percent of John's narrative place 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 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 attic 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 leads 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 refuses to give the kind of spectacular sign the authorities ask for. Signs are for the well disposed to evoke or to confirm faith. He proceeds to give them a subtler sign, but one which is 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 speaks 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).

“While he was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, many began to believe in his name when they saw the signs he was doing.” Belief in the name is equivalent to belief in the person. Faith is not simply the acceptance of a truth; it also consists of a commitment to a person. The Jewish practice of calling “Yahweh,” “the name” appears to have been imitated in primitive Christian references to Jesus (Mk 9:38).

But this initial faith is weak and incomplete. A faith based merely on miracles without a proper recognition of the divine nature of him who performed them would prove to be unstable and inconstant. Some, seeing Jesus’ miracles accept him, but only to a certain degree; they see only the marvel of the sign, not the meaning behind it. “But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all, and did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well.” The supernatural knowledge

of Jesus is often highlighted in the Gospels (4:39; 16:30; Mt 9:4; 17:27; Mk 11:2-4; Lk 22:9-13). Here he detects deficient faith in those who marvel at his miracles but fail to grasp the significance of his person and his mission.

Jesus’ miracles moved many to recognize that he had extraordinary, divine powers. But that falls short of perfect theological faith. Jesus knew their faith was limited, and that they were not very deeply attached to him: they were interested in him as a miracle worker. This explains why he did not trust them (Jn 6:15, 26).

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Gospel: Mt 25: 14-30

Through parables, Jesus continues to prepare us for his coming at the end of our lives and at the end of the world. Today’s parable calls us to be faithful in administering the goods and gifts committed to us by the Master. We will have to face him in the particular judgment at death and in the general judgment at his second coming.

Let us now look at this week’s gospel in greater detail.

“A man going on a journey” represents Jesus who will soon be going away through his passion, death, and resurrection and leaving his disciples in charge of carrying out his mission to the world.

The man “called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them.” These are his possessions. They do not belong to us, his disciples; they are on loan to us to be invested with profit.

“To one he gave five talents; to another two; to a third, one—to each according to his ability.” Each one is given responsibility according to his ability. Some are endowed with more, some with less; not all have the same ability. Each degree of ability demands a new degree of responsibility.

The parable tells us that God gives people differing gifts. It is not a person's talent which matters; what matters is how he uses it. God never demands from someone abilities which he does not have; but he does demand that he should use to the full the abilities which he does possess. People are not equal in talent; but they can be equal in effort. The parable tells us that whatever talent we have, little or great, we must lay it at the service of God.

The talent mentioned in the Gospel is a very large sum of money, the equivalent of 6000 denarii. (One denarius was a day's wage for a common laborer.) But the fiscal term "talent" closely associated with the term "ability" has led to the use of the term talent for gift or aptitude. More was given to those with greater ability; the greater the ability, the greater the responsibility.

After entrusting his possessions to them, the master went away. "Immediately the one who received five talents went and traded with them, and made another five. Likewise, the one who received two made another two. But the man who received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money."

Christians are servants who are expected by Jesus, the Master, to make full use of any gifts he has given them so that his kingdom may grow on earth; they must give an account of this administration. They must make responsible use of the master's goods in view of the judgment to come.

We do not own what we have. We are stewards entrusted with God's property. A day will come when we shall have to give an account of our behavior. Let us examine our whole approach to the gifts we have received from God. Do we think ourselves as stewards, or do we live under the illusion that we are true owners of what we possess? The Lord wants to see that his gifts have been well administered. Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required.

Then, "after a long time the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with

them." The second reading tells us that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief at night", suddenly and unexpectedly. Though the Parousia or second coming may be delayed, it will come, and those who wish to share its blessings must use the time wisely in serving God.

"The one who had received five talents came forward bringing the additional five... His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.'" The second servant likewise doubled his two talents and was rewarded with great responsibilities and invited to share in his master's joy.

