

EVERY WEEK
GOD SPEAKS - WE RESPOND



**Aid to contemplation, personal prayer, homily,
spiritual self-direction and enrichment
according to the living word**

**Sundays - Holy Days - Major Feast Days
Liturgical Year A**

John Trần Bình Trọng

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“Every Week God Speaks – We Respond, Cycle A” is written by John Trần Bình Trọng, a priest of the Catholic Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, USA. To keep the author’s writing style and his foreign background, this English edition has not been edited by a hired hand. The author did not live in the US until his adult and English is not his mother’s tongue. Passive sentences are used intentionally in this context as to avoid using the first personal pronoun ‘I’ when applicable. That might be associated with an idea of egotism in accord with the French saying known as: ‘Le moi est haïssable’. (The Ego is detestable). The book is published Online by www.mucvuvanbut.net as to be more available for worldwide readers. It may be available in printing with limited numbers upon request.

Front cover picture: 117 Martyrs of Vietnam canonized in Rome 1988.

Clip Liturgical Arts: By Bùi Sỹ Cảnh.

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OFFERED AND DEDICATED TO

As a gift of thanksgiving, this book is offered to God of providence who has taught, purified, rectified and guided me step-by-step, faltering on bumpy stretches of road to the altar. He led me through masses of dark clouds, covering my mind and heart, struggles between reason and heart, kept me from falling away from the sanctuary and more than once saved my life.

Dedicated to parishioners of Holy Family Catholic Church, Saint Ann Catholic Church, and Saint Leo Catholic Church, Saint Francis de Sales Catholic Church, Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church, Holy Martyrs of Vietnam Catholic Church, Saint Bernadette Catholic Church, and Saint Michael Catholic Church. All those churches are from the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, USA for their affirmation, encouragement and challenge to my preaching/teaching ministry at Sunday masses in English and Vietnamese.

Also dedicated to priests and readers of Dân Chúa Mỹ Châu monthly Magazine in America and vietcatholic.net from different parts of the world, who have read my reflections in Vietnamese on the Sunday scripture readings, then have had them copied and forwarded to relatives and friends through E-mail or have had them reproduced to share with parishioners

Finally dedicated to prospective readers of *Every Week God Speaks – We Respond. Year A*

FROM PARISHIONERS AND READERS

Verbal comments in English on homilies in English after Sunday and Feast Day Masses:

Inspiring messages each week. - A comment after mass by Michael Cantrell, St Bernadette Church, Springfield, Virginia, USA.

A phenomenal homily. – A comment after mass by a parishioner of Saint Bernadette Church, Springfield, Virginia, USA.

An awesome homily. – A comment after mass by a parishioner of Saint Bernadette Church, Springfield, Virginia, USA.

There are many good points to consider in the homilies. A comment after mass by a parishioner of St Michael Church, Annandale, Virginia, USA.

Like to listen to your wonderful homilies on Sundays. Would like to read them again if you plan to have them published. A comment after Sunday mass by a parishioner of St Michael Church, Annandale, Virginia, USA.

Written comments in English on homilies in English of Sundays and Feast Days:

Prayerful and insightful homilies each Sunday. - Sally Allman, St Bernadette Church, Springfield, Virginia, USA.

Homily was well prepared, proposing application of theological and spiritual notions to everyday life, helping mind and heart open to the action of the Holy Spirit. - Brian P. Brodfuehrer, St Bernadette Church, Springfield, Virginia, USA.

The audience can assume that the homilist's study and consideration have been put in each sentence. His level of understanding in interpretation of the Gospel and care about the

congregation are appreciated. - Blogger Pater Familias, St Michael Church, Annandale, Virginia, USA.

Written comments in Vietnamese on Sunday and Feast Day reflections in Vietnamese translated in English:

Scripture reflections are brief, easy to understand and remember. Hope they will be welcome by readers. - Most Reverend Peter Trần Đình Tứ, Bishop of Phú Cường, Committee Chairman on Divine worship, Vietnamese Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Contents of the book are compendious, distinct, and intelligible, close to life situations. It surely brings about spiritual benefit to readers. – Most Reverend Paul Bùi Văn Đọc, Bishop of Mỹ Tho, Committee Chairman on Catechism and Doctrine, Vietnamese Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Sunday scripture readings are interpreted clearly with concrete applications for everyday life situation. Hope the author would continue to write as to help readers: priests, religious men, women, and the laity understand more about the living word and love God and the Church more. – Most Reverend Peter Numen Van Tot, Apostolic Nuncio to Costa Rica.

Reading each reflection in: ‘Every week God Speaks ... We respond’ shows the contents compendious. Ideas are expressed intelligibly, not affected. God’s words are presented through everyday life experience, easy to penetrate in people’s heart, not questionable or doubtful in mind. With real and natural stories, readers would find it easy to pray as talking to God. Recommending to those who want to enrich spiritual life. - Reverend Vũ Minh Thái, PhD., Ohio, USA, former president of Đà Lạt University.

With his zeal for the spread of application of the word of God and his studies and degree in social psychology, the author writes in accordance with the grasp of most of his readers and brings them to a high level of contemplation. – Rev Trần Văn

Kiệm, Georgia, USA. *His scripture reflections should help readers in the pilgrimage of faith and practice of it.* – Msgr Đinh Đức Đạo, Rome, Italy.

Hope 'Every week God Speaks – We Respond' is welcome by many readers and bears fruit for them. – Rev Bùi Thượng Lưu, Stuttgart, Germany. Editor of Dan Chua Magazine in Europe.

The book's title itself 'Every week God Speaks – We Respond' could express a heart-to-heart relationship between two friends, not such and such reasoning. Indeed, according to the author, a homilist needs to let the word of God brood on his life the whole week, that is, to evangelize him first. Thus, this book is the result of a faith experience of the living word and a desire to share. Hope readers can tune to that heart rhythm. – Rev Trần Cao Tường, Louisiana, USA., Director of Website Dung-Lac.

The author's scripture reflections with new theological development sent via e-mail to Viet Nam are welcome and accepted joyfully by priests. – Rev Nguyễn Văn Hưởng, Brisbane, Australia. *Feeling a sense of relief when reading 'Every Week God Speaks .. We Respond' as the word of God echoes in mind and heart.* – Sister Nguyễn Tô Nga, California, USA.

In 'Every week God Speaks .. We Respond', at times the author mentions this priest says or writes this, that priest thinks or questions that. So whether this priest or that priest is the author himself? If not, why in the reflection of the Passion Sunday, Cycle B, the author describes and analyzes the way St Peter struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his ear in such details. To comment on the servant's ear being cut off, the author writes 31 lines long. – Nguyễn Việt Sử, New York, USA.

A valuable publication helps readers reflect the words of God and put them into practice in life. – Rev. Phạm Quốc Sử, Maryland, USA.

The author's Scripture reflections are spiritual nourishment for my life in America, which I have not received for the last few months due to my e-mail address changed. Enclosed is my new e-mail address in hope to receive the reflections again. – Vũ Văn Phúc, USA.

Reflections are profound and close to everyday life situation touching human life as if there are inter-communication and shared feelings between the author and readers. – Đinh Thu Hà, catechist, Saigon, Vietnam.

Thoughts are profound and presentation is easy to understand, yet can be assimilated by people of different levels of education. – Nguyễn Long Thao, High school class mate, Vietcatholic News; author of Sơ Thảo Tính Danh Học Việt Nam, California, USA.

Reflections are concise and compendious urging application in life.- Trần Vinh, High school class mate, Vietcatholic News, Texas, USA.

Ideas are expressed coherently and thought patterns logical. – Phạm Châu Bình, Louisiana, USA.

Polished is writing style and compact thought expression. It seems that the author tends to play on words; at times uses words and expressions that sound new. – Nguyễn Thị Lan, Đồng Nai, Việt Nam.

A good understanding about the meaning of the scripture readings and profound reflection with practical application and prayer over the scriptures reflected. Readers can find it easy to understand God's words, pray and apply to life situations. – Rev Ngô Kim Trạng, Virginia, USA.

Reflections help enrich spiritual life of readers. Author's knowledge compasses many areas with new writing styles, strange to a Vietnamese ear. - Nguyễn Văn Long, Maryland, USA.

Wide and profound reflections help bring about inspiring experience of the living word. - Cao Thiên Đài Trang, R.I.P., Maryland, USA.

Reading the author's weekly reflections gives joy and hope to one's life even though one has to face difficulties and struggles, lest one falls in a blasé and hopeless frame of mind. – Têrêsa Thu Hà, Saigon, Vietnam.

Reflections are profound and meaningful. – Sr Nguyễn Thị Thanh, Saigon, Vietnam.

Reading carefully one finds reflections profound and meaningful: simple and yet erudite. – Rev. Chu Quang Minh, S.J., Ph. D, Founder of Family Marriage Enrichment Program; Author of a series of book on marriage life. California, USA.

The author's profound reflections are seasonings to helping readers enjoy spiritual nourishment: the Word of God. – Rev Hoàng Ngọc Dũng, Washington D.C., USA.

Reflections on Sunday readings are interpreted skillfully, appropriate to the present and modern life. Wishing the reflections bring readers to a suitable life of faith, happiness and peace. - Trần Ngọc Khoái, High School Class mate, California, USA.

Reading repeatedly the author's contemplating reflections on the word of God penetrates one's heart. – Lê Thu Hằng, Virginia, USA.

Concise yet profound reflections give rise to spiritual experience: everlasting and lenient love of God for the unworthiness of a human being. They touch the reader's heart, bringing about thought and concrete application to the inner life. – Sr Anne Theresa Võ Thị Lan, Cần Thơ, Việt Nam.

Concise and profound yet understandable are reflections with verified references from theology and scripture. – Rev Tran Xuan Lam, Toronto, Canada.

Thoughts on loneliness and aloneness in 'Seeking to find God in the solitude of soul' of the fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A, are profound. Perhaps the author had personal experience of the theme. – Rev Tran Van Kiem, Georgia, USA.

Wishing to continue to receiving reflections in 'God Speaks ... We Respond', with valuable references from Scripture in order to contemplate and keep them for precious treasures on the journey of faith. - Trần Việt Tân, Publisher/Editor of Weekly Đồi Nay, Virginia, USA.

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Andrew Dung-Lac, priests, martyrs and his companions:

They have been hated for they do not belong to the world

Bibliography

Related Publications by the author : Back page of back cover

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



To search a genealogy of a family of eight children: five sons and three daughters, at Đồng Nhân village, Kim Sơn district, Ninh Bình province of North Việt Nam, one finds the last one named Trần Bình Trọng, with a baptismal name John, born April 14, 1944.

His father died when Trọng was an infant.

Thanks to his pious mother, he was taught about mores and manners and was sent to school. Back home from school he had to help with family chores. In 1954, he moved to South Vietnam with his sister's family first, then the rest of his family moved south later. He was sent to a parochial school and chosen to be an altar server. In 1957, he was introduced to Saint Paul's high school seminary in Saigon by his parish priest. Coming home in the summer, his mother woke him up for mass at five o' clock in the morning. When he snoozed, his mother woke him up again.

He majored in philosophy at Saint Joseph college major seminary in Sài Gòn. In 1966, he was appointed principal of a junior high school of a parish in the Diocese of Phú Cường. In 1967, he was sent to the United States for theological studies at Saint Anthony-on-Hudson Theological Seminary, Rensselaer, New York. Ordained a priest in 1971 in Albany, New York, he received a Master degree in theology in 1972 from Saint Anthony-on-Hudson in conjunction with the University of the State of New York. With limited financial conditions plus his spirit of independence in thought and action, Trọng had to struggle in some aspects of life. In 1974, Father Trọng received another Master degree in Social psychology from the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science of the New School for Social Research in New York City.

He did further graduate studies at Columbia University's Teachers College with expectation for a PhD in mind. It was

unusual for a Catholic priest to study at two non-Catholic universities. When South Vietnam fell under the communist North, he dropped out of school in 1975 in order to work for the Department of the Army as a chaplain for Vietnamese refugees at Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania for five months.

He then served in several parishes: American and then Vietnamese, in the Diocese of Arlington for over thirty years as both an associate and a pastor. Preaching is one of his priorities in both English and Vietnamese. When his mother passed away in 1987, he could not go home for her funeral mass.

Trần Bình Trọng wrote commentaries un-periodically for *Chuông Việt* magazine 1970-1972 for Vietnamese students in the US. He was editor of *Cộng Đồng* magazine 1971-1975 for the Vietnamese Clergy and Religious in the US and Canada. In *Cộng Đồng* he wrote semi-official news and later on, funny stories of priests and religious for the magazine. He was publisher of a series of Christmas edition: *Đặc San Giáng Sinh* of Holy Martyrs of Vietnam Parish, Arlington, Virginia, 1988-1993. He contributed un-periodically for monthly magazines: *Chân Trời Mới* and *Thời Điểm Công Giáo*.

He was also the author of *Chỉ Nam Giáo Xứ* 1992 of the above Parish. He then compiled *Gia Phả Dòng Tộc Họ Trần Văn Uy*, his paternal genealogy, including ten generations, with much information and *Gia Phả Dòng Tộc Họ Nguyễn Văn Công*, his maternal genealogy, including eight generations, with much information.

He participated in the *Cursillo Movement*, *Marriage Encounter Movement*, *Eucharistic Youth Movement*, and *Marriage Family Enrichment Program* for a few years each when needed. He has been involved in the *Charismatic Movement for Renewal* for a longer period.

His priest friends called him a *closet* charismatic and he did not object it.

PREFACE

A certain priest said when he looked back at his homilies ten, twenty years before, he wondered how he could have preached that way, i.e., he laughed at himself, without blaming himself since he realized his knowledge and preaching experience at that time had been only that so.

That priest also said preaching the word of God is like the art of cooking. To cook a delicious and attractive meal, one must know how to cut meat, fish, vegetables and fruits in different ways: which seasoning is to be used, how long a certain meat has to be marinated. How long does a certain food need to be cooked, which food needs only to be stirred up on a hot pan? That is why each kind of food needs to be cooked separately and if appropriate, they can be mixed together into one dish. Therefore, it would be easy to chew, swallow and to be digested. To preach the word of God in such a certain way that people can be alert to hear, understand and assimilate is also an art.

The priest further said from this year to that year, one could not find an appropriate theme for a homily until at a certain moment; a suitable theme came up, expressing the main ideas of the scripture readings. If a theme were not selected, one would find it easy to wander around. Then a homily would be a collection of ideas, unrelated.

Then the same priest said when one wanted to have ideas for his homily or talk, he could not find ideas for his talk/homily for an hour, a day or a week. Then at night awaking from sleep, ideas came up suddenly. Ideas continued to come up, like each gust of wind blowing sycamore fruits down on a pond: plop, plop or apples down on the ground: thud, thud. In that case, one must get out of bed, making a brief note of ideas. If not, the next morning, one would forget. What a loss! Sometimes, after you have gone back to bed, ideas would come up again. In the winter night,

covering you with a blanket and having to get up is a big effort to make. Yet, some night you had to get up a dozen times to have a short note jotted down. Ideas coming up suddenly like that are called intuition without reasoning.

Every week God speaks – We respond that came into existence was due to appreciative and encouraging words from the audience who had listened to Sunday homilies in English or readers who had read written reflections in Vietnamese posted in the internet and due to requests for copies of the homilies or written reflections.

The reflections have been preached in English or Vietnamese in those parishes in which the author has served as both an associate and pastor for about over thirty years. In those years, homilies have been revised; unwanted thoughts eliminated, changed partly or totally and new thoughts added according to the author's experience of his personal journey of faith and pastoral ministry. The reflections were also shared with readers of the Dan Chua monthly Catholic magazine for a cycle of three years. In another cycle of three years, the reflections were also posted on Viet Catholic Network website and in one year posted on Phu Cuong Diocese website.

While preparing the homily, the preacher needs to let the word of God brood on his mind and heart for a week. When preaching, not only the preacher aims at the audience, but also at himself. When the preacher hears him preach or reads his homily, he then becomes the audience or reader to respond to God's word, lest his word should lay inactive in the past or should become a one-way communication. In that case, one shall speak, write and hear with mind and heart. Without response, the word of God will become a monologue, something of the past, not related to the present. Each homily/reflection has a theme depending on a salient thought drawn from the Gospel. Related thoughts of the first and second readings are drawn in to build up the theme.

At the end of the reflection is a short prayer related to the word of God of the day with thanksgiving, atonement and petition. The

clip art related to the gospel is aimed at helping readers reflect and pray according to the gospel of the day.

The book is aimed to share:

- With priests who are too busy with parish works and with religious brothers and sisters.
- With lay Catholics in their preparation of mind and heart when coming to church to listen to the word of God and respond to his words each week with prayerful spirit at home, in office, when eating, resting, working and entertaining. To help reflect Sunday readings, a reader should read beforehand the three scripture readings of the mass concerned. After the evening prayer, a prayer after the reflection on the Sunday reading can be added. The reader can make the author's prayer his/her prayer after each reflection.
- With Christians or non-Christians who are seeking to find the truth or seek theological thought on the word of God or the catholic way of life.

This is not a book to be read in a few days or a few weeks, but to read one Sunday reflection for five or ten minutes each week, then to reflect and pray on the reflection. However, if inspired, one can read the whole book, and afterward one can read each Sunday reflection each week.

After the three-year cycle, one can read over again. The reader is asked to use the catholic liturgical calendar to find out when to read which Sunday or which feast.

However, the reader can read any theme interested in the contents.

If finding it helpful and pleasing, the reader is asked to recommend it to relatives and friends also. Those who had asked for copies of the author's homilies and/or prayers before, and

somehow due to the author's forgetfulness, have not received them, can read a number of homilies published online in www.mucvuvanbut.net, of the Scripture Reflections on Sundays and Feast days, or in the book titled "Every week God speaks – We respond, Cycle A" published online in 2017. The Vietnamese version of this book was published in the US in 2007 and re-published in Vietnam in 2010.

The author did not live in the US until his adulthood and English is not his mother's tongue. To keep the author's writing style, this English edition has not been edited by a hired hand. Passive sentences are used intentionally in this context as to avoid using the first personal pronoun 'I' when applicable. That might be associated with any idea of egotism, in accord with the French saying, known as: 'Le moi est haissable' (The ego is detestable).

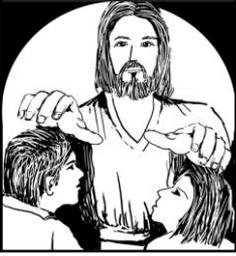
John Trần Bình Trọng

ADVENT SEASON

RISE UP

1 Sunday of Advent, Year A

Is 2:1-5; Rom 13:11-14; Mt 24:37- 44



Scripture of the Old Testament is the story of waiting. Advent is also a season of waiting, reminding us of the time, the people of the Old Testament waited for the messiah to come in the human history. Today the Church wants to write in our minds and

hearts the image of Christ who is the center of the universe: the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end of all things.

The people of the Old Testament waited for the first coming of Christ into the human history. We the faithful of the New Testament are waiting for his second coming at the end of time to sum up our human history. However, we do know neither the day nor the hour of his second coming. His second coming can be understood as a day ending the human history, or a day ending our earthly life. That could occur suddenly at anytime and anywhere. At the beginning or the end of the liturgical year, the Church uses scripture passages referring to destruction and death, making us think about the end of the world.

In the days of Noah, the great flood occurred suddenly, terrifying people. The mistake of the people of the time of Noah as today's gospel tells us was that they were too occupied.

While people were busy eating and drinking, and busy with daily things, Noah prepared to build the ark to face the flood (Mt 24:38). He was the only one who listened to the warning word of God. He was the only one who was vigilant and waiting. Until the day Noah and his family were ready to enter the ark, the people were still not aware of the coming of the flood. Then the

water rose up suddenly and swept them away. At the time just before the birth of Christ, people acted similarly. They were too busy to pay attention to hear the word of God. They had wrong ideas about the messiah that they did not pay attention to predictions about his coming.

Today Jesus used two parables to give us a warning: two men working in the field and two women grinding at the mill (Mt 24:40-41). In the eyes of men, the two men do the same work; the two women also do the same thing. However, in the eyes of God, they are different in their intention of doing things and the way of doing them. One of the men and one of the women know how to be watchful and vigilant and they will be accepted into the kingdom of God, and the other two will be left behind. The second parable Jesus used to warn them was the head of the household must be vigilant and watchful for the thief.

In order to enter the ark of Noah and to be accepted into the kingdom of God as one of the men and one of the women, Jesus told us to be *vigilant* (Mt 24:42) and to be *ready* (Mt 24:44). However, in reality, are we in the state of preparedness and readiness? We might try to settle an account with our creditor and our bank and we forget to settle an account with God. We might be busy doing things of this world without paying attention to spiritual matters. We may consider this world as the end and purpose of life. We might be busy taking care of worldly business, and forgetting to take care of our spiritual life.

As a result, we have no time for God, no time to pray and attend mass, no time to reflect on the state of being human and examine our relationship with God, no time for family members. With days and years, passing by, interests in and concerns about secular business will slow us down spiritually until our faith in God becomes so sluggish, with no energy to rise.

Today let us rise to do what Saint Paul tells us: *It is the hour now for you to awake from sleep* (Rom 13:11). Let us rise to do what

the prophet Isaiah tells us: to *climb the Lord's mountain (Is 2:3)* and to do what the book of Psalm says: *to go up to the house of the Lord (Ps 121:1)*.

Prayer for spiritual energy to rise:

Oh! Lord, the almighty!

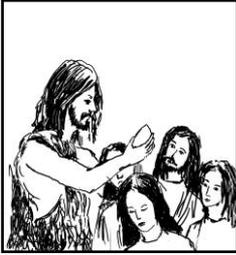
***In order to warn people not to be drowsy,
you refer to disasters to alert them.***

***Give us energy so that we may rise from drowsiness
as to be awake to welcome you. Amen.***

RESPONDING TO JOHN THE BAPTIST'S CALL TO REPENTANCE

2 Sunday of Advent, Year A

Is 11:1-10; Rom 15:4-9; Mt 3:1-12



To prepare the way for the coming of the messiah, John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the New, went to the desert to preach a baptism of repentance around the Jordan river, announcing: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand* (Mt 3:1). The way he dressed looked weird, with a garment of camelhair, a leather belt and living on locusts and wild honey (Mt 3:4).

And yet, as we learn from the gospel today people from all over Jerusalem, Judea and the whole region flocked to hear him speak and to be baptized by him. The baptism of repentance by John was not the sacrament of baptism and therefore it was not for the forgiveness of sin. It was merely a temporary rite to prepare the people to receive the messiah. He announced the messiah would be coming to establish his kingdom, to fulfill the people's expectancy.

His message was pleasing to the people because for centuries, they had been under the colonialism of the Persians, the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Greeks and the Romans. John awakened in them a hope of independence from the Roman occupation. Many Pharisees and Sadducees also came and asked to be baptized by John but they showed no sign of repentance. They did not want to level their mountains of pride and hypocrisy. They did not want to shake off their complacency, indifference, and self-righteousness. Temporal values have blinded their minds and hearts so much, that they could not stand the idea of repentance. John the Baptist warned them severely:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance (Mt 3:7-8).

To understand why John the Baptist called the Pharisees and the Sadducees brood of vipers, we need to find out the social and religious background at that time. Sick of those corrupt practices of civil and religious leaders, sick of the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes who had poisoned religion with their hypocrisy, arrogance and pride, John the Baptist went into a retreat for some time. A number of scripture scholars presumed John the Baptist withdrew to the Qumran area.

According to the Dead Sea Scrolls found in Qumran in 1947, John the Baptist was thought to be one of the leaders of the Qumran monastery. The Qumran monastery belonged to the Essenes as opposed to the other two branches of Judaism: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. When time came, John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea, preaching a baptism of repentance. John's message of repentance (Mt 3:2) was also Jesus' message of repentance: *Reform your lives! The kingdom of heaven is at hand (Mt 4:17).*

Thus, we can see John's way of life and his teachings were close to the Gospel values. Repentance in the biblical context means admitting our sins committed, atoning for past sins, and reforming our lives or avoiding sin again. Reading the gospel, we see the Pharisees and Sadducees often opposed Jesus. In his teachings, Jesus accused the Pharisees of their hypocrisy, arrogance and pride. Repentance demands a total reformation of our lives. Repentance begins with an act of humility, realizing that we have sinned and deciding to return to God. Some people find it hard to admit that they need repentance because they think they do not miss mass on Sundays, they do not murder, they do not commit adultery.

However, if we look carefully into our lives, then we need to repent our sins and to reform our lives.

The second Vatican Council in its Constitution on the liturgy stated: *The Church announces the good tidings of salvation to those who do not believe, so that all may know the true God and Jesus Christ, whom he has sent, and may be converted from their ways, doing penance (On the Sacred Liturgy #9).* The Council also said in the same document: *To believers also, the Church must preach faith and penance (ibid).* The penance referred to means repentance.

Repentance is not so much an external change, but an internal one that influences our whole life. Repentance is a true change of heart; necessary for inner conversion. Repentance is different from guilt feeling. It is not psychologically healthy to foster a guilt feeling when sin has been confessed sincerely and forgiven. A feeling of guilt keeps us distant from God. It is not psychologically harmful to foster a spirit of repentance. A spirit of repentance should help us stay closer to God in mind and heart.

Prayer for a spirit of repentance:

***Oh Savior about to be born!
To prepare for your coming,
John the Baptist called people to repentance.
Forgive me for the times I was indifferent,
For the times I hardened my heart.
Stir up in me a spirit of repentance
so that I may welcome you into my heart. Amen.***

SHOULD WE LOOK FOR ANOTHER?

3 Sunday of Advent, Year A

Is 35:1-6a, 10; Jas 5:7-10; Mt 11:2-11?



In a nation, which is filled with social and moral problems such as injustice, corruption, unemployment, shortage of food, high cost of living, and social unrest and so on, then people would lose faith in their government. The Hebrew nation at the time of Jesus was a nation filled with many social ills and problems. Their nation was occupied by the Romans, a foreign power. Internally there were divisions between political and religious factions. Their puppet King Herod led the immoral life by taking his brother's wife.

When John the Baptist spoke out against it, he was put in jail. Even though being relatives of Jesus, yet the family of John the Baptist lost contact with the Holy Family when Joseph and Mary took the child Jesus to Egypt. On their return, the Holy Family settled in Nazareth of Galilee while the family of John the Baptist were in Judea, about seven to eighty miles apart. At that time, the means of transportation was simple that Jesus and John the Baptist did not have a chance to meet. From his prison cell where he heard of Jesus' works, John sent a delegation to ask Jesus: *Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another (Mt 11:3)?*

John's question to Jesus means something like this: are you the one who is to come to eliminate social ills, injustice and evil in the society? It is strange that previously John had talked to his disciples about Jesus: *I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He it is who will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire (Mt 3:11)*. When he saw Jesus, John the Baptist introduced Jesus to his disciples: *There is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29)*. Yet today John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus whether he was the one who was to come. So did he

pretend to ask? Did he doubt the divine mission of Jesus? Alternatively, was he too anxious, no longer patient enough to wait for the Messiah to come to punish those evil doers? If his hidden intention was so, then his question meant to urge Jesus to act. Jesus did not answer yes or no. He did not confirm or deny the title of Messiah. Here was Jesus' answer to John's question: *Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind recover their sight, cripples walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, men are raised to life, and the poor have the good news preached to them (Mt 11:4-5)*. That was the good news of the messiah to come.

The reading from the Book of the prophet Isaiah was written at a time when life in Israel was miserable. Expelled from their own land, the Jewish people had no idea when and how to begin to rebuild their lives. Yet Isaiah's own experience of being close to God gives them hope. He shared that vision of hope with his contemporaries in writing. That is also the vision shared by Saint James in his epistle today. Saint James tells us: *Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand (Jas 5:8)*. So the prophet Isaiah and Saint James could see beyond the chaos to a bright and renewed future.

Looking into our own situations, we may wonder whether we face similar problems of life as the Hebrew people did at the time of Jesus. We all have problems in our lives: personal problems, health problems, marital problems, family problems, social problems, and church problems, job related problems and so on. It is so easy to be bogged down in the chaos and problems in our lives. In difficult and confusing times, we can raise questions similar to John's questions. Is the Lord the one who can free us from sickness, disease and suffering? Is the Lord the one who has power to heal emotional wounds between husband and wife, parents, brothers and sisters and children?

Is the Lord the one who can help our children change their life style and amend their lives? Is the Lord who can liberate us from loneliness, anxiety, worry and fear or are we to look for

something else such as astrology, good luck, and fortune telling? Is the Lord the one who can give meaning and purpose to our lives, or are we waiting for somebody else? Is the Lord who will come to save us as the prophet Isaiah has promised (Is 35:1-6).

Prayer for putting faith in the Savior about to be born:

Oh! Savior about to be born!

Impossible, I will not seek any other god.

But will put my faith and trust in you alone

Come. O come Emmanuel!

Come and free me and save me. Amen.

SEEKING TO FIND GOD IN THE SOLITUDE OF SOUL

4 Sunday of Advent, Year A

Is 7:10-14; Rom 1:1-7; Mt 1:18-24



The problem of loneliness affects not only the elderly, the widow and widower, but also the young and the married. However, loneliness is not the same as being alone, because people can be alone and not feeling lonely. On the contrary, people might still

feel lonely,

Even though when they live in the midst of their family and friends or in a joyous atmosphere. That is why the great poet novelist Nguyen Du of Vietnam could weave Thuy Kieu's sadness into the poetic novel Doan Truong Tan Thanh with a vague sadness: *How can a sad person enjoy a cheerful landscape?*

The winter with the cold, dull weather can even make people feel more lonesome. According to reports, the number of people who took their own lives was higher in the winter than any other season. In this season from December to mid-January, the sadness of the elderly who live alone is more acute. They see people with family and friends send greeting cards to one another, visit one another, exchange gifts with one another, and they themselves feel isolated. If their children visit them, send cards or gifts to them, they might question why during the year they have been forgotten and now suddenly they are remembered?

Therefore, they wonder whether their children remember them only according to social customs rather than they do out of piety and love. The single or the married persons, who, for different

reasons, live alone, have to go shopping, do their cooking, their laundry and their house cleaning themselves. To cope with a solitary life, people need to follow some kind of religious guidelines, some ideals for their life so that life may become meaningful. Besides, the single or the married person needs to have quiet time in order to find intimacy with self. Intimacy with self means to know oneself one's good points and bad. Most people know their good qualities, but do not pay attention to their bad qualities.

Intimacy with self means to get in touch with one's feelings: feelings of joy, sadness, happiness, depression, tiredness, remorse, pride and guilt. Not only we need to get in touch with our feelings, we also need to know why we have such feelings at that particular time in life. For instance, to know why we are low in spirit at a particular time so that we can prevent it from happening, and cope it when it happens. To be low in spirit may be due to lack of eating and sleeping, or lack of a certain vitamin in the body, or lack of support and appreciation. In summary, we need to observe the signs of our body, the feelings of our mind and the aspirations of our soul.

Self-intimacy will help us recognize our weakness and sinfulness as to put our trust and faith in God's mercy. Self-intimacy will help us recognize our ability and favor as to be thankful to God for those ability and favor received. The result of self-intimacy leads us to intimacy with God. Intimacy with self and intimacy with God should help us cope with moments of loneliness.

To have an intimacy with self and with God, loneliness leads to solitude of soul where we can have stillness and tranquility of soul. To have an intimacy with self and with God, one likes to seek a solitary place so as to maintain and prolong the solitude and tranquility of soul and experience the presence of God and intimacy with him.

That is the reason why in the past there were hermits who went to the woods to live among trees and plants, seeking harmony with that shrill sound of singing birds and gibbons, or those

whispering sound of crickets and insects in order to praise their creator.

Lack of intimacy with self and with God, solitude or being alone will become loneliness. And loneliness will become a threat. To cope with loneliness, one might seek to turn to God or to a certain spiritual power.

Unable to cope with loneliness, plus a feeling of depression, one might decide to end his/her own life. To cope with loneliness, one might get involved also in alcohol, chemical dependency or pornography in order to pass time.

To cope with loneliness, one may seek illicit pleasure, or illicit and temporary relationship. Those illicit and temporary relationships cannot last long. At a certain time, one has to cut it off. When one has to cut off that illicit relationship for different reasons, one would head for suffering a great deal.

There were those who felt miserable, floundering and unable to eat and sleep. Could it be that only God's love can fill up the emptiness in us? In the past, God revealed himself to humankind in many different ways: in a cloud, on a mountain, in a burning bush, in a desert. However, God's presence through such indirect ways was still somewhat hidden.

Therefore, the prophet Isaiah promised humankind a new presence of God: a personal presence through a wonderful event. That was *the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel (Is 7:14)*. What Isaiah promised, Saint Matthew sees it fulfilled in the Son of the Virgin Mary, named Emmanuel, which means *God-is-with-us (Mt 1:23)*. In the event of Christmas, God became flesh and dwelt among us and made his presence among humankind.

To have God's presence and to experience his presence is similar to the experience of two lovers who were absent from each other. Even though they were not present physically, they often think of

each other, miss each other, which means they are *out of sight*, but not *out of mind*.

The experience of God's presence in our lives is similar to that. A person, who experiences God's presence, thinks of God, feels God is present with him/her that God embraces and protects him/her, which God eats, drinks, works and rests with him/her,. That was what Saint Paul wrote:

The life I live now is not my own, Christ is living in me (Gal 2:20). Christ is living in us with his grace, his thoughts, his feelings, his dreams and his aspirations.

Two lovers have experience of their presence, their shadows, their glances of eyes and their whispering voices. To love God and to be loved by God, we also have experience of his presence, his shadows, his glance and his whispering voice along with his shelter and protection.

Prayer for experiencing the presence of God:

Oh Lord Jesus, incarnate Word about to become man.

You promised 'to be with us until the end of times'.

Fill the emptiness in my life.

Be my joy, my strength, my hope.

Be my reason to live and my heritage.

Come Lord, Jesus, come and stay with me.

O come, Emmanuel. Amen.

CHRISTMAS SEASON

JESUS' SMALL WAYS IN HIS BIRTH

Christmas Vigil Mass: A, B, C

Is 62:1-5; Acts 13:16-17, 22-25; Mt 1:1-25



For most Christians and non-Christians, Christmas is a season of joy with decorations: lights and colors, trees and flowers, mangers, and nativity sets, inside and outside, etc. At Christmas, shop owners try to decorate their shops and play Christmas music to attract customers. Christmas is a season for the exchange of gifts. People prepare to send Christmas cards and gifts with beautiful wishes. At Christmas, warring factions put down their arms to observe the spirit of peace at Christmas.

However, the backgrounds around Jesus' birth, and the ways of his birth were contradictions. The first contradiction was, instead of choosing to be born from a princess of a royal family, Jesus chose to be born of a simple virgin named Mary (Mt 13:55). The second contradiction was the man chosen to be his foster-father was only an ordinary carpenter named Joseph (Mt 13:55). The third contradiction was, instead of being born in a royal palace, he chose to be born in a manger for animals (Lk 2:7).

The fourth contradiction was, instead of being born in the capital of Jerusalem, magnificent and splendid, he was born in a small town of Bethlehem (Mt 2:5). There were many more contradictions in his public life. In reality, his whole life was a contradiction.

In today's Christmas Eve, we limit our discussions on those contradictions up until his birth only. Why did he choose those lowly people and small things as such? At the time just before his birth, many Jewish women dreamed of the motherly role of a messiah. Meanwhile a simple virgin was chosen to be the mother

of the savior. Thus, the selection of the Virgin Mary to be the mother of the savior was to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy: *The virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel (Is 7:14).*

As for his foster father, although he was an ordinary carpenter, yet he was of the house and lineage of David because the messiah was supposed to be a descendant of David. Moreover, Joseph was also of the lineage of Jesse (Mt 1:5) as to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy: *On that day, the root of Jesse set up as a signal for the nations. The gentiles shall seek out for his dwelling shall be glorious (Is 11:10).* Joseph is also a just man, faith filled and responsible for the Holy Family.

The reason the Son of God chose to be born in Bethlehem, a small town, instead of being born in Jerusalem, was to fulfill the prophecy of Micah: *And you Bethlehem-Ephrathah, too small to be among the clans of Judah. From you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel (Mi 5:1).*

Today Bethlehem is still small, yet became a holy site, dear to millions of Christians around the world. If we have a chance to visit Bethlehem in the future, we can gather around the manger scene to sing a Christmas song as to stir up the Christmas spirit. Nobody would question what we will be doing, because we are in the holy place.

In fact, people might join us in singing or at least in spirit especially we sing a song familiar in melody to many people around the world like *Silent Night*. Another reason why the Son of God chose to be born in the manger for animals was that people could find it easy to come to Him. Those who first came to celebrate his birth were shepherds, considered outcasts. Yet in the ordinary things at Bethlehem, it contained a sublime mystery: The Son of God made man to redeem humankind. That is why the angels of the Lord announced: *This day in David's city a savior has been born to you, the Messiah and Lord. Let this be a sign to you: in a manger you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes (Lk 2:11-12).*

The place where the Holy Family settled was also insignificant, a small town called Nazareth to fulfill the prophecy: *He shall be called a Nazorean (Mt 2:23)*. The birth of the God-made-man is a contradictory. One of the themes we find in the scripture is God often chose lowly and humble persons and small things to do his works and to reveal his power. So in order to seek God, we have to follow his ways, simple and ordinary.