These servants teach us the need to respond to grace by making genuine efforts throughout our life. All the gifts of nature and grace which God has given us should yield profit. It does not matter how many gifts we have received; what matters is our generosity in putting them to good use. The servants are rewarded because they were faithful to carry out the task committed to them; they were trustworthy.

The parable primarily teaches us that God's gifts of nature and grace are held in stewardship and must not be allowed to lie idle. They are to be used to further his kingdom. It emerges secondarily that the standard of God's judgment is relative to the opportunities offered; the greater the gifts, the greater the account demanded.

"Share your master's joy" means that the servant is admitted to intimate association with the master; he is admitted into the joy of the banquet of the kingdom of God. Faithful use of one's gifts will lead to participation in the fullness of the kingdom and the happiness of the heavenly banquet.

The reward of our faithfulness to grace is already anticipated in the kingdom of God in its first phase on earth—even before the end of our life and entry into heaven. Dying to self-centeredness and selfish living opens us to living for God and

the enjoyment of the banquet of his kingdom on earth. He himself tells us in sacred Scripture, “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). We are called to live in the presence of the Master and enjoy his company; there he nourishes us with the “hidden manna” (Rev 2:17) and “pure spiritual milk” (1 Pet 2:2) as we commune with divinity.

In praising the faithful servants Jesus said, “Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities.” What does that mean? Jesus is saying that he will give them a promotion and a raise, a kind of permanent reward for being so trustworthy and industrious. If we carry out our daily duties faithfully and responsibly for the love of God and people, doing God’s will humbly and obediently, we will gradually grow in virtue and become stronger as children of God; we will be conditioned to be able to desire and do still more for God; we will become proficient in the service of the kingdom of God; we joyfully assume greater responsibility because we are spiritually capable and favorably disposed. We will be like talented athletes with developing skills who are delighted to be given a greater responsibility in playing and winning the game for the team. And in serving the kingdom of God in this way we have a greater fruition of the heavenly joys that are in God. Overcoming the selfish self through faithful administration of their talents has disposed the industrious servants for personal, loving association with the master, who brings them into his friendship. They are no longer mere servants who serve a distant master impersonally. Now they can be closely associated with him in a face-to-face, personal relationship. Each of us is called to this intimate relationship with Jesus.

“Then the one who had received the one talent came forward” blaming the master for being “a demanding person”, trying to find an excuse to exonerate himself from fulfilling his responsibilities.

The master is a “demanding person” only insofar as he demands accountability. He wants us to be responsible and wants what is best for us. He wants us to develop our talents to the best of our ability so that we will be fit for the kingdom of heaven. Scripture says that our “works accompany” us when we die (Rev 14:13). Our good works require spirit assertiveness and the practice of the virtues. These perfect and spiritualize us. They prepare us to live the heavenly life. But those of us who live according to the flesh cannot understand this; we only want to follow the selfish, earthly desires of our sinfully inclined human nature; we fall prey to spiritual sloth.

In the end, the servant reveals the reason for his negligence: “out of fear,” he says, “I went off and buried your talent in the ground. Here it is back.” But the master did not accept his excuse. It would have been very easy for him to put the money in the bank to get interest for it. That was not asking very much of him. But if there is, nonetheless, some kind of irrational fear, he is called to muster up his courage and risk. Nothing is gained without risk and effort. The person who is stingy in his expenditure of self will receive nothing further and will lose what he has. Surely servile fear unmixed with affection and confidence may preserve one from transgressions, but it cannot put into our heart the generous will to do our duty. To be a good servant, it is not enough to avoid doing evil; it is also necessary to love and do good.

The error of the fearful servant is in believing that it is enough for him to return to his master the property he has received from him; as though he is not accountable for all his time and all his ability. Much more are we bound to conduct our lives for the service and glory of our sovereign Master.

We must distinguish between the servile fear of a slave who is afraid of punishment and a reverential fear that prompts us to do God’s will out of a loving desire to please him because He is so good to us. The industrious wife of the first

reading is complimented for all of her good work, saying, “The woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” This kind of reverential fear moved her to spend herself for the good of her family and the poor. The psalm response expresses it this way, “Blessed are you who fear the Lord, who walk in his ways” (Ps 128). Holy fear prompts obedience to God’s will. It is not paralyzing like servile fear.

The master, however, reveals the ultimate reason why the servant has failed to use his talent. He says to him in reply, “You wicked, lazy servant!” The main reason why people are not spiritually active, by way of spiritual reading, prayer, frequent reception of the sacraments, and good works is sloth, or spiritual laziness. They hate to give up their leisure and self-centered lives to devote themselves to the serious labor of spiritual exercises and works of mercy.

The master goes on to say, “Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten. For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And throw this useless servant into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.” The servant has been irresponsible, so what he had is taken away and is given to another; and he is cast out.

The powers and gifts conferred on the disciples grow with use and wither with disuse. The punishment for those who do not use their talents is as severe as the punishment for more positive sins; it is expulsion into outer darkness. This is a figure of speech to describe the lot of those who exclude themselves from the joy of the Lord in the kingdom of heaven.

If a person has a talent and exercises it, it will progressively increase; but if he has a talent and he fails to exercise it, he will inevitably lose it or remain totally unproductive.

God’s grace is like our physical limbs and intellectual talents: exercise brings greater

strength; neglect brings atrophy, causes it to waste away. Such a useless Christian will be punished exactly like the dissolute and abusive servant—with eternal damnation. He has done nothing whatsoever to merit spiritual recompense. He is totally unprepared to enter eternal life. He is only worthy of hell!

FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING

Gospel: Mt 25: 31-46

Today’s feast of Christ the King is an anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ in power and majesty. His glorious return will fill the hearts of his faithful with joy and wipe away every tear.

Meanwhile, we Christians cannot be passively waiting for these momentous events to unfold. We have to desire ardently the establishment of his kingdom.

First of all, the Lord must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ as taught by the Catholic Church. Jesus must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God, as we love him with all our hearts. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn sinful desires and love God above all things, and cling to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls.

Jesus describes his Second Coming as that of a king arriving in all his majesty. He is the Son of Man spoken of by the prophet Daniel (7:13-14) “coming in his glory, and all the angels with him; he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him.” This verse implies the doctrine that all will be raised from the dead for the judgment.

Our divine king will judge rightly and authoritatively. There will be no appeal against

his sentence. Each will receive his reward or punishment according to his merits or demerits. There will be no need for discussion or proofs: all the facts will be an open book not only to Christ but also to all people. Those who have been his loyal subjects will be placed at Christ's right hand—the place of honor; the disloyal, on his left.

I would think that all of this will take place spontaneously, “in an instant, in the blink of an eye,” as Scripture tells us, “the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor 15:52).

The Catechism tells us, “The resurrection of all the dead, ‘of both the just and the unjust,’ will precede the Last Judgment” (CCC 1038). Then, “In the presence of Christ, who is Truth itself, the truth of each man's relationship with God will be laid bare. The Last Judgment will reveal even to its furthest consequences the good each person has done or failed to do during his earthly life” (CCC 1039).

“Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’ Jesus is king, but He acknowledges that it is the Father who blesses them and who is the ultimate source of their glory. And we also understand that it is through the working of the Holy Spirit that the elect are glorified.

We have a preview of “what are the riches of glory of his inheritance among the holy ones” (Eph 1:18) in the mystery of the Transfiguration of Jesus: “his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light” (Mt 17:2). Furthermore, Jesus says that “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43). That is why we must be “giving thanks to the Father, who has made [us] fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light” (Col 1:12).

Then Jesus gives the reasons why they have been blessed by the Father and inherit the kingdom of heaven: because they cared for him

when he was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, ill, and in prison.