Otherwise, we will not be able to find him. Jesus himself told us about God's way when he said: *Father, Lord of heaven and earth, to you I offer praise, for what you have hidden from the learned and the clever, you have revealed to the merest children (Mt 11:25)*.

So we can see the instrument God uses, does not depend on our human wealth, power or knowledge, but on the grace and power of God and our cooperation.

So after those busy days, drawn in external preparations for Christmas by commercials, we need to find quiet time before the manger, alone with the Lord, in order to ponder like Mary (Lk 2:19), those contradictions about his birth and his way. To find us think/ponder about something that questions our conscience is the first step for our spiritual awakening and change in life.

A prayer asking to follow the Redeemer's humble way?

Oh! The Infant Savior!

You did not operate our human way.

Yet chose to be born and live

among humble persons and small things,

May I realize that I will hardly find you

among noble and gentle folk, in noisy and fussy places.

***Teach me to seek you according to your small and humble way
so that your grace may be reborn in my heart. Amen.***

HOW DOES JESUS' BIRTH INFLUENCE OUR LIVES?

Christmas Midnight Mass

Is 9:1-6; Ti 2:11-14; Lk 2:1-14



In the Old Testament, God revealed himself to his people in many different ways: in the cloud (Ex 16:10), in the desert (Nm 3:14; 9:1), on the mountain (Dt 9:10), in the burning bush (Ex 3:4-6). In addition, God spoke to us, his people in an indirect way through the prophets (Heb 1:1). Finally, when the *designated time* (Rom 5:6) had come, God sent forth his Son to speak to us directly (Gal 4:4).

The designated time was the ripe time, the time when God's people needed a savior more than ever because they were tired of the decadent situation in society at that time. Their religious and civil leaders were on the way downhill. On the political front, the Romans occupied their nation. Therefore, they longed for a messiah to come to liberate them from the foreign power, not necessary from sin. Anyway, the birth of Christ changed the reckoning of the world events completely.

Since the birth of Christ, time has been counted all over again. We call this year or that year after the birth of Christ. If events occurred before the birth of Christ, we calculate time in a reverse order. For instance if a certain event happened before the birth of Christ, we say that event happened in a certain year before the birth of Christ. Historians in the world based on the year of the birth of Christ in order to reckon time. Afterwards they found out they miscalculated the year of the birth of Christ for four or five years. However, they did not want to rectify the correct year of Christ's birth and the dates of world events because to do so would be very costly and time consuming.

The birth of Christ is the most important event in the human history. However, Jesus came, not just to make change in the reckoning of time. He came to make a change in the heart of each person: to change the way of our thinking, our viewpoint and our human values. About 700 years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah prophesized: *The people, who walked in darkness, have seen a great light (Is 9:1)*. Isaiah's prediction about the messiah was fulfilled on the night of Christmas. At the first Christmas, only a few people witnessed the nativity scene: *They were Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds, and their cattle (Lk 2:8, 10, 16)*. In our days, we have seen beautiful nativity scenes.

However, the very place where Jesus was born was the shepherds' manger, possibly dirty and smelly. How could the shepherds recognize the newborn infant as the Savior? Each one should try to find out an answer for him or her. In order to help us have an adequate answer, we could put the question in a different way. Who is the one who can recognize the footprints and handiwork of God? What spirit or what kind of spirit we should have in order to recognize God's presence?

Reading the Bible, we can see Mary celebrated Christmas in a different way. The Scripture speaks of her: *Mary treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart (Lk 2:19)*. Celebrating Christmas in the heart means to open our mind and heart to welcome the Savior. Many of us have been celebrating Christmas for years: ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty or seventy.

We are all familiar with the Christmas story: the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus in the manger of Bethlehem, the astrologers coming to offer gold, incense and myrrh. A number of us might have been chosen to act out the role of Joseph, Mary and shepherds in the Christmas pageant. However, has anything changed in our lives?

Since the time of his birth, Jesus has been disturbing people as he did disturb the mind of Herod. His mission was to bring peace.

However, his teachings disturbed people first, to make them unhappy with their old self and their own way of life so that he can be in control of their lives and grant them peace and joy.

After our external preparations for Christmas with decorations, exchanges of Christmas cards and gifts, making mangers, we need to set aside some quite time to reflect on the true meaning of Christmas. God speaks to us in silence.

Only in silence, can we be aware of God's presence and discover the true meaning of Christmas. God has come into our human history over two thousand years ago to reconcile humankind with God.

In addition, God promised to come again at the end of time to judge the living and the dead. Between these two big comings, God often comes into our lives with his grace, each time we receive a sacrament, each time we pray, each time we make a sacrifice for the love of God or to do a good work. As mature Catholics, we should not consider Christmas as a distant event unrelated to our lives.

We have to find out the real meaning for the celebration of Christmas. We have to renew and relive the coming of Christ. In order for God to come and to be in control of our lives, we have to remove obstacles from our lives, so that God can have room to stay in our hearts, to give peace and joy to our lives. That is what Christmas is all about.

Prayer asking Jesus to be born in our heart

***Oh Infant Jesus, born among us.
You were born poor in the manger.
Teach me to prepare for you a manger in my heart,
made up of my prayers, sacrifices, charities
to warm you. Amen***

HOW WAS THE FIRST CHRISTMAS CELEBRATED?

Christmas at Dawn, A, B, C

Is 62:11-12; Ti 3:4-7; Lk 2:15-20



The mass at dawn used to be called the Shepherd's mass. Today's Gospel tells us about the shepherds: *Let us go then to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us (Lk 1:15)*. Why were the shepherds quick to respond to the message of the angels as such?

The scripture today tells us the shepherds kept *night watch by turns over their flocks (Lk 2:8)*. If they had been asleep, they would not have heard the voice of the angels, and thus not seen *the glory of the Lord shone around them (v.9)*. The shepherds lived close to nature.

They must have found it easy to have a feeling of fear and wonder before natural forces such as storms and thunders and lightning. That was what today's Gospel tells us: *The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were very much afraid (Lk 2:9)*. How were the shepherds able to recognize the tiny infant lying in the manger as their Lord and Savior? Each one of us can find a different answer. In order to help us find the answer, we can put the question in a different way. Who is the person who can easily recognize God's presence in his/her life? Who can find it easy to recognize the footprints and the handiworks of God? What kind of heart should we have in order to recognize God's presence?

Every day around us, there are found footprints and handiworks of God around us. What we need to do is to open our eyes of faith. The shepherds found it easy to put their faith in the words

of the angels in order to make their decisions to go and see the wonderful phenomenon at Bethlehem because they were simple folks and they kept night watch.

In order for us to be able to find God, we need to have a spirit of simplicity and trust before God like that of the shepherds. Simplicity, age, wealth and education are not positively correlated. Therefore, even if we are highly educated, we can still be simple before God. Even if we are advanced in age, we can still be trustful in God. Only with a spirit of simplicity and trust, can we open ourselves: our mind, heart and soul to welcome the Lord.

The Gospel of today tells us: *Then, the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them (Lk 2:20)*. In the first Christmas night, there were only a few persons who observed the Bethlehem event: Mary, Joseph, the angels, the shepherds and their flocks. The first Christmas was celebrated at the stable of the flocks, not at home, not in a hotel, not in a hospital. In our days, we make beautiful mangers for Christmas. However, the very place where Jesus was born was the manger in a stable, perhaps smelling and filthy. How did Mary observe the first Christmas? Scripture had little to say about Mary's celebration of the first Christmas. Scripture only recorded: *Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart (Lk 2:19)*.

After all those busy days, preparing for Christmas such as sending Christmas cards and gifts and decorating home and church, we need to find some quiet time to ponder the Christmas mystery. Only in silence can we feel God's presence.

In 2003 when praying the Angelus, Pope JP II called upon the faithful to relive the Christmas event in the atmosphere of silence and the spirit of humility of Mary. Our Holy Father said: *Mary calls upon us to be humble so that God can find a room in our heart*. She also shows us the value of silence so that we can hear the song of the angel and the cry of baby Jesus, not to be suppressed by noise and chaos.

As mature Christian Catholics, we should not consider Christmas as a distant event unrelated to our lives. We must try to find out the real meaning of Christmas. We must renew the meaning of Christmas and make it alive in our hearts.

A prayer for a spirit of detachment to seek God:

*Oh infant Jesus just born!
In the first day of your birthday,
only Mary, Joseph and a few shepherds present
along with sheep around to celebrate your birth.
Give me a spirit of simplicity,
detached from worldly attachments
so that like the shepherds
I may find it easy to come to you. Amen.*

DUAL NATURE OF THE WORD INCARNATE

Christmas Day Mass of the Year A, B, C

Is 52:7-10; Heb 1:1-6; Gn 1:1-18



Born in time, but existed from eternity. That is the mystery of the Word incarnate, if understood as something mysterious, unable to explain and understand satisfactorily. Saint John began his gospel by announcing: *In the beginning was the Word; the Word was in God's presence (Jn 1:1)*. That was something, which Saint John in his book of Revelation had put in, the the mouth of the Word of God: *I am the Alpha and the Omega (Rev 1:8; Rev 21:6; Rev 22:13)* meaning the Savior was the beginning and the end of all thing and all living beings.

The Word is the second Person, cooperated with God in the work of creation of human beings and all things as Saint John confirms: *Through him, all things came into being (Jn 1:3)*. The Word is life and light. That is the eternal life and the light of revelation (Jn 1:4).

The life of the created is given. Human life is natural. Scripture contains theme of symbols of light, contrary to darkness. The origin of the universe was depicted in darkness. The book of Genesis tells us darkness covers the universe. Then God orders light to appear. At the Easter vigil, the Church lights the Easter candle, symbolizing the light of Christ, the light of truth, the light of the gospel.

He came to testify to the light, foretold by Isaiah about seven hundred years before: *I sent my messenger before you to prepare your way (Is 40:3; Mk 1:3)*. The messenger is John the precursor (Jn 1:6). The light of truth, the light of the gospel came into the world, but the world did not accept him (Jn 1:11), nor did it

recognize him (Jn 1:10). Those who welcome him and believed in his name were given the power to become his children (Jn 1:12). Why did the world not recognize him? Perhaps people looked for him in royal palaces, instead of poor places, even smelly in manger. Perhaps they looked for him in high positions or in busy market places. Perhaps they looked for him according to human wisdom instead of seeking the divine wisdom, which is contrary to human wisdom.

When the word of God became flesh and dwelt among men (Jn 1:14), it does not reduce his divinity because *the glory of an only Son coming the Father, filled with enduring love (v. 14)*. He surpasses John because he existed before John (Jn 1:15). To say so means the incarnate Word, born among us has two natures: the divine nature and human nature. The Word incarnated in the womb of the virgin is a mystery. The creator chose to be born out of a creature is a mystery. That was a question raised by Mary. To answer that question, the angel Gabriel responded: *For nothing is impossible with God (Lk 1:37)*. In the person of Jesus, it is not fifty percent of God and fifty person of man combined. In the person of Jesus, it is one hundred percent of God and one hundred percent of man, except sin.

That is the difference between Christianity and other religions. Christianity is the religion that came down from heaven. The founder of Christianity is the eternal word from heaven incarnate in the world. According to John, nobody has seen God (Jn 1:18). Through the Word incarnate, born as man and dwelt among humankind, man has seen God because God has let humankind know about Him through his Son. Through the Word incarnate, humankind knows about love, mercy and forgiveness of God. Humankind also knows about the second person of the Trinity who showed his human feelings when he showed pity toward a widow whose only son had passed away (Lk 7:13); he wept when he saw Mary weep at her brother Lazarus's death (Jn 11:33-35); saddened and feared at the crucifixion (Mk 14:33-34). In addition, perhaps he also told jokes to the apostles and not recorded in the bible.

God understands our human nature's weakness as well as human aspirations through contact with his incarnate Son living among us. Through the incarnate Word, God teaches us to live according to the right and just way, and his teachings recorded in the Gospel. The mystery of the incarnation unites the human nature with the divine nature in the incarnate Word and hence allows the human being inherit the heavenly kingdom. To have God in our lives and experience the presence of the incarnate Word is the whole meaning of the celebration of Christmas.

Jesus was described by an important witness of the Roman Empire during the reign of Emperor Tiberius Caesar. Following is a report on Jesus by Pontius Pilate, governor of the Roman Empire:

To Tiberius Caesar, Emperor of Rome: Noble Sovereign. Greeting! Among the various rumors that came to my ears, there was one in particular, that attracted my attention. A young man, it was said, had appeared in Galilee preaching with a noble unction a new law in the name of the God that had sent him. At first, I was apprehensive that his design was to stir up the people against the Romans, but my fears were soon dispelled. Jesus of Nazareth spoke rather as a friend of the Romans than of the Jews. One day in passing by the place of Siloam, where there was a great concourse of people, I observed in the midst of the group a young man who was leaning against a tree, calmly addressing the multitude. I was told it was Jesus. This I could easily suspected, so great was the difference between him and those listening to him. His golden-colored hair and beard gave to his appearance a celestial aspect. He appeared to be about thirty years of age. Never have I seen a sweeter or more serene countenance. What a contrast between him and his hearers, with their black beards and tawny complexions.

I was even informed that some misfortune would befall him: that it would be the first time that Jerusalem had stoned those who called themselves prophets; an appeal would be made to Caesar. However, my conduct was approved by the Senate and I was

promised reinforcement after the termination of the Parthian war. Being too weak to suppress an insurrection, I resolved upon adopting a measure that promised to restore the tranquility of the city without subjecting the praetorian to humiliating concession. I wrote to Jesus requesting an interview with him at the praetorian. He came. You know that in my veins flows the Spanish mixed with Roman blood – as incapable of fear as it is of weak emotion.

When the Nazarene made his appearance, I was walking in my basilica, my feet seemed fastened with an iron hand to the marble pavement, and I trembled in every limb, as does a guilty culprit, though the Nazarene was as calm as innocence itself. When he came up to me he stopped, and by a signal, he seemed to say to me: 'I am here', though he spoke not a word. For some time I contemplated with admiration and awe this extraordinary type of man – a type of man unknown to our numerous painters, who have given form and figure to all the gods and heroes. There was nothing about him that was repelling in the character, yet I felt awed to approach him. 'Jesus, said I unto him at last – and my tongue faltered' [1]

Through the report, we can see the person of Jesus so perfect and special, as well as the way and the responses of Jesus were so profound. The procurator of Judea interviewed Jesus tactfully. At the praetorian, Pilate's wife sent him a message: *Do not interfere in the case of that holy man. I had a dream about him today, which has greatly upset me (Mt 27:19)*. When the chief priests and elders and the crowds wanted to crucify Jesus, Pilate responded: *I am innocent of the blood of the just man. The responsibility is yours (c. 24)*.

A prayer asking to experience the presence of the incarnate Word:

***Oh! Incarnate Word living among us.
You became like us except sin.
You also set an example of virtues for us to follow.***

***Teach me to continue to seek you,
to find your truth, goodness and beauty
the justice of your kingdom
and the values of the Gospel. Amen***

[1]. Extracted from Pontius Pilate. The History of Jesus Christ's three year's ministry, trial, death, burial and Resurrection. Copied April 7, 1893, from the original Scroll in Greek, now on file in the Ancient Library in Rome.

SEEKING THE ONE WORTHY OF WORSHIP AND PRAISE

Epiphany of Year A

Is 60:1-6; Eph 3:2-3a, 5-6; Mt 2:1-12



To prepare for his Son to be born into the human history, God chose a nation to be his own in order to convey his saving grace to other nations. Throughout the history of the Old Testament, God commanded his prophets to speak to his people about his nature and his way, as well as to test them and purify their faith.

However, it was not that other nations had to stay outside waiting forever. That is why there was a story of the astrologers, used to be called magi or three kings, who came to worship the newborn king. In order to find out about the birth of the messiah, the magi had to come to a nation to whom scripture had revealed. First, they came to Jerusalem to visit the king's palace. However, they asked the wrong people like Herod. Herod was afraid of losing his throne, trying to deceive them. The attitude and purpose of the magi's inquiry of the newborn king are to be taken into consideration.

They were sincere in their inquiry, not like Herod. They came to worship the newborn king according to their oriental custom. Homage and adoration were reserved for those who were considered majestic, great and powerful. Royal children were born in royal palaces. Here the messiah king chose to be born in the manger, dirty and smelly, not beautiful as we see in the manger we made and decorated in the church. So how did the magi prostrate themselves to worship the newborn king? What was the sign for them to recognize the newborn infant as the messiah and king? According to scripture, the sign was the wonder star.

The birth of the messiah at Bethlehem was predicted by Micah, the prophet, over seven hundred years before. So why did the chosen people not recognize him when he was born? Perhaps they expected the messiah to come in glory and power. Therefore, when he was born in the manger, they did not recognize him. Usually people use signs and symbols to express their frame of mind and position of soul. So let us try to find out what signs and symbols the astrologers used to express their frame of mind and position of soul towards the newborn king?

Today's gospel tells us: *They prostrated themselves and did him homage and offered him gold, frankincense and myrrh (Mt 2:11)*. Why did they offer these gifts? In other words, what is the meaning of their gifts? Gold stands for kingship and power. In offering gold to the newborn King, they acknowledged his kingship and majesty. Frankincense was a gift offered to God. By offering frankincense, they acknowledged his divinity. Myrrh was used to embalm bodies for burial. In offering myrrh to the newborn king, they acknowledged his human nature, subject to death.

We also use postures and gestures in our worship. Our postures like standing, kneeling, sitting, bowing heads, folding hands, making the signs of the cross and so on are appropriate gestures to help us stir up appropriate feelings. Our mere postures are sufficient to express something without any word. So kneeling to pray is an act of prayer and worship. It signifies a spirit of penance and sorrow in need of God.

As Catholics, we need to answer for ourselves those questions: Why do we go to church to attend mass? Why do we pray, why kneel, why stand, why sit, why genuflect, why bow, why make the sign of the cross. We need to know why we do those things so that we may avoid doing them in a mechanical way and in a routine fashion. Each week we come together before the altar of the Lord for the Eucharistic celebration. We do not have gold, frankincense, and myrrh to offer to God. What we offer is the gift of love, adoration, joy and sorrow, the gift of ourselves.

Prayer for knowing how to worship the Almighty:

*Oh Savior, the newborn among us.
As the three gentile astrologers
set out to seek out and worship you,
teach us how to worship you with our total being.
Forgive me for the times I worshiped you
with my lips, but my hearts were far away from you.
Worship, praise, glory and love
I offer to you with my sincere heart. Amen.*

LENTEN SEASON

LIVING THE SPIRIT OF LENT

Ash Wednesday: A, B, C

Jl 2:12-18; Cor 5:20 – 6:2; Mt 6:1-6, 16-18



Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, lasting forty days and nights, to commemorate forty days and nights Jesus prayed in the wilderness (Mt 4:2). Today at the signing with ashes, the priest celebrant reminds us: *Remember, man, you are dust, and to dust you shall return (Gen 3:19)*. The book of Genesis records: *The Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life and so man became a living being (Gen 2:7)*. Thus, at death, man returns to dust. If one thinks of cremation, then the image of man returning to dust is more appropriate to describe the fate of man. For the prophets in the Old Testament, the signing of ashes is a sign of repentance and return to the Lord.

In the United States, people come to mass on Ash Wednesday in good number, almost like Sunday, even though it is not a holy day of obligation, in order to be signed with ashes on the forehead in the form of the cross. Some priests signed a small cross with ashes; some signed a big one. People displayed ashes on their forehead in public and their offices. Some Protestants also came to catholic churches to receive ashes.

The traditional works the Church teaches in Lent is prayer, penance and works of charity. Prayer consists of common prayer and private prayer at home, in church or in an appropriate place. Attending mass, reading the scripture and reflection are also prayer. In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches us: *Whenever you pray, go to your room, close your door, and pray to your Father in private (Mt 6:6)*. Should we follow the teaching of Jesus literally by going into our room with a closed door to pray? We need to

understand that Jesus spoke this to respond to the Pharisees who wanted others to be aware of their prayers and consider them as holy. Not like the Pharisees' ways of prayer, we need to come to church to express our faith in God, to share our faith with others and to support those with weak faith. Jesus himself went up to the temple to pray publicly, meaning others saw him pray. According to Saint Ambrose's interpretation, to go into our room to pray means to go into the inner room of our heart, where we harbor thoughts and feelings. This inner room can always go with us. Jesus tells the apostles: *Be on guard and pray that you may not undergo the test (Mt 26:41)*. When the apostles asked Jesus why they could not expel a mute spirit from the boy, Jesus responded: *This kind you can drive out only by prayer (Mk 9:29)*.

The second traditional work during Lent is penance. Penance consists of fast, abstinence, sacrifice and self-denial. After the second Vatican Council, the Lenten regulations have been simplified: obligatory abstinence is observed on Lenten Fridays and fast with abstinence on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. That makes people think that fast and abstinence have been simplified. However, if we go deeper, we can find out it is not so. These days many Catholics should reexamine their fast and abstinence. Living in an industrial, consuming society, there is a surplus of meat. Therefore, to eat fish is also good for health. To abstain from meat is not a big sacrifice for those who like seafood. How can it be called a sacrifice if we eat lobster - expensive and delicious - as a way of abstinence from meat?

The advantage of fast is not only to maintain physical health, but also to help increase spiritual strength as to fight temptations. If we abstain from food only to stay physically healthy or in shape, to control blood pressure or reduce high cholesterol, then our fast and abstinence have no spiritual values. Thus, if we want spiritual values, we have to bring spiritual motive to our fast and abstinence. The purpose of fast and abstinence is to create a vacuum space in the stomach as to help us feel an emptiness in life and thus to invite God to come and fill the emptiness in life. In other words, the purpose of fast and abstinence is for our mind

to be purified as to lift us up spiritually. At the beginning of fast, we would feel hungry. With times passed, we will get used to it. If we still feel hungry, then to drink some hot water should help.

Besides, the Church wants the faithful to fast voluntarily on different days. Those who think the Lenten regulations for Catholics are strictly should try to find out the way the Buddhists and Muslims fast. Besides abstaining from food and drink, the Church wants the faithful to watch our language, to control our tongue, our eyes and ears as to speak, look and hear only what is decent and healthy mentally and spiritually. The faithful need to remember God uses the prophet Isaiah to warn those who fast like this: *Your fast ends in quarrelling and fighting, striking with wicked claw (Is 58:4).*

A certain priest on his trip to visit Vietnam was given three toy monkeys as gifts, made out of baked clay, looking artistically. One monkey covers his eyes with both hands, one did his his ears, one did his mouth, meaning not to look, not to hear, and not to speak, The priest brought the gifts home for displaying in his room to remind him of watching his eyes, his ears and mouth.

The third traditional work is works of charity, instead of using the word almsgiving. About doing works of charity, Jesus teaches us not to blow a trumpet before us as a hypocrite does to receive praise from others. Jesus warns those who do works of charity in order to boast and get praise instead of giving glory to God. For God to be praised, Jesus tells us our light must shine so that others might see and praise God. If we let others praise ourselves, we would be rewarded already, and would have no more merit. If not being watchful, we might want to get credit for things done in the name of charity instead of giving glory to God.

To be called works of charity, we need to share what is ours, to give away part of ourselves, instead of giving away what is not used. If we only give away our clothes, which we do not use, how can it be called a work of charity? In summary during Lent, the faithful are invited to reform their lives and hearts by returning

toward God so as to journey with Christ on the way of the cross, and to go up to Calvary on Good Friday and to share the joyful resurrection with Jesus on Easter Sunday.

A prayer asking God's blessings for works during Lent:

*Oh God, we thank you for this holy season of Lent.
Teach me how to live the spirit of Lent:
by prayers, sacrifice, fast, abstinence and self- denial
and works of charity that would be acceptable to you.
Grant that I may reconcile with you
through the sacrament of penance
as to return to you and live in grace with you. Amen.*

‘LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION’

1 Sunday of Lent, A

Gen 2:7-9, 3:1-7; Rm 5:12-19 or 5:12, 17-19; Mt 4:1-11



In the arid desert of Judea, realizing how hungry Jesus was after forty days and forty nights of fasting, the devil tempted him to turn stones into bread for food. There is nothing wrong with this kind of temptation because any hungry person needs to eat.

However, it was useless for Jesus to perform this miracle. Jesus could survive in the desert for such a long time of fasting, why should it be necessary for him to use his extraordinary power for his own benefit. In rejecting this temptation, Jesus quoted scripture, saying: *Not on bread alone is man to live, but on every utterance that comes from the mouth of God (Dt 8:3; Mt 4:4).*

If Jesus yielded to this temptation, he would be subject to Satan’s power. In a beautiful Garden of Eden, the devil did not tell Adam to disobey God directly, but invited him to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The Jews at that time expected a messiah to come with great power.

Thus, the devil challenged Jesus to live up to the Jews’ expectation by performing a jump from the parapet of the temple to the ground, for, according to the tempter, God’s angels would support him. This was a temptation to pride or vainglory. To reject this temptation, Jesus quoted the second book of Deuteronomy, saying: *You shall not put the Lord, your God to the test (Dt 6:16; Mt 4:7).*

The devil now had a hint that Jesus was the Son of God because he did not say ‘If you are the Son of God’ any longer, when he tempted Jesus the third time. He showed Jesus the world’s glory,

and promised to give it to him if he would prostrate himself to worship the tempter. Jesus uses scripture to tell him: *The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve (Mt 4:10).*

In the three temptations, Satan's disguise is the exploitation of bread, heavenly protection and worldly possessions to lure Jesus to disobedience to God's will. Disobedience to the will of God would mean God's plan of salvation would end. Satan is the devil. He is very devilish. We learn from catechism that Satan was the fallen angel, banished to the netherworld for disobedience to God. Thus, his plan is very subtle. He used an overall plan of temptation, and then attacked opponents in each phase to lure them to his side.

First, Satan took advantage of the moment when Jesus was hungry in order to tempt him to food. Satan could have heard a Vietnamese proverb: *Morality comes only after sufficient food and clothing.* The reason why saying Satan could have heard this proverb because the devil does not know everything. According to Satan's scheme, after Jesus had eaten, he would have lured him to show off his power for people to see. Then Satan would tempt Jesus to use his power to govern the nations, which he would promise to give.

As human beings, we have a tendency to blame others for bad things happened. We have a tendency to blame Satan too. So when something bad or ugly happens, we tend to blame Satan for it. In addition, we say: ugly as the devil, bad as the devil, mischievous as the devil, cruel as the devil. Poor Satan!

Perhaps that is why painters often painted the devil with a long tail because an animal with a long tail is often mischievous like a monkey. A certain Vietnamese priest before going to the US to study asking an American priest in Vietnam about weather in the States. The American responded in Vietnamese: You go there and see, it is cold as the devil. The Vietnamese priest thought the

devil is supposed to be in hell, so it must be hot. Now it is strange to hear the American priest said as cold as the devil.

Today we must realize that not every temptation is instigated by Satan. Temptation is usually a symptom of those weak points of our human character. Each day of our lives, we are tempted to put God to the test, to turn away from the true God in order to worship alien gods: god of materialism, god of pleasure, god of science, god of technology, god of superstition.

When we, relying on God's grace, say no to temptation a few times, it would be easy for us to reject it the next times. To fight temptation, one must be decisive from the beginning. For instance, when we are tempted to watch pornography, and if we have the courage to throw them to the garbage dumpster, next time it would be easy to cope with it. When one intends to buy them, the devil would know because he can see something concrete.

When we have committed the sin of injustice and do not know how to return or feel shameful to return what was stolen, we can return indirectly by using those things not belonging to us to help with works of charity or by putting money taken unjustly into a poor box in any church. Such concrete act should help us to practice the virtue of justice and charity in the future. As a human being, Christ was subject to temptation and did undergo temptation and he overcame it. That is what Saint Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans of how Jesus conquered sin, destroyed death by his resurrection.

As we begin our journey of Lent, let us spend this forty-day period for more prayers, penance and works of charity to build up our spiritual strength so that we may be able to fight temptation when it comes along.

In the desert of soul, with feelings of weakness and sinfulness, it would be easy for us to make decision for survival of soul. Then

at mass, the church invites us to pray for ourselves and for others when we pray the 'Our Father' together: 'lead us not into temptation'.

Prayer asking the Lord to deliver us not into temptation.

*Lord Jesus, in the desert you are tempted.
You allow temptation to touch those whom you call.
Every day of my life, I was tempted to be selfish,
jealous, proud, greedy, unfaithful and rebellious
Forgive me for the times I put myself
in the near occasion of temptation.
Teach me to discipline myself
by fasting, self-denial, sacrifice and prayer
as to build up my spiritual strength
in order to fight temptation. Amen.*

FOLLOWING JESUS TO THE MOUNTAIN OF SOUL

2 Sunday of Lent, Year A

Gn 12:1-4a; 2Tim 1:8b-10; Mt 17:1-9



In the prospect of his passion and cross, Jesus took Peter, James and John to a high mountain to show them the glory of his kingdom. Even though the apostles had followed Jesus for three years, listening to his teaching and witnessing his miracles, they still had the wrong idea about the messiah and his mission. They still hoped the messiah would establish an earthly kingdom: rich and strong, capable of overthrowing the Roman rule. The three apostles whom Jesus took to the mountain for the transfiguration showed different characters and qualities.

Peter, even though with a hot temper, quick to speak, showed leadership ability, capable of uniting the other apostles. James was strong in faith. John was full of love. Yet these three apostles also would witness Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane. Lest the passion and cross of Jesus would give them a painful experience, Jesus took them to a high mountain and was transfigured before their eyes so that they could see his glory and the glory of his kingdom.

His transfiguration was to strengthen their faith and hope in the prospect of the Good Friday. The apostles' reaction to the transfiguration is worth of our attention. At first, they were fascinated by the glory of God's kingdom, wishing to treasure the experience by asking to stay on the mountain. That is why Peter exclaimed: *Lord, it is good that we are here (Mt 17:4)*. They also saw Moses and Elijah at the scene of the transfiguration. Then they heard a voice from the cloud saying: *This is my beloved Son,*

with whom I am well pleased (Mt 17:5). In the Old Testament, a cloud was considered the symbol of God's appearance to his people.

It is noted here that the voice heard from the cloud when Jesus was transfigured is the same voice heard from the sky when Jesus was baptized by John (Mt 3:17). Thus, the voice from the cloud showed the apostles that their master is the Son pleasing to God in the fulfillment of his Father's will. What is about the presence of Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration? According to the Jewish tradition, Moses was considered the gathering and unifying author of the Pentateuch, representing the Law and Elijah, the greatest prophet in the Old Testament, representing the prophets. Thus, their presence was intended to help the apostles realize that Christianity to be founded by their Master would not be separated from what was written in the Old Testament.

Thus, the three realities of Jesus' Transfiguration: his dazzling face, the presence of Moses and Elijah and the voice spoken in the cloud are aimed to help the apostles realize the agony and cross of their master would not be a failure, but a transformation, and thus they would be able to keep their faith firm. In the garden of Gethsemane, Peter just drew his sword to cut off the right ear of the high priest's servant in defense of his master. Yet, in the courtyard of the high priest's residence, Peter was timid like a chicken. He denied Jesus three times, denying all connections to Jesus.

When he heard a cock crowed, remembering Jesus' word, *he went outside and began to weep bitterly (Mt 26:75).* His tears flowed out as if he was saying: Master, how could I deny you as such when I myself did ask your permission to erect three tents on the mountain to contemplate the glory of the Kingdom. Happy is Peter! His tears of repentance moved Jesus to forgive his sin. We are now in the second week of Lent. Lent is a time when Christians need to take spiritual exercises to follow Jesus to the mountain of our soul as to be transfigured in smaller scales.

In order to be able to stand firm in time of trials and tribulations, the Christians need to have the experience of loving transactions between God and human soul. The apostles were fascinated and immersed by the glory of the transfiguration, and then at least we Christians need to ask God to touch our lives or ask to have what is described in mystical literature as ecstasy, rapture or levitation.

To attend a good retreat, to witness virtuous examples, to hear lofty thoughts can make us eager for call to holiness. To hear an inspiring sermon can ignite the fire of our love for God, impelling us to eliminate obstacles from our lives. Seeing good examples of sacrifice and charity can make us want to serve the poor, the sick and the suffering.

It is so encouraging and consoling for us to know that someday we will share in Jesus' glory, the glory of the transfiguration. Peter in his moment of excitement, asked Jesus to stay on the mountain in order to contemplate the glory of God. However, Jesus told him he would have to go down the mountain again to bear witness to the Lord, to suffer and die with the Lord first, before he could go up the mountain again. That is the way of Jesus: through the cross to the resurrection, through suffering to glory. To be Jesus' disciples, shall we take a different way, or shall we, or must we follow the way of the Lord?

Prayer asking for contemplating the glory of God's kingdom:

Oh Lord Jesus whom I adore.

You took the three close apostles to the mountain to show them the glory of your kingdom.

Give me some certain sign about your presence so that I may be confident to walk with you. Amen.

ASKING FOR THE LIVING WATER

3 Sunday of Lent, Year A

Ex 17:3-7; Rom 5:1-2, 5-8; Jn 4:5-42



In order to understand why the Samaritan woman tried to argue with Jesus as well as the way Jesus used to bring her to faith, it is necessary to know something about the geographical, historical and religious backgrounds of Palestine at the time of Jesus.

Palestine at that time was divided into three provincial regions: the north was called Galilee, the South Judea and the Central Samaria. Since the eighth century before Christ, Samaria was occupied by Assyria. Jewish law did not allow a Jew to marry a pagan. However, the Jews in Samaria eventually accepted the occupants and intermarried with them. That made the Jews in Judea angry.

Therefore, they looked down on the Samaritans, considering them as half-breeds and heretics. Later on, Judea was also colonized by the Babylonians. However, the Judean Jews did not assimilate with foreign occupants. That is why when Jews in the South wanted to go to Galilee in the North and vice-versa, they did not want to cross Samaria, but made a detour to avoid setting foot on Samaria. The two groups of people did not associate with each other due to that enmity.

However, the Samaritans still believed and accepted the Pentateuch as the Judean Jews did. They also waited for the coming of the Messiah like the Jews. The gospel today tells us Jesus went through Samaria to a town of Sychar. When he sat down to rest at the well of Jacob, he encountered a Samaritan woman who went out to fetch water. Facing a hostile and distrustful woman, Jesus tried to break the ice by asking the woman for a drink. The custom in Palestine at that time did not allow a man and a woman to meet and talk in public, especially a

religious leader and those in high positions like Jesus. That is why the woman said sarcastically to Jesus how a Jewish man could ask a Samaritan woman for a drink? To respond, Jesus told her if she would recognize the gift of God and the one who asked for the water, she would have asked for the living water. The woman retorted that Jesus had no bucket to get water from the deep well. Jesus told her: *Whoever drinks the water I shall give, will never thirst (Jn 4:14).*

At this, the woman seized the opportunity asking for the living water so that she would not have to go far away to get it – even though she did understand what kind of water, Jesus would give. Now he recognized that Jesus had something to offer her. When she said she had no husband, Jesus caused an awakening in her heart by bringing to light her private life. Jesus told her she had five husbands and the one she was now living with was not her husband either. At this, the woman recognized Jesus had moral perception and said to him: *I can see you are a prophet (Jn 4:19).*

She then changed the subject wondering where people should worship God. Jesus told her not to worry about where people should worship God, because the day would come when people would worship not just in Jerusalem or on the mountain of Gerizim, but everywhere all over the world. She also understood when the Christ would come; he would tell her people everything. The story continues up to this point, when the woman hurried back and told her townsfolk about whom she had seen and what she experienced. Her people rushed out to see Jesus. They put their faith in him as the messiah-savior. The confrontation between Jesus and the woman shows she was a tough woman, politically, theologically and racially minded and discriminated. Facing Jesus who has moral perception as the woman sees it; the woman realized the reality of her life and softened her heart. She also realized the reality of the supernatural entity: God is not limited to be worshipped here or there, in Jerusalem or in Gerizim in Samaria. The confrontation between the woman and Jesus showed she was a woman of reason with political mind, ethnic and sectarian discrimination.

She was also a tough woman – so tough. That is why some men are afraid of tough wives. In case, a wife has a black belt on certain kind of martial arts, it is more fearful. However, in the last analysis, the Samaritan woman was not so fearful since she was open-minded, yielding to reason and accepting the truth, although gradually. If she actually tough, she could counter Jesus' revelation of her private life by saying: Do not mind my own business. Facing someone who has moral perception, would elicit respectful consideration and would not invite opposition from others. For instance, when someone wants to attack an opponent who has moral perception, his/her hands and tongue gradually become weakened, unfit for action. Facing Jesus whom the Samaritan woman realized he had moral perception, she realized the reality of her private life and let her heart soften. She also recognized the supernatural reality that God is not limited to any place of worship here or there.

From his request for water, Jesus led the Samaritan woman to open her heart gradually. First, she saw Jesus as a Jewish man, then called him Sir, and then recognized him as a prophet, and eventually the Messiah by saying: *Could he possibly be the Christ?* (Jn 4:29).

Thus, the gospel story shows Jesus came to bring the saving grace not only to the Jewish people, but also to the gentiles through his offering of the living water to the Samaritan woman. The living water, according to Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans, is the love of God, pouring out into our hearts, through the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5).

Prayer asking for the living water:

Oh Lord, my God!

Once upon a time, our ancestors were also gentiles.

Thanks to those missionaries, my ancestors received the gift of faith.