Here we have a list of the traditional “corporal works of mercy” as known in Judaism, Christianity, and other religions. These are within reach of every single one of us. Every day we meet someone in need of our love and attention: we can give our assistance to others in the simplest of ways. This teaching of Jesus opens the way to glory for all of us. It challenges us to step out of our self-centeredness so we can start loving others. We are also called to minister to those in grave need who are further away from us: victims of the tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, and floods, among other things. Those in need in our diocese we can help through the Bishop's Services Appeal. Perhaps we can give personal assistance to those in nursing homes and hospitals.

The whole stress in today's Gospel is on the law of fraternal charity: love of neighbor. There are other obligations and duties in life; but true love of neighbor, anyone in need, is a proof of true love of God. Therefore, he who truly loves God will keep all his laws. When we act charitably toward our neighbor we do so for love of God and Jesus; otherwise, our actions will have no merit for heaven.

The great St. Teresa of Jesus writes: “Here the Lord asks only two things of us: love for his majesty and love of our neighbor. It is for these two virtues that we must strive, and if we attain them perfectly we are doing his will ... The surest sign that we are keeping these two commandments is, I think, that we should really be loving our neighbor; for we cannot be sure if we are loving God, although we may have good reasons for believing that we are; but we can know quite well if we are loving our neighbor. And be certain that the further advanced you find you are in this, the greater the love you will have for God; for so dearly does his majesty love us that he will reward love for our neighbor by increasing the love which we bear to himself, and that in a thousand ways: this I cannot doubt...

for if we practice love of neighbor with great perfection, we will have done everything ... since our nature is bad, we will not reach perfection in the love of neighbor if that love doesn't rise from love of God as its root" (Interior Castle 5:3).

This parable clearly shows that Christianity cannot be reduced to a kind of agency for "doing good". Service of our neighbor acquires supernatural value when it is done out of love for Christ, when we see Christ in the person in need. This is why St. Paul asserts, "if I give away all I have ... but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13:3). Any interpretation of Jesus' teaching on the Last Judgment would be wide of the mark if it gave it a materialistic meaning or confused mere philanthropy with genuine Christian charity.

In describing the exigencies of Christian charity which gives meaning to "social aid", the Second Vatican Council says: "... the Council lays stress on respect for the human person: everyone should look upon his neighbor (without any exception) as another self, bearing in mind above all his life and the means necessary for living it in a dignified way 'lest he follow the example of the rich man who ignored Lazarus, the poor man' (see Luke 16:18-31). "Today there is an inescapable duty to make ourselves the neighbor of every man, no matter who he is, and if we meet him, to come to his aid in a positive way ... calling to mind the words of Christ: 'As you did it to one of the least of these brethren, you did it to me'" (*Gaudium et Spes* 27).

This solemn, overpowering scene of the Last Judgment is found only in the Gospel of St. Matthew. It is an unveiling of the truth which lay behind the parables these last few weeks. The emphasis now is: what is the criterion of judgment? What does it mean to be watchful and ready and faithful? The answer is that to be watchful means to be able to recognize the Son of Man in all those in need; to be ready means to be loving towards the Son of Man in these people; to be faithful means to translate this love into active service, into concrete deeds of mercy. This is the

criterion by which one enters into or is rejected from eternal life. Therefore, we are not dealing with supererogatory works performed to get "extra points". On these works of mercy, which most, perhaps, would not consider their strict duty, hangs their salvation or damnation.

It is not the commendation of works of mercy that is the surprising element here. The elect know they have performed such works, and know that such works are pleasing to God. Fittingly, they are designated "the righteous", those who are right with God by doing his will. What astounds them, however, is that the king claims that they did this "to me". When? How? The king replies by revealing the mystery not even the just comprehend: Jesus has fully identified himself with the poor and outcast and oppressed.

Jesus is indeed Emmanuel, God-with-us. He is with his people, his church; but he is most especially with the no-accounts of this world, all those in desperate need of the basic necessities of life. The Son of Man, the crucified King who judges all people is encountered in everyone who suffers. His association with the poor in the beatitudes and in his healing activity is broadened here to a cosmic scope.