As a result, I myself was granted the gift of the living water.

If I get lost in any area of my faith life,

I ask you to awaken my soul so that I can drink the living water again. Amen.

FAITH BRINGS BACK EYESIGHT

4 Sunday of Lent, Year A

1 Sm 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a; Eph 5:8-14; Jn 9:1-41



At the time of Jesus on earth, many of the Jews, influenced by Plato's philosophy, believed that physical suffering was considered as some sort of punishment from God in retribution for a person's sin or the sin of his/her parents. This idea is similar to the Vietnamese proverb: *Father has eaten salty food, his son is thirsty*. The above Vietnamese proverb is also similar to the proverb, which was recited in Israel: *Fathers have eaten green grapes, thus their children's teeth are on edge* (Jer 31:29; Ez 18:2).

In the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, God uses the mouth of the prophets to question his people why they still recite in the land of Israel that proverb and teaches them each generation is responsible for its actions (Jer 31:30; Ez 18:4). The implication of the Jewish proverb only applies to some hereditary diseases based on physiological causes.

Still in today's Gospel, the Pharisees raised their voice accusing the blind man of sinfulness, either his or his parents. Even Jesus' disciples believed that the man was born blind because of his sin or his parents' sin. Raising his voice, Jesus said the man's blindness since birth was not caused by any body's sin, i.e., Jesus rejected the causal relation in this case. In other word, the Jewish proverb in Jeremiah and Ezekiel's cannot be applied to the blind man from birth.

Then Jesus mixed clay with his saliva and smeared it on his eyes, and told him to go and wash it in the pool of Siloam. In ancient times, saliva was used by physicians both from the East and the West to cure disease. However, to mix saliva with mud seemed to

be strange and unsanitary. Yet, feeling lost and sad due to his being unable to see, the blind man was willing to cooperate with Jesus' way of healing.

After having been healed, a dispute broke out concerning how the blind man was healed. The main role was now played by the blind man. Those who played supporting roles are his neighbors, the Pharisees, the Jews and the blind man's parents. Jesus temporarily withdrew to backstage in order to reappear on the last scene. Among his neighbors, some were surprised at how he was healed; some thought it was not him, but somebody else. The healing was taken place on the Sabbath, a day off work.

Therefore, some Pharisees asked how the blind man was healed. Others said Jesus could not be from God because he did not observe the Sabbath. Still others objected saying how a sinner could do such signs. At this time, a group of Jews entered the scene. They double-checked with the blind man's parents to find out if he was their son and how he was healed?

His parents said their son was old enough to answer that for himself. In fact, they did not want to testify to their son's healing because they were afraid of the Jews who opposed anyone proclaiming Jesus as the Christ. The Jews again accused Jesus of sinning on the Sabbath. The blind man's obvious response made the Jews dumbfounded: *'It is unheard of that anyone ever opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything'* (Jn 9:32-33).

The Jews could not find any reason to reject the simple, yet obvious answer of the blind man. In retaliation, they expelled him from the synagogue. After he had been expelled, Jesus sought him out and said to him if he would believe in the Son of Man. The blind man responded: *'I do believe, Lord'* (Jn 9:37). The process of his profession of faith underwent three stages.

First he saw Jesus as a man, whom people called Jesus (Jn 9:11), then he recognized Jesus as a prophet before the Pharisees (Jn 9:17), and finally he proclaimed Jesus as from God before the

Jews (Jn 9:38). The attitude of the blind man was different from that of the Pharisee. Even though the Pharisees and the Jews acted bossy and threatening, the blind man appeared calm in rebutting their reasoning and accusations.

He also showed courage in proclaiming his faith in Jesus as the Christ without fear of being expelled from the synagogue. For the Pharisees, they could see the blind man's eyes restored to sight, but they did not recognize Jesus' work as from God. They did not realize that Jesus is also Lord of the Sabbath. They also did not know that good works need to be done even on the Sabbath.

Today the book of the prophet Samuel gave us an example of how erroneous human judgment was. Samuel was sent by God to anoint one of Jesse's sons to be king. When looking at the appearance of Eliab, Samuel thought it was he to be anointed. However, God said to Samuel: *'Not as man sees does God see because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart'* (1 Sm16:7).

God wants to share with us his authentic way of seeing and judging things as St Paul told us in his letter to the Ephesians: *'You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light'* (Eph 5:8).

A prayer for the light of faith:

***Lord God, the Almighty,
we thank you for the gift of sight
and the light of faith we received at baptism
through our parents and god-parents.
Teach me to see things in the light of faith.
If I am blinded internally like the Pharisee
grant that I may realize that I am blinded.
To be reflected by the supernatural light from on high,
I can walk in the light of faith. Amen.***

ASKING TO RISE AGAIN WITH JESUS

5 Sunday of Lent, Year A

Ez 37:12-14; Rom 8:8-11; Jn 11:1-45



Bethany was a village located on the foot of the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives about two miles from Jerusalem. It was the home of Marta, Mary and Lazarus. This brother-sister family seemed to be a rather well to do family. That was why the Bethany house was offered to Jesus and his apostles as the guesthouse where they could have room and board free of charge, each time they came to Jerusalem. Mary could afford to buy a pound of costly perfume made from aromatic nard and anointed Jesus' feet and dried them with her hair at her home (Jn 12:3). The two sisters could afford the tomb in a cave with a large stone at the entrance for their brother Lazarus.

According to scripture scholars, this Mary of Bethany was not to be mistaken with Mary Magdalene, or the un-named penitent woman, who also brought in a vase of perfumed oil to anoint Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair at a certain Pharisee's house, named Simon (Lk 7:36-50). When Lazarus was ill, the sisters sent word to Jesus notifying him of his illness, knowing Jesus loved their brother. Yet Jesus stayed where he was for two more days.

Where did he stay? According to the gospel of John, he *went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier (Jn 10:40)*. That place where John baptized was Bethany across the Jordan River (Jn 1:28). Bethany beyond the Jordan River was different from Bethany of Marta, Mary and Lazarus, and is no longer exists. When Jesus arrived, Marta went to meet him saying reproachfully: *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died (Jn 11:21)*. Later on, Mary said exactly the same thing to Jesus if he had arrived early; her brother

would not have died (v.32). Their statement implies Jesus was special to them and their brother and they trusted his power to keep his brother from dying or to raise him to life. Yet he failed to show up earlier.

Therefore, Jesus reassured her that her brother would rise. Marta understood and believed that her brother would rise in the resurrection on the last day. Her belief showed that she had a rather good understanding about Jesus' teaching on the resurrection of the dead. They might have heard that Jesus had raised to life the only son of the widow of Naim (Lk 7:11-16) and the daughter of a synagogue leader named Jairus (Mt 9:18-26; Mk 5:21-43; Lk 8:40-56). In this case, their brother had been dead for four days and had been buried.

So how could he raise him up to life? At that time in Palestine, it was customary to bury a dead person on the same day he died, partly because the climate was hot and there was no way to keep the body from decomposition for a longer period. When Jesus saw Mary and the Jews weep, he *became perturbed and was deeply troubled (Jn 11:33)*. When they showed him the tomb, *Jesus wept (v.35)*.

His weeping suggests Jesus had feeling of a person with a heart touched by the sisters' grief. On the way to the tomb, Marta said to Jesus there would be a stench by now. Regardless of what she and people thought, Jesus still raised his eyes to heaven in prayer, calling out loud to Lazarus, commanding him to come out. Lazarus came out from the tomb alive in body, soul and spirit. To come alive in spirit is what the prophet Ezekiel prophesied to the Israelites who lost their hope in exile like dry bones that God would put his spirit in them (Ez 37:14) to make them come alive. To live in the spirit is what Saint Paul told the Romans: *You are not in the flesh; you are in the spirit (Rom 8:9)*. To live in the spirit means to be alive with the presence of Christ.

Lazarus' resurrection at the command of Jesus foreshadows Jesus' death and resurrection. There is some similarity between the two

deaths and resurrections. However, there is also a big difference between the resurrection of Lazarus and the resurrection of Jesus. Being raised to life is only temporary for Lazarus. Therefore, he had to die once again in order to share a fuller life with the Lord.

So what was the purpose of raising Lazarus to life since he had to die once again? For Jesus, to raise Lazarus to life was to glorify God, to make the Jews and the apostles believe that Jesus was sent by God and to comfort Marta and Mary. The Liturgy of the Word for today about the resurrection of Lazarus should stir up some feeling of hope in us even in the midst of Lent when we meditate the passion and death of Jesus.

Yet Jesus' life and ministry cannot be summed up in his passion and death alone. For this reason, in the liturgical celebration, the Church always reminds us of the resurrection of Jesus. That is why after the consecration, we all proclaim: *We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again.*

Prayer asking for eternal life:

Oh almighty God!

We thank you for creating us with a body and a soul.

May we realize all power of life and death is in your hand.

Grant that people may respect human life including their own.

We pray for those who have died through acts of war and violence, those who have died: unburied and mourned that they may find comfort in your mercy.

***When you call us from this life,
may we inherit the everlasting life. Amen.***

SEEKING TO DO GOD'S WILL

Palm/Passion Sunday, Year A

Is 50:4-7; Pl 2:6-11; Mt 26:14- 27: 66



Palm Sunday, which we are celebrating today, is Jesus' triumphant entry to the city of Jerusalem. His being welcome to Jerusalem was a short-lived glory in his earthly life. The people carried palm branches and praised him: *Hosanna to the son of David; blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord (Mt 21:9)*. They were enthusiastic in welcoming Jesus, for they hoped he would set up a secular kingdom, nationalistic and political.

Although the people were enthusiastic in welcoming him and acclaiming him king, they missed the point. Their intention was they wanted a messiah to help them fight the Romans, making their country rich and strong, capable of driving out the Roman rule. However, when they realized Jesus did not fit into their notion of what a messiah should be, they were ready to crucify him. Therefore, there was another event followed, that is the event of Jesus' passion. That is why today, the Church has the Passion of Christ proclaimed.

It has been learned that after victory, a king or a general returned in his glorious day, rode on an elephant to the city with an imposing bearing. Jesus chose to enter the city of Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. Donkey is a docile animal. Thus, by choosing a donkey as a means to enter the city, Jesus wanted to express his willingness to obey the Father's will. As a servant does his master's will, Jesus identified himself with the faithful servant of Yahweh who was sent to do his Father's will? As a servant says *'I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting (Is 50:6)*, Jesus was willing to let the crowds spit on

his face and hit him (Mt 26:67) and make a fool of him (Mt 27:31). Even though he is God, yet obeys the will of the Father, takes our human nature, suffers, and dies on the cross as a ransom for many.

Therefore, the purpose and mission of the messiah is to do God's will: *My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Still let it be as you would have it, not as I (Mt 26:39).* Saint Paul in his letter to the Philippians tells us about Jesus: *He humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Pl 2:8).* Today each one of us needs to ask, how I have lived according to the will of God?

We are like people in today's gospel when we want religion to change according to our wish, tendencies and interests. Today we are entering the Holy Week. Holy Week is the most important week in the history of salvation, also the most important week in the liturgical year of the Church. In the Holy Week, the Church celebrates the mysteries of salvation, which Jesus accomplished in the final days of his life on earth, from his triumphant entry to the city of Jerusalem to his passion and death on the cross.

In the Holy Week, we reflect our faith experiences: faithful or unfaithful to God. Holy week is a time to find out our weakness and our sins. Am I like Judas or Peter? If we are true to ourselves we have to realize sometime we are like Judas when we sinned, refusing God's grace.

At other times, we are like Peter when we do not want to show that we are Catholics, for fear of being ridiculed. Jesus is about to suffer and die for our sins. How and what can we do to return for his love? On Holy Thursday, we commemorate the institution of the Eucharist for our spiritual nourishment. In order to continue the Eucharist, in order to do it in remembrance of him, Jesus also instituted the priesthood, and washed the feet of the Apostles as a symbol of service. So the Eucharist and the priesthood are inseparable because there can be no Eucharist without the priest. On Good Friday, we commemorate Jesus'

death on the cross for our salvation. On Holy Saturday, we continue to reflect the suffering and death of the Lord in anticipation of his resurrection.

A prayer for living according to God's will:

O Lord our God, your way is the way of wisdom and righteousness.

However, I do not know what you want me to do.

*Enlighten my mind so that I may find your will:
through prayers, listening and reflection.*

*Give me courage and perseverance in following your will
so that like Mary and Joseph with their obedience to your will
I can be sure to go forward in peace. Amen.*

**PASCHALTRIDIUM
YEAR A - B – C**

EUCHARIST UNITES PRIESTHOOD AND SERVICE

Holy Thursday, Year A, B, C

Ex 12:1-8, 11-14; Cor 11:23-26; Jn 13:1-15



This evening of Holy Thursday, Jesus celebrated the last supper with his disciples before his suffering and death on the cross, following the Jewish custom of observing the Passover meal. It was on this occasion of the Passover meal that Jesus celebrated the Passover supper of the New Covenant or the first Eucharist.

The book of Exodus today tells us the meal is a memorial feast, recalling the night the destroying angel passed over the houses of the Israelites, smeared with blood of a lamb on their doorposts as they prepared to flee from Egypt (Ex 12:13).

Saint Paul mentioned this event in his letter to the Corinthians when he told them that on this night, the memorial of the Passover night, Jesus instituted the Eucharist (1Cor 11:23-25).

The Gospel tells us he took bread and turned it into his body and he took a cup of wine and turned it into his blood for our spiritual nourishment (Mt 26:26-29). Thus the first celebration of the Eucharist of the New Covenant, a future deliverance not from physical slavery, but deliverance from sin and death, replaced the Passover meal of the old covenant. In other words, the Eucharist is the Christian Passover meal.

In order to continue the Eucharist, Jesus instituted the sacrament of holy orders, telling the apostles to do it in remembrance of him (1Cor 11:24-25). Thus, Jesus shared his priesthood with them. So when we celebrate Jesus' presence in the Eucharist, we do not just remember what he did in the past, but we make the body and

blood of Christ, who suffered and died for the forgiveness of our sins, present in our midst.

That is exactly what Saint Paul tells us: Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, *you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes (1Cor 11:26)*. At the last supper, Jesus also gave us a beautiful testimony of his loving service by washing the apostles' feet. Washing of feet was a servant's job in Palestine at the time of Jesus. One of the jobs of the servant at that time was to pour water on the guest's feet.

In our time and our country, when we go outside in the summer we sit in our automobile with air conditioning and go inside with air conditioning, we do not want cold water poured on our feet. We even take a hot shower in the air-conditioned house. However, on a hot day walking on sandy ground without shoes, but with sandals and no socks and there is no air conditioning inside, you would feel good, if somebody pours fresh water on your feet.

That was the job of the servant in Palestine at the time of Jesus. That was what Jesus did for the apostles. That is why Peter protested. Jesus prevailed over Peter's reluctance and protest. He insisted on serving and he insists on the apostles serving one another: *You call me teacher and master, and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet (Jn 13:13-14)*. The servant washed the feet of their master's guests for money or for room and board free.

Jesus washed the feet of the apostles out of love. In our days, we do not have servants any longer. People do not wash one another's feet except that parents still wash the feet of their small children. However, there are many different ways to serve.

We are called to serve one another in many different ways as *Jesus came not to be served, but to serve (Mk 10:45)*. In the

garden of Gethsemane, when the apostles all fell asleep, left Jesus alone in his agony, so he asked them: *Could you not stay awake with me for even an hour (Mk 14:37)?*

When mother Theresa of Calcutta was asked how she got her strength to continue her daily work of loving service to poor children of India, she answered: she got her strength from the Lord present in the Eucharist. She spent hours and hours praying before the Blessed Sacrament. In order to continue our daily service in the family for instance, we need to spend time with the Lord in order to get spiritual energy.

The Lord asks us to spend some time with him before the Blessed Sacrament, if not tonight then some time in our lives to see if he is real, if he can be our strength and comfort and hope.

Prayer for spiritual hunger:

Oh Eucharistic Lord!

***Before ascending into heaven,
you instituted the Eucharist***

to remain with us until the end of times.

***In order to continue the Eucharist, you instituted the priesthood
and taught the apostles a humble lesson of service.***

Teach me how to serve with humility.

***May your Body and Blood, which I receive
lead me to eternal life. Amen.***

LOVE TRANSFORMS ONE'S SUFFERING AND CROSS

Good Friday, Year A, B, C

Is 52:13 - 53:12; Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9; Jn 18:1 - 19:42



Good Friday is the day the whole Church commemorates Jesus' passion and death on the cross. In order to participate in his suffering and death, the faithful have been offering prayers, penance such as fasting, abstinence, sacrifice, self-denial and works of charity for the love of God during Lent. Today the Church does not celebrate mass so that the faithful can focus attention on the cross of Christ and his passion and death. The Liturgy of Good Friday consists of three parts: the Liturgy of the Word, Veneration of the Cross and Holy Communion.

The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Saint John today tells us about Jesus' suffering for the sins of humankind from his entry to the garden of Gethsemane for prayer, to the time he was arrested, interrogated, struck and beaten, crowned with thorns, forced to carry the cross and nailed to the cross like a criminal (Jn 18:1-19:42). That was the image of the suffering servant which the book of the prophet of Isaiah is about (Is 53:3-5). By taking away the sins of the world, the suffering servant would justify many people (Is 53:11).

Saint Paul also confirms in his letter to the Hebrews, through his obedience to the will of God the Father, Jesus underwent many sufferings so as to become the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb 5:8-9). In a few moments, we will come forward to venerate the instrument of salvation: the cross of Christ. The cross is a paradox in Christianity. Just before the coming of Christ, people were afraid of the cross because it was a kind of punishment for criminals in the Jewish society. That was

why two criminals were crucified on either side of Jesus. Jesus was sentenced to death as a criminal. Today the cross has become the symbol of love, the symbol of triumph over sin and death. That is why Saint Paul tells the Corinthians: *The message of the cross is complete absurdity to those who are headed for ruin, but to us who are experiencing salvation, it is the power of God (1Cor 1:18)*. For practical application, each Christian family should display the cross at home and should teach children to do the same as to remind family members of the symbol of religion, of the presence of God whom they worship.

That is the way to create a religious atmosphere of faith in the family. If we were angels, we do not need symbols. As a human being with a body, we need symbols to help us meditate on religious mysteries and remind us of God's presence. A certain priest when still in his minor Seminary was taught to put a crucifix beside his pillow to remind him of the mystery of Jesus' suffering. Later on and up until now, the priest concerned still keeps that practice of keeping the crucifix beside his pillow. When there was no cross beside his pillow, he felt missing something important, felt difficult to sleep, and did not have a sound sleep. The Christian cannot believe in Christ, and denies his cross.

He/she must be proud of the cross, a symbol of Christianity. In other words, being proud of the symbol of the cross must be Christian identity. To say so does not mean we stop at the cross. The Christian must go beyond the cross in order to find out the meaning of the cross, which he/she carries: the cross of illness and disease, the cross of anxiety and worrier, the cross of separation and division, the cross of poverty and hunger, the cross of slander and false accusation, the cross of suffering in body and spirit.

Those are the crosses which Jesus wants his disciples to carry when he said: *If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and begin to follow in my footsteps (Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23)*. The Christian does not carry the

cross for the sake of it. He/she does not suffer for the sake of suffering as a dead end. There is a question, which people often ask is the question why. Why did God send his cross to me and my family and let us suffer? For us Christians, suffering is still mysterious, that is, we do not understand it because good and holy people also suffer. Even innocent children also suffer with sickness and disease. By accepting his suffering and cross for the salvation of humankind, Jesus brought meaning and purpose to suffering and cross.

Saint John Newman once put it in writing: *The cross of Christ calls all human values into question by revealing a love powerful enough to bridge the terrible gap between life and death.* Saint Augustine recognized the effect of love when he wrote: Where there is love, there will be no more hardship, and if there is still hardship, that hardship will be accepted with love. Saint Augustine meant when we season our work with love, i.e., when we do thing for the love of God, our work will become easier, more meaningful for our lives and beneficial to our soul.

Prayer to find meaning for the cross and suffering:

***Oh merciful Lord Jesus!
For the love of sinful humankind,
you accepted suffering and death
on the cross for the salvation of souls.
Teach me to respond to your love
by carrying my daily cross out of love
as to partake of your glorious resurrection. Amen.***

CELEBRATING THE RISEN CHRIST & CONGRATULATING THE NEWLY BAPTIZED

Easter Vigil, Year A, B, C

Gen 1:1-2:2; Gen 22:1-18; Ex 14:15-15:1; Is 54:5-14; Is 55:1-11;
Bar 3:9-15,32 –4:4; Ez 36:16-17a, 18-28; Rom 6:3-11; Mt 28:1-10



If anyone asks whom God, is? One can hears different answers such as: God is the maker of heaven and earth, humankind and living things; God is the regulator of the universe, controller of the human and animal lives; God rewards the good and punishes the bad. That is also the common view of the Vietnamese people on ‘Trời’ (Heaven). *When understood in this sense, the Vietnamese often add a title ‘Mister’ before heaven, called ‘Ông Trời’ (Mr Heaven).*

The common view of the Vietnamese on Heaven also circulates folk verses such as *May Heaven rain down for my drink, till my land, that I may eat and have straw for cooking.* That Heaven of the common Vietnamese folk is in a sense God of the Christians.

One thing different is the Catholic know more about the God whom they worship through his revelation to them thanks to his prophets in the bible. Finally, the Son of God came down from heaven to save humankind, teaching his disciples. Due to the original sin of man’s first parents, sin came to the world and descendants have to suffer from the Original sin.

To save humankind, God sent his only Son to the world, born of the virgin, named Jesus. Jesus was anointed to be the Christ, preached the gospel of salvation for three years about God’s kingdom, about love, forgiveness and charity. He used his divine power to perform miracles such as to give sight to the blind, make the dead hear, the mute speak, the crippled healed, to give

food to the hungry and water to the thirsty so that people may believe in him. Not to accept his way and his message, the contemporary Jewish authorities decided to persecute, crucify and condemn him to death. On the third day, he rose from the dead as he had predicted (Mt 16:21; Mt 17:23; Mt 20:19; Mk 8:31; Mk 9:31; Mk 10:34; Lk 9:22; Lk 18:33; Jn 2:19).

To build up his kingdom on earth, Jesus took twelve selected apostles, sent them to preach the gospel of salvation and testified to his resurrection by their deaths. Whichever way people want to define God, let them do so. As for John the apostle, he defines God in short, not wordy, but in a meaningful way: *God is love (1Jn 4:8)*. Indeed out of his love, God has done all the above things.

Today we gather ourselves in the church to celebrate the risen Christ. Through death to sin in Lent, the faithful are risen in grace with God. Today the Church also celebrates with the newly baptized in their rebirth in water and spirit in the sacrament of baptism.

To newly baptized brothers and sisters!

You have been instructed on the Catholic faith from last September. From the beginning of Lent, you have been elected to continue to study the Catholic faith. During Lent, with the whole church, you have prayed, made sacrifices in preparation to rise with the risen Christ.

Today you are gathering here to share the joy with the risen Christ by asking to be born in grace through the sacrament of baptism. For those whose spouse is already Catholic, then from now on you both will see in the same direction, follow the same spiritual goal.

You will aim at an integral love, total and lasting happiness. The integral love is a faithful love. Total happiness is happiness in material, emotional and spiritual life. Lasting happiness is happiness in this life and in the life to come.

Accepting faith in the Catholic Church does not mean you have to cut off your past relationship. If in the past, you were accustomed to make offerings to your ancestors, grandparents and parents on their death anniversaries, and then from now on you have duty to be filial to them by praying for them. That is the Fourth Commandment of Christianity. To specify a filial piety, today you are asked to give thanks to God for your parents who gave you birth and education and gave you freedom to adopt the Catholic faith.

Accepting the Catholic faith does not mean that from now on, you will never be lonely and sad. At times, you will feel lonely and sad. However, from now on, you will have God to travel with you on all your ways. God will be your reason to live and to die. God will be your light, your strength, your hope, your comfort and your salvation. From now on, God will be your heritage. You can come to God any time because God does not need to rest. You do not need to telephone him to find out if he is at home. You do not need to wait for your turn because he has been seeing someone else more important.

God is not partial to anyone. Before God, all people are equal. From now on, you can come to God anywhere because God is everywhere. To come to God privately and suddenly as such, you do not need to prepare such as to put on clothing or redo your make up. You will experience God's love as real, not distant, but near to you, if you open your heart to him and let him enter your life personally. From now on, you do not live and work by yourself, but live and work in union with God and for the love of God. That is what Saint Paul affirmed in his letter to the Galatians: *The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me (Gal 2:20)*.

Accepting the Catholic faith does not mean that faith is something that you can hold fast in your hands, or put it in a deposit box in the bank, or in a clay jar for burial, but you have to find ways to preserve it. Sometimes you would experience your weakness of faith, hours of desperation, days and months of

darkness and doubt like Saint Thomas who doubted about his master's resurrection (Jn 20:25). Other times, you would feel as if God is absent or no longer exists. However, like Mary of Magdala (Mk 16:1-8), Saint Peter and Saint John who still had to look for God (Jn 20:3-9) when darkness covered their minds, you also need to continue to look for God even when you feel discouraged and desperate.

My brothers and sisters! God is still there to wait for you. God still comes to you in your daily life when you eat, work and rest. God is still present in you through the wonders of the universe, the beauty of nature. It is necessary that we learn to be aware of his presence as to recognize his voice.

Prayer asking for rising in spirit with the risen Lord:

Oh Risen Chris!

We thank you for this day,

the day of the resurrection of your Son from the dead.

***During Lent, we have prayed, fasted, repented
and performed works of charity.***

At this mass, we just renewed our promise of baptism

to be ready to die to sin

as to rise in grace with you. Amen.

ASKING TO RISE IN GRACE WITH THE RISEN CHRIST

Easter Sunday, Year A

Acts 10:34a, 37-43; Col 3:1-4; Jn 20:1-9



When the guards of the tomb of Jesus were terrified, reporting everything that had happened such as a violent earthquake, the chief priests immediately met with the elders and made their plan of action. They gave a large bribe to the guards with the

instructions:

'You are to say: His disciples came during the night and stole him while we were asleep' (Mt 28:12-13). Suppose his disciples came and stole his body, or anybody did so, then reported Jesus had risen, then it would be a fraud.

However, there is a question in our mind here. If his body were stolen when the guards were on the watch, then robbers would have to act in a hurry. How could they have enough time to roll up the head cloth and put them in a place separated from the burial cloths? Seeing such signs, John due to his special love for Jesus, possessed a keen intuition of his master's resurrection. Anyway, we cannot conclude that Jesus rose from the dead on the basis of the empty tomb alone.

The apostles believed in the resurrection not just, because they found the tomb empty, but because Jesus appeared to them, ate and drank with them and conversed with them. According to the gospel of Matthew, Jesus first appeared to Mary of Magdala and another Mary, saying: *Do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.* (Mt 28:10).

The apostles then went to the mountain of Galilee and *'saw him, they worshipped.'* (Mt 28:17). The gospel of Mark tells us: *He appeared first to Mary of Magdala (Mk 16:9).* Jesus also

appeared in another form to two of them, walking along on their way to the country (Mk 16:12). Finally he appeared to the eleven (Mk 16:14). The gospel of Luke tells us about the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, unable to recognize their master at first when he appeared to them, conversing with them.

When they invited the stranger home, Jesus broke the bread during a meal, then *their eyes were open and they recognized him (Lk 24:31).* The two disciples returned to Jerusalem, seeing the Eleven and were told that Jesus *has appeared to Simon (Lk 24:34).* When they were still speaking, Jesus appeared to them saying: *Peace be with you (Lk 24:36).*

They thought they saw a ghost, Jesus reassured them, telling them to observe his feet and hands (Lk 24:36-38). When he ascended to heaven, *he let them out as far as Bethany, raised his hands and blessed them (Lk 24:50).*

Finally, the gospel of John tells us Jesus appeared to Mary of Magdala, calling her by name: *Mary (Jn 20:16).* Then he appeared to his disciples and said: *Peace be with you (Jn 20:19).*

Eight days later, Jesus appeared to his apostles and wished them peace, then told Thomas to put his hand into his side and not to be unbelieving (Jn 20:26-27). Afterwards Jesus appeared to his disciples at the sea of Tiberias (Jn 21:1) and gave Peter the responsibility of feeding his sheep (Jn 21:17). We believe in the resurrection because he has done wonders in the apostles.

The apostles were simple folks, mostly fishermen with little education, could not make big plans and strategies to deceive the world. In the courtyard of the high priest Caiaphas and in the praetorian of the procurator Pilate, the apostles were timid like chicken. What was the motive behind the changes in the apostles? That motive was the fact that the apostles saw Jesus after the resurrection. They touched his body (Lk 24:39), ate and drank with him (Acts 10:41). They received command from Jesus to preach the good news of the resurrection. The risen Lord also appeared to Paul, questioning him: *Saul, Saul, why do you*

persecute me (Acts 22:7), making him change completely. Before, Paul was a fanatic persecutor of Christians. After his conversion, Paul became a zealous preacher of the gospel.

Seeing the risen Lord, the apostles were ready to accept threat and danger on their missionary journey, willing to be persecuted, to be crucified and die on the cross as their master was. According to the Acts of the Apostles: *The Apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4)* and stood up with Peter, addressing the crowd (Acts 2:14), and with power from the Lord, they testified to his resurrection (Acts 4:33), and performed many miracles for people to see (Acts 5:12).

Today not only the Catholic Church celebrates Easter, but also the Christians around world do. Orthodox churches also celebrate Easter but on a different day. Easter is the biggest, the most important feast for Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox Christians. Easter must be the basis of our Christian faith. It is so as Saint Paul wrote: *If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is void of content, and your faith is empty too (1Cr 15:14)*. Based on the words of Saint Paul, we can say further: If Christ has not risen from the tomb, my preaching is in vain. If Christ has not risen from the dead, your listening to me is a waste of time.

A prayer for rising in grace with the risen Christ:

O risen Christ, during the Lenten season.

***I was reminded to live the spirit of lent
by prayers, fast, abstinence, sacrifice and self- denial
along with works of charity.***

***I also was advised to die to sin and vices
such as greed, selfishness, infatuation, laziness, pride and hate
by confession, act of contrition and penance.***

***Now I desire to rise again in grace with you
so that I may experience the presence of your risen life. Amen.***

EASTER SEASON

BELIEVING IS TO TRUST THOSE TRUSTWORTHY

2 Sunday of Easter, Year A

Acts 2:42-47; 1Pt 1:3-9; Jn 20:19-31



When Mary of Magdala and the women went back to tell the apostles about the empty tomb and the appearance of the angels who told them to carry the good news to the apostles, they thought it was the product of women's imagination (Mk 16:11; Lk 24:11).

Possibly, the apostles were influenced by the Jewish law at that time, not accepting the witnesses of women in court. That was why they did not take the women's report on Jesus' resurrection seriously in their community of discipleship. John was the only one who believed that his master had risen when he saw the empty tomb and the head cloth rolled up lying separately from the wrappings.

The death of Jesus was a bombshell to the Apostles, destroying all their hope. In three years of their discipleship, the apostles heard Jesus predicting he would suffer and die and rise on the third day (Mt 16:21; Mt 17:23; Mt 20:19; Mk 8:31; Mk 9:31; Mk 10:34; Lk 9:22; Lk 18:33; Jn 2:19) according to the Old Testament scripture. They still did not understand the meaning of his word of prediction about his resurrection (Ps 16:10, Hos 6:2). They also witnessed his power through his miracles, yet they did not keep in mind. When they were praying in their locked room for fear of the Jews, Jesus appeared to them and said: *Peace be with you (Jn 20:19)*. This time Thomas was absent. When the Apostles told Thomas about their master's appearance to them, he refused to believe. He demanded to see the Lord, to hear his voice, to touch the nail marks on his body, before he could believe in his resurrection. Thomas was a practical and pragmatic man. Once Jesus said he would go and prepare a place for them, Thomas questioned Jesus that they would not know where he

would be going. So how could they know the way (Jn 14:5)? We might blame Thomas for his persistent unbelief of Christ's resurrection.

However, Thomas doubted on this one occasion only. After Jesus had personally appeared to him, Thomas made his profession of faith personally, firmly and resolutely: *My Lord and my God* (Jn 20:28). His profession of faith was worthy to be an example and to be repeated hundreds, thousands of times for those who are doubtful about Jesus' resurrection.

In our times of experimental science and technology, people want to verify all hypotheses. However, faith is not a science. Faith is a gift from God. Faith is not something we can hold fast in our hands, put in a deposit box in the bank, or bury in the ground. It is something that we have to find ways to maintain. Since faith is a gift from God, we do not need to rely on reason to understand what we believe, because faith and understanding are on two different levels.

We cannot use our limited reason to understand the mysteries of religion such as the mystery of the Trinity, the mystery of the incarnation, the mystery of the resurrection, but only to accept them with faith. Suppose we can understand a mystery of religion, then what is called religion is no longer a religion, but merely a system of philosophy or science. The question here is why we do not understand, yet we believe? To believe means to trust those who are trustworthy. We believe in the resurrection of Christ because we rely on scripture, on Jesus' appearances to the apostles, on the witnesses of the apostles to his resurrection. We believe in the resurrection of Christ because we rely on millions and millions of other Christians in the world, who have followed the risen Lord faithfully day by day. In the Jewish court at that time, women could not act as witnesses. Thus, the witness of Mary of Magdala was invalid. In any time, people consider one witness as no witness: *Testis unus, testis nullus*. In this case, there were eleven apostles as witnesses and two more witnesses of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:35). The ten apostles accepted death to bear witness to their master's resurrection.

Yet, to believe in God does not mean that there is no more problem of life. Thus, we can see people with strong faith, but still face difficulties in life: diseases and sufferings in body and mind, spirit and soul. Faith should help us face illnesses, diseases and difficulties in daily life. Faith has entered our lives gradually. With daily observation, we realize God leads us step-by-step and day-by-day through different paths of life from infancy through adulthood, to old age, sometimes it's smooth, other times it is rough.

Today is the Divine Mercy Sunday. In 1931, Jesus appeared to Saint Faustina Kowalska, a Polish nun, telling her to spread devotion to his divine mercy. Jesus further asked that a Novena to the Divine Mercy be made beginning on Good Friday. On each day of the novena, the Divine Mercy chaplet is prayed on ordinary rosary beads. A prayer to the Divine Mercy is repeated like Hail Mary: *For the sake of His Sorrowful Passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world.*

A prayer of the first day of the Divine Mercy Novena Chaplet [1]

Most Merciful Jesus, whose very nature it is to have compassion on us and to forgive us, do not look upon our sins but upon our trust which we place in Your infinite goodness.

Receive us all into the abode of Your Most Compassionate Heart, and never let us escape from it.

We beg this of you by Your love which unites You to the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Eternal Father, turn Your merciful gaze upon all mankind and especially poor sinners, all enfolded in the Most Compassionate Heart of Jesus.

For the sake of His sorrowful Passion show us Your mercy, that we may praise the omnipotence of your mercy for ever and ever. Amen.

[1]. *The Divine Mercy Message and Devotion. Revised edition with selected Prayers from the Diary of St. Maria Faustina Kowalska. Fr. Seraphim Michalenko, MIC with Vinny Flynn and Robert A. Stackpole. Marian Press. Stockbridge, MA 01262*

RECOGNIZING GOD'S PRESENCE

3 Sunday of Easter, Year A

Acts 2:14, 22-33; 1Pt 1:17-21; Lk 24:13-35



The passion and death of Jesus on the cross was a heavy blow not only to the apostles, but also to his disciples. On that Sunday morning, two disciples abandoning their calling, returned to their native village, called Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem.

Although Jesus had told them about his impending death and resurrection, they still did not understand.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus tried to search scripture for some explanation of the Good Friday tragedy. Along the way, someone came along, conversed with them saying: *Did not the Messiah have to undergo all this as to enter into his glory? Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted for them every passage of scripture which referred to him (Lk 24:26-27).*

They travelled several miles with Jesus to Emmaus, conversing with him, yet they did not recognize him. The reason for that is they had their own idea about the messiah. Perhaps, from now on, they thought there would be no hope for a possible position in his kingdom. They locked themselves in self-pity at the crucifixion of the Lord on Good Friday.

Their sadness and despair so clouded their minds that they could not transcend themselves. The situation that made the disciples unable to recognize Jesus was similar to the situation when Mary of Magdala and the apostles did not recognize the risen Lord at first (Jn 20:14; Jn 21:4; Lk 24:37). Why was that so? The first reason was the apostles did not expect with faith his resurrection as Jesus had predicted. The second reason according to Saint Mark was when appearing to the apostles/disciples: *He was revealed to them completely changed in appearance (Mk*

16:12). Certainly the changed appearance was not because he was unable to eat for three days and thus lost his weight. Saint Paul explained the difference in Jesus' resurrected body as follows: *A natural body is put down and a spiritual body comes up (1 Cor 15:44).*

Jesus' conversation with them on the road made their hearts burning (Lk 24:32), yet they failed to recognize him until they invited him to their home for an overnight stay. At the meal when he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them (v.30), then their eyes were open and they recognized him. Immediately they returned to Jerusalem to inform the apostles of the master's resurrection and appearance to them. They found out the apostles were also convincing of Christ's resurrection.

Among the eleven apostles, there was Thomas who was skeptical of Jesus' resurrection when the other apostles told them about their master's resurrection. Jesus had to appear directly to him so that Thomas could see the nail-marks in his hands and put his hand into his side. Among seventy-two disciples, there were Cleopas and the other disciple who were also unbelieving in their master's resurrection, when Mary of Magdala and some other women announced to them that they found the tomb empty and that an angel of the Lord appeared to them and told them about Jesus' resurrection. The risen Christ had to appear to them on the road to Emmaus, interpreted to them those scripture passages referred to him.

Preaching the risen Christ was so essential a message at the early church that Christ did not want his apostles and his disciples to be doubtful of his resurrection. That was why Jesus let Thomas examine the nail-marks in his hands and the wound at his side so that he could be able to express his powerful profession of faith: *My Lord and my God (Jn 20:28)*. Recognizing the risen Lord at the breaking of bread, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus *set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them (Lk 24:33)* so as to share the joy of his resurrection.

Perhaps we have faced situations similar to that of the two disciples. Did we ever doubt God's presence in our lives? Were we afraid of dark future? Were we desperate about corrupt practices in society and scandals in the Church? When we face winds and storms of life, our minds are clouded that we are unable to recognize God's presence and his foot-prints. When we are burdened with anxiety and worrier, doubt and confusion, fear and despair, we cannot go beyond ourselves. In order to be able to recognize God's presence, we need to eliminate those obstacles from our lives and open our minds and hearts to the spiritual and supernatural domain. We need to be attentive to the word of God and the Eucharist. Every day of our lives, we are surrounded by the footprints of God and his works of creation. We need to teach ourselves to be aware of his presence.

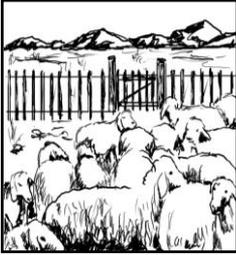
A prayer for being aware of God's presence:

*O risen Lord, we thank you for your coming into the world,
to suffer and die on the cross for our sins
as to save us from the condemnation of the original sin.
We thank you for your promise
to remain with us until the end of time.
Free me from anxiety and doubt, confusion and fear
so that I may be aware of your presence in my life,
in the scripture I read, in the sacraments I receive,
in the poor, the sick, the lonely and the suffering,
in the work of your creation and the wonder of the universe
and may be sure to go forward in your presence. Amen.*

ASKING TO REMAIN IN THE SHEEPFOLD

4 Sunday of Easter, Year A

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; 1Pt 2:20b-25; Jn 10:1-10



The Jews of the Old Testament were a pastoral people. Their literature, that is the Old Testament books, often mentioned pastoral images like sheep, goat, shepherd, wheat and weeds, sparrow, mustard seed, vine, grape and vine grower. Shepherding in the ancient times was a hard work. Sheep needed a shepherd's care taking and protection. First, a shepherd had to know his sheep: which one belonged to his flock; which one was sick; which one was missing. Then, a shepherd had to feed his sheep. He had to lead them to streams of water to drink, to a meadow to graze and to keep them from poisonous weeds.

Finally, a shepherd had to protect his sheep from the dangers of wolves and dangerous cliffs. At night, the shepherds often led their flocks to gather in an enclosed area with one opening for safety's sake. In that way, they could help one another to defend their flocks from wild animals and to support one another. At dawn, the shepherds led their flocks out to the meadows, and the sheep followed their own shepherd's voice.

At the time of Jesus, sheep were useful for family economy. The sheep furnished milk, butter and cheese. Sheep hair furnished wool clothing. Sheep were used as animal sacrifice in the Old Testament. Sheep was Jesus' favorite animal. Jesus considered himself as a lamb, coming to be a sacrificial offering as a ransom for the sins of humankind. For practical application, to commemorate the Jewish Passover meal in the Old Testament, chosen to be the background of Jesus' Last Supper with his apostles in the New Testament, the faithful might want to eat lamb meat on Holy Thursday. Lamb roasted in the oven or grilled on a charcoal fire served with mint sauce provides a good meal.

However, sheep are meek, weak and slow, vulnerable to attack by other animals. The sheep have no horns and tusks to attack; no pointed canine teeth and fangs to bite; no sharp claws to catch and seize. When attacked, the sheep cannot back-kick like a buffalo or horse because of their short and weak legs. They cannot run fast like a rabbit, or jump to a tree branch like a monkey to escape. Besides, sheep cry like a baby: be-e-e, not frightening at all to other animals. They speak the same language everywhere, not like people.

In the Gospel today, Jesus calls himself shepherd of the sheep. He also calls himself the gate of the sheepfold, saying: *I am the sheep-gate. All who came before me were thieves and marauders whom the sheep did not heed (Jn 10:7- 8)*. The books of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea and Micah identify the false prophets as thieves and robbers. Thus, to enter through the sheep-gate is to enter through the Church, through the organizational and hierarchic structure of the Church. As the sheep need to stay in the sheepfold in order to be protected from wolves, the faithful also need to stay in the Church as to be protected and nourished by the Word of God and the Body of Christ.

To be separated from the Church, the faithful will be scattered and attacked. The history of the Church has proved that if the faithful did not stay in the church, which Christ himself instituted, they would continue to break up into different denominations. As the sheep need to stay inside the sheepfold to be nourished, the faithful need to stay in the Church so that parish priests may know them and different pastoral needs and offer them with counseling and prayers.

Jesus appointed the apostles to be pastors to take care of the pastoral needs of his faithful. Even though the apostles and their successors as well as collaborators were those, who still carried within them weakness and sinfulness, Jesus promised to be with the Church until the end of times (Mt 28:20). Jesus founded the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that the teaching

of the Church may be reflected by the truth. The purpose of founding the Church was to maintain the communion of faith and the unity of Christians. If not, it would be like what Jesus said: *They were like sheep without a shepherd (Mt 9:36).*

Christ's Church is a pilgrim church. A pilgrim church means a constantly self-renewing church, finding new ways to cope with new problems and new challenges, purifying it from abuses and imperfections and seeking always the truth. Throughout the history of the Church, the Church has gone through different periods of history: sometimes it was up; sometimes it was down; sometimes it had a golden period; other times it had dark days due to weaknesses and abuses by individual members. Since the foundation of the Church, anti-Catholic forces always took advantage of weak points in the Church to attack the Church. Happily, Jesus guaranteed Peter: *On this rock, I will be my church and the jaws of death shall not prevail against it (Mt 16:18).*

A prayer asking to stay in the sheepfold:

***Oh Lord Jesus Chris! The supreme shepherd and sheep-gate.
We thank you for having founded the church as the sheepfold.
Protect those whom you appointed shepherds,
to take care of the sheep.
Keep them from personal ambition and disobedience,
lest they disperse sheep through breach of rules
or to take sheep out of your sheepfold.
Grant that I may recognize your voice
and remain in the sheepfold as to be protected and nourished
with your word and the Eucharist and the official teaching of
the Church, which you founded on the rock of Peter:
one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Amen.***

FOLLOWING JESUS WHO IS THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE.

5 Sunday of Easter, Year A

Acts 6:1-7; 1Pt 2:4-9; Jn 14:1-12



Jesus' farewell message to his apostles at the Last supper gave them a feeling of anxiety and fear. Therefore, in today's gospel, he tries to calm their anxiety and fear, saying: *Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me (Jn 14:1).* Through

the Apostles, Jesus also wants us to put our faith and trust in Him, in his word and his providential care. Trust is something we can learn from experience. When we have to face difficulties and problems of life, we feel as if God is absent and we ask ourselves why God would let bad things happen to our family and us.

However if we look at things happened with the eyes of faith, we can see difficulties and problems of life can help us come closer to God in prayers. Then with times passed, we learn to put our faith and trust in him. Bidding farewell to the apostles for heaven, Jesus did not abandon them, but promised to stay with them with grace and spiritual power until the end of times. Jesus also promised them, saying: *I will come back again and take you to me, so that where I am, you also may be. Where I am going, you know the way (Jn 14:3-4).*

At this, Thomas said to him that he did not know the way. Jesus replied: *I am the way and the truth and the life (Jn 14:6).* Reading the bible, we can see Thomas is always a practical and pragmatic man. On another occasion, when the other apostles told him Jesus had risen and appeared to them, Thomas refused to believe. He insisted that he should put his finger into the nail-marks and his hand into his side before he could believe. Thomas' problem reflects the ignorance of the other apostles about the perfect

union of Jesus with God the Father. They have been with Jesus for three years: listening to his teaching, witnessing his miracles. Yet, they have not come to realize that through Jesus, they could come to know and see God the Father. Philip has a similar problem as Thomas does. Philip asks Jesus to show him the Father. Jesus told Philip he had seen God the Father through seeing the Son.

For forty years wandering through the Sinai desert, Moses tried to find his way [1] to bring God's people to the Promised Land. Now Jesus confirms he himself is the way. His way is the way of the Gospel. If we lose our way and miss our direction, Jesus promised to show us the way to the Father if we come to him for help. For many centuries, many philosophers and scholars have tried to seek truth [2].

Now Jesus said he is the truth. The concept of revealed truth is found in the gospel. For many generations, Chinese and Egyptian emperors and empresses have tried life-long medication to prolong life indefinitely. Now Jesus said he is the resurrection and the life (Jn 11:25).

To inherit the everlasting life, we have to follow the way of the Lord, and to seek his truth. The way of the Lord is the way of the Gospel. That is why Christianity at the times of the apostles is simply called *the way* (Acts 9:2; 18:25; 24:22). Saint Paul substitutes what is considered to be truth in the Law by the Jews for *the truth of the gospel* (Gal 2:5, 14). In the gospel, Jesus teaches the truth not only by his words but also by his examples. Jesus possesses life from the beginning (Jn 1:4). In his death, he gives his life so that in his resurrection he becomes a life-giving spirit (1Cor 15:45).

Thomas à Kempis of the middle Ages, in his book titled *Imitation of Christ* put those words back into Jesus' mouth: *I am the way you must follow, the truth you must believe, and the life you must hope.*

A prayer asking to inherit eternal life:

***Oh risen Christ! You are the way, the truth and the life.
I offer to you my difficulties and problems of life.
When I am in the midst of the crossroads,
when I abandon the way of piety and justice,
show me the way I must follow,
and lead me back to the right path.
When I am confused about the teaching of the Gospel,
show me the truth which I must seek
so that I may inherit the everlasting life. Amen.***

[1]. According to Thomas L. Kemp. *Homilies on the Sunday Gospels*.
Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Inc. 1976, p. 44.

[2]. *Ibid*

BELIEVING IN JESUS'S PROMISE TO SEND HIS SPIRIT

6 Sunday of Easter, Year A

Acts 8:5-8, 14-17; 1Pet 3:15-18; Jn 14:15-21



When still on earth, Jesus was present physically and sensibly with his disciples. However, when he left them for heaven, a new presence was necessary as he said: *I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always (Jn 14:16).*

These were the consoling and encouraging words to the disciples. Jesus knew that very soon the Apostles would find themselves alone in the world; they would be exposed to the hatred of the world; they would be persecuted, imprisoned and put to death. Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit was to prepare the Apostles to receive the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday.

His promise to send out his Spirit had to be words of assurance since he never broke his promises. His promise to send the Holy Spirit was fulfilled in the faithful of the early Church. When the Apostles at Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. Peter and John *went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for it had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15-17).*

Later on, we the faithful received the Holy Spirit when we were confirmed. When baptized, we already received the Holy Spirit. At confirmation, we received the Holy Spirit in a fuller and more abundant way.

God comes to us in his Spirit and remains with us in his Spirit. To be present in the Spirit is the way God is present in the

Church and in the Christian. To see in the eye of man, we do not see the Spirit. In order to see in the Spirit, we need the eye of faith. The faith that is enlightened by the Spirit will help us see a reality different from the reality of the world for the reason that grace does not depend on experiment. Neither grace can be perceived by our senses.

When we see a strange phenomenon, that phenomenon may come from the Holy Spirit, or from the devil [1] or from a magician or from human imagination. Therefore, we need to rely on faith to differentiate which phenomenon is from the Holy Spirit; which is from the devil and which is from human magic or imagination. To speak as such does not mean that there are no longer miracles in our days.

With the eye of faith, we can still see numerous miracles happening in our world and around us. Reading the bible, especially the Acts of the Apostles, we see the activity of the Holy Spirit at work in the apostles and in the early church. The power of the Holy Spirit has changed the apostles from timid followers into enthusiastic instruments of the Gospel. The grace of the Holy Spirit also acted upon the hearers, who were ready to accept the faith in Jesus Christ and did apostolic works for the kingdom of God.

It is the same Spirit that, moves the faithful to respond to Jesus. Compared to the way of life and the apostolic activities of the early Christians, some people think their era is not era of the Holy Spirit, because they have not experienced the activity of the Holy Spirit in their lives, and they have not seen great wonders of the Holy Spirit at work in the church.

If people say, their era is not the era of the Holy Spirit, then Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit would be an empty promise or it would mean the Holy Spirit would come for a certain period of time and then go away, and then come back again. Theologically speaking, that is not the case. Scripture tells us God is always faithful to his covenant with humankind.

When we do not see the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us, it is because we put obstacles in our lives. Obstacles we are talking about here are sins and vices. We do not see the activity of the Holy Spirit at work in us because we have stifled the activity of the Holy Spirit. Besides, Catholics are familiar with concrete images. We often see the statue of Jesus in his human figure with authority, and the statue of Mary, graceful and lovely.

Yet we do not see any statue of the Holy Spirit in a human figure. We only see the Holy Spirit symbolically, as in a figure of a dove or fire. Therefore, it is hard for us to figure out the Holy Spirit because we do not get used to what is abstract. It is also hard for us to pray to the Holy Spirit in abstract.

So today let us be assured that every era is the era of the Holy Spirit if we know how to open ourselves to the Spirit of God and cooperate with his grace by responding to God's everyday invitation in our everyday life.

A prayer for the grace of the Holy Spirit:

***O risen Christ, we thank you for having revealed to us
the third Person of the Blessed Trinity.
We ask you to fulfill your promise to send your Spirit
Grant that I may love you by keeping your commandments
by getting rid of obstacles from my life
so that the grace of the Holy Spirit may activate
my heart, my soul and my life.
Help me recognize where your Spirit is. Amen.***

[1]. Carr, W.M. (ed). *Instructions for Lectors and Commentators. Quincy, Illinois: Sunday Missal Service, May 1987. p. 22.*

PRAYING FOR THE GLORY OF HIS NAME

7 Sunday of Easter, Year A

Acts 1:12-14; 1Pt 4:13-16; Jn 17:1-11a



Reading the bible, we can see Jesus frequently prayed in order to be united with God the Father. Today's Gospel records the beautiful prayer of consecration of Jesus. Facing the prospect of the crucifixion, Jesus raised his eyes towards heaven praying:

Father, the hour has come! Give glory to your Son that your Son may give glory to you (Jn 17:1). When the hour of crucifixion and resurrection was near, Jesus prayed for the readiness to obey his Father's will in order to fulfill his mission on earth by accepting crucifixion on the cross as a price for the redemption of humankind.

When humankind inherits everlasting life, God the Father will be glorified. Up to this point, Jesus has obeyed the will of the Father: he was born and lived among human beings, gave good examples and taught them, cured sickness and disease. His obedience to God's will was affirmed in his consecrating prayer: *I have given you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do (Jn 17:4).* How his prayer had immediate effect on the apostles! The Acts of the Apostles records: *Together they devoted themselves to constant prayer. There were some women in their company, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers (Acts 1:14).* Within a week, the apostles witnessed many different events. They saw the crowds profess Jesus as the Savior. They witnessed the crucifixion of their master. They returned to live in an atmosphere of reflection and prayer, along with Mary to pray for the coming down of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus sets an example of prayer for the apostles so that they can follow. He always prays for us and with us as he said: *Where two*

or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst (Mt 18:20). The essential point of Jesus' consecrating prayer was to glorify God the Father. To glorify God the Father is to make men inherit everlasting life. His prayer is to make men know God as the only one and true God and the one whom he sent, that is the Christ (Jn 13:7). To know in a biblical sense is a profound knowledge rather than to know about. In the Our Father, Jesus taught us pray for his name known, his kingdom come and his will to be done on earth and in heaven.

However, when praying, perhaps we only ask: we ask too much for our family, our relatives, and ourselves without asking for the glorification of God's name. We also complain about God and blame him or we complain about our lot.

Our relationship with God may be compared to that of our own father. If we exercise our filial piety, our father will take care of us. Did we ever pray as Jesus did in glorifying God's name? We might say yes because we have prayed the Our Father, asking for the glorification of his name. However, were we aware of the meaning of our prayer for the glorification of his name, or did we read it in a mechanical way? Jesus did give glory to God the Father by his obedience to the Father, to suffer and die on the cross. So where are our concrete works to prove that we do seek God's glorification?

Our prayers should help us discover God's presence in his people, especially the poor, handicapped and suffering. Our prayers should help us discover God's presence in his work of his creation, in plants and flowers, in the sky and the ocean. In our prayer, we should give glory to God, to follow his will, not just to ask for favor. Before the natural beauty and the wonders of the universe, we should ask whether God's hands are in there.

The liturgy of the word today should remind us to ask for the grace to become people of prayer. Our prayer should help us enrich our relationship with God. How do we increase our relationship with God if we do not pray or converse with Him?

With the apostles, we ask Jesus to teach us how to pray so that our prayers may become fragrant incense rising before God's throne, pleasing to him and acceptable to him.

A prayer asking for God's name to be hallowed:

Oh Lord Jesus Christ!

We thank you for revealing to us your beautiful consecrating prayer expressing the closeness between you and the Father.

You also taught us to pray in the Our Father for glorification of the Father's name.

Teach me how to pray and live for the Father's name to be glorified instead of saying the prayer in a mechanical way. Amen.

I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS UNTIL THE END OF THE AGE

Ascension of the Lord, Year A

Acts 1:1-11; Eph 1:17-23; Mt 28:16-20



A farewell message is often rich in meaning and deep in sentiment. The one who is leaving tends to tell the one who is staying what is the most important and can be helpful to the one, who stays to remember. Oftentimes we think death is the last farewell. However, Jesus' farewell message to the apostles was not his crucifixion and death, but his Ascension. Yet the Ascension was not really the farewell either since Jesus promised to be with the apostles until the end of time. We have the impression that Jesus' Ascension into heaven was the end of his life and activity on earth.

Yet it is not true. In the prologue of the Gospel of Matthew, it was recorded: *The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son and they shall call him Emmanuel, which means God-is-with-us* (Mt 1:23). At the conclusion of the same Gospel, we hear Jesus says: *I am with you always, until the end of the age* (Mt 28:20).

How could Jesus stay with us after he had left for heaven? When Jesus was on earth, he was limited in his human body. That means when he left Nazareth to go preaching in different parts of Palestine, Mary and Joseph and his neighbors could not see him physically. After the Ascension, Jesus entered into a new dimension so that he could stay with us in a supernatural dimension and a spiritual sense. If we think of Jesus' ascension in a geographical sense, in terms of a vertical dimension as heaven is up high, and earth is down low, then we tend to think Jesus' ascension is far away from us. That would be heretical. On the

one hand, the Ascension ended his visible presence on earth. That was a painful experience for the Apostles. On the other hand, his Ascension marked a new beginning. His Ascension does not mean that he abandoned us. He always stays with us in different ways. He stays with us in his word.

He instituted the Eucharist to nourish us spiritually, and to be present with us in the Eucharist. He commanded the apostles to turn bread and wine into his body and blood for our spiritual nourishment. He also established a church, which is his body: *the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way (Eph 1:23)* and the means of salvation.

He also sent the Holy Spirit to be our bond of union, our source of strength, hope, joy and consolation as he said: *It is much better for you that I go. If I fail to go, the Paraclete will never come to you, whereas if I go, I will send him to you (Jn 16:7)*. So the Ascension which seems to be the final farewell, is only the way that leads to his invisible presence among us: closer, more universal and lasting.

That is the way Jesus is present in his word and the Eucharist. That is the way Jesus is present in his Spirit. That is the way Jesus is present in his Church with his grace. With his presence as such, we now can talk to him, pray to him anywhere and anytime, day and night. We do not need to make an appointment to see him.

Before him, nobody is more important than another is. We do not need to wait for our turn to see him. Anyone can come to him and talk to him. We do not need to call him on the phone or knock at the door to find out if he is home or not. He is there all the times. There is no need to make an appointment to see him. He is always present, always available.

At night, if we find it hard to sleep, we can repeat over and over in an inaudible voice a short prayer like ‘thank you Lord’, or ‘I

praise your name, O Lord' or 'have mercy on me, O Lord' or any short prayer which we like, or sing over and over a few verses of a favorite song. Then we would fall asleep without being aware of it. One thing we should try to avoid is to repeat words of complaint when we pray. That would make sleeping difficult. His presence with us is a supernatural reality. Yet to be aware of his presence or not is a different story.

To live in the peace and grace of God by avoiding sin and keeping his Commandments will lead us to an experience of his presence in our lives. The result of his presence in us is that our life and heart are reflected by his presence in our words and deeds. Reflected by God's presence, we will bring his presence to others. That is the way we bear witness to our faith and bring God's presence to others.

A prayer asking Jesus to stay with us:

*Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you for being born into our world
and your promise to remain with us until the end of the age.
We ask you to remain with us in your word,
your sacrament, your Spirit and your grace.
Help me to eliminate obstacles from my life
so that I may experience your presence
in my life and heart. Amen.*

OBSTACLES TO THE ACTIVITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Pentecost Sunday, Year A

Acts 2:1-11; 1Cr 12:3b-7, 12-13; Jn 20:19-23



Pentecost Sunday is considered the birthday of the Church. It is the day, when the apostles officially assumed their mission to proclaim the good news of salvation. Before Pentecost, we had a situation when one apostle betrayed Jesus. Those who remained faithfully were timid like chicken. When Jesus was arrested, one apostle denied him three times, and the rest fled in disorder. On the Pentecost, the apostles *receive the Holy Spirit (Jan 20:22)* and they experienced radical changes in their lives. They enthusiastically testified to the risen Lord, and preached the good news of salvation without fear.

They began to *speak God's word with confidence (Acts 4:31)*, and with power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (*Acts 4:33*), and they performed *many signs and wonders occurred among the people (Acts 5:12)*. Not only the Holy Spirit transformed the lives of the apostles, but also transformed the lives of those who would hear their preaching.

According to the Acts, *those who believed shared all things in common; they would sell their property and goods, dividing everything on the basis of each one's need (Acts 2:44-45)*. *Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 4:47)*. *In one particular day the number of the men came to about five thousand (Acts 4:4)*. To compare the activity of the Holy Spirit in the early Church with that of the Church of today, we wonder why the Holy Spirit does not work wonders in their times their lives. Then they conclude: Then our era is not the era of the Holy Spirit. Today we must eliminate this notion, thinking

that our era is not the era of the Holy Spirit. First, there is no such thing as saying that a certain era is not the era of the Holy Spirit. An era that we think is not the era of the Holy Spirit is due to our failure, it is not due to the Holy Spirit's absence. The Holy Spirit always remains with the Church and its members.

If the grace of the Holy Spirit is not active and increased in our lives, it is because we have stifled his activity. We stifle the activity of the Holy Spirit when we do acts of worship and prayer in a mechanical way and in a routine fashion. We stifle the activity of the Holy Spirit when we keep the minimum requirements to be a Christian, when we are stingy with God concerning our time of worship.

We stifle the activity of the Holy Spirit, when we bargain with God for a cheap price of being his disciples, like saying to God: Oh God if I do this for you, what can I have for return. It is like when we say to our parents: Mom, Dad, if I do this or that for you, what can I get back. If parents do not like that kind of bargain from children, then God will not like that that kind of bargain from us either. So if we just go ahead and do things for God generously without condition, without strings attached, God will return to us abundantly. We stifle the activity of the Holy Spirit when we divide our heart into different compartments: one compartment is for work, one for recreation, one for eating and drinking, and one for sleeping. Those compartments, we do not allow God to enter.

The last and small compartment, we reserve for God, for worship and prayer. Another obstacle to the activity of the Holy Spirit is sin and all kinds of vices such as laziness, greed, selfishness, sensuality, jealousy, pride and anger... A soul full of such obstacles is a soul, lacking of peace, preventive to the activity of the Holy Spirit.

In order to drink the good stuff from the bottom of a cup of coffee or a milkshake, we have to stir it up. In order to increase the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we have to remove

obstacles from our lives so that his grace may permeate every aspect of our lives and his activity may be stirred up. The grace of the Holy Spirit can transform anyone who opens himself/herself to him and to cooperate with his will and his grace. That is the time when we experience the era of the Holy Spirit in our own lives. Thus, if members of the church do the same, we will have the era of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

A prayer for the activity of the Holy Spirit:

*O Holy Spirit, the Advocate of Christians
Come, kindle in us the fire of your love
Help me remove obstacles from my life
such as sin and all kinds of vices
so that your grace may permeate my heart
that my life may be reflected
by your love and your strength
and that I may become your instrument. Amen.*

**ORDINARY SUNDAYS
OF THE YEAR A**

WITH LOVE, JESUS REVEALED THE BLESSED TRINITY

The Most Holy Trinity, Year A

Ex 34:4b-6, 8-9; 2Cor 13:11-13; Jn 3:16-18



Holy Scripture of the Old Testament did not have anything to say explicitly about the triune God. Therefore, the Jews in the Old Testament did not know if there would be three persons in one God. They believed in one God and only one. To speak of three persons in one God, it might have weakened their belief in one only true God and they might have been confused with pantheism. It was only when Jesus came down from heaven that the mystery of the Holy Trinity was revealed to humankind. In today's Gospel, Jesus revealed to us God the Father saying: *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).*

In different parts of the four gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John, God the Father was also revealed to the apostles through his instructions. Before the Ascension, Jesus asked the Father to send his Holy Spirit to sanctify, console and strengthen the apostles: *I will ask the Father and he will give you another Paraclete to be with you always (Jn 14:16).* Receiving the mission from Jesus, the apostles went to preach the gospel to all the nations, baptize them in name of the Holy Trinity: *of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19).* In his letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul sent his greeting in the name of the holy Trinity: *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (2Cr 13:13).* The same scripture greeting is used by the Church when priest celebrant greets the congregation at mass. Thus, the Corinthian community was already familiar with the doctrine of one God in three persons because they were baptized in the name

of the Trinity. Since the early Church, the apostles did not preach three gods, but three persons in one God, united mysteriously in one nature. The early Christians accepted the mystery of faith willingly.

God's nature is three persons, the richest and deepest mystery of the Christian faith. That is the climax of our Christian faith. Three persons in one God is a family. Saint John, the beloved disciple of Jesus (Jn 13:23; 21:7), experiencing Jesus' love for him, defines God very briefly and yet full of meaning: *God is love (1Ga 4:8)*. The result of God's love was the only Son of God (Jn 3:16), born from all eternity (Jn 1:1), and born in time to redeem humankind (1:14).

Between the Father and the Son is the love uniting the two that is the Holy Spirit, not born, but preceded from God the Father and the Son as the Christians proclaim in the profession of faith in the Nicene Creed. Why did Jesus reveal to us the nature of God? The revelation by Jesus to us about his nature does not change anything in God's nature, especially when we do not understand. There is a Vietnamese saying: *Better to talk to your knees than to talk to someone who does not understand*. However, Jesus still talks to us through the apostles about the mystery of the Trinity even though we do not understand.

So what is the motive for Jesus to reveal the holy Trinity to us? To tell someone something personal and secret about oneself is a sign that we trust that person and want to be close to that person. To tell someone something personal and secret is a sign of a closer friendship. People tell something personal and secret about themselves not just as a sign of friendship, but also as a way to enhance that friendship. It was love that Jesus at the last Supper revealed to the apostles a secret about God's nature.

That is a wonderful favor, which God reserved for us. God does not lock himself in self-love. His love is a sharing and transforming love. God shares his love by creating man in his image, by sending his Son to redeem humankind and by sending

the Holy Spirit to strengthen, sanctify and console the Christians. Thus, God is no longer distant and separated from us. He has entered into our human life and become intimate and closer to us.

A prayer asking to remain in the love of the Trinitarian God:

*O most Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit!
We thank you for having revealed to us
the nature of your being and entered our lives
in order to enrich our spiritual lives.
May we become aware of your Trinitarian presence
when we make the sign of the cross asking for help
in our prayer and work and rest.
Grant that we may remain
in your Trinitarian love. Amen.*

WHOEVER EATS THIS BREAD WILL LIVE FOREVER

Corpus Christi, Year A

Dt 8:2-3; 14b-16a; 1Cr 10:16-17; Jn 6:51-59



Before the Ascension, Jesus gave us, the most precious gift out of his love. That is his Body and Blood. At the Last Supper, Jesus instituted the Eucharist for our spiritual food and drink so that he could remain with us sacramentally until the end of time. The Last Supper [1] was the first mass celebrated by Jesus with the apostles before his suffering and death on the cross.

The masses to follow, celebrated all over the world, according to the command of the Lord: *Do this in memory of me (Lk 22:19)* is the renewal of the sacrifice on the cross. To partake of the sacrificial offering is a sign that we accept the new covenant with God. The Jews in the Old Testament lived by the word of God. God's words were their reason to live and their source of hope even though they faced difficulties, sufferings and hardships as the book of Deuteronomy says: *Not by bread alone does one live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord (Dt 8:3)*.

The Protestants also live by the word of God. God's words foster their faith. Jesus' teaching on the Eucharist as the bread of life scandalized the Jews. They argued among themselves: *How can this man give us his flesh to eat (Jn 6:52)*. For Catholics, the Body of Christ is also our spiritual food as Jesus tells 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)*. The *manna* which God gave to the Jews in the desert (Dt 8:16) was to nourish their body and was understood as a foreshadowing of the bread of life. The bread of life, which is the

Body of Christ, is to nourish our soul as Jesus tells us: *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him on the last day (Jn 6:54).*

To be turned into bread for physical nourishment, the grain has to undergo processes like being un-chaffed, grounded, blended into flour, then baked, broken and distributed to people to eat. In a similar way, to become the sacrificial offering for the remission of sins and be united with God, Jesus also underwent such processes as being rejected, opposed, persecuted, tortured, beaten, crowned with thorns and crucified on the cross.

He offered himself as to become the living bread for humankind to eat. To receive the Body of Christ, the faithful try to live, according to the way of the Lord and to keep his commandments as to inherit eternal life. Believing in the word of God could unite the Jews together for thousands of year. Believing in the word of God can also unite the Protestants. Through our belief in the word of God and reception of the bread of life, the faithful are united in the mystical body of Christ as Saint Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians states: *Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for all partake of the one bread (1Cr 10:17).*

Today Jesus invites us to his Eucharistic table as to receive his body. To respond to his invitation, we pray for the grace to avoid what is called *familiarity-breeds-contempt* attitude as to show reverence and love towards the Eucharist. We do not appreciate what we always have. Only when we lose it, would we miss it. Suppose for a long time, we do not have mass and the Eucharist, we would appreciate mass and the Eucharist more dearly. We also pray as not to offend the Body and Blood of Christ as Saint Paul warns us: *Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily, sins against the body and blood of the Lord (1Cr 11:27).*

And we also pray asking the Lord to grant us eternal life as the priest celebrant prays silently at mass at the breaking of the

bread: *May this mingling of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ bring eternal life to us who receive it.*

A prayer for eternal life thanks to the reception of the Eucharist:

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the bread of life.

***We thank you for your institution of the Eucharist
for our spiritual food and drink.***

***I am sorry for the times I received Holy Communion
in a mechanical way, in a routine fashion, without preparation.***

For the times I showed disrespect for the Eucharist.

Renew my faith in your real presence in the Eucharist.

Come, Lord Jesus, come into my life

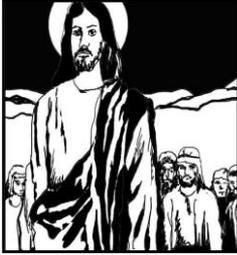
to nourish and strengthen my soul. Amen.

[1]. According to the gospels of Matthew (Mt 26:26-28) and Mark (Mk 14:22-24), it is presumed that Judas was not present when Jesus instituted the Eucharist, since according to the Gospel of John, Judas had eaten the morsel (Jn 13:26) before Satan entered his heart (v. 27) and then went out (v. 30). According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus instituted the Eucharist (Lk 22:19-20) before he foretold Judas' betrayal (v. 21). Following the line of thought, it seems that Judas did eat the body of Christ.

RECOGNIZING ONE'S CATHOLIC IDENTITY

2 Sunday of the Year A

Is 49:3, 5-6; 1 Cr 1:1-3; Gn 1:29-34



One of the major problems, psychologists, counselors and spiritual directors have to deal with in our days is the problem of lost identity or lack of identity. There are different kinds of identity such as individual identity, sexual identity, family identity, cultural identity, identity of religion and so on. In a foreign country, if we lose our passport, we shall become nobody. Even in our own country, if we lose our identity card such as a driver license or a social security card, we shall have a hard time to identify ourselves before a police officer, a possible employer or a medical doctor.

At the time just before the birth of Christ, the Jews expected a messiah would come to liberate them from the Roman occupation. They hoped the messiah would come to set up an earthly kingdom in Palestine with a mighty army, rich and strong, capable of overthrowing the Roman rule, and making their country number one. Of course, these were their wrong notions about the messiah and his religion.

In today's gospel, John the Baptist tried to correct these wrong ideas about the messiah and his religion. John the Baptist identified Jesus as the Lamb of God: *Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world (Jn 1:29)*.

In the Old Testament, lambs were used as sacrificial offering to God. By calling Jesus the Lamb of God, John showed us that Jesus' life was offered to God as the sacrifice for the remission of sins of humankind. Testifying to Jesus' mission, John also testified his own mission when he appeared preaching the message of repentance. John was revered and regarded as a

messiah himself. At that time in Palestine, people were tired of the Roman occupation and immorality in their nation.

Therefore, they expected the messiah to come more than ever. Thus, if John the Baptist wanted to deceive people by claiming to be a messiah, people would believe so, because his message of preaching was so powerful and appealing. However, John did not mistake his identity, not claiming to be what he was not, but playing his role appropriately.

He considered himself only as *a voice in the desert, making straight the way of the Lord (Jn 1:23)*, and *not worthy to carry his sandals (Jn 1:27)*. Saint Paul in his letter to the Corinthians also gives us our identity as we are sanctified in Christ Jesus to be holy (1Cor 1:2). Living in our pluralistic society and our changing world, it is easy for us to lose our Catholic identity.

We can mistake the identity of religion, and the identity of the Church. We can be influenced by what we read in newspapers and magazines, what we hear from radios and see in television, and even in internet. When secular journalists write commentaries on religious issues, they tend to write from a secular point of view. Since they do not understand the essence of religion and the mission of the church, they tend to give comments on one aspect of the whole picture. For them, religious truth is a matter of opinion taken from pollsters, rather than something revealed from above. There are certain terminologies a number of Catholics used, do not express a sense of Catholic identity either. Did we ever ask a certain Catholic priest such as: What service do you have today, or how many services do you have today? Or do we have a sacrament of reconciliation today? Actually, there is no such thing as the sacrament of reconciliation. There is only a rite of reconciliation. As for sacrament, it is to be called the sacrament of penance. For us mature Catholics of understanding, we can tell what is right and wrong and what is correct or incorrect. However, for our young children, they can be misled and deceived easily by the mass media. Thus, if we think our children's mind has been poisoned

by what they had read or seen in the mass media, we have to help disinfect it and intoxicate it from their mind.

The lesson John the Baptist teaches us today is the lesson of self-identity, the identity of God and of religion. The lesson we can learn from John is to accept our position, our standing and our limitation, good points and bad, not faking, not attributing to ourselves what we do not have and did not do. Did we ever feel empty inside ourselves at night, finding it difficult to sleep, after we had been boastful of what we did not have and did not do? To feel empty inside ourselves is a first step for an internal conversion.

The sense of our Catholic identity is important for us and for others in dealing with us. It helps us to know ourselves and where we stand. As Christians, we are concerned with who we are, what is to become of us, what we are to believe and to do, and why we have been born into this world.

Prayer for knowing who we are and our religion:

*Oh Lord God! You know everything,
you know my heart.*

Grant that I may know myself:

*my substance, my stand, my role and my limitation,
along with my good points and bad.*

May I be true to myself

so that I may live in peace and joy. Amen.

ASKING TO HAVE A SPIRIT OF REPENTANCE FOR SIN INCLUDING THE SIN OF DIVISION

3 Sunday of the Year A

Is 8:23-9:3; 1Cor 1:10-13, 17; Mt 4:12-17



God's words in the Old Testament and the New are closely related. It can be said what was prophesied in the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New. Isaiah the Prophet in the Old Testament foresees: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom, a light has shone (Is 9:1)*. Saint Matthew in his gospel realizes Jesus has come to fulfill the word of Isaiah: *The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light (Mt 4:16)*. Jesus has come to bring his light to dispel the darkness: the darkness of error and sin, including the sin of division in the Church.

However, Saint Paul in his letter to the Corinthians realizes that, the Corinthian have dimmed the light of Christ, the light of his gospel by rivalries and factions. His letter to the Corinthians tells us they have been divided into factions: *I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollo, I belong to Cephas, or I belong to Christ (1Cor1:12)*. Then Paul asked them: *Is Christ divided? (1Cor1:13)*. The disputes among the Corinthian Church were not related to doctrinal or moral issues. They were only differences in character and preference. When Paul felt it was time to set the matters straight, he told them: *Were you baptized in the name of Paul (1Cor 1:13)*. Saint Paul meant they were baptized in the name of Christ only.

On the road to Damascus to ask for credentials to persecute Christians, a light from the sky shone around him, making him dizzy, he fell on the ground, hearing a voice, saying: *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me (Act 9:4)*. In fact, Paul persecuted Christians only. Later on, with much study, meditation, prayer

and inspiration from the Spirit, he understood the Christians are members of the mystical body of Christ. So explaining from this theological notion, he understood to persecute the Christians is to persecute Christ himself. At the last supper, Jesus prayed for the Apostles and for those who listen to their preaching that they may be united in one church, which he founded on the rock of Peter. He did more than pray for unity. He died for it so that humankind may be united.

Looking everywhere, we can see division everywhere. Around us, we see many churches of different denominations, each claiming to follow Christ faithfully. Besides the Catholic Church, there are also the Orthodox Church, the Eastern rite Churches not in communion with the Catholic Church, and hundreds of different Protestant Churches. A number of those who started different denominations at first were in the Catholic Church. For different reasons such as disagreement on theological viewpoints or disobedience or personal passion or ambition, they started different denominations.

History shows if Christians did not stay united with the Church, which Jesus had instituted, more division would follow. In this week of prayer for Christian unity, we must come to realize that division among Christians in general, and factions in the Catholic Church in particular, have been weakening the mystical body of Christ and making the work of evangelization less attractive to non-Christians.

The faithful need to pray for unity in the Catholic Church. If we want to promote Christian unity in the Christian world, first we need to pray for unity in the Church which Jesus himself instituted: one, holy, catholic and apostolic. In order to be united, the faithful need to respect the official teaching of the Church. The faithful need to pray for the unity of the bishops with the pope, successor of Peter. The faithful need to pray for their priests to be united with their bishop. They need to show unity with the Church in word, action and prayers.

In order to walk in the light – the light of truth – Jesus tells us to repent (Mt 4:17) and to eliminate the darkness of error and sin. Repentance in the biblical sense means to turn away from the sinful way of life. There are certain kinds of sin we commit. The reason we commit those kinds of sin are that we have problems. To tackle those problems, we need to bring the problems to light. First, we need to confess that we have a problem, or to say bluntly, we have a problem of sickness, usually psychological sickness. Not to admit a problem as a problem, not to admit a disease as a disease, it cannot be healed.

To admit a problem is halfway healing. When we admit that we have a problem, we will seek help by doing some research about the problem, or by talking to professional people to find out reasons why we have this problem or that problem of sinning and then we pray for healing.

To face the problem, we need to go through three stages. (1). First is to find out the cause and root of the problem. The reasons can be loneliness, or curiosity or passion, or jealousy or low self-esteem, or unfulfilled wishes, or inferiority complex in certain aspect of life, or lack of self-satisfaction, or lack of satisfaction for what one has. Therefore, one commits sin with expectation for wishes to be fulfilled. Then one comes to realize that to seek satisfaction this way, one cannot be satisfied for good. (2). Secondly to find way to develop one's talents and good points so that one can have something to be proud of, or to have a standing in the group or in the community or in society, so that one can be satisfied with self in a certain aspect of life.

One can also volunteer to do certain charitable and social works as to bring about spiritual and mental satisfaction to one's life. (3). Feeling difficult to develop certain talents or good points as to attain certain kinds of satisfaction, one has to learn to accept: self-acceptance and acceptance of circumstance, and learn to surrender one's will to God's will. Since then one should learn to establish a personal and close relationship with God as to have a personal experience of God's love for oneself.

Prayer asking for the gift of repentance for sin:

Lord Jesus, the only Son of God!

You came down from heaven to unite earth to heaven.

*You instituted the Church on the foundation of the apostles
and put Peter the leader.*

*May Christian denominations be united
in one mystical body of whom you are the head
as to bear witness to the Gospel.*

*Shine your light into my heart and my life
so that I may find out what is true and what is false. Amen*

LIVING THE BEATITUDES

4 Sunday of the Year A

Zep 2:3, 3:12-13; 1Cor 1:26-31; Mt 5:1-12a



In the old times, God spoke to his people through his prophets and ancestors. The prophet Zephaniah told us about God's way: *Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth, who have observed his law; seek justice, seek humility; perhaps you may be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger (Zep 2:3)*. Eventually God sent his only begotten Son to turn our human values upside down by teaching us the way of the Beatitudes. Looking at the human viewpoint, the teachings of Jesus in the Beatitudes would make us puzzled and uncomfortable.

Saint Paul also recognized the way of the Lord in his letter to the Corinthians: *He chose the world's lowborn and despised those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who were something (1Cor 1:28)*. If those who live the Beatitudes are considered foolish and losing, then in the eyes of God, they are considered wise and gaining (Mt 5:1-12a). In the eyes of man, money is synonymous with power and fame because it is a way of getting things done. In God's eyes, wisdom means to live the spirit of poverty (v.3).

Here we need to pay attention to poverty in spirit rather than poverty in fact. To be rich or poor in the evangelical spirit depends on our attitude towards material goods. Accordingly, the materially poor might be considered spiritually rich in thought and wish, if they always dream to make money dishonestly. On the contrary, if the materially rich have not acquired their wealth dishonestly, do not put their hearts into material possessions, and are willing to help those in need, then in the eyes of God, they are also blessed. In the eyes of man, those who mourn are unhappy.

To compensate for it, Jesus promises those who mourn for their sins committed, will be consoled (v. 4).

In the judgment of man, the meek are foolish, Jesus promises they will inherit the land (v. 5). In the judgment of man, if a person desires to be righteous, he/she might be considered unrealistic. Jesus promises they will be satisfied (v 6). In the eyes of man, people might take advantage of those who perform works of mercy. Jesus promises they will be treated with mercy (v. 7). In the judgment of man, a person should seek pleasure to full satisfaction in this life. Jesus' promise is those who are clean of heart will see God (v. 8). In our human experience, those who make peace might be considered weak. Jesus promises the peacemakers they will be called children of God (v. 9).

We can imagine those who are being hated, slandered and persecuted for their faith in God in different parts of the world at the present time, will be consoled so much when they hear the message of the Beatitudes. If we put ourselves in the situation of those who are being persecuted for their faith, how much comfort the Beatitudes could bring to us. There are some people who might question: Is it not enough for us to keep God's commandments? Why should we be concerned with the Beatitudes? The answer is the Ten Commandments are the minimum requirements, which a good Christian must do this and not do that in order to fulfill his/her duty towards God and neighbor. However, to be a true disciple of Christ, we must go beyond the minimum requirements of the law in order to live the Beatitudes so that we may become perfect, as Jesus wants us to be.

Why are those who live the Beatitudes called blessed? The reason is those who live the Beatitudes are those who follow the way of the Lord. Those who do not rely on material possessions, those who have no one and nothing to rely on, tend to rely on God, to put their trust and faith in him as their shelter and their inheritance. If we might think the Beatitudes are suitable to gray haired people only and thus the church should not preach this message of the Beatitudes to young people, then we are wrong.

On the World Youth Day in Toronto, Canada of 2002, Pope John Paul II challenged the youth of the world to live and proclaim the Beatitudes to the world. That is the way that leads to true happiness; the Pope repeated what Jesus had said. It was not easy to attain happiness, according the Pope. Even though it is hard to attain it, the youth welcomed and accepted the message of the Beatitudes wholeheartedly.

Watching them on TV, we could see their enthusiastic expressions in their face, their eyes, their mouth, their hands and their whole body. Throughout the history of the Church, there have been those including non-Christians who tried to live the way of the Beatitudes with expectation that their spiritual life would be uplifted. To live the Beatitudes, we will be sinking down for a certain period in order to be raised up. That is a law which has been called '*the law of reversed effort*', which God has planted in our human system.

Prayer for knowing how to live the Beatitudes:

Lord Jesus, the almighty, you exist from the beginning:

You came to put our human values upside down.

Your way is contrary to our human way.

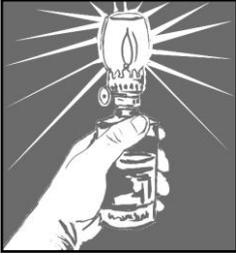
What the world considers unhappy, losing and foolish, you consider wise and blessed.

Teach me to be ready to to live the way of the Gospel as to allow your power to transform my life. Amen.

HOW TO BE THE SALT OF THE EARTH AND THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

5 Sunday of the Year, A

Is 58:7-10; 1Cor 2:1-5; Mt 5:13-16



In the old times when there was no refrigerator, salt was used as a preservative for food. In our times, some industries still use salt for the same purpose. When cooking, people also season food with salt for flavor. If we do not eat salt for a long time, we will lose strength. Sometime ago, it was reported a woman in Florida, due to her high blood pressure, did not eat salt for a certain period. As a result, she collapsed, unable to walk. Besides the function of preservation and seasoning for food, the salt-metaphor also has a purifying function for the Hebrew mind (2K 2:19-22). Jesus born a Jew also uses the salt metaphor to teach us a lesson in our faith life. He tells us in today's gospel: *You are the salt of the earth (Mt 5:13)*.

Thus, a Christian has to purify, season and preserve his/her life of faith with his/her prayers, acts of worship and works of charity. The works of charity, which the Book of Isaiah points out today are: *Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless, clothe the naked, and do not turn your back on your own (Is 58:7)*. The theme of light symbolism can be found throughout the Holy Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments. At the beginning of creation, the universe is portrayed in darkness as the book of Genesis tells us: *darkness covered the abyss (Gn 1:2)*.

Then God orders light to appear to separate light from darkness saying: *Let there be light (Gn 1:3)*. To speak of darkness, people often associate it with ghost, evil and sin. Darkness often panics children; sometimes it even does an adult. When a sin is

committed, it is often hidden in the dark. Christ came to cast out the darkness of sin and death and show us the way to God the Father.

On the Easter Vigil, with the surrounding darkness in the church, the Easter candle is lighted, representing Christ, the light of the world. Then the priest lights the catechumen's baptismal candle from the Easter candle and offers it to the parent or Godparent, saying: *Parents and Godparents, this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. These children of yours have been enlightened by Christ. They are to walk always as children of the light. May they keep the flame of faith alive in their hearts (Rite of baptism).*

Light is an image of God. Jesus came to reveal himself as the light of the world. To believe and be baptized in Jesus Christ, we are enlightened by the light of Christ. In today's gospel, Jesus also tells us: *You are the light of the world (Mt 5:14)*. When we eliminate the darkness of sin from our lives, then our thoughts, words and actions will begin to shine. To be reflected by the light of Christ, we will become the means for others to recognize his light. Our prayers, acts of worship and works of charity also shine so that the world may recognize God and glorify his name. When performing prayers, acts of worship and works of charity, we should seek the glory of God, not our own glory that is we should forget ourselves so that God may be glorified. There is a proverb that says: *We cannot give to others, what we do not have*. So to be 'the salt of the earth' (Mt 5:13), we must have salt in our lives. We have to preserve our life of faith first, before we can preserve society from being decayed. Similarly, the faithful can only be the light of the world, when they possess God in their lives and live in God's grace.

Today we need to ask ourselves whether the salt of faith is still tasty or has it become insipid in our lives. Do I practice my faith at home? Do I bear witness to my faith in my work place, in the society where I live in? Do I pray at home before I go to bed? Do I go to church on Sunday? Is the light of faith still shining or has

it become dimmed? When we brought our children to the water of baptism, we promised to bring them up in the practice of faith. So do I send my children to religious education? Do my children know those basic prayers such as our Father, Hail Mary, the Creed and the Ten Commandments? Have my grown-up children made their first confession, received first communion and confirmation? The above questions are raised in order to help us see at what level our salt of faith and our light of faith are. When we try to find reasons to excuse ourselves easily from doing certain works of faith and works of charity and more and more excuses are added up to a point, where we might have no longer energy to rise up.

A prayer for our salt of the earth to be seasoned
and our light of faith to shine:

Oh, Lord our God!

We thank you for the faith we received at baptism.

***Forgive me for the times I neglected my practice of faith,
for the times I insisted on my unbelief,***

for the times I refused to seek the light of your word.

for the times I was lazy in studying the teaching of religion,

***for the times I refused to rely on those with strong faith
as to help strengthen and renew my faith.***

***When darkness covers my mind, shine your light
so that I may walk in the light of faith. Amen.***

LIVING THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

6 Sunday of the Year A

Sir 15:15-20; 1 Cor 2:6-10; Mt 5:17-37



In the ancient times when there was no written word, each nation lived according to different sets of tradition, handed down from one generation to another, determining ways of behavior in a tribe and society. When sets of tradition were not kept, contradiction would occur. Until man discovered writing system, those sets of tradition were recorded in laws. Laws could be simple or complicated depending on degrees of advancement in each society in different aspects of culture, economy, science and social services. In those progressive societies, laws can cover every aspect of life such as freedom of worship and traffic laws. The purpose of promulgating laws is not to restrain, but to liberate people, to civilize humankind and to safeguard the human dignity.

If a nation has no law or does not enforce laws properly, one or the other following situations will occur. Either people might choose to live according to a law inscribed in their heart by the creator, meaning to live according to the law of the right conscience. They might live according to the law of the jungle. When the jungle law is carried out, cruelties, disasters and damages will fall on the defenseless. By observation, one can see when an organization or a nation has no law, or does not enforce law and its citizens do not live by the law, disorder and state of chaos will occur in society. God's law given is aimed to direct and advance the human life. God gives the law to the human being and gives freedom to choose. That freedom to choose has been recorded in the book of Sirach: If you choose, you can keep the commandments (Sir 15:15). If man keeps God's commandments, God promises to give him wisdom. That is a

wisdom, which Saint Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians contradicts with wisdom of this age (1Cor 2:6).

Reading the Gospel of today, we have the impression that Jesus came to give a new law, stricter and more complicated than the old do. However, Jesus came not to abolish the old law and to give a new law. He came to fulfill the law, to give man a new sense of righteousness in interpreting the law. He wants us to live the spirit of the law rather to observe the external law. To fulfill the law means to go beyond the law. To go beyond the law does not mean to abolish it, but to find meaning and purpose of keeping the law. If the purpose of having laws is to serve man, then when the right to life is threatening, then man can violate it. Jesus himself violated the letter of the law of Moses a few times when he cured sick persons on the Sabbath and when he ignored his apostles who pulled heads of grain and ate them (Mk 2:23).

Therefore, he was considered a reactionary, coming to overturn those traditions of their ancestors. However, that violation of the letter of the law can still fulfill the law, since the purpose of having the law is not to oppress people, but to safeguard and liberate people from living according to instinct and the jungle law. To talk about violating the law, we have to make a distinction between God's law and the human law. For God's law, nobody can abolish it. Therefore, when the human law is contrary to God's law, the faithful must express their position according to the voice of conscience.

In today's gospel, Jesus pointed out three commandments of the Ten Commandments. The fifth commandment forbids murder. The Pharisees recognized this commandment. However, they tolerated hatred, revenge and greed, which are the roots of murder. Therefore, Jesus told them to eliminate the roots rather than to cut the top. The sixth commandment forbids adultery. Jesus told them to avoid adultery in thought and desire. To attain it, Jesus told them to watch and control their eyes, ears and tongues. The second commandment forbids false swearing. Jesus told them not to swear at all, but to say what it is meant.

Even to bear true swearing also offends God. Also in today's Gospel, Jesus tells us: *Unless your holiness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of God (Mt 5:20).*

The scribes and Pharisees at the time of Jesus distinguished 613 precepts to interpret God's commandments. These precepts were very wordy and sometimes blurred God's commandments. Jesus often scolded the scribes and Pharisees, calling them hypocrites because they followed the external observation of the law, and their hearts were far away from him. If the scribes and Pharisees in the Old Testament distorted the meaning of religion, by keeping the external observation of the law, then the faithful of today can also keep the minimum requirements of religion nominally. After the second Vatican Council, the church laws have been simplified. That makes people think the practice of faith has been lax. In reality, the changes of Vatican II were to encourage Catholic people to take initiative to put their faith into practice, to do more voluntary fasting, abstinence, sacrifices and works of charity.

A prayer asking for keeping God's commandments

***Oh God, you are God of all wisdom and knowledge.
You gave humankind your Ten Commandments.
Teach me to follow your laws
as to share your wisdom.
May the civil laws reflect your laws
since all laws come from you.
Teach me to keep the law of justice in society
as to maintain public order and interest. Amen.***

TO LIVE ACCORDING TO THE LAW OF MERCY

7 Sunday of the Year A

Lv 19:1-2, 17-18; 1Cor 3:16-23; Mt 5:38-48



According to the old law of the Old Testament, a person who causes offense must be punished depending on the degree of trespasses. If a person injures another person, restitution must be made in compliance with the law of retaliation: *An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth* (Lv 24:20; Mt 5:38). It means that if someone breaks your tooth, you can break his. If someone pulls your eye, you can pull his. However, you cannot injure his lips or nose. That is what the Latin phrase says: *Do ut des*. That means you do what they did to you. Jesus came to reject the law of retaliation and teach his disciples the law of mercy and forgiveness.

The law of love surpasses the law of justice and calls for mercy and forgiveness. For the Jews at the time of Jesus, love of enemy was a paradox and unthinkable. They have been taught to hate an enemy and to do harm to him when occasion came. Jesus came to teach his disciples: *Love your enemies, pray for your persecutors* (Mt 5:44). However, Jesus does not require us to love our enemies to the same degree of love, which we reserve for our relatives and friends. One cannot love one's enemy with a kind of love derived from our heart and impelled by our natural tendency. Yet Jesus told us to love our enemy with a kind of love derived from a supernatural motive and make a decision not to hate our enemy, but to pray for the salvation of our enemy.

That is the characteristic of Christianity and the way to perfection. The command of the Lord in today's gospel must be emphasized when human beings have a tendency to be locked into gain seeking syndrome in society. The good work of the

human person often aims at return and response: *I scratch your back and you scratch mine*. When Trang Vuong forgave Duong Giao, he aimed that the latter would remember him and protect him in the future. The reason Quan Cong forgave Tao Thao was to remember a past favor from the later. What Jesus taught us today is a good work must be disinterested. A benevolent person must be ready to welcome the unfortunate, without being concerned about receiving a return. Jesus himself gave us an example when he taught us the lesson of forgiveness to an enemy. When hanging on the cross, Jesus prayed asking the Father to forgive those who had persecuted him: *Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing (Lk 23:34)*.

In a competitive society, one finds it hard to follow Jesus' teaching as to become perfect. One would be considered foolish and lost if one lives according to Jesus' teaching in the gospel. However, that is the difference between man's wisdom and the wisdom of God. Saint Paul in his letter to the Corinthian wrote: *For the wisdom of this world is absurdity with God' (1Cor 3:19)*. If there are those individuals who harbor resentment, there are also individuals holding grudges depending on personal disposition, family, education and society. Resentment is similar to a chain that ties people down. Resentment also has detrimental influence on mentality, emotional life, health and job and social life of man. It is not necessary to find enemy from far. Hatred can be found even in the family members and friends, due to money, infidelity and broken promise. How can we apply God's word of forgiveness to hatred situation in the family? Those hurt feelings among family members must be healed so that family members can see and talk to one another. Then we pray for those who have caused this problem. God's words in today readings demand us to show mercy and forgiveness. How can we forgive those who have received favors from us, yet betrayed us? However, that is what Jesus requires his disciples to do.

As Christ's true disciples, we begin to offer the sacrifice of the mass with a prayer for forgiveness in a spirit of repentance. At the beginning of the mass, we have an opportunity to ask God for

his forgiveness of our failure. Then before the reception of the Holy Communion, we ask God to *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*. We come to mass with an awareness of our sin and when we return to our everyday life, with our awareness of the presence of the kind, merciful and forgiving God.

A prayer for a merciful and forgiving heart:

***Oh Lord Jesus!, You are God of mercy and forgiveness.
We give you thank for coming to teach us
a lesson of forgiveness and mercy.
Forgive me for the times
I have harbored resentment and hatred.
Give me a generous heart so that I may forgive others' faults
that my faults may be forgiven. Amen.***

TRUSTING IN GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL PLAN

8 Sunday of the Year A

Is 49:14-15; 1Cor 4:1-5; Mt 6:24-34



Living in the present and modern society, people enjoys a great deal of comfort, but also live in fear. Those who are employees are fearful that they might lose jobs; those who are on public assistance, are fearful that it might be cut off; those capable of work, are fearful that they might not find jobs; those who are retirees are fearful of boring at home.

People are afraid of getting sick, gaining weight and getting high blood pressure. They are afraid of getting old; that they may be divorced; afraid of being robbed; afraid that they may get involved in an accident; that their family may break down; that their children may be involved in drugs and gangs.

To cope with those kinds of worry and fear, people find different ways to avail and avoid. They put money, gold in the bank. They keep essential papers in a safety box. They bought all kinds of health insurance for their old age, their homes and vehicles with hope for social security in retirement.

The liturgy of the word today reminds us of one thing, i.e., we should never forget that we depend on God in every single moment of life. God is God of all creatures. He has power to give life and power to take it away. He holds everyone's destiny in his hand. From the book of Isaiah, the prophet reminded the people even when they were exiled in Babylon, God still loved them and did not abandon them. Even though punished, God still remembered them and delivered them from the slavery.

The message of the prophet Isaiah tells us we should put our trust and faith in God even in our dark days because God did not abandon his people. The Gospel also conveys a similar message. God's words resound within our ears as consoling words: *Stop worrying, then, over questions like, 'what are we to eat, or what are we to drink, or what are we to wear'. Your heavenly Father knows all that you need (Mt 6:31-32)*. So does Jesus want us to shirk responsibility for our life? Not really. Jesus only told us not to worry too much. To worry too much about material things might mean we question God's providence or we lack faith in His care.

Through divine providence, not only does God guide the activities of the human beings, but also animals, vegetables and plants: *Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns; yet your heavenly Father feed them. Are not you more important than they (Mt 6:26)*. God also cares for the grass in the field: *If God can clothe in such splendor the grass of the field, which blooms today and is thrown on the fire tomorrow, will he not provide much more for you, O weak in faith (Mt 6:30)*.

Thus among all the creatures of the earth: human beings, animals and things, God is more concerned about the human person, the masterpiece of God's creation. If God shows concern about the birds in the sky and the grass of the field, he must show concern much more about the human person, created in his image.

Why do we not feel happy with all kinds of insurance for physical life? The answer is we lack spiritual insurance. When our subject, goal and reason to live are not God, but something else - and when that something else is lost - we will fail because we have nothing to cling to. God does not want us to let surroundings control our life. He wants us to live the present in the experience of his love and providence every moment of our life. In order to do so, we need to contemplate his words: *Seek first his kingdom over you, his way of holiness, and all these things will be given you besides (Mt 6:33)*.

A prayer to put faith in God's providence:

Oh Lord, our God!

You are God of providence and loving care.

You care for the birds of the air and the grass of the field.

You care much more for us.

Teach me to put my faith in your providence

so that we may not worry too much

about what to eat, drink and wear.

Having your providence for my life,

I will be assured to live my life. Amen.

BUILDING SPIRITUAL HOME ON ROCK

9 Sunday of the Year A

Dt 11:18, 26-28, 32; Rom 3:21-25, 28; Mt 7:21-27



To hear the word of God and to profess his name may be easy for those who believe in pantheism for instance. For those pantheists, they believe in different gods. In case one god cannot help, then they hope another can. With our God, there is a big difference. In the Old Testament, God wanted his chosen people to keep his commandments. That was what Moses told the chosen people in the book of Deuteronomy today: *I set before you here, this day, a blessing and a curse: a blessing for obeying the commandments of the Lord, your God, which I enjoin on you today; a curse if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord, your God (Dt 11:27-28).*

For the people of the Old Testament, what is God's commandment in this situation? The answer is they must worship the only one God, not any other god. However, God's people showed unfaithfulness many times. They abandoned their only one God for other alien gods. They made a molten calf and adored it (Ex 32:8; Dt 9:16; Ps 106:19).

Those warning words were referred to them, which they did not want to hear. To worship alien gods are not only referred to people of the Old Testament, God's people in the New Testament are more or less the same: *birds of a feather*. They worship God, but at the same time, they also believe and seek after things like science, fame, fortune, superstition. They think they can interpret scripture according to their own view and the Church should not impose on them what they should hear and do.

In today's Gospel, we hear words of warning from Jesus himself: *None of those who cry out, Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of*

God, but only the one, who does the will of my Father in heaven (Mt 7:21). These words are hard sayings for those who think God is an all yes god, kind of a wishy-washy god, easy to anyone, regardless of what they say and do. And if the Church holds an election between a yes God and a god who knows how to reward and punish, then those who want a god that fit into their own notions, would vote for an all yes god.

However, a righteous conscience tells us that we cannot build our spiritual house on view of an ineffective god who can tolerate all things we do and the way we live. To think of God like that is like those who build their house on sandy ground. To cry out to God sincerely and humbly must be an act of faith. An act of true faith must lead us to action by keeping God's commandments. In other words, the result of true faith must lead us to action. That would make us justified through faith (Rom 3:22). Let us try to find out how we have built our spiritual house on sandy ground? We build our spiritual house on sandy ground when we just want to be nominal Catholics, when we just want to keep the minimum requirement of the church law, when we do not practice what we recite in church.

God wants us to live our faith by putting his words in action and obeying his commandments. When an owner of the house sees the wind blow and his house is shaky, he must find ways to support it or rebuild it stronger. It is in a similar way with our household of faith. Like an athlete who must practice his physical exercise or outdoor game in order to compete against his opponent, we must also put our faith into practice as to oppose Satan's temptations; otherwise, it might fade to mere lip service.

According to Jesus' teaching, we must build our household of faith on a firm foundation. Our faith and our practice of faith are similar to two faces of a coin. We cannot have one side of a coin without the other side. We have received the gift of faith through baptism. We need to practice it as to have stronger faith. If not, the words of Saint James might be applied to our situation: *Faith without works is as dead as a body without breath (Jas 2:26)*.

At baptism, the priest handed a child's baptismal candle to the godparent, reminding him or her: *This light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. These children of yours have been enlightened by Christ. They are to walk always as children of the light. May they keep the flame of faith alive in their hearts (Rite of Baptism # 100).*

In order for our children to walk in the light of faith and persevere in faith and later on to be able to build their household of faith on a firm foundation, parents and god-parents need to create a faith atmosphere in the family as to foster the child's faith. As Christians, we need to help strengthen the faith of others. That is the solidarity of responsibility of the Christian.

A prayer asking for our faith to be established on a firm foundation:

***Lord Jesus Christ! Redeemer of the world.
We thank you for having called us to the life of faith.
Teach me to build my spiritual house on a firm foundation
with my practice of faith
so that my light of faith may not go dim.
May my faith in you and my word of love for you
may go with actions. Amen.***

THE SICK NEED A PHYSICIAN

10 Sunday of the Year A

Hos 6:3b-6; Rom 4:18-25; Mt 9:9-13



Taxation was something detestable to the Jews under the Roman occupation at the time of Jesus. The Jews considered the tax system not only corrupt but also as a way of collaborating with the Roman authority even though under King Herod, some of tax money was used to rebuild the temple of Jerusalem. The Roman colonists did not tax the Jews directly. They auctioned off contracts to collect taxes to the highest bidder among its local citizens. The highest bidder had the right to collect taxes for them. The tax collectors had to turn over to the Roman government a specified amount of money.

To take advantage of this occasion to make money the tax collectors collected more taxes than what was needed in a certain area and were allowed to pocket the surplus. Therefore, the tax collectors could grow wealthy through this corrupt system of taxation. They were considered traitors, paired with sinners, treated with contempt, and not allowed to enter the synagogue, because they collaborated with the foreign power.

In the eyes of his fellow men, Matthew was a poor candidate for being Jesus' disciple. Although Matthew was not the chief tax collector of the area, but only one of the subordinates, he was still considered an outcast of Jewish society. At the call of Jesus: *Follow me (Mt 9:9)*, Mathew's first reaction was his immediate response similar to the fishermen's response to Jesus' call.

In the gospels of Mark (Mk 2:14) and Luke (Lk 5:27), Matthew is named 'Levi'. The gospel of Matthew was written for the Jews who held him in low esteem. The purpose of his gospel was to

prove to the Jews that Jesus is the messiah, a descendant of David. He came to fulfill the law and the prophets. His new law requires a radical change of heart, an inner conversion rather than an external observation of the law.

The second response of Matthew was to invite Jesus to a farewell dinner with his friends: tax collectors. The Jews, particularly the Pharisees at that time considered the tax collectors and sinners as the outcasts in society and tried to avoid contact with them.

According to the Jewish customs at that time, to be at dinner was an occasion to share similar points of view and to show friendship with guests at dinner. Yet Jesus' presence at dinner with the tax collectors and sinners made the Pharisees unhappy. They complained to Jesus' disciples: *Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners (Mt 9:11)*.

The Pharisees were proud of keeping the external Law of Moses, but their hearts were far away from the spirit of the law. Their opposition to Jesus' eating and drinking with the tax collectors made Jesus react: *Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do (Mt 9:12)*. However, the Pharisees do not admit that they have illnesses such as pride, conceit, hypocrisy in need of a physician.

Those who do not admit that they have spiritual problems cannot be healed. In reality, each one of us has a problem, each one of us has sinned: either in thought, word or deed. Not to admit that we are sick, either physically, mentally or spiritually, cannot be healed.

If we need a physician for our physical problem, we also need a physician for our spiritual problem. We need the doctor of the soul for our spiritual problem. Jesus' reaction to the snobby attitude of the Pharisees is quoted from the book of Hosea: *It is love that I desire, not sacrifice (Hos 6:6)*. The quotation means Jesus deals with us in kindness and mercy and he wants us to deal with one another in mercy and kindness rather than external sacrificial offering.

A prayer asking for the physician of soul.

*O Lord Jesus! You are kind, merciful and forgiving.
We thank you for coming into the world,
to call those who have wandered away.
Forgive me for the times I was prideful:
thinking I am better and holier than others;
and for the times I was judgmental and looking down on them.
Grant that I may admit my weakness and sinfulness
so that I may seek you as the physician of soul
and may deserve your forgiveness and healing. Amen.*

ASKING FOR MORE LABORERS

11 Sunday of the Year A

Ex 19:2-6a; Rom 5:6-11; Mt 9:36-10:8



The word of God in today's Gospel speaks of the urgency of the apostolic work. Jesus said to his disciples: *The harvest is abundant, but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out his laborers for his harvest (Mt 9:38)*. In a broad sense of the

word, all God's people through baptism and confirmation are called to be laborers for God's harvest. Today's gospel tells us Jesus chose twelve close disciples to be his apostles. He gave them authority, making Peter their leader and the visible head of the Church. The purpose was to unite the faithful in the faith and fellowship.

The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests stated: *Christ, through the apostles themselves, made their successors, the bishops, sharers in His consecration and mission. The office of their ministry has been handed down, in a lesser degree, indeed to the priests. (Priestly Life and Ministry # 2)*.

After the second Vatican Council, we experienced considerable changes in the church especially in the liturgy. From the Second Vatican Council until now, almost a half century later, the Catholic Church has been undergone a crisis in vocation to the priesthood and religious life especially in Europe and America. After the Second Vatican Council, the church lost a good number of priests, religious men and women due to different reasons such as a crisis of faith, a crisis of conscience and a crisis of identity and crisis of sexuality.

Some objected to the loss of the Tridentine Mass, the old rite of the Latin mass, instead of the new mass in vernacular languages.

The old Latin Mass was uniform in similar settings, in the use of the same text in Latin with Gregorian songs. Others were unwilling to accept the changes in the new mass. Losing a number of priests without being supplied with another number of priests created a shortage of priests.

The reason is after the second Vatican Council, young men and women seldom saw priest and religious men and women on the streets or in public gatherings. Not because priests and religious men and women were not present in those places, but because they did not want to wear their clerical collars and religious habits.

Therefore, the image of priests and religious men and women were not in the mind of young people. When young people do not see a clerical collar in public, they might not think about the priestly life.

After the Council, some religious communities decided to go secular in their dress and their ways of life with intention to convert the world. They made a few converts in the world. However, when they went secular, they lost their religious ways of life necessary to foster their vocation. Therefore, those religious communities faced crisis in their religious life from within and shortage of vocation from outside. Those religious communities who still maintained their traditional ways of life did not face shortage of vocation. That corresponds to young people's reasoning.

The young people maintain religious life must have something different. If there is no difference in the religious way of life, they rather stay in their lay state of life. To face a pessimistic view, we must realize that every time we face a big change either in the church, in the government or in an organization to which we belong, we should expect reaction to it: either favorable or unfavorable. We are still in the transient time of pre-Vatican and post-Vatican II. We are still facing a crisis of vocation in the priesthood and religious life.

However, with faith, we should hope that when the Church pass the transient period of pre-Vatican and post-Vatican II and when members of the ordained clergy and religious men and women recognize their identity and live their identity, then vocation to the priesthood and religious life would increase.

So at the meantime, how can we promote vocation to the priesthood and religious life? Father Franklyn M. McAfee pointed out concrete ways to help foster and develop vocation in the American family. He suggested seven points for parents to do in the family to promote vocation. Children will think about vocation to the priesthood and religious life, when they see and hear those following in their family:

- (1) Their family attends Sunday mass with preparation in advance, come early and stay a few minutes after mass for thanksgiving.
- (2) Their family prays and prays the rosary in the evening and say grace before meals.
- (3) Their family gives devotion to the Mother of the priests in a special way devoutly.
- (4) Virtuous stories such as the stories of Saint John Bosco and Saint John Vianney.
- (5) Good stories about priests such as this priest married their parents, that priest baptized the children.
- (6) Examples of sacrifice instead of hearing only about money business and enjoyment. One reason for the shortage of vocation is when children used to receive what they wanted. That is why they felt it hard to give away and renounce.
- (7) The Holy Father's picture and good stories about him and the family pray for him [1].

If we put these seven points into practice in the family and there is no vocation in the family, then the parents still attain a general goal in promoting vocation and living the Christian ideal. Their children, who marry, in state of entering the priesthood and religious life, would educate their own children or grandchildren

like the way they themselves were educated. Perhaps vocation might come in the next generation. According to the command of the Lord, each one of us should continue to pray for more laborers in the vineyard of God; each one of us should pray for more vocation to the priesthood and religious life. We are asked to support vocation financially and morally (Lk 10:7) and cooperate with the apostolic activities of the church.

A prayer for more laborers in God's vineyard:

O Lord Jesus, the Most High Priest.

We thank you for your institution of the priesthood.

Teach me to pray for more priests,

to nourish and support the priestly vocation.

Give young people good will,

and willing to respond to your call to the priesthood

to go and preach the gospel and administer the sacraments.

Grant that they may remain faithful in their calling

and experience joy in their dedicated life. Amen.

[1]. Seven practical points are summarized from: McAfee, Franklyn F. 'Vocations come from Families' in *Soul*, Jan – Feb 1995.

DO NOT BE AFRAID

12 Sunday of the Year A

Ger 20:10-13; Rom 5:12-15; Mt 10:26-33



The prophet's mission in the Old Testament was to remind God's people, of who they were, how they had to live and to do as his chosen people. When the prophets warned the people of idol worship, immorality and injustice, they would not be welcomed into the community. That was what the prophet Jeremiah had to bear. He was denounced by the king and the people for his criticism of their unfaithfulness and evil practices in the temple. The role of prophet does not exist in the Old Testament only, but is also applied to the New Testament.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, the apostles had to continue his work of redemption on earth. If the prophets in the Old Testament were persecuted, then the apostles in the New Testament were also persecuted for their faith. In the Gospel of today, Jesus told the twelve not to be afraid three times when preaching the Gospel. At first, Jesus said: *Fear no one* (Mt 10:26). Thus, Jesus prepared them to face trials and persecutions in their missionary work. What they heard *in the darkness*, they had to *speak in the light* (Mt 10:27). It means what Jesus spoke to their small group of the Twelve; the apostles had to preach to all nations.

What they heard whispered, they had to *proclaim on the housetops* (Mt 10:27). It means what Jesus spoke privately to the apostles, they had to preach publicly. Later on, the church has to preach with all kinds of mass media such as public address system, books, newspaper, magazines, radio, television and even the internet. Jesus' second reminder was: *Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul* (Mt 10:28).

The meaning here is obvious. To bear witness to the faith will mean death for many of the faithful. That is why since the foundation of the Church, there were so many faithful who were willing to shed their blood for their faith. There were hundred thousands of martyrs who died for their faith in different parts of the world: a great multitude of the first Roman martyrs, those martyrs in Japan, those martyrs in China, those martyrs in Vietnam, those martyrs in Korea, those martyrs in England, those martyrs in Uganda, those martyrs in Mexico and so on. They did apply the message of the gospel to the situation they encountered in life.

The Gospel message of today does not seem to be suitable in our days. In our days, there is no longer persecution of Christian faith, except in some parts of the world. However, even in those countries where freedom of religion is guaranteed, people are still afraid of expressing their faith and bearing witness to their faith. When our way of life and our practice of faith are different from that of the world, we will suffer ridicule, suspicion and rejection. Any form of opposition would intimidate us. We might be afraid of losing jobs or friends only because we are faithful to the Gospel. One more thing that might intimidate us is to fear ourselves. We are afraid of facing the truth about ourselves since the truth might hurt. In the papacy of Pope John Paul II, a number of times he reminded the Christians of the Gospel message: *Be not afraid*. When visiting different countries with moral decays, with high divorce and abortion rates, with oppression, injustices, with different standards of living between the rich and the poor, he dared to speak the truth; even it might have hurt their leaders. The Pope also wrote a book entitled: *Be not afraid*.

The third time in today's gospel, Jesus said to the Apostles: *Do not be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows (Mt 10:31)*. Even though the sparrows are worth only a little, the heavenly Father still takes care of them. If God takes good care of the birds of the air, how much more will he take care of us? That is the meaning of his words: *First seek the kingdom of God and his way of holiness, and all other things will be provided*

later (Mt 6:33). God's words mean first we should find time to worship God and to practice the Christian faith, and all other things like food and drink, job, housing and so on will be provided later on in a proper order..

A prayer for not being afraid:

***O Lord Jesus, you are our fortress and our shield.
We thank you for your encouraging us not to fear.
When I am afraid of expressing my faith,
Increase my courage and strength.
When I am scared to face opposition and rejection
Come to my assurance.
Teach me to put my complete trust and confidence in you
In all the circumstances of my life
in happiness and sadness, in success and failure
'in sickness and health'. Amen.***

DOING THINGS FOR THE GLORY OF GOD

13 Sunday of the Year A

2V 4:11, 14-16a; Rom 6:3-4, 8-11; Mt 10:37-42



When somebody or something stands on our way of following God, we call it an obstacle. The liturgy of the word today teaches us about things we must do in order to follow God and seek his glory directly or indirectly in our either dedicated life or married life.

First, Jesus teaches us about things we do as to seek God's glory directly. Upon reading the first verse of today's Gospel, we have the impression that Jesus came to abolish the fourth Commandment. The fourth Commandment reminds us to honor our father and mother. Yet in today's Gospel, Jesus said: *Whoever loves father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me (Mt 10:37).*

When Jesus said this, some of his disciples such as John and James had already abandoned their families to follow Jesus. Thus, we can see that John and James loved Jesus more than they did love their father. Saint Perpetua was arrested after she had been converted to the Catholic faith. She was threatened with death unless she abandoned her faith. Her father visited her in prison carrying her child in his arms, pleading with her to renounce her Christian faith.

However, even her love for her father and her child was not strong enough for her to abandon her faith. Many other saints have chosen to accept their faith in God and dedicated their lives to God for the Kingdom of heaven despite the objection of their family members. In order to follow the Lord, they had to cut off worldly attachments. In fact, the meaning of God's word today is God wants us to put the right priority of values for our lives so that we can give priority to God and the work of God.

That is what the Christian martyrs did by shedding their blood for their faith in God. They rather obeyed God than did their earthly rulers. They accepted death for the love of God rather than for the love of money, power, and earthly goods. They believed in God's words: *Whoever loses his life for my sake, will find it (Mt 10:39)*. That is why St Paul could say as we learn from his letter to the Romans: *If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him (Rom 6:8)*.

Secondly, Jesus teaches us to do things for the glory of God indirectly, i.e., to do things for others in Jesus' name. The Gospel shows us God has a close relationship with his people because people are created in God's image (Gen 1:27) and redeemed by the blood of his son Jesus (Mt 26:28). Jesus has a close relationship with those, who preach the gospel of salvation, when he said: *Whoever receives you, receives me (Mt 10:40)*. He also said: *Whoever receives a prophet, because he is a prophet, will receive a prophet's reward (Mt 10:41)*. This word of Jesus refers to a story of Elisha in the second book of Kings.

When the Prophet Elisha went to the region of Sunam, he was invited by a wealthy widow to have supper at her home. Moreover, she also suggested to her husband to build a room in the upper floor so that each time the prophet would pass by he could have dinner at their home, because she recognized he was a holy man of God. The Prophet's reward reserved for her was to promise her that she would conceive in her own age. The widow had no thought of any personal gain when she made a room for Elisha in her home.

Thus, we can see things we do for God and others seem to be lost, are beneficial and profitable to us, if not materially, then spiritually. We believe so because Jesus himself promised as such. We know it is so because their lives have been transformed by these apostolic works of charity and service. Even a small work of charity is rewarded: *To give a cup of water to one of these little ones to drink because the little one is a disciple, will not lose his reward (Mt 10:42)*.

That is what Lazarus, Marta and Mary did when they welcomed Jesus and the apostles on his missionary journey. That is what Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome did when they followed Jesus and helped him when he was at Galilee. That is what Mary our Mother and some women did by their constant prayers with the apostles and for the Apostles after the crucifixion of Jesus. That is what many early Christians did, including Joseph, by way of selling land, properties and putting them under the feet of the Apostles, for distribution to each according to his/her needs. That is what so many faithful have been doing since the foundation of the Church by offering time, talent, energy, money and prayers to spread the Gospel message of salvation around the world. What have we been doing?

A prayer for knowing what to do for the glory of God:

*Lord Jesus! We adore you; we bless you and glorify your name.
According to our human tendency we only want to do things for
our gain
Teach us how to do everything for the love of
God and for his glory.
Sanctify our work, teach us to find meaning and purpose
in what we do so that everything we do may be pleasing to God
and acceptable to him. Amen.*

HOW TO COME TO JESUS FOR REFRESHMENT

14 Sunday of the Year A

Zec 9:9-10; Rom 8:9, 11-13; Mt 11:25-30



The Gospel of today's mass contains one of the most consoling and encouraging words of the whole bible. Jesus gives praise to God the Father for he has given understanding of his words to the humble, the lowly and the insignificant, while the wise and the learned fail to understand. What is hidden from some is revealed to others. So what is the difference and why is the difference? God's revelation, at least in scripture, is available to everyone. That means everyone can borrow or buy a bible to read if he or she can afford it. However, only those who open their mind and heart to him, only those who humble themselves before God, are receptive to his word.

That is what Jesus said in the Gospel: *I give praise to you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, you have revealed them to little ones (Mt 11:25)*. Pascal was a physicist, mathematician and philosopher, and yet he said: *The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not God of the sophisticated and philosophers*. Thus, does God really hide the mystery of his Kingdom from the wise and the learned?

If God does so, it seems to be unfair to them. Actually, God reveals himself to everyone, but only those who are humble and open themselves to what is supernatural are receptive to his word. Those wise and learned who rely on themselves tend not to depend on what is supernatural. When they do not want to depend on the supernatural, that is the moment, the mysteries of the kingdom are hidden from them. On the contrary, those wise and learned who are humble and keep their mind and heart open,

can come to God to receive the mysteries of the kingdom. They are big in mind, but small in heart. Being small or little in a biblical sense means being simple, humble, and dependent and trusting.

In order to come to God and put our trust in him as children put their trust in their parents, we need to possess those qualities of children: simplicity, humility, dependence and trust. When growing up with possessions, knowledge and power, people tend to become less dependent on God, or still want to depend on him, depending on the degree they attach to possessions and power. Today Jesus invites us: *Come to me all of you who are weary and find life burdensome, I will refresh you (Mt 11:28)*.

Did we ever feel weary due to duties in the family and responsibilities in society that would make us try to escape from some of our burdens of life? Did we ever have to carry burdens of life such as incurable disease in the physical, mental and emotional wound that made our mind and spirit worn out? Did we ever face suffering, sadness, anxiety, worry, fear and desperation? Did other people say we looked happy, yet we cried inside ourselves, we were ashamed of families and ourselves?

If so, today Jesus invites us to come to him, to express those feelings of our soul, to offload our burdens of life onto him, to mingle our sufferings with his suffering as an offering to God for the remission of sins, including own own sins. Jesus did not promise to take away our burdens of life, but invites us carry his yoke: *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart (Mt 11:29)*. How was Jesus meek and humble of heart? The prophet Zachariah pictured a savior who would come as follows: *Meek and riding on a donkey (Zec 9:9)*. Donkey is a docile animal, easy to be submitted. When Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem, he chose to fulfill Zechariah's prophecy by riding on a donkey, not on a horse even though Arabian horses could be found in Jerusalem at that time. That means Jesus was willing to obey his Father's will, accept suffering and cross as a ransom for the sin of humankind. He

assures us that *his yoke is easy and his burden light (Mt 11:30)*. Why did we find our yoke, not easy, our burden, not light?

Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans gave the reason for the heavy yoke and burden because the spirit of Christ is lacking in our lives (Rom 8:10). We get tired of our struggles when we begin to rely on our own strength, and not on the grace of God to pull us through. Did we ever complain that God and religion did not do any good to us? If religion does not do any good to our lives, then religion is going to an end. However, Christianity still stands today and has brought spiritual benefit to millions and millions of Christians. If Christians have not attained spiritual benefit, then who is to be blamed? Therefore, we have to find out where is a motive that makes a yoke easy and a burden light. The answer is the love of Christ.

Saint Augustine recognized the motive of love in our lives when he wrote: *Where there is love, there will be no more hardship. If there is still some kind of hardship, that hardship will be accepted with love.* To come to God, our soul will find rest as Jesus promises (Mt 11:29) and as Saint Augustine confirms it when he wrote: *Our hearts are restless, until they rest in the Lord.*

A prayer for refreshment:

***O Lord our God, the source of energy and strength.
We thank you for your promise to refresh us.
I offer to you my labor and burdens of life,
my illnesses and sufferings in body mind and spirit.
I offer to you my anxiety and fear, loneliness and sadness,
misunderstanding and doubt, my loss and shame.
Come Lord Jesus! Come into my life and travel with me
to repair, correct everything inside and outside of me. Amen.***

MAY THE WORD OF GOD BEAR FRUIT

15 Sunday of the Year A

Is 55:10-11; Rom 8:18-23; Mt 13:1-23



Reading the Bible, we can see God often reveals to his people their origin, purpose, final goal and the way they must follow in order to maintain a close relationship between the Creator and the creature. However, the word of God is not a monologue, not a one-way communication, but a dialogue between God and his people. The word of God is full of life, develops and bears fruit in our life when there is a corporation from his people. The word of God has the power to change, to save or to condemn. In the parable of the sower, Jesus shows his people the different disposition to receive the word of God. As the seed sown on different soils, the word of God is also sown on different types of soul.

The seed sown on a footpath (Mt 13:4) is only to be eaten by birds of the air. It is like the word of God that is sown in the heart of those, who do not understand it, and is stolen away by the devil. The seed sown on rocky ground (c. 5) can spring up, but scorched by the sun. It is like the word of God that is sown in the heart of those who receive it at once. However, they have no root to stand when tribulation or persecution comes. The seed sown among thorns (c. 7) is choked. It is like the word of God that is sown in the heart of those with worldly anxiety and interest and the word is choked and bears no fruit. The seed sown on rich soil produces good fruit. It is like the word of God that is sown in the heart of those who understand it and bear much fruit.

Thus, the reason for the seed not to be rooted and bear fruit is not due to the seed's fault. In a similar way, the word of God does not bear fruit in our lives is because we are not ready to receive

it. When we close our mind and heart, the word of God comes in through one ear, and goes out through the other. When facing persecutions, we will fall because our faith is shallow and weak, causing the word of God not to be rooted in our heart. When our minds are occupied with worldly matter, the word of God can be stifled in our lives.

The word of God has been recorded in scripture thousands of years ago and the word of God is still alive because God was present from eternity and God is still alive and present. Jesus himself said: My words are spirit and life (Jn 6:63). The word of God in scripture is our common heritage, meaning everyone can buy a bible to read and to pray if he/she can afford it. Our ears can hear the word of God when somebody proclaims it, but only the heart can listen.

There was an old story of matching wits between a northern king of China and a southern ambassador of China circulated years ago in China as follows. To humiliate the Southern Chinese, the Northern king of China ordered four southern Chinese criminals living in Northern China to be exposed and asked the southern Chinese ambassador the reason why. The southern Chinese ambassador calmly responded that there is a certain kind of very sweet tangerine in Southern China. However, when it was brought to be planted in northern China, the fruit turned very sour. Therefore, perhaps, these four southern Chinese when living in Northern China were influenced by bad examples in Northern China, turned out to be criminals. The story sounds sarcastic, but it helps us understand somewhat the parable of the seed sown in different soils in today's Gospel.

The seed in today's Gospel that is sown on different types of soil also produces different results. Therefore, if farmers want to have a good harvest, they have to do something about the soil. First, they have to clear the ground, hoe it, fertilize it and water it so that when the seed is planted, it can be rooted, sprouted, grow and bear fruit. In a similar way, if we want God's word to bear fruit in our life, we have to prepare the soil of our soul. We have

to remove obstacles from our lives. A soul full of sin and garbage has no room for the word of God to enter.

Then we have to water our soul by prayer, self-discipline, sacrifice and charity. When we read the word of God, we must meditate it and pray according to the meaning of the word so that his word may be nurtured, rooted, sprouted and grow and bear fruit in our lives.

That is what the prophet Isaiah today said about the word of God: *For just as from the heavens, the rain and snow come down and do not return there, till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats (Is 55:10).*

Therefore, for practical application, when we read the word of God, we should ask ourselves these questions:

- (1) What does this scriptural passage mean, and what does it mean to me personally?
- (2) How is it related to my life?
- (3) How can I apply to my own situation in life?
- (4) And finally, we reflect and pray over that bible passage according to its meaning, in order to allow the word of God to be nurtured, sprouted, and rooted in our lives.

A prayer asking that the word of God may bear fruit in our lives:

*Oh God, your ‘words are spirit and life,
you have the word of everlasting life’.
Teach me how to listen to your word.
Grant that I may remove obstacles from my life,
that is sins and all kinds of vices
as to prepare for your word to remain.
Grant that I may make the soil fertile in my soul
so that your word may be nurtured, sprouted and rooted,
grow and bear fruit in my life. Amen.*

COEXISTING WITH WEEDS AMONG THE WHEAT

16 Sunday of the Year A

Wis 12: 13, 16-19; Rom 8:26-27; Mt 13:24-43



In order to help us understand the growth of the kingdom of God, Jesus used three parables to convey the idea. The parable of the mustard seed signifies small beginnings of the kingdom of God with the selection of only twelve apostles. The growth of the kingdom also starts from slow beginnings like the fermented leaven. The kingdom of God is likened to a field, in which good seed was sown: *While everyone was asleep, his enemy came and sowed weeds all through the wheat, and then went off (Mt 13:25).*

Wheat and weeds look alike and grow side by side, but symbolize good and evil. The Bible tells us there is evil in the world, and how evil has influence on our life. Catholic faith and Catholic theology also tell us about evil spirits. Evil is the product of man's freedom given by God to his creatures: angel as well as man.

Lucifer, due to his sin of rebellion against God, was banished to the netherworld. Adam and Eve, because of their sin of disobedience, let evil to enter the world. Therefore, as long as we continue our lives on earth, we have to face both good and evil in the world and in our lives. The enemy of the heavenly kingdom is waiting for the children of light to sleep, not to be watchful as to sow weeds of sin and all kinds of vices in our lives. Under the pretext of freedom: freedom of press, freedom of speech, freedom of thought and respect for individual view, people have sown all kinds of weeds in the human society. They have spread debauched books, newspapers, magazines, motion pictures, music, video and internet as to stifle the word of God, to

monopolize the vineyard of God and to corrupt the human mind and heart. Crimes against God and neighbors occur every minute, every second around the world.

Human beings have a tendency to blame the devil. When we see something bad, ugly, or sinful, we blame the devil for it. Today we must realize that not every temptation is instigated by Satan. Temptation can come from the evil tendency of our human character. That is what Saint Paul recognized when he wrote: *My inner self agrees with the law of God, but I see in my body's members, another law at war with the law of my mind (Rom 7:22-23)*. Saint Paul meant there are two tendencies or two laws opposing to each other in each human being.

The spirit wants to rise above, yet the flesh wants to pull us down. Evil in the world is like weeds in the field. It can cause bad influence on our lives and can harm us any time.

The effect of evil can have influence on everyone, good and bad. In order to guarantee a good harvest, the servants in today's Gospel suggest that the master allow them to pull up the weeds. Yet the master tells the servants to let the wheat and weeds grow together until harvest time when it would be easier to separate the two. The idea to let the wheat grow together with weeds until harvest time tells us something about God's patience and his tolerance of evil, which we need to learn. Perhaps sinners may have opportunity to repent and turn away from sins as the Book of Wisdom suggests today: *You gave your children good ground for hope that you would permit repentance for their sins (Wis 12:19)*. Some people might object to this solution of postponement. Their reason is if the Church is the means of salvation, it should root out evil. However, the time to separate good from evil thoroughly and effectively has not yet come. The second lesson we need to learn is the time of judgment belongs to God. The third lesson we can derive from the Gospel message today is good deeds and evil ones have small beginnings. The practice of virtues must begin with easy and small ones. We need

to fight small temptations first before we can expect to fight big ones. Thus, we have to be on guard against temptations.

We need to be watchful, to be vigilant, to be prayerful like the good and faithful servant waiting for his master to return, or the wise bride-maids waiting for the coming of the groom. As long as we still live in the world, we have to coexist with weeds and the wheat, with good and evil. In the Our Father, we pray today at mass, let us pray with meaning and understanding, asking the Lord to *lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

A prayer for the grace to stand firm amidst weeds:

***O Lord, everything you created is good.
 Yet the sin of Satan, Adam and Eve turned it bad.
 May I realize that as long as I am in the world
 I have to coexist with weeds among the wheat
 in our human society and in myself.
 May those who are sowing weeds in the world
 have the spirit of fear of you.
 Help me to stand firm, lest I succumb to the weeds. Amen.***

WISHING AND CHOOSING

17 Sunday of the Year A

1 Kgs 3:5, 7-12; Rom 8:28-30; Mt 13:44-52 or 13:44-56



People have different wishes and dreams. Some want to be rich, some want to be famous, some want to have many friends. Even little children have different wishes. If you ask, children whom they want to be when they grow up, we can hear them say: I want to be a doctor, lawyer, police officer, firefighter, wrestler, Redskin player and priest. Some children have been seen to act like a priest saying mass at home. That is why children like to ask famous people in certain fields for signatures to keep for memories. Little girls also have different wishes. However, many fields have not yet opened to women, so their wishes are limited.

Most adult people wish to be happy. Yet they disagree with one another about how to attain it. Some people go and seek wealth so that they can be happy. To wish is one thing, but to choose is another. We can wish to have many things, but cannot choose all. We can choose only one or a few.

Facing different choices, King Solomon did not ask for longevity, wealth, or vengeance against his enemies. King Salomon realized that he could not understand everything with his own mind and he did not have enough experience in order to govern his people. Thus, he asked God for a gift of wisdom and understanding so that he could distinguish right from wrong, good from evil. The King also asked for sound judgment so that he could guide and govern his people.

This is what he asked: *Give your servant, therefore, an understanding to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong (1Kgs 3:9).*

As a result, God showed his kindness towards Solomon, giving him a wise and understanding heart that he could remain to this day a figure of wisdom that so many people admire him: *I give you a heart so wise and understanding that there has never been anyone like you up to now, and after you there will come no one to equal you (v. 12).* It was Solomon's wisdom, which Queen of Sheba sought to learn as it is written in the Gospel: *At the judgment, the queen of the South will rise with the present generation and be the one to condemn it (Mt 12:42).*

The parables of today tell us the different reactions when people found something very valuable. To tell parables is difficult because if application is not appropriate and realistic, then it is like to put a man's beard into a woman's chin. In the four Gospels, Jesus tells many parables and his parables are excellent, interesting and meaningful. Jesus uses images like fields, wheat, grass, flour, birds and sheep familiar to his hearers as to teach them a moral lesson.

When telling a parable about a man who finds a treasure buried in a field, Jesus said a farmer decided to sell his property in order to buy that treasure. At that time in the region where Jesus was born, Palestine was colonized by the empires of Babylon, Assyria, Persia, Greece and Roman. Therefore, burying treasures underground was not rare. According to the Roman law at that time, whoever finds anything valuable underground was his. The Jewish law taught whoever an owner of a field is, is the owner of treasures in the field.

When a farmer finds a treasure buried in a field, he goes and sells his property in order to buy the field. Jesus wants him to keep the Jewish law. Also in the old days in Israel, diamonds and precious stones were unknown. That is why fine pearls were considered as great value.

When a merchant finds a fine pearl, he also goes and sells everything he has to buy the pearl. When a fisherman hauls a net full of fish to the shore, he has to make a choice. He has to collect and keep what is good, and to throw away what is undesirable.

In order to attain the kingdom of heaven, we have to seek and practice those values of the heavenly kingdom. What are the heavenly values and where can we find those values of the kingdom of heaven. These values can be found from the Bible and from the Gospel. They are the Ten Commandments and the Gospel values and the Beatitudes.

They are truth, justice, goodness, holiness, love, charity, mercy, forgiveness, peacemaking, poverty in spirit. The kingdom of heaven is not just happiness in heaven but also happiness on earth. To say so means when we live and practice the values of the kingdom of heaven, then the kingdom reigns in our heart.

The second Vatican Council states: *Though mankind is stricken with wonder at its own discoveries and its power, it often raises anxious questions about the current trend of the world, about the place and role of man in the universe, about the meaning of its individual and collective strivings, and about the ultimate destiny of reality and of humanity (Gaudium et Spes # 3).*

Man of today has to face a crisis in values which humankind has not faced. The aged feel those traditional values are shaken and uprooted. The biggest single problem of today is how to find meaning and purpose in life. Unable to find meaning and purpose in life might bring man to ruin.

God gave Solomon wisdom because he had chosen the right priorities of values in life. The fact that we choose will exert influence on our children and grandchildren's choice. In the Gospel Jesus himself tells us: *Seek first the kingdom of God and his ways of holiness, and all other things will be provided later on (Mt 16:33)*. Those are treasures which Jesus tells us: *Neither moths nor rust corrode nor thieves break in and steal (Mt 6:20)*.

A prayer for the grace to find the right priorities
of everlasting values :

*Oh Lord our God! You are the wise and transcendental.
Your wisdom surpasses all kinds of our human wisdom.
Open our eyes so that we may see things in the light of truth.
Give us the grace so that we may seek and choose
the right priority of values in life,
the values of the heavenly kingdom
as to have influence on our children's choice. Amen.*

FEEDING THE HUNGRY

18 Sunday of the Year A

Is 55:1-3; Rom 8:35, 37-39; Mt 14:13-21



Today's scriptural readings tell us about God's providence. God not only directs our lives according to his plan, but also takes care of our physical needs. God commanded Moses to deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, through the Red Sea and the desert to

the Promised Land.

Throughout forty years in the desert, they made a journey led by Moses to the promised- land, stopped at different locations for camping, resting, planting, raising livestock in order to continue their journey. Throughout the pilgrim history in the desert, God's people underwent many trials: many ups and downs in their lives. They were unfaithful to God by worshipping alien gods and molten cows. However, God always took care of them, raining down *manna* from heaven to feed them. The Reading from the Book of Isaiah today shows God's concern for his people: *All you who are thirsty come to the water. You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat (Is 55:1).*

God's providence in the Old Testament was to prepare for his providence for the whole humankind, not just for this or that particular nation. The crowds in today's Gospel followed Jesus without bringing food along. When the evening came, the disciples suggested that Jesus dismiss the crowds so that they could get food for themselves. Jesus told them: *Give them some food yourselves (Mt 14:16).* He wanted his disciples to cooperate with him in feeding the crowds. However, they had only five loaves and two fish. Jesus took the loaves and the fish, broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples so that they could give them to the crowds. The number who ate, were about five

thousand men, not including women and children. They still gathered twelve wicker baskets, full of the fragments left over.

What needs to be noticed here is before he broke the bread, Jesus said the blessing. According to an old Jewish tradition when a Jew sat down at his dining table, he often blessed his food first. This is our Catholic tradition. The Catholic tradition reminds us of giving thanks to God before meals.

When the early Christians offered mass or the Eucharist, they kept in mind a biblical notion of thanksgiving, since Eucharist in Greek means giving thanks. Everything we have, has been given by God through his gracious and loving providence. As pious children, we need to be reminded to give thanks to God for all his blessings. The miracle of the loaves was considered so important in apostolic times that it was recorded by all four gospels with a few different details (Mk 6:34-44; Lk 9:10-17; Jn 6:1-14).

A number of scriptural scholars assume the miracle of the loaves was a prefigurement of the Eucharist. The words Jesus used in multiplying the loaves: *He said the blessing, broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples* (Mt 14:19; Mk 6:41; Lk 9:16; Jn 6:11) are the same as the one he used at the last Supper (Mt 16:26; Mk 14:22; Lk 22:19; 1Cor 11:22-23). Just before the miracle of the loaves, Saint John mentioned the Passover meal.

It was in the background of the Passover meal that Jesus instituted the Eucharist. Right after the miracle of the loaves, Saint John reserved the rest of chapter 6 for Jesus' teaching about the Bread of Life. Each one of us needs to realize the importance of food and drink. If we were hungry, we would find it hard to attend to our spiritual matters.

Reading the Bible, we can see Jesus usually worked miracles when people asked him to do. However, on this occasion, he took the initiative to perform the miracle of the loaves for people to eat. God's providence is at work in the world through the care

of the apostles for those who are hungry and through the help of this person for another.

Millions and millions of refugees in the world left their homes for other safe places with little belongings. Through God's providence, they were fed, and they could rebuild their lives with help from host governments and individuals. Through the Gospel, Jesus also taught us not to waste food. After the crowds had eaten their meal, Jesus told the apostles to collect fragments left over lest they would be wasted. It is not because we have plenty of food, that we should waste them while there are millions of hungry people in the world.

A prayer for daily food:

*O Lord, every day of our lives you give us food and drink.
Forgive me for the times I thought I earned my nourishment,
for the times I was ungrateful to you.
Forgive me for the times I wasted food and drink
for the times, I was selfish, not sharing with those in need.
Grant that I may realize everything I have comes from you
so that I may live in a spirit of gratitude by my sharing.
May those rich nations be aware of their responsibility
in helping poor and needy nations. Amen.*

CRYING OUT TO JESUS FOR HIS SAVING GRACE

19 Sunday of the Year A

1Kgs 19:9a, 11-13a; Rom 9:1-5; Mt 11:22-36



The Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias or the Sea Lake of Gennesareth is thirteen miles long, and eight miles at the widest in a pear shape. It lies about seven hundred feet below sea level and over two hundred feet at the deepest. Usually the surface of the Sea is calm. Sometimes turbulent wind currents blew up suddenly from the mountains and churned the water into turbulence.

Being aware that the crowds wanted to make him their king (Jn 6:15) after the miracle of the loaves, Jesus decided to dismiss the crowds and tell the apostles to get into a boat and to precede him to the other side of the lake. Then, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray because he did not want to have anything to do with their secular scheme. Today's Gospel tells us when the Apostles just sailed offshore, the water turned very rough. During the fourth watch of the night, they saw somebody walking on the water toward them. They were terrified, thinking it was a ghost.

Jesus immediately reassured them: *It is I. Do not be afraid* (Mt 14: 27). Peter, as we know from the Gospel account, is a quick-tempered man and a man of action. When he just heard Jesus' voice, he demanded to come to Jesus on the water. However, when he felt how strong the wind was, he became frightened.

Beginning to sink, he cried out: *Lord, save me* (Mt 14:30). Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him. Peter and the Apostles were not the only ones to experience fear. Elijah the prophet as we learn from the first Book of Kings today was also in a fearing

situation. He tried to hide in a cave when idol-worshipping queen Jezebel was seeking his life.

Saint Paul was in sorrow and torment because his fellow Jews rejected the gospel of Jesus that he brought to them. As the apostles feared for their safety in the stormy Sea of Galilee, Elijah feared for his life in his persecution and Paul feared that God would condemn Israel, we also have experienced similar fears. So many people are fearful of so many things. We are fearful of war and terrorism, fearful of accident and violence, fearful of disease and sickness, fearful of criticism and ridicule, fearful of robbery and murder and death.

We have been buffeted by storms of life: by sorrow and pain, by stress and pressure, by anxiety and worry, by depression and rejection. Many of us have undergone heavy temptation and crisis of faith in our lives. When South Vietnam fell under the communist North in 1975, hundred thousands of Vietnamese boat people took to the sea in small boats to escape. They ran out of food, water, and fuel; they confronted with high wind, waves, and pirates. They cried out to God for help. God saved them. A number of them perished not because they did not pray. They did pray asking God to save them and their soul if they would die.

In times of troubles told in today's scripture readings, God came to help and give them hope. When Elijah was hiding in a cave, God said to him in a tiny whispering sound and gave him a mission to do. Saint Paul was in anguish, but he put trust in God and God revealed to him one day he would draw his people to Christ. When the boat of the apostles *was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it (Mt 14:24-25)*. Jesus came down from the mountain, walking toward his disciples on the sea to watch over them and rescue them.

Peter was terrified because he thought he saw a ghost. When he felt the force of the wind, he became frightened and began to sink when he doubted and called to Jesus to save him.

Yet, Jesus complained: *Why did you doubt (Mt 14:31)?* Jesus' point is that Peter should have turned to God for help in all the circumstances of life, not just in crisis, not just in desperate situation when the violent wind and high waves blew and pushed against his boat. This is a lesson for all of us too. Jesus wants our prayer to be a habitual part of our lives. He wants us to turn to him in prayer in all the circumstances of our lives and to put our trust and faith in him as a child does in his or her parents.

Once there was a group of priests making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The traveling agency rent a boat, taking them to the middle of the Sea of Galilee in a late evening. Then the captain of the boat turned off the engine. One of the priests carried a bible with him. He opened the gospel passage of today and proclaimed it to everyone to listen to and ponder. According to the travelling priests, it was so touchy when they imagined the scene of Jesus walking on the water and the miracle he made to calm the water, and how he saved Peter from sinking, and how he reassured the apostles: *It is I; do not be afraid (Mt 14:27)*. In a calm atmosphere, God's word came alive in their heart.

A prayer asking the Lord to save us:

*O God, your strength and power are over all creation.
My life is like a boat floating on the sea.
Sometimes it is smooth sailing;
other times confronted with violent storms and waves
and even with undercurrents and hidden rocks.
I ask you to come into my boat of life
as you got into the boat of the apostles
to calm down the wind, the storm and the wave.
Show me the way and help me steer my boat of life
so that I may reach my port safely. Amen.*

SAVING GRACE COMES TO THE GENTILES

20 Sunday of the Year A

Is 56:1, 6-7; Rom 11:13-15, 29-32; Mt 15:21-28



The Jews in the Old Testament regarded all those who had no Jewish blood as gentiles and pagans. Even though those who had Jewish blood, but if they acquired bad foreign customs, they were still considered as pagans. However, the Canaanite woman in the region of Tyre and Sidon, considered as a gentile and a pagan, was not afraid to come to Jesus and ask him to heal her daughter possessed by a demon.

Jesus' disciples wanted her to go away because she was annoying them. Perhaps to test her faith, even Jesus himself tried to put obstacles to her faith, saying that his mission was: *Only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt 15: 24)*. That means his mission was not for the gentiles, like her, but for his own chosen people. At first, Jesus was not only silent and indifferent to her, but also used the language of the time, referring to her people as dogs when he said: *It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs (v.26)*. At that time, people of the Near East referred to one another using figures of speech. That is why the Jews called non-Jews dogs. The term *dog* did not imply an insult in the Aramaic language at the time of Jesus as it does to us.

The woman cleverly replied using the same play of words that Jesus had used: *Yes, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters (v. 27)*. Her response means that she is willing to recognize the priority of the Jews in receiving the saving grace and humble to take what the children reject, that is to accept any small favor from Jesus. Seeing her humility and strong faith, Jesus said to her: *O woman great is your faith* and granted her request (v. 28). Even her daughter was not present, she recovered that very moment. By granting the

favor to the Canaanite woman, to the pagan centurion, and to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, the disciples were able to see Jesus' mission beyond one nation, one race and one chosen people.

Before these events, the mission of the Messiah was understood as to teach and heal his chosen people. Why did he have to choose one nation to be his own? God chose one nation as this own as to test them, purify them and to show them his way and teach them how to live as his chosen people. Throughout the history of the Old Testament, many times God's chosen people were unfaithful to Him. They abandoned their God in order to worship alien gods. However, when they were sorry and repented their sins, God was ready to forgive them.

Paul is a devout Jewish member even to the fanatic point. As a jealous Jew, he asked the court's order to go to Damascus to persecute Christians. When he received the gift of conversion, Paul began to preach the Gospel to the Jews with new enthusiasm. Only when the Jews rejected the gospel message, then Paul turned his preaching to the gentiles as we learn from his letter to the Romans today (Rom 11:31). The story of faith of the Canaanite woman should give us a lesson of faith. She overcame obstacles put on her way by the apostles and even by Jesus. Jesus' initial word of denial to the woman was only a way to put her faith to the test.

In order to come to God, we need to have the determined faith of the Roman centurion. He showed his faith by not daring to ask Jesus to come to his home, but by only saying one word and his servant would be healed (Mt 8:5-13).

To come to Jesus, we need to be reasonable and accept the truth as the Samaritan woman did. The Samaritan woman at first was close-minded and tough when she met Jesus. However, she knew how to yield to reason and accepted the truth about herself even when it hurt (Gn 4:7-42).

To Judaism, the religion of the Old Testament, we were once considered as gentiles, foreigners, and pagans like the Canaanite

woman, the pagan centurion, and the Samaritan woman. Now, by accepting faith in Jesus Christ through baptism, and by following his way, we have become God's new chosen people. That is what the Prophet Isaiah envisioned centuries ago, even before Christ.

The reading from the Book of Isaiah today tells us: *The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, ministering to him, loving the name of the Lord, and becoming his servants ... then I will bring to my holy mountain (Is 56:6-7).* This prophecy means those who want to believe in God, worship him, serve him, and become his People, God will bring them to the holy mountain of his kingdom.

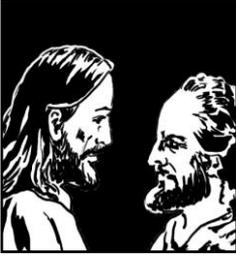
A prayer for receiving God's saving grace:

***O Lord our God, giver of all good gifts.
Teach me how to open my heart to welcome your saving grace.
Give me a humble heart, a perseverant faith
of the Roman centurion and the Canaanite woman
so that your grace may touch my soul.
Give me a heart that knows right from wrong,
how to accept the truth about myself: good point and bad
of the Samaritan woman
so that your grace can transform and change my heart. Amen.***

I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH UPON THIS ROCK

21 Sunday of the Year A

Is 22:19:23; Rom 11:33-36; Mt 16:13- 20



Rock often carries with it rich meaning in Scripture. Rock stands for firmness and stability. That is why Jesus told his disciples to build their house on rock so that when the torrents come and the winds blow and buffet the house, it can stand firm. When Simon Peter followed Jesus to be his apostle, Jesus changed his name from Simon to Cephas or Peter which means rock. He promised to make Peter the foundation stone upon which he would build his church.

The Gospel today tells us how Jesus handed the keys of power to Peter: *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you declare bound on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you loosed on earth, shall be loosed in heaven (Mt 16:19)*. The key in the biblical sense is a symbol of responsibility and authority. Those who carry the key has authority to decide who can enter and cannot as the key of the house of David was given to Eliakim who was summoned to guard the palace (Is 22:22). Thus, the keys entrusted to Peter symbolize authority or leadership.

It would be helpful to appreciate the authority of Peter, if we look at the situation, in which Jesus gave the power of keys to Peter. It was the moment of Peter's recognition of the divinity of Christ: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God (Mt 16:16)* that Jesus gave him the power of keys and it was in that moment that the apostles were united. Peter's profession of faith in the Messianhip of Jesus is a divine revelation, not a human understanding. That is why Jesus said to Peter: *You are a happy man, because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven (Mt 16:17)*. Peter's understanding of

Jesus at that time was still limited. That is why when Peter tried to dissuade Jesus from going to Jerusalem to suffer and die, Jesus scolded him, calling him Satan, because he was *not judging by God's standards, but by man's* (Mt 16:23). Peter's faith was still fragile when he denied Jesus 3 times (Mt 27:69-75) and was needed to be strengthened.

In order to prepare for the role of leadership and governing, Jesus asked Peter whether he would love him more than others do. This time Peter dared not be proud that he would love him more than others, but expressed himself that Jesus had already known about his love for him. When Jesus asked him a third time if Peter would love him (Jn 21:15-19), he felt hurt perhaps it reminded him of his three-fold denial of Jesus (Jn 13:38; Jn 18:17, 27).

With experience, Peter dared not pride himself as before, but proclaimed his love for Jesus three times as if to compensate for the three-fold denial. This time Jesus told him to feed his lambs (Jn 21:15) and his sheep (v. 16), including his brother apostles and the entire Church which he would institute. When Jesus predicted Peter would deny him, he also predicted Peter would return, and reminded him of supporting his brother apostles (Lk 22:32). Jesus' above words imply the role of leadership of Peter.

Peter was considered the natural spoke-man for and leader of the twelve whenever the occasion arose. Peter took the initiative to speak in the name of the apostles on Pentecost Sunday (Acts 1:15-20; 2:14:16). He received Jewish and pagan converts through baptism (Acts 2:38). He recommended that one of their company should be chosen to replace Judas (Acts 1: 21).

He defended the other apostles (Acts 4:8-12) and to convene and preside over the first Council of the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:7-11). It was Peter, who founded the Church in Rome as his apostolic see and reigned as its bishop. Therefore, the bishop of Rome today is regarded as his successor as pope in the Catholic Church. Reading the New Testament, we can see Peter who writes his Epistle with authority of the leader.

Christ founded the Church by choosing twelve apostles and appointing Peter to be their leader and gave them authority. Its purpose was to keep the faithful in the unity of faith and fraternal communion (*Lumen Gentium # 18*). Thinking over and over, we have realized that God's way is the way of wisdom and knowledge as Saint Paul pointed out: *How deep are the riches and wisdom and the knowledge of God (Rom 11:33)*.

Throughout the history of the Church, we can see the supremacy of the pope has been a topic of conversation and a cause of dispute and controversy, and has led to division. History has proved that when people left the Church which Christ had founded one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church (Nicene Creed), they would continue to divide into different denominations when they were in disagreement on theological and moral issues.

That is why today we can see there are so many different Christian denominations, all claiming to follow Christ faithfully. There have been cases when people left the Church to form different denominations due to personal ambitions, unbalanced judgments or disobedience to authority in the Church. Christ gave authority to the apostles so that they could serve others. Jesus might have chosen to deal with each person directly without human mediation. However, he wanted human beings to cooperate with his plan of salvation, and he appointed them to guide the Church. They still carry within themselves weakness and sinfulness. Therefore, the Church has undergone difficulties: with abuses and mistakes made by members of the church. As long as the Church is still on earth, the pilgrim church always seeks the truth and purifies itself from error and abuses.

How can the faithful remain united with the Church and be in communion with the Church? The faithful must realize that unity does not mean uniformity. In past, the faithful were proud of the uniformity in the Church: mass celebrated in Latin all over the world with the same rituals and settings. In the present, we must be proud of the plurality in the Church. Mass is celebrated in

different languages. The faithful are allowed to take parts in the liturgy such as lectors and extra Eucharistic ministers. It is a plurality that is not in division, but in unity.

The most important, vibrant image of the church is the parish. To build up the parish means to build up the church. There are many ways to help build up the parish by registering in the parish, by participating in the sacramental, prayerful, and educational life of the parish, joining the social and charitable works and supporting the parish financially. Another unit in the church is family. The family is the primary church. It is in the family that religious values are transmitted to children and children learn moral and charitable works. To build up the family and the parish is to build up the church. Thus, we can be assured of Jesus' words when he promised Peter that the *jaws of death cannot prevail against the Church (Mt 16:18)*.

A prayer asking for the grace to remain in the church:

Oh Lord Jesus, we thank you for coming down from heaven to establish the Church on the foundation of the apostles with Peter their leader.

You also prayed for the apostles to be united.

Grant that Christian denominations may discover their roots as to seek unity with the Church which you instituted.

Grant that I may become an instrument of unity in my conducts, speeches and writings

as not to cause confusion and division in the Church.

May I live and die as a member of your Church. Amen.

DENYING SELF AND TAKING UP ONE'S CROSS

22 Sunday of the Year A

Gr 20:7-9; Rom 12:1-2; Mt 16:21-27



Reading the daily newspaper and watching television news, we can see stories full of misery, and crisis of men and women in their suffering. Even though man tries to avoid suffering, suffering is here to stay. The Gospel of today, as well as the Gospels of the 24th Sunday, Cycle B, according to Saint Mark and the 12th Sunday, Cycle C, according to Saint Luke have similar contents and words almost identical. In all three gospels, Jesus revealed to Peter and the other apostles the contradiction of Christianity.

Jesus came to turn our values upside down. Today's gospel carries with it a meaning contrary to those, who want to turn Christianity into humanism. Christianity is not a religion for people to live according to their personal interest or to satisfy their selfishness. In order to emphasize and discuss Jesus's word more profoundly, on the 24th Sunday, Cycle B, we will reflect on the meaning of his word: *The Son of Man must suffer greatly (Mk 8:31)*. On the 12th Sunday, Cycle C, we will reflect on his word: *Whoever loses his life for my sake, will save it (Lk 9:24)*.

In today's Gospel, we reflect on Jesus' word: *Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross (Mt 16:24)*. To deny self and take up one's cross is a condition to be Jesus' disciple. We cannot follow Jesus without self-denial. Thus, what does it mean to deny self? Before different choices, we cannot choose all. To choose this, we have to give up that. Self-denial means to deny our own will and individual tendencies and our ego. To deny ego is necessary for God to enter our lives. When our ego is too big, there will be no room for God to enter. To

deny self so that God can increase as Saint John the Baptist maintains: *Christ must increase and I must decrease (Jn 3:30)*.

To deny self is necessary to carry one's cross. If we do not deny ourselves, we are unable to carry his cross. So what does it mean to carry one's cross? To carry one's cross means to accept one's suffering for the love of God. Generally, to carry one's cross means to accept one's limitations, situations and conditions. There is a question, which people often asked is the question why. Why did God let me suffer? Why did he send his cross to me and my family? The majority of people, except small children, have to carry some crosses in their lives: the cross of illness and disease, the cross of anxiety, worry and fear, the cross of loneliness and rejection, the cross of separation and alienation. Some people had to carry their crosses all their lives.

The purpose of matrimony is to start family life so that husband and wife can support each other materially and emotionally. However, husband and wife can be a burden to each other because they have to live with different temperaments and shortcomings, and differences in eating and sleeping habits. When one person needs to sleep, and another is awake, turning on music loudly, or sleeps, yet snores, it can annoy the other. The religious community life is to support one another in their vocation to religious life, but can be a burden to one another. The story goes that when doing laundry, one sister spread soap bubble to Saint Teresa's clothes. Teresa did not object it, but tolerated it, considering the soap bubble as spiritual rose petals offered to God for the love of God and the salvation of souls. Jesus did not tell us to go and look for suffering and cross. He just told us to take up our own cross. However, in reality, many times we ourselves head for suffering and cross.

We carry disease and suffering because of our addiction: drinking or smoking, not taking care of our health or our diet. We have to be imprisoned because we break the law. We have to suffer in spirit because of illicit and temporary relationship. When we have

to cut off that kind of illicit and temporary relationship, we would feel painful.

A reading from the Book of the prophet Jeremiah tells us the Prophet was saddened when Jerusalem fell and its people went into exile. Despite being opposed and rejected for his defeatism, Jeremiah remained faithful to God. Faith in God does not guarantee us a life free of disease, suffering and cross or crisis and difficulty of life. Thus, believers and non-believers also carry within themselves disease and suffering alike. The difference here is believers do not bear suffering for the sake of suffering as a dead end. They have God as their companion on the way of their suffering and cross. Believers embrace suffering and cross for the love of God in order to share in the suffering of Christ as to participate in his resurrection. Saint John Newman once put it: *The cross of Christ calls all human values into question by revealing a love, powerful enough to bridge the terrifying gap between life and death.*

A prayer for self-denial and cross bearing:

*O Lord, my God! We thank you
for coming to suffer and die on the cross for our sins.
Forgive me for the times I complained, blaming you
for the suffering and cross, I had to bear.
Grant me patience so that I may deny myself
and carry my cross daily.
Be my strength and my comfort
when I have to carry the crosses of life.
Show me the cross that can be the transforming instrument in
this life and the salvific instrument in the life to come. Amen.*

CORRECTING AS JESUS TAUGHT

23 Sunday of the Year A

Ez 33:7-9; Rom 13:8-10; Mt 18:15-20



TO find an outstanding element in a community of Christian faith, one has to look for spiritual values. The community of faith does not advocate factions or dispute, who wins and who loses. The community of faith will be interested in healing the offender and those who are offended.

The Hebrews of old considered correction as a mean of moral education. They believed it was necessary for parents to discipline their children. Scripture lies in the context of Judaism. Therefore, in the Book of Ezekiel, God reminds the prophet of giving warning to Israelite individuals. The Gospel tells us to follow a three step method of fraternal correction.

The first step is to correct the offender on an individual basis as to avoid embarrassment for the offender and to save face for him. The second step is to call upon one or three witnesses to convince the guilty party. The third step is to refer the case to the Christian community in order to guarantee spiritual health of the offender and the community (Mt 18:15-16).

Correction of others is a duty and responsibility of the chosen people in the Old Testament as the Book of the prophet Ezekiel tells us today: *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 (Ez 33:8)*. That means we are held responsible partly by our silence. Christian love means we should remind others, especially those under our care such as children and students, of their wrongdoing. If our time and culture are ones of broad permissiveness, then people do not take correction seriously. Living in a culture, which extols individualism, people do not want to correct others, but let them alone. Living in a society

of which culture is sensitive, or living in an era of which culture has become sensitive, then correction would hardly be accepted.

As for those who are touchy or thin-skinned, then we have to be careful when we correct them even in a constructive way, for fear that we might make their hair stand on end. If so, then on the spiritual level, there would be no spiritual growth for the offender. The offender would have no chance to become perfect as Jesus wants his disciples to be perfect (Mt 5:48).

The correction is so necessary that the faithful should not wait until he/she becomes perfect in order to do the correction. Those who are corrected must understand that the one, who does the correction also has faults, but when seeing others do something wrong, he/she has obligation to remind others of their wrongdoing. Only when we allow ourselves to be given a good dressing down, can we be eliminated from dirt. One of those things that is hard to say in the human relation is to tell others what they do not want to hear.

If in the family, parents always defend their children since childhood, then later on in life, their children would have a tendency not to admit their wrongdoing, but always find ways to justify what they do, no matter how wrong they are. If at infancy, a child was praised instead of being dissuading from doing something wrong - for instance from taking something from others for personal use – then later on he/she may develop that bad habit. From a human relationship, those who often defend themselves have few close friends.

Those who often defend themselves before others are also those who defend themselves before God. When we defend ourselves before God, then God's grace can hardly permeate our lives. That was the case of the Pharisee, who defended himself in his prayer before God, saying: *Oh God, I am not like the rest of man: grasping, crooked, adulterous or even like this tax collector (Lk 18:11)*. Jesus said this Pharisee would not be justified when he goes home (v. 14).

We often heard silence is gold. However, there are cases when silence means condoning for wrongdoing. Correction is not an easy task. It is possible for the one who corrects, to lose friendship, and for the one who is corrected, to lose face. Therefore, those who do the correction need to do it in a tactful way and in a spirit of charity and to pray for the grace of wisdom in their correction. In today's Gospel Jesus tells us, in order to admit our wrongdoing, one must learn how to listen. So today let us pray according to the Responsorial Psalm: *Oh, that today you would hear his voice: Harden not your hearts (Ps 94:8).*

A prayer to accept corrections:

*O Lord, my God, you are all good and right.
We thank you for showing us your way:
the way of goodness and righteousness.
You also teach us to correct one another.
Give me a humble spirit
to admit my weakness and sinfulness
so that I may open myself to correction.
May I realize that to be perfect is your command. Amen.*

TO FORGIVE IN ORDER TO BE FORGIVEN

24 Sunday of the Year A

Sir 27:30-28:7; Rom 14:7-9; Mt 18:21-35



Forgiveness is a theme recurring repeatedly in scripture. God forgives his people because he is a forgiving God, not because the sinner deserves his forgiveness. Sometimes, we do find in the Bible that God got angry and decided to punish his people. However, in those cases, the bible speaks of those who deny God's love and reject his forgiveness. The scripture readings today tell us it is with mercy that God forgives each one of us, but also it is our duty to forgive one another.

To respond to a question of Peter who wanted to know how often he had to forgive his brother when his brother sinned against him. Then Peter himself suggested a generous answer: *As many as seven times (Mt 18:21)*. In scripture, number seven means totality, completeness. Jesus told Peter to forgive *seventy-seven times (Mt 18:22)*, meaning to forgive indefinitely without any limit to the number of times.

Then Jesus brought up a case of a servant who, was forgiven by a king for a huge amount [1] but refused to forgive his fellow servant who owed him a much smaller amount. Jesus used this occasion to call upon us to show mercy and forgiveness toward one another. This is also the occasion for us to learn the lesson of the servant, who refused to forgive.

The servant who was forgiven so much was expected to forgive his fellow servant who owed him so little. For us, what makes forgiveness difficult is when we have been offended and hurt badly. It makes us suffer emotionally like a thorn in our heart. We would like to forgive, and to have the burden lifted from our

shoulders. However, we find it difficult to forgive and forget. That is the moment we have to make a decision.

Either we want to continue to harbor resentment as the reading from the Book of Sirach today points it out, or we can forgive as to be free. Even after we have decided to forgive, the hurt feeling might be still there. In this case, what we can do is to pray for those who have offended us. Then that hurt feeling will go away with times passed. Thus, we will be at peace. With those whom we meet occasionally, it is easy to forgive. With those whom we live day after day, and with those whom we are in daily contact, it is harder to forgive. It is necessary to forgive if we want to live in peace and harmony.

Whoever has betrayed by a dear friend or a loved one should have experienced how painful it was. There are those who have been betrayed by loved ones, do not want to meet and trust any person of the opposite sex. The Book of Sirach today warns us: *Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself, can he seek pardon for his own sins (Sir 27:4)*. Jesus understands our human weakness and is willing to forgive. He prayed asking the Father to forgive those who persecuted him: *Father, forgive them for they know not what they have been doing*. Realizing that man is weak and imperfect, we must be willing to forgive, for we might be the cause of suffering for others.

Every day we owe one another a debt of offense and hurt by words and deeds. There are offenses of which we were not aware – only God knew – such as our wrong judgment of others. Therefore, we need to pay them back by our forgiveness.

At the beginning of the mass, we have the opportunity to confess our sins publicly, before bringing gifts to the altar. Just before Holy Communion, we pray together the prayer Jesus taught us: *Forgive us our trespasses*. To forgive others is the condition for God to forgive us. If we think our prayer for forgiveness of sins is too general, not sufficient to stir up our gratitude for God's forgiveness, then we need to remember some detestable sins of

ours: sin against God, sin against neighbors as to stir up a spirit of sorrow. To experience God's mercy, will we have a spirit of mercy? The law of mercy and forgiveness is essential to the Gospel and the Christian life. Today we ask God to teach us the lesson of gratitude for his forgiveness of our sin.

A prayer for a spirit of forgiveness:

***O Lord, the Son of the living God!
We thank you for coming into the world,
to suffer and die for the salvation of humankind.
You taught us the lesson of forgiveness.
Grant me a generous heart
so that I may forgive those who have trespassed against me
and thus receive your forgiveness. Amen.***

[1]. A Vietnamese edition reads as ten thousand talents of gold.

BEING SATISFIED WITH WHAT ONE HAS

25 Sunday of the Year A

Is 55:6-9; Phil 1:20c-24, 27a; Mt 20:1-16



The size of the world in which we live depends on our vision. We can make the world bigger or smaller in our mind. When we reduce the size of the world in our mind, we choose to live in a small world. The more we choose to be narrow-minded in our vision

of the world, the less happy we are. That is the explanation for the grumble of the laborers, who worked the whole day in the vineyard. They had agreed on the wage with the landowner (Mt 20:22), but then they reproached him for paying the same amount to the latest comers.

Seen from a few points of view, today's parable is similar to the parable of the forgiving father who treated his prodigal son with kindness. When the prodigal son returned, his father threw a big party to celebrate his return. That made the elder son jealous and angry.

That is also a typical reaction of human beings. Biblical scholars see those who were called first as representing the first chosen people who were to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. When the Messiah came, they rejected Him. As for the gentiles, who were called later, they accepted the call and were to be first (Mt 20:16a).

The Parable also implies that anyone who responds to God's call and lives according to his way will be treated kindly. That was the case of the tax collectors and prostitutes who were promised to enter the kingdom of God before the chief priests and elders of the people (Mt 21:31). The tax collectors and prostitutes whom Jesus talked about were also the Jews, but were converted and followed his will. The lesson we can derive from the Gospel

today is God's call to the faith comes to different people at different times. Some were called to the life of faith since childhood through baptism.

Some were called to the faith later. The moment people put their faith in God and joined the Church through baptism, they are equal members of the Church. Thus, to join the Church earlier or later makes no difference. All those who are called to work in God's vineyard must be grateful to God's generosity.

The Gospel points out God's way of justice and righteousness is different from our human way of justice and righteousness. His way of justice and righteousness lies in the context of his kindness and mercy. That is why the Prophet Isaiah in his book today praises God's ways: *As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways (Is 55:8)*.

In paying the latest comers the same amount, the owner did no injustice to the earliest workers, because they had agreed on their payment and it was a fair and standard payment. The payment to the latest comers the same amount is from the owner's generosity. In other words, the owner applied the law of justice to the earliest workers, and he applied the law of charity to the latest ones. In the context of today's Gospel, those who stood idle in the market place were not lazy, not just hanging around, but nobody hired them (Mt 20:7).

To look for jobs in the marketplace and wait until five o'clock [1] meant they needed jobs badly. In Palestine at that time, the marketplace was a place where un-employees looked for jobs, like the 7-Eleven store or some convenient store in the USA where un-employees have been gathering to look for jobs in the last twenty years of the twentieth century and also in about the first twenty years of the twenty first century.

The highest point of the grape picking season in Palestine, according to William Barclay, an exegete, was in September, then came the rainy season. Therefore, the owner needed workers

to pick up his grapes before the rainy season came. Otherwise, his grapes might have become rotten. Thus, he needed as many workers as possible.

According to his plan of agricultural economy, the owner of the vineyard was a good manager. According to the Catholic Social teaching, we have to praise the owner of the vineyard for his social distribution of his goods, instead of accusing him of being partial and unfair. He paid the workers according to their individual needs, instead of their hours of work.

If we think we are better morally than others are, and they are better than we are, socially and financially, we might become jealous of them and resentful of God. We want to put limit to God's generosity. That is what the owner of the vineyard questions: *Are you envious because I am generous? (Mt 20:15)*. The early arrivals must have rejoiced with the latest arrivals because they needed money to help themselves instead of complaining.

When we emphasize the importance of material values and we see others are better off in material possessions, jobs and housing, we will become jealous. Jealousy will make us unhappy. When we consider material values not important, then we are not concerned, if others are better off.

So today each one of us needs to remind us that everything we have comes from God. We need to learn to live in a spirit of gratitude.

A prayer for being satisfied with what we have:

***O Lord, our God! You are God of justice and generosity.
We thank you for your justice and generosity
toward your people according to their needs.
Grant me a humble heart
so that I may be pleased to receive your blessings.
Also grant me a generous heart***

*so that I may understand what you give to others
instead of being jealous of them and complaining against you.
And grant that those who come later
may be invited to work in your vineyard also. Amen.*

[1] A Vietnamese version reads as the eleventh hour according to the Jewish reckoning time at that time.

FOLLOWING THE WILL OF GOD BY DEED

26 Sunday of the Year A

Ez 18:25-28; Phil 2:1-11; Mt 21:28-32



The parable of the two sons requested by their father to work in his vineyard in today's gospel dramatizes the classic difference between promise and performance. The elder son refused to work in his father's vineyard, but changed his mind later. He was a type of person who had a conscience regretted. After a short time of consideration, his conscience told him he needed to change and reform.

The other son promised, but failed to act. He was a type of person who was ready to say yes, to agree with his father, to make his father happy, but only with his word, without action. Jesus told this parable to warn the chief priests and elders of the people. They were the chosen people of God. Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets told them about the coming of the Messiah. They pledged to look for his coming. Yet when John the Baptist came, preaching a baptism of repentance, they did not repent. They also refused to believe in Jesus and accept him. On the contrary, tax collectors and sinners were ready to listen and accept the word of God in his Son Jesus. Therefore, Jesus said to them: *Those tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you (Mt 21:31).*

God has given us free will and he respects our freedom to choose. If we did not have freedom to choose, there would be no reward and punishment. In other words, if there were no free choice and decision, then reward and punishment would make no sense. Therefore, man's freedom to choose involves blessings and curses. That is the meaning of today's reading from the Book of Ezekiel: *If someone turns away from the wickedness he has*

committed, does what is right and just, he shall preserve his life (Ez 18:27). If there were no freedom to choose, then the son, who did not go out to work in the vineyard, did not have to be responsible. Perhaps today each one of us needs to examine our word and action to see if our word matches our action, and if our word and action go together.

When we pray, we may say to God we would love God and neighbor. Yet, we do not put our word of love into action. We can say yes to God and neighbors with many nice words. However, it is only lip service, if we do not take any action. We can go to a retreat, hear a good sermon, and read the word of God in the bible, telling us to follow the way of God and we ourselves want to live according to his way. Yet, we do not put into practice. We do not draw any practical, realistic plan of action. Suppose a child always said, he would love his parents but never did what his parents asked him to do. Every time his parents asked him to do something, he would either refuse or ignore his parents, then we would question his sincerity or there would be something wrong with his memory. Jesus sees it the same way.

He told his disciples: *You will live in my love, if you keep my commandments (Jn 15:10).* In another context he said to us: *None of those who cry out 'lord, lord', will enter the kingdom of God, but only the one who does the will of my my Father in heaven (Mt 7:21).* Even though he is God, Jesus humbled himself to obey the Father's will, took the human nature, suffered and died on the cross to save humankind (Phil 2:6-8).

If we are asked what type of persons: the first son or the second, or what category we are, we have to say each one of us carries a number of cells and some amount of blood of both sons. In other words, each one of us has a mixture of both personalities in us. Therefore, if we have rejected God's grace, or rejected his invitation to do something for the suffering and the unfortunate, we ask God for a spirit of regret. If we have promised God something like the second son did, and have not fulfilled it, we also ask God for his forgiveness. How many times have we

promised God if God would free us from some dangerous situations, we would do something for Him? It is our duty to do something either for God, for our parents and others, who have done big favors to us.

In order to remind us of doing something we rejected, or doing something we have promised, yet have forgotten, we have to find ways to remember it, for instance to mark on the calendar to remind us of doing it. If not, it might be too late to do it for someone, because either that someone or we we will have been gone for good.

A prayer for doing the will of God by deed:

O Lord, our God! You are God of faithfulness.

You are always faithful

to your covenant with humankind.

Forgive me for the times I broke my promise.

And the times I rejected your grace

and your invitation to do something for you.

Grant me a conscience open to regret

and a perseverant faith so that I may fulfill your will. Amen.

CALLED TO WORK IN GOD'S VINEYARD

27 Sunday of the Year A

Is 5:1-7; Phil 4:6-9; 21:33-43



In the Old Testament, God sent his prophets to speak to his chosen people. God's people were frequently likened to a vineyard of God's kingdom (Ps 5:7). At the time of Jesus, those wealthy people often invested their money in vineyards. They did not have to cultivate their vineyard. They could hire tenants to do it for them. According to the Jewish law at that time, if the owner of the vineyard died without children, then the vineyard was given to anyone who first claimed it.

In today's Gospel, Jesus uses the image of a vineyard to teach us a lesson of morality. According to this parable, the landowner was referred to God; the vineyard referred to Israel; the tenant farmers referred to the religious leaders: mainly the chief priests and elders of the people; the owner's servants referred to the prophets. The owner's son was a clear reference to Jesus.

Each person in the parable has a role to play with a special meaning. The tenant farmers seized the servants, beating one, killing another and stoning a third. They hatched a plot to take possession of the vineyard. They spoke to one another: *This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and acquire his inheritance (Mt 21:38)*. Then they put him to death. They understood they were tenant farmers in the vineyard. Thus, when Jesus asked the chief priests and elders of the people what the landowner would do to the wicked tenants. They reluctantly answered: *He will put those wretched men to a wretched death and lease his vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the proper time (Mt 21:41)*. Their answer boomeranged on them when Jesus said the vineyard would be taken away from them and given to others.

Reading the history of the Bible, we learn that God is eager to communicate with his people through his prophets. The prophet could speak of future events. However, it was not necessarily that the prophet had to predict a future event. Rather, the prophet was a spokes-man of God. The duty of the prophet was to remind the people of whom they were, how they were to live and what they were to do as the chosen people of God.

When the prophet had to criticize the people for their insincerity, idol worship, immorality or unfaithfulness to the way of God, he was not welcomed by the people because the message he brought, was a message of warning and condemnation. The chief priests and elders of the people were religious, political and civil leaders of the people. Instead of guiding the people to follow God's way, they led them astray. They abused, mistreated or killed the prophets. Last of all God sent his only Son with expectation that the tenants would respect him. On the contrary, they sentenced him to death also. Their preconceptions and wrong expectations about him prevented them from recognizing and accepting him.

Each one of us has a different role to fulfill in the vineyard. Each one of us is given a portion of the vineyard to cultivate. The vineyard can be the universal church, the local church, the school, the community or the family or an organization of the catholic action. The vineyard can be our gifts, skills, talents and blessings given to us by God.

The vineyard can be our soul too. St Paul tells us to cultivate our vineyard by practicing *whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, and if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Phil 4:8).*

Whether the vineyard we cultivate can produce fruits, it all depends on us. The owner of the vineyard from the book of the Prophet Isaiah had to have his vineyard *spaded, cleared it of*

stones, and planted the choicest vines, within it he built a watchtower (Is 5:2).

What should we do in order to cultivate God's vineyard? As for the vineyard of our soul, has it been nourished or has it been starved without food? Today we need to listen to Jesus' warning: *The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruits (Mt 21:43)*. That is the meaning of the word of prediction of Isaiah that the vineyard of the house of Israel (Is 5:7a) will be made a ruin (Is 5:6).

The vineyard of God is given to the Church of God instituted on the cornerstone of Jesus (Mt 21:42). As tenant farmers of God's vineyard, what must we do and how must we do for the vineyard to bear fruits?

A prayer for being a faithful tenant farmer in God's vineyard:

***O Lord, our God! You are the owner of the vast vineyard.
Your vineyard is the widespread universal Church
with different areas of land.
We are called to cultivate different plots of the vineyard
each doing different jobs such as weeding out,
hoeing, fertilizing, watering, hedging,
in a spirit of encouragement and cooperation.
Teach me how to cultivate your vineyard
so that it may bear fruits. Amen.***

ACCEPTING THE INVITATION TO ATTEND THE WEDDING

28 Sunday of the Year A

Is 25:6-10; Phil 4:12-14, 19-20; Mt 22:1-14



Each covenant between God and His people in the Old Testament is understood and interpreted according to the wedding image. The covenant between God and his people in the Old Testament paralleled the covenant between Christ and the Church in the New

Testament. In the covenant between God and his chosen people, God refers to himself as the groom, and to his people as the bride. The nuptial image was used by Saint Paul and Saint John to compare a relationship between Christ, considered to be the groom and the Church as the bride (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:22; Apoc. 19:7-9; 21:2; 22:17).

The parable of the wedding banquet records different responses to the invitation. To invite somebody to the wedding is to expect him/her to attend the banquet. However, the guests invited to the wedding feast in today's gospel, first declined the invitation. The second time, the king sent his servants to implore them to come to the banquet, saying to them: *Behold, I have prepared my banquet, my calves and fattened cattle are killed, and everything is ready; come to the feast (Mt 22:4).*

The wedding feast relates to another heavenly feast, which Isaiah envisioned: *On this mountain the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples, a feast of rich food and choice wines (Is 25:6).* However, the invited guests still refused to attend. They used many excuses for their absence. Worse off, they abused, beaten or killed the king's servants. When the invited guests declined the invitation, the king threw the party open to everyone to attend. However, when the king went in to see the guests, he caught sight

of one, not properly dressed and ordered him to be cast into the darkness outside.

We might think that the king was unreasonable and unrealistic. Did the king demand too much here? How could he expect a guest, who was just invited from the streets to dress properly for the wedding? However, according to the Jewish custom at that time, sometimes the groom family provided fabrics to the guests so that they could make their own wedding garments. The host family also provided wedding garments, hanging at the entrance for the guests to wear

If we do not know about this tradition, we might think the king was unreasonable, demanding too much. However, according to most biblical scholars, then perhaps this piece of story about the guest who did not wear his wedding garment was the conclusion of another story, incorporated by Saint Matthew into the parable of the wedding banquet.

Therefore, when it is read as one story, it sounds sudden and difficult to understand. Anyway, the parable of the wedding banquet shows when the guest wanted to attend, he had to follow the wedding tradition, and the tradition was almost considered as a law. Thus, anyone who refused to wear the wedding dress meant he showed contempt for the host. Therefore, when he was questioned why he did not wear the wedding dress, he kept silent, because he could not find any excuse. According to the parable, the wedding feast was referred to the heavenly banquet; the king referred to God; the king's son referred to the Messiah; servants referred to the prophets and apostles; guests referred to the chosen people in the Old Testament; city burned referred to Jerusalem destroyed in the year seventy.

As in the parable of the tenants, the vineyard will be given to other tenants, and then in the parable of the wedding feast, other guests in the street such as gentiles and sinners will be invited to the wedding feast. The wedding dress understood in a figurative sense means the invited guests have to wear a proper dress for the

occasion. The invited guests must show some sign that they accept the invitation seriously.

The wedding feast was given priority to the chosen people in the Old Testament. However, they did not respond to God's invitation through his prophets. John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet came calling the people to repentance to prepare the way for the Messiah. However, many of them were indifferent, not responding. When the Messiah came, they rejected Him. When they rejected him, the invitation was sent to all kinds of people. The invitation to attend the heavenly banquet has been sent to millions and millions of people, including us, since the foundation of the Church in different circumstances and times. Today we must ask ourselves this question. How have we been responding to God's invitation?

A prayer asking to partake in the heavenly banquet:

*O Lord our God, we thank you
for paying attention to our gentile ancestors.
Through the sacrament of Baptism, you invited
our ancestors to partake in the heavenly banquet of your Son.
As a result, I inherited my ancestors' blessings.
Grant that I may be faithful to my baptismal faith
as to partake in the heavenly banquet. Amen.*

REPAYING TO CAESAR AND TO GOD

29 Sunday of the Year A

Is 45:1, 4 -6; 1Thes 1:1-5b; Mt 22:15- 21



The Pharisees in today's Gospel teamed up with the Herodians to draw Jesus into political-religious confrontation. The Pharisees were a religious sect in Judaism, considering themselves more educated and holier than others. They often criticized and judged Jesus' words and actions, thinking Jesus acted out of their ancestors' tradition. Jesus himself often warned them, calling them hypocrites because they performed religious acts for show without love for God. The Pharisees resented paying tax to the Roman government. A tax concerned here was the census tax levied on men from fourteen to seventy-five and women from twelve to seventy-five. As for the Herodians, they favored the Roman rule and thus supported puppet king Herod's rule.

Before setting a trap to catch Jesus, they tried to flatter him by praising him as a truthful and impartial man (Mt 22:16). Then they put a question before Jesus: *Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not (Mt 22:17)?* The question seemed to be simple, but their intention was not.

If Jesus answered yes, meaning it was lawful to pay tax to Caesar, and then he would be considered reactionary and thus losing influence among the people who wanted to be free from the foreign power. If Jesus answered no, meaning it was unlawful to pay tax to Caesar, the Herodians would denounce him before the Roman authority as opposing the Roman rule.

Being aware of their evil intention, Jesus asked for the Roman coin to explain to them. Pointing to Caesar's image on the coin, Jesus told them: *Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar*

and to God what belongs to God (Mt 22:21). Here Jesus differentiated two spheres of authority: civil authority and divine authority. Civil authority and the divine authority are separated and yet related. Jesus wanted them to obey the civil authority as to maintain order and the common good. Civil authority comes from God as scripture tells us all power from heaven and earth is from God. From the book of the prophet Isaiah, we learn that God anointed king Cyrus, the Persian and gentile king to subdue the Babylonian empire as to bring back his chosen people to Jerusalem from exile (Is 45:1).

The second Vatican Council tells us about relations between civil and divine authorities as follows: *The more that both foster sounder corporation between themselves with due consideration for the circumstances of time and place, the more effective will their service be exercised for the good of all (Gaudium et Spes # 76).*

According to the teaching of Jesus, then God and Caesar, each has his proper claim on us. By telling us to pay tax to Caesar, Jesus upholds the legitimate power of Caesar to maintain order and the common good in the human society. Even though it was the colonial government, but in that colonial period, the colonial government could also provide certain services to its citizens.

Paying tax is a means to help the government maintain order and social welfare. Jesus himself set an example in paying the temple tax so that others may not be dis-edified, even though interpreted according to the temple law, he was exempted.

He told Peter: *Go to the lake, throw in a line, and take out the first fish you catch. Open its mouth and you will discover there a coin worth twice the temple tax. Take it and give it to them for you and me (Mt 17:27).* Obeying the civil law, Joseph made a trip to Bethlehem to register with Mary according to a decree ordering a census by Caesar Augustus (Lk 2:1-7).

Civil obedience supposes civil law is based on and corresponds with the divine law. When a civil law opposes God's law, a

Christian has to express position. The Christian has double citizenship: civil citizenship and citizenship of God's kingdom. As a citizen of a nation, the Christian is to pay tax and follow the legitimate law of the land. Moreover, according to Jesus' teaching, the Church also encourages the faithful, citizens of a nation, to participate in a civil government. However, the church as a whole and the priests do not participate in a civil government (Can. 285.3), or bring party politics to the church because the church is a transcendent entity, standing above all political entities.

The Church has a lasting character, while a ruling political party has power only when it holds office. The second Vatican Council reaffirmed its position on the Church and a political entity as follows: *The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community, nor bound to any political system. She is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person (Gaudium et Spes # 76).*

When Pope John Paul II visited America, he told a priest being a member of the House in North America, and another priest, being a government minister in Central America that if they wanted to remain priests, they had to abandon politics. The reason is that to play party politics can be tricky and deceitful. To be tricky and deceitful is not compatible to priestly ministry. Moreover, in order to attract votes from this group or that group, a priest holding a public office might have to support a view that is contrary to the Church teaching.

As citizens of the kingdom of God, we have our duty to repay to God what belongs to him. We repay to God our worship, hope, love and our observance of his commandments. We repay to God our financial contributions in order to build, repair and maintain God's house of prayer. We repay to God our apostolic works to build his kingdom on earth and to make his name hallowed. We repay to God our help, service, and charitable works to our fellow beings.

A prayer for knowing what to repay to God and what to Caesar:

*Oh Lord, we thank you for coming to teach us
how to differentiate between civil and divine authority.
Grant that the law of nations may reflect your Law.
As for those lawmakers who do not know you,
may the law they make reflect the natural law
implanted in their righteous conscience.
Teach me to observe the just law
as to guarantee order and public services.
Teach me to observe your law
so that our relationship may grow. Amen.*

TO LOVE GOD AND NEIGHBOR, ONE MUST LOVE SELF

30 Sunday of the Year A

Ez 22:21-27; 1Thes 1:5-10; Mt 22:34-40



God's commandment of love is one, which we have heard and read repeatedly in scripture, religious books and sermons. We have also heard about human love stories in books, magazines and movies in secular literature. Therefore, our notion of love in scripture has been poisoned by our notion of love, which we have heard in secular literature. That is why the word of love sounds like an empty word because people do not really mean it. Jesus came in this world to reveal his love by dying for our sin. The word of love according to the Gospel has become an event of Jesus' death on the cross.

In today's gospel, Jesus quotes the book of Deuteronomy (Dt 6:5) to respond to the Pharisees' question: *You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind* (Mt 22:37). To love with all one's heart, with all one's soul and with all one's mind, is a Jewish phrase of speech, expressing the totality and completeness of love involving the whole person.

Thus, the addition with all strength to the word of love in the Gospel of Mark (Mk 12:30) does not add anything to the concept of love. The amount of love for God, which God demands from his people in the Gospel of Mathew and the Gospel of Mark, is the same, no more or less. God's second command is quoted from the book of Leviticus: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (Lv 19:18). The Ten Commandments God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex 20:1-17; Dt 5:1-33) are the minimum requirements for the God-loving and fearing person. These

commandments were broken down by religious leaders into 613 distinct precepts, including 248 commanding precepts and 365 forbidden precepts to guide a person's personal conduct. Now Jesus summed up in the Two Great Commandments of love or in the one double commandment of love: love for God fully and love for one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus' answer showed that he was faithful to the Jewish tradition and heritage in the Old Testament.

To love God is to love one's neighbor, seeing God's presence in the neighbor. To love God and to love one's neighbor are inseparable. They are the two most important commandments as Jesus pointed out: *The whole law and the prophets depend on those two commandments (Mt 22:40)*. Saint John, the disciple of love reminds us: *Anyone who says he loves God, yet hates his neighbor, is a liar (1Jn 4:20-21)*. The reason we must love our neighbor is our neighbor is created in God's image and likeness, and redeemed by the blood of his Son Jesus. To love neighbor is to pray for our neighbor and to help those in need of food, drink, clothing and shelter as the book of Exodus tells us today (Ex 22:20-25).

Jesus taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves as Saint Paul echoed: *No one ever hates his own flesh (Eph 5:29)*. To love oneself is not excessive self-love. To love self means not to feel self-pitiful about self. To love ourselves means to accept ourselves, our limitations, to accept what we have: talent, health, look and possessions. To love ourselves means to forgive ourselves for any mistake we might have made. We often talk about forgiveness for others, yet we do not know how to forgive ourselves even after having confessed our sins and been forgiven. The reason for that is sometimes we like to foster a feeling of self-reproach and self-pity for our sins and failures committed; other times we do not want to admit our faults. To love ourselves means to be thankful for what God has given to us.

When we do not love ourselves, we can hardly love others. When we are not satisfied within ourselves, our talents and look, possessions and conducts, we can hardly be interested in others.

When we complain about our unfortunate destiny or miserable fate, we might lock ourselves in self-pity. When we are not content with what we have, we would be preoccupied, worried about ourselves, finding ways to defend ourselves and criticize others as to cover our faults. Reading the Vietnamese literature, one can find figures that have not satisfied with themselves. Beautiful as Thuy Kieu was, but ill fated. Talented in writing poems with good words, but double meaning: good and bad as Hồ Xuân Hương was, but in concubine status. Living in the royal palace as Cung Oán Ngâm Khúc was, but without being paid attention to by the king.

When we have to carry within ourselves illness and diseases in body and spirit for a long time, we might complain to God and resent him. We cannot love God fully when we harbor complaint and resentment against him. As long as we still carry within ourselves sickness and suffering in our body and spirit even after having been treated in the hospital or by doctors and taken medication, we ask God to help us bear our cross of sickness and suffering for the love of God. We offer to God our sickness and suffering as to be united with Jesus' suffering and cross for the salvation of souls including our own. We ask God to help us find meaning and purpose in our suffering and cross. Only by acceptance of suffering and cross with love, our cross can transform our lives and our suffering can become redemptive suffering.

A prayer to know how to love God and neighbor:

***O Lord, our God! We thank you for coming
to teach us about the Two Greatest Commandments of love:
loving you fully and loving neighbor as ourselves.
Grant that we may live in a spirit of gratitude
to those gifts, you have given me big or small, much or little.
Teach me to recognize your image in others,
May I accept my situation, condition and content with my fate?
and compromise with life. so that I may love you and others
with my open heart. Amen.***

THOUGHTS, WORDS AND ACTIONS MUST MATCH

31 Sunday of the Year A

Mal 1:14-2:2, 8-10; 1 Thes 2:7b-9, 13; Mt 23:1-12



In order to have an overview and a related understanding of the Gospel, we need to know something about those following groups. Besides the chief priests, there were also the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Zealots, the Herodians and the elders.

When they met Jesus, they tended to confront him and find faults with him more or less.

First, the chief priests belonged to the line of Levi, taking care of worship in the temple and synagogues. Zacharias, the father of Saint John the Baptist was a priest. It fell on him by lot to offer incense in the sanctuary of God (Lk 1:5-6). After having healed the lepers, Jesus told them to go and present themselves to the priest as a proof of healing (Mt 8:1-4; Mk 1:44; Lk 5:14; 17:14). Yet one priest was indirectly criticized when he saw a wounded man beaten by robbers and continued on (Lk 10:31). Secondly, the scribes were scholars and intellectuals in Judaism. They did not belong to any political or religious group. However, many of them were Pharisees and they showed attitude and actions opposing Jesus like the Pharisees.

Thirdly, as for the Pharisees, they were a religious sect within Judaism, mentioned frequently in the gospels. According to Josephus, there were about 6,000 Pharisees in Herod's time. The Pharisees tended to criticize Jesus and oppose him and his disciples. Saint Paul was a former Pharisee. Nicodemus (Jn 3:1-12; 7:45-48) and Gamaliel (Acts 5:34) were also Pharisees. Fourthly, the Sadducees were a group also within Judaism. They neither believed in the resurrection of the dead (Mt 22:23-32; Mk

12:18-27; Lk 20:27-40), nor did they believe the existence of angels and spirits (Acts 23:8). The Sadducees and the Pharisees demanded a sign once from heaven (Mt 16:1-12). Fifthly, the Zealots represented fanatic nationalism. They believed in the restoration and independence of Israel. They opposed the census ordered by Caesar Augustus. Their tactics of attacks against foreigners were similar to guerilla warfare of the Communists before their seizure of power and similar to terrorists' attacks of the Islamist militants. Yet Jesus chose one of the zealots, named Simon, to be his apostle. Sixthly, then come the Herodians (Mt 22:16; Mk 3:6; 12-13) who were pro-king Herod and thus pro-Roman rulers.

Finally, the council of the elders maintained the rabbinical traditions collected into books. Three groups involved in the persecution and crucifixion of Jesus were the high priests with the Temple guards, the scribes and the elders with the crowd. God demands from his people a sincere response to his words. The Old Testament priests were responsible for leading God's people in worship on the Sabbath and for bringing God's message to his people.

Yet the God of the Sabbath worship in the OT, the same God of the Sunday worship in the New Testament, was not pleased with them because they were not responsible. They offered to God cheap worship and lip service according to a routine fashion and exterior manner. Therefore, God commanded the prophet Malachi to warn them: *You have turned aside from the way and have caused many to falter by your instruction (Ml 2:8)*. In today's Gospel, the scribes and the Pharisees came to the scene. Jesus said they held the chair of Moses, meaning they were experts on the Law of Moses and chosen to interpret the law. However, Jesus warns us of their hypocrisy and injustice and of their misguided values.

They appeared to be holy to people. They paid attention to the external observances of the law that made them feel good. Therefore, Jesus told the crowd and his disciples: *Do and observe*

all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach, but do not practice (Mt 23:3). There are a few points in today's Gospel, which seem to be knotty in our mind.

Jesus told us not to address anybody on earth as *teacher, father or master*. Yet people still address one who teaches them as teacher. Parishioners still address a priest as father to express a spiritual relationship: father so and so. Children still address the one who gave them birth as father. Some people have foster-parents. Christians also have godparents. So, do we try to go against what Jesus taught? The answer is when we address somebody as father; we realize that only God is the all-mighty and ever-present Father. Jesus's word was not meant that his disciples were not allowed to teach, to heal and to sanctify. Since the beginning of the Church, the faithful considered bishops and then priests as spiritual fathers.

Thus, it implied that the two disciples considered Saint Paul as their spiritual father. Then when we address somebody as teacher or master, we realize that only Jesus is the supreme teacher and the all-wise and all-knowing master. Jesus condemned the scribes and the Pharisees only because they wanted to be addressed as teachers or fathers. The scribes demanded from their students an absolute respect. Their desirable pride to *love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, greetings in marketplaces and the salutation 'rabbi' (Mt 23:6-7)*, plus their hypocrisy, fake, pride and boast that made them blameworthy, condemned and punished (Mt 23:13-36). Jesus' warning to the scribes and Pharisees should help us examine ourselves about our worship and our practice of faith. We might discover that some of the actions and attitudes of the Pharisees are also rooted in our spiritual lives.

Our religious acts can be hypocritical, phony, boastful, displaying and self-seeking. In a certain sense, perhaps the Phariseism and scribeism may be found in our spiritual system. Today we must come to realize that God knows everything. He knows our secret

thoughts and desires. We cannot hide anything from him. If we look deep into our lives, we will discover what needs to be dusted, what needs to be repaired, what needs to be thrown away? When we clean our house, we need to dust, to throw away garbage, and then when we clean our spiritual house, we need to dust, and to throw away garbage from our soul.

A prayer for being true to self:

Oh Lord, our God! You know everything.

You know our secret thoughts and desires.

*May we know ourselves: good points and bad
as to be true to ourselves.*

*May my thought go with my word and action? so that my
prayers and offerings may be pleasing and acceptable to you. Amen.*

PREPARING OIL FOR THE LAMP OF SOUL

32 Sunday of the Year A

Wis 6:12-16; 1Thes 4:12-17; Mt 25:1-17



Many different images of the kingdom of God, or the reign of God, or kingdom of heaven were used by Jesus to teach his contemporaries. The kingdom of God was likened and explained in different parables. They were the parable of the weeds, the mustard seed, the leaven, the hidden treasure and the pearl, the net, the unforgiving servant, the workers in the vineyard, the two sons, the tenants and the wedding feast.

Today the kingdom of heaven is likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom, of whom five were wise and five foolish. The foolish virgins took their lamps with no extra oil. The five wise virgins prepared their lamps with oil reserved (Mt 25:3-4). According to Jewish historians, a wedding ceremony at the time of Jesus began at sunset when a new day began and they celebrated with lavish banquet lasting for days. However, this wedding was delayed because the marital agreement concerning betrothal gifts and dowry was not solved between the two families until midnight.

Therefore, the return of the bridegroom with the bride at midnight caught the foolish virgins by surprise. When the announcement of the arrival of the bridegroom was made, the virgins got up, taking their lamps. When their lamps were going out, the foolish virgins asked the wise ones for some of their oil. Afraid that there would not be enough oil for both, the wise virgins did not want to share their oil. When the foolish virgins went to buy oil, the bridegroom came with the wise virgins, and the door shut. The foolish virgins returned, not allowed to enter. The fault of the foolish virgins was not due to their state of sleeping, but due to their lack of preparedness and anticipation.

Oil in scripture symbolizes the grace of God, called the consecrating oil, used for the anointment of one chosen by God (Lv 8:12; 1Sm 10:1; 16:13).

A lamp without oil is useless. In a figurative sense, the soul without God's grace is the lifeless and stunted soul. We may blame the wise virgins for their selfishness for not sharing some of their oil with the foolish ones so that they all could enter the wedding banquet. However, how much oil needed to light up the lamp for the wedding depends on each person's planning. The oil we need to attend the heavenly banquet is the grace of God. We can remind others to prepare spiritually for the heavenly banquet, but cannot do it for them. Wisdom in the biblical sense is related to belief in Yahweh. According to the book of Proverbs, wisdom is ultimately *a gift of Yahweh (Prv 2:6)*. Accordingly, the book of Proverbs teaches: *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prv 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Jb 28:28)*.

The Gospel tells us about the wisdom of the Child Jesus as follows: *Jesus, for his part, progressed steadily in wisdom (Lk 2:52)*. Later on, his acquaintances remarked: *Where did this man get such wisdom and miraculous powers (Mt 13:54)?* They realized that he was only the son of the carpenter and the housekeeper among themselves (Mt 13:55) and he did not attend a rabbinical school. The Book of wisdom today values wisdom as a guarantee for the heavenly happiness:

For taking thought of wisdom is the perfection of prudence and whoever for her sake keeps vigil, shall quickly be free from care (Wis 6:15). Wisdom tells the five wise virgins to bring extra oil for their lamps. Wisdom is also mentioned in his letter to the Thessalonians. Saint Paul told them to believe in Jesus' death and resurrection and his power to resurrect those, who passed away in faith: *For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, will bring forth with him from the dead those also who have fallen asleep believing in him (1Thes 4:14)*.

In Vietnam of the old times, virginity was valued for a young girl before marriage. As a result, a motto was circulated: *You can be wise for three years, but stupid for one hour.*

Due to being stupid for one hour, her marriage was annulled and the possibility for her to marry again would be dim. In a similar way, in order to attend the heavenly banquet, one must be careful and watchful for one's spiritual life, lest there would be no time and occasion to learn wisdom. The wedding banquet stands for the heavenly banquet when the faithful are called out of this life. The ten virgins stand for the whole people of God: clergy, religious and laity, men and women, old, young and children. If we want to be listed with the wise virgins, we must be prepared spiritually, waiting for the angel of the Lord to call us from this world and stand before the judgment throne. However, nobody knows the day or hour of God's call.

Nobody knows when disease, accident, natural disaster will come. The coming of the groom at midnight hour conveys the unpredictability concerning the time of the Lord's coming. God does not give us an appointment to come into our lives. To wait until the last minute for purchasing oil for their lamps was too late for the foolish virgins. It would be too late for us to wait until the last minute to give an account to God. To plan to do something at the last minute in order to get ourselves into spiritual shape is not to be recommended. It is to be avoided. We might have heard people say that day they would make a confession and amend their lives. Unfortunately, that day might never come for they might have gone before that day. So while waiting for a day to attend the heavenly banquet – the day of judgment – we need to be vigilant and ready to light the lamp of our soul, to live in right relationship with God.

A prayer for being listed with the wise virgins:

*Oh Lord, our God! You are all-wise and all-knowing.
As the five wise virgins prepared oil for their lamps,
teach me to be vigilant and anticipatory
ready to prepare myself spiritually
lest when I am called out of this world suddenly
and my soul has no oil of grace in you.
Grant that I may be listed with
the five wise virgins to enter
the wedding banquet. Amen.*

INVESTING WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN

33 Sunday of the Year A

Prv 31:10-13; 1Thes 5:1-6; Mt 25:14-30



It was a common practice in the Near East such as Egypt, Assyria and Palestine for wealthy men, when going on a long journey, to entrust their property to their trusted servants, more or less depending on their ability [1]. Today's parable tells us the servant who received five talents knew that his master expected him to invest for his benefit. Thus, he made five more. The servant who received two talents, also invested the money for interests, and thus made the additional two. In proportion to percentage, the servant who made two more talents was also as successful as the one who made the additional five. Both tried to invest their master's talents for his benefit and thus were in favor of their master.

How did both servants double their money in their investments? The answer is at that time in Palestine, money lent for a long period could yield very high interest, possibly one hundred percent. The servant who buried his master's talents had enough ability to handle a small task entrusted to him. However, he let his fear and laziness take over.

He did not give the reason to bury his talents; he simply blamed his master for being a hard bargainer. Due to his laziness and his lack of responsibility, he was discharged disgracefully. There might have been other reasons for his failure to invest his master's money, perhaps his dissatisfaction with the small talents or his jealousy of his fellow servants who received more. A number of scripture scholars considered the slothful servant as the scribes and Pharisees. They were experts on the Law of Moses, but they kept the law for the sake of law observance,

closed their minds and hearts before God's call and disregarded others.

The one who had received two talents made two more talents, was praised as *well done, good and faithful* (Mt 25:23) and promised to receive more and share his master's joy as the one who had received five talents and made another five. The one, who refused to use his small talents, missed the opportunity to develop his talents. That is what Jesus said: *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* (Mt 25:29).

The lesson Jesus wants to teach us today is the importance of investments materially, mentally and spiritually. According to Saint Paul, each has received different spiritual gifts from God: *To one the Spirit gives wisdom in discourse, to another the power to express knowledge. Through the Spirit, one receives faith; by the same Spirit, another is given the gift of healing, and still others miraculous powers. Prophecy is given to one; to another power to distinguish one spirit from another. One receives the gift of tongues, another that of interpreting the tongues* (1Cr 12:8-10).

Each person also receives mental and moral gifts. Some have intelligent and creative mind. Others are good in sports and music. Some have good quality in personality. Others have profound spiritual life. What is important is to discover our goods, talents and gifts and find ways to develop them for the glory of God and the service of man, not just for self-praise. We might not be aware of our potential if we do not use whatever talent or gift we have and develop them. When we use our talents and gifts, we would have feedback from people. When people evaluate our talents and gifts, we would be motivated to cultivate them further.

Hàn Mạc Tử's poetry at first was not quite distinctive. When he got different inspirations, his poetry became more flowery and appreciated. Then an event came to him, upsetting his whole life.

He was shocked at his leprosy. It changed his whole view on life. At the end, finding a source of strength and comfort from God and the Virgin Mary, Hàn Mạc Tử accepted the disease with a spirit of love and trust and offered his life in serving humankind with touchy poetic verses from supernatural inspiration.

Each person has a number of talents and gifts for investment: material, mental and spiritual. The question we need to tackle today is how we have used his material blessing and gifts. Each one of us needs to find out the gap between his/her talents and gifts and his/her performance. As the master of the household expected the servants to invest their talents for his benefit, God wants us to develop our talents and gifts for his glory and honor. Each one of us, depending on his/her ability, opportunity and condition, and circumstances in life should use our talents and gifts wisely and responsibly to glorify God and serve humankind. A prayer for investing what God has given:

Oh Lord our God, you are God of all creation.

***We thank you for the goods, talents and gifts
you have given us for investment in our life.***

***Teach me to be willing to accept
those things we have received with gratitude.***

Do not let us grumble and complain to you.

***Teach me to be faithful to my investment as to serve you and
your people. Amen.***

[1]. Kemp, T. L. *Homilies on the Sunday Gospels*. Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1977, p. 110.

FACING THE JUDGMENT THRONE

The Solemnity of Christ the King, Year A

Ez 34:11-12, 15-17; 1Cor 15:20-26, 28; Mt 25:31-46



The Church established the feast of Christ the King at the end of the liturgical year to show us that Jesus is not only the origin of all things, but also the end of everything. That is what Jesus revealed to John the apostle in the Book of Revelation: *I am the Alpha and the Omega (Rev 21:6; 22:13)*. It means Jesus is the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

According to the Book of Revelation, Jesus is Lord of all lords and King of all kings (Rev 17:14) for he has overcome sin and death. All kings are subject to death, and nobody can rise by himself. Christ the King accepted death and after three days overcame death by his resurrection. That is why in his letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul preached Christ's sovereignty: *Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep (1Cor 15:20)*!. By accepting the sovereignty of Christ, King of kings Lord of lords, many Christians were ready to shed their blood to bear witness to their faith. In the Nicene Creed, we profess with the Church: *He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.*

On the Day of Judgment, Christ will appear as King and supreme Judge. As King, Christ *must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet (1Cor 15:25)* as Saint Paul expresses it in his letter to the Corinthians today. As Judge, he *will separate the sheep from the goats (Mt 25:32)* as Saint Matthew tells us in his Gospel. The sheep and the goats were fed in the same meadow. At night, they were kept in separate enclosures and they were separated at market. Christ's kingdom is seen clearly through the image of the good shepherd. According to the Book of Ezekiel,

the prophet complained about the deeds of priests and kings of Judah, who neglected to take care of the sheep, his chosen people. Ezekiel predicted that God would come to bring back the lost sheep: *I myself will look after and tend my sheep. As a shepherd tends his flock when he finds himself among his scattered sheep, so will I tend my sheep (Ez 34:11-12)?* The Church attributes the above words to Jesus, the shepherd king. When taking our human nature and dwelling among us, Jesus himself gave us an example of service by washing the Apostles' feet and taught us to wash one another's feet.

The Old Testament and the New tell us about the Day of Judgment. The criterion for the final judgment is love, charity and service. In his teaching, Jesus identified himself with the least of his people: *Whatever you did for one of the least of my people, you did it for me (Mt 25:40).*

Thus, the Gospel shows us membership in his kingdom requires responsibility to serve others as Christ did. Christ shows us that besides the vertical relationship between what is divine and what is human, that is between God and his people; there is another relationship - a horizontal relationship - between people and people. People are the masterpiece of God because people were created in God's image (Gen 1:26-27) and redeemed by the blood of his Son Jesus (Heb 9:12).

One of the conditions to join the kingdom of God is our service and charity as Jesus said: *For the Son of man has come, not to be served, as to serve (Mt 20:28).* Now back in heaven, Jesus needs our heart to soothe human suffering. He needs our hands to bandage up human wounds and feed the hungry. He needs our feet to go visit the sick and the imprisoned.

According to Jesus' teaching, then in the final day, people will be judged according to their responsibility toward those needy and unfortunate. Punishment will be inflicted on those who do not help and serve those unfortunate. That is the punishment for the wealthy person who refused to help and serve Lazarus (Lk 16:19-

31). The Catechism of the Catholic Church also teaches us: *The Last Judgment will reveal even to its further consequences the good each person has done or failed to do during his earthly life (CCC # 1039)*. Perhaps so far, we tended to confess only what we did wrong. To remind us of Jesus' teaching, we have to confess what good we have failed to do for others also.

A prayer for merciful judgment:

***Oh, Lord our God! You created human beings
according to your image and saved us
with the blood of your Son.
Teach me to recognize your presence in the hungry,
the homeless, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned.
Forgive me for the times I blinded my eyes
and covered my ears before the human misery
by my selfishness and laziness.
Grant me a heart that is touching
so that I may respond to the needs of others. Amen.***

SOLEMNITIES AND MAJOR FEASTS

MARY IS ALSO THE MOTHER OF THE CHRISTIANS

Solemnity of the BVM, the Mother of God: A

Nm 6:22-27; Gl 4:4-7; Lk 2:16-21



When the older Irish monsignor realized he was no longer holding his Sunday mass congregation alive with his preaching, making them dozing off, he decided to seek the advice of his bishop. When he explained his problem to the bishop, the bishop had a solution for him, saying: Next Sunday when you preach at the masses, tell the congregation that you are in love with a woman. Then tell them you have been in love with this woman for thirty years. Now, when you have the congregation sitting on the edge of their seats, wondering what will come next. Tell them that this woman is the Blessed Virgin Mary. Now you will have their attention, and you can talk about Mary and what she means to you. The monsignor thanked the bishop a lot. The following Sunday, he went to the pulpit and began: The bishop is in love with a woman. He has been in love with this woman for the past thirty years. Now the congregation was alive. Then the monsignor paused, scratching his head and said: And so help me, I cannot remember her name [1].

The liturgy of the Word today reminds us the circumcision of Jesus, but also emphasizes the position of Mary who gave birth to Jesus. Scripture emphasizes the role of Mary in the divine plan of salvation. How did Mary become the mother of the Savior? When Mary responded to the message of the angel Gabriel: *Let it be done to me as you say (Lk 1:38)*, that moment the Son of God was incarnated in the womb of Mary.

The Scripture tells us: *When the designated time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to*

deliver from the law, those who were subjected to it, so that we might receive our status as His adopted children (Gal 4:4-5). The Creator born of the created is a mystery. However, according to the message of the angel: *Nothing is impossible with God (Lk 1:37)*. The title of Mary, mother of God was recorded in scripture according to the word of Elizabeth: *Who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me (Lk 1:43)*. The Church recognizes Mary to be the mother of God according to the General Councils of Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople (553), Lateran (649), Toledo (675) and Vatican II (1964) in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium # 69*). Moreover, the Church also declares Mary, mother of God in the Nicene Creed. The Church teaches that Jesus has two natures: the human and the divine nature. According to his human nature, Jesus needs to grow in a family with a mother and a father.

Now a second question comes to our mind: How did Mary become the mother of the Church and mother of the Christians? The Scripture again tells us: At the foot of the cross, the dying Jesus turns to his mother saying: *Woman, this is your son (Jn 19:27)*. Saint John at that moment welcomed Mary home and took care of her. Afterwards too, once her Son entered into his glory, Mary gave a moral support to the apostles, prayed with and for the apostles (Acts 1:14). After her assumption, Mary continued praying for the Christians to receive grace and salvation (*Lumen Gentium # 62*). The second Vatican Council officially accepted Mary as mother of the Church and solemnly proclaimed this title by Pope Paul VI in the third talk (Nov 21/1964) of the Council.

Today we begin the New Year, we should spend some quiet time in order to reflect, like Mary, to look back into the past year, reexamining our relationship with God, thanking him for all his favors he has given in the last year, evaluating whether we have opened ourselves to his word and his will. If we just complain about our misfortunes and unhappiness, our eyes would be covered by negativism, unable to see our blessings and the bright side of life

At the beginning of the New Year, let us ask God to forgive our failures, our shortcomings in the last year. Each one of us might want to make resolutions to change in the new year, for instance resolution to give up a bad habit like heavy drinking, or chain-smoking, or to spend more time with our family members. In that way, each year when we grow older, we add something more beneficial to our soul and spirit. We might want to look to the future also. Even though we are not sure about what the future would be. However, like Mary, we can put our complete trust and faith in God so that we can say like her: *Let it done to me, as you say (Lk 1:38)*.

Prayer asking Mary to be our mother:

*Oh Mary, at the foot of the cross,
 Jesus entrusted you to be mother of the Apostle John.
 Since then you gave moral support to the Apostles and prayed
 for them.
 Today I accept you to be my mother personally.
 And I ask you to travel with me
 on all the roads of my life.
 Show me the way to God.
 At the hour, God calls me from this life,
 come to my bedside to counsel me. Amen.*

[1]. This story is from *The Catholic Digest*

BAPTISM MARKS THE MISSION OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT OF YAHWEH

Baptism of the Lord, Year A

Is 42:1-4, 6-7; Acts 10:34-38; Mt 3:13-17



In the desert of Judea, John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance, preparing the people for the coming of the kingdom of God through the Messiah. John's baptism was only with water, not for the forgiveness of sin. In order to ratify John's work and his mission, Jesus asked to be baptized by John. By submitting to baptism, Jesus wanted to show us the importance and necessity of the future sacrament of baptism. Later on, he said: *No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being begotten of water and spirit (Jn 3:5).*

Jesus' baptism marked his public ministry as servant, preacher and healer. That is why when Jesus walked out of the water, a voice was heard from the sky: *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased (Mt 3:17).* This voice from heaven in the Gospel of Mathew is almost identical with the word of Isaiah chosen for today's mass: *Here is my servant whom I uphold; my chosen one with whom I am pleased (Is 42:1).* Who is the servant whom Isaiah means? After much study and discussion, most Jewish scholars identified the servant of Yahweh as the Israelites. In the Greek version of the Gospel of Matthew, the Greek word for servant is *pais* meaning either son or servant. This point helps to identify the suffering servant of Yahweh in Isaiah as the Son of God in Matthew's Gospel. The Servant of Yahweh is identified as Jesus in the Acts of Apostles (Acts 3:13; 3:26; 4:27; 4:30).

By submitting himself to John's baptism, Jesus made the mission of the Servant his own. On the Passion Sunday liturgy, we see Jesus' image in the Suffering Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah, when

the Servant said: *My face I did not shield from buffets and spitting...knowing that I shall not be put to shame (Is 50:6c,7d)*. On Monday of the Holy week liturgy, we hear God speak about his Servant Son as follows: *He will not cry out, nor make his voice heard in the street (Is 42:2)*.

On Tuesday of the Holy week liturgy, God said to his Servant Son: *I will make you a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth (Is 49:6)*. On Wednesday of the Holy week liturgy, the Servant Son said of himself: *I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard (Is 50: 6)*.

The Good Friday liturgy tells us about the Servant Son: He himself was wounded for our sins (Is 53:5). As a servant does his master's will, Jesus as the suffering servant also came to do the will of the Father. He committed himself to the work of redemption: to preach and teach God's way, to suffer and die for sinful humankind and to heal the sins of humankind. The Suffering Servant was willing to accept suffering and death on the cross in order to take away the sins of the world.

Through baptism, we are called to be suffering servants in corporation with the work of salvation of Jesus. If the Israelites recognized themselves in the suffering servant of Yahweh in Isaiah, then should we, Christians recognize ourselves in the suffering servant of God with Christ? If we are to suffer, remember Jesus' words: *If you find that the world hates you, know it has hated me before you (Jn 15:18)*. That is what Jesus said: *If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and begin to follow in my footsteps (Mt 16:24)*. In another place, Saint Paul said: *Are you not aware that we, who were baptized into Christ Jesus, were baptized into his death (Rom 6:3)?*

The Christian suffers with Christ does not mean we accept suffering as a dead end without escape. The Christian suffers and carries his cross for the love of God as to participate in the

suffering with Christ and to share in Jesus' glory. To suffer here is to suffer in body or spirit due to disease or circumstance or what is caused by others. The Christian should not seek or embrace suffering for the sake of suffering. Therefore when suffering in body or spirit, we need to seek healing. As long as we still carry within ourselves suffering in body or spirit, we need to find meaning for suffering and cross and ask for patience as to suffer for the love of God and for atonement for sins. To suffer and carry the cross that way, suffering and cross will become salvific, bringing salvation to soul.

Prayer for living according to the way of the Lord:

Oh Lord Jesus Christ!

You came to identify yourself

with the suffering servant in the book of Isaiah.

May I come to realize your way is the way of the cross and suffering before the glorious resurrection.

May I also come to realize that

to be your disciple, I have to carry my cross

and follow in your footsteps according to your teaching. Amen.

TWO EXAMPLES OF OBEDIENCE AND SACRIFICE

Presentation of the Lord: A, B, C

Mt 3:1-4; Heb 2:14-18; Lk 2:22-40



According to the Law of Moses, every first-born male child had to be presented to the Lord in the temple. That is why the parents of the child Jesus brought the infant Jesus to the Temple to be dedicated. The book of Exodus teaches that the first born son belongs to God because of being delivered from the slaughter of the born sons in Egypt in the Passover on the way to the promised land (Ex 13:2, 15). The book of Numbers determined the ransom for a boy is five silver shekels (Nm 18:16).

According to the book of Levi, the mother has to make her ritual of purification 40 days after she has given birth to a boy (Lev 12:1-8). The mother had to offer a yearling lamb for a holocaust and a pigeon for a sin offering. However, Joseph and Mary offered only two young pigeons as a sacrifice to God because they were poor.

In this case, Saint Luke combined the mother's purification and the presentation of the son together. In fact, the offering of two young pigeons was for the mother's purification, not for the son's presentation as misunderstood by many. How much did Mary and Joseph offer for their son's presentation? The Gospel did not say, but might be implied in these words: *When the pair had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee and their own town of Nazareth (Lk 2:39).* In appearance, there was nothing special about the parents of Jesus.

Saint Joseph was only a village carpenter, like other carpenters in town. Mary was a regular housekeeper like many housekeepers in

the area. However, scripture tells Simeon and Anna were filled with joy and gratitude on this occasion. Enlightened by the Holy Spirit, they both recognized the identity of the Child Jesus. Simeon had waited all his life for this moment.

Seeing the Messiah of God, his first reaction was to give thanks to God. Then he declared he would be ready to depart from this life when he uttered the gospel canticle (Nunc dimittis: Lk 2:29-32) since he had seen with his own eyes the Messiah of God, not only for Israel, but also for the whole world as well. Simeon blessed the child Jesus and his mother, then spoke prophetically: *This child is destined to be the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed (Lk 2:34).*

According to the prophet Malachi's prophecy in today's first Reading the Lord whom people seek, will come to the temple (Mal 3: 1), Simeon sees the coming of the Infant Jesus to the Temple as the fulfillment of this prophecy. How was Simeon able to recognize the Child Jesus as the Savior? How he was able to distinguish what was divine and what was human? Today's Gospel tells us: *Simeon was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him (Lk 2:25).*

These two virtues in Simeon helped him recognize the child Jesus as the Savior. His mind and his look were not blocked by obstacles that would prevent him from recognizing the divinity of Christ. This should help us understand one of the eight Beatitudes: *Blessed are the single for they shall see God (Mt 5:8).*

Then Anna took turn to utter her voice of praise for the child Jesus. How was she able to recognize the divine mission of the Child Jesus? Do not say because she was a prophetess. Being a prophetess was special, since she was the only one female prophet in the whole history of the Old Testament. However being a female prophet was no guarantee that she would know the identity of Jesus' divine mission. Today's Gospel tells us: *She*

was constantly in the temple worshipping day and night in fasting and prayer (Lk 2:37).

She was eighty-four years old, no longer in a state of being physically fit and mentally alert. Yet fasting and prayer helped her become alert spiritually, alert to the voice of God and the word of God, alert to his presence.

The liturgy of the word today teaches us two lessons. We can learn a lesson from Mary and Joseph about the virtue of obedience and sacrifice. Mary and Joseph obeyed the will of God according to the Law of Moses by bringing the child Jesus to the Temple to be dedicated. They also obeyed the Law of Moses by offering the sacrifice according to the prescriptions of the law of the Lord (Lk 2:39).

Our sacrificial offering to God must help transform our lives and find the meaning of life and make us feel the inner joy in our practice of faith. According to a chemical principle, food comes to the stomach without being digested, our stomach would be floating. A psychological and spiritual principle suggests if we only receive without giving away, our heart would be stagnant.

A second lesson we can learn from Simeon and Anna is to learn how to be able to recognize God's presence and his voice and his will in our lives. How can we recognize the footprints of God and his presence, if our minds and hearts are full of obstacles?

A prayer for contemplation of God's countenance:

Oh, Lord our God!

You are the one we are longing for.

Teach me how to obey and sacrifice

Like Mary and Joseph.

Give me an upright spirit and a devout heart

Along with zeal for the work of your house

Like Simeon and Anna

***So that I may recognize the footprints and your presence
in my life and in the universe. Amen.***

MISSION OF PREPARATION AND WITNESS

Nativity of John the Baptist: A, B, C

Is 49:1-6; Acts 13:22-26; Lk 1:57-66



John the Baptist was born in a very special way because his Father Zachariah was old and his mother was also advanced in age and was sterile. That is why when the angel announced to Zachariah that his mother would give birth to a son, he refused to believe the word of the angel and thus was made mute, unable to speak until Elizabeth gave birth to a son (Lk 1:5-25). The name of John the Baptist was also special. When it was time to name him, they intended to name him after his father. However, his mother intervened, saying: *He is to be called John (Lk 1:60)*. People objected saying among his relatives, nobody had that name. Then they asked Zachariah what his son would be called. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote: *His name is John (Lk 1:63)*. At that moment, his tongue was loosed and he raised his voice praising God.

Born in a special way, John the Baptist also lived in a special way. Scripture relates: *He lived in the desert until the day when he made his public appearance in Israel (Lk 1:80)*. His way of living and clothing looked weird: *Clothed in a garment of camel's hair, and wore a leather belt around his waist. Grasshoppers and wild honey were his food (Mt 3:4)*.

Document found near the Dead Sea in 1949 supposed John the Baptist had lived in a monastery in Qumran before he preached a baptism of repentance. At the monastery were found scrolls, pulpit, ceramics, water tank, pipes and bathtubs. John admitted he was only a voice in the desert, preparing the way for the redeemer. His message of preaching must have strong appeal because he preached in the desert and yet people from Judea and

Jerusalem went to hear him (Mk 1:5). When John appeared preaching a baptism of repentance, people rushed out asking to be baptized. When many Pharisees and Sadducees asked for a baptism, John with his voice of warning told them: You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come (Mt 3:7)? His message of preaching was repeated: *Repent your lives. The reign of God is at hand (Mt 3:2).*

When baptizing, John showed the virtue of humility of the one who prepared the way for the Lord. When seeing John preach a baptism of repentance, people wondered if he was a Messiah. He answered: *What you suppose me to be I am not. Rather look for the one who comes after me. I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals on his feet (Acts 13:25).* John was not afraid to say to Herod that he was not allowed to take his sister-in-law Herodias as his wife (Mt 14:4; Mk 6:18). Anyway, scripture tells us: *Herod feared John, knowing him to be an upright and holy man (Mk 6:20).* Even though only with the role of preparer, Jesus talked about John as follows: *A prophet indeed, and something more (Mt 11:9).* Jesus said more about John: *I solemnly assure you, history has not known a man born of woman greater than John the Baptist (Mt 11:11).*^a

The mission of witness has been given to every Christian at baptism and confirmation. So how can we remain faithful to bear witness to our faith? In bearing witness to the faith, we must remember we are only God's instrument. We must be careful that less instead of making God's name to shine, we might do things to show so that our name can be shined or we might advertise our works. Instead of making God's name be shone, we might dim his name because our ways of life are contrary to the Gospel. After we have made God known, the faithful must withdraw to shadow so that God's name may be known as John maintains: *He must increase while I must decrease (Jn 3:30).*

In bearing witness to the faith, the faithful must do according the way of the Gospel. Under the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, some clerics advocated a liberation theology in South America.

For them it was liberation from a political system by violent means if necessary. The Pope told them Jesus also came to preach the liberation theology, but liberation from sin and betterment of the human dignity.

John Paul also told other clerics who held public offices in North and Central America if they wanted to remain in the priesthood, they would have to give up those public offices. Thinking it out, we can see a person who holds a public office tends to play party politics. To play party politics, it can be tricky and deceitful. To be tricky and deceitful is contrary to the way of the Gospel.

Today we need to learn that from John the Baptist about the way we prepare for God less instead of preparing the way for the Lord, we might block his way to others and people's way to God. We also need to learn from John the Baptist to bear witness to the faith in God instead of countering witness.

A prayer for being faithful to the mission of preparation and witness:

Oh, Lord our God!

Through baptism and confirmation, we are called to prepare your way and bear witness to our faith in you.

Teach me how to live my faith,

as to prepare your way to those who have not believed

and bear witness to my faith by word and deed,

by my prayers and good examples

so that people may recognize you and worship you. Amen.

IN HONOR OF THE TWO GREAT SAINTS

Solemnity of SS Peter and Paul: A, B, C

Acts 12:1-11; Tm 4:6-8, 17-18; Mt 16:13-19



Today the universal Church celebrates the two pillars of the Church: Saint Peter and Saint Paul, who lived in the early days of the Church. Why does the Church celebrate them together in one feast? The answer is the Church considers them inseparable because their roles and their works are complimentary to each other. The two were persecuted, suffered and martyred in the same city of Rome, the capital of the Church.

Peter was the leader in faith, a gathering figure for the apostles and a symbol of unity in the Church. Saint Paul was the enthusiastic missionary in the early Church. From a fanatic persecutor of Christians, Paul was converted to be an apostle, making people amaze as he himself related his story and his works before (Acts 22:3-16) and after his conversion. With less academic education and a hot temper, Peter denied Jesus three times. In order to prepare him for the roles of leadership and governance, Jesus asked Peter three times whether he would love him more than other apostles. At that moment, Peter dared not boast of himself that he would love him more than others, but only expressed his love for Jesus.

When Jesus asked him a third time whether he would love him (Jn 21:15-19), Peter felt hurt, probably thinking of his three-fold denial of Jesus (Jn 13:38; Jn 18:17, 27). Peter must have had experience, now not being assured of himself, but only professing his love as if to compensate for his denial of Jesus three times. This time, Jesus trusted Peter to feed his lambs (Jn 21:15) and his sheep (v. 16, 17), meaning to tend the entire Church which he would institute. When Jesus predicted that Peter would deny him,

Jesus also predicted Peter would be converted. That is why Jesus told him after his conversion, he would have to strengthen his brothers' faith (Lk 22:32). Jesus' words in those two occasions implied the role of leadership of Peter.

Not to be concerned about what others said about him, Jesus asked Peter what the apostles said about him, Peter professed: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God (Mt