The stunning universalism of this revelation must not be blunted by restricting "the least of my brethren" to Christians, to poor and insignificant Christians, or the Christian missionaries...now in the broader context of the Last Judgment, he calls all human beings his brothers and sisters. And so he rewards deeds of love, wherever they are performed, for they have been done to him. It is not that he considers these words "as though" they are done to him; in virtue of his mysterious presence in all who suffer, they are done to him. These deeds for others are the criterion of judgment because they define a person's essential behavior and relation to the Judge, not just to other men.

Judgment according to works of mercy is therefore a judgment based on Christology, on

the Christology of the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the criterion of judgment as well as the Judge.

But to those on his left, Jesus, the King, says, “Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” The reason for their rejection is given as, “... what you did not do for one of these least ones you did not do for me.’ And these will go off to eternal punishment.”

Here we can see the seriousness of sins of omission. Failure to do something which one should do means leaving Christ unattended. We will be judged on the degree and quality of our love ... Our Lord will ask us to account not only for the evil we have done but also the good we omitted to do. We can see that sins of omission are a very serious matters and that the basis of love of neighbor is Christ’s presence in the least of our brothers and sisters. He takes as done to himself what we do to others or fail to do. This is the same truth revealed to St. Paul on the road to Damascus to persecute Jesus’ followers. “A light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are persecuting me? ... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’” (Acts 9:3-5).

That is why those who have neglected such works of charity are “cursed” — the only time the word appears in St. Matthew’s Gospel — and damned. Neglect of the poor is the decisive not-doing of the will of God, which marks one as fit company for the devil. Those at Jesus’ left are guilty of evil by default—which is just as serious as positive wrong-dong ... The condemned do not deny their neglect of the suffering; they do, however, object that they never saw Jesus in need. But this is just the point and the reason for their condemnation. Failing to understand Jesus’ identification with the needy, they fail to minister to or serve him. Jesus has already demanded that his disciples be servants (20:26; 23:11); service means the concrete performance of the loving acts listed.

Because the second group has neglected such acts, it neglected the Son of Man, and so its neglect has become fatal. No matter what good they may have done or evil they may have perpetrated, the decisive question is: Did you love the poor in concrete acts of mercy? Christ’s teaching on the twofold love of God and neighbor thus undergoes a profound transformation: love of the poor neighbor is practically identified with love of God and receives a Christological basis.

The surprise of those who are condemned is easy to understand; they never accept the fact that they encountered Jesus in other people and to love them is also to love Jesus or God. They are ranked with the devils, whose proper element is the fire of Gehenna.

Eschatology means man is capable of a final decision that gives his life a permanent character. Both the righteous and the wicked here have made decisions that are irrevocable.

Like the last discourse in John, the theme is love based on the identity of Jesus with people. In the last analysis, it is love that determines whether people are good or bad. If their love is active, failure to reach perfect morality in other ways will be rare, and it will be forgiven. But there is no substitute for active love.

This scene of the Last Judgment is a conclusion to the whole of St. Matthew’s Gospel. It is possible to trace a train of thought going through the Gospel, which builds up to this point. Jesus has said to his disciples that unless their righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven (5:20); and that this righteousness consists of deeds (16:27). Moreover, these deeds are not the sacrifices of the Law, but mercy (9:13; 12:2); and this mercy must be shown to those who are weak and like children and in this way shown to be Jesus himself (18:5).

The Last Judgment scene forms the most fitting conclusion to the whole discourse which began in Chapter 23: one of the faults of the scribes and Pharisees is that they talk but do not do anything; they lay burdens on people but do not make the slightest effort to help them (23:3 ff). And we have seen how the answer to the disciples' question (24:3) about the time of the end moves into a series of warnings about being ready. Now we are told how to be ready, namely, by practicing mercy to the poor and suffering, and thus to Christ himself. Moreover, this parable is also the last section before the account of the Passion in St. Matthew's Gospel; and there we shall see how the King, to whom mercy is shown by those who minister to the oppressed, identifies himself with them voluntarily by his crucifixion and death (see *Pelican Gospel Commentaries, St. Matthew*, by J.C. Fenton).

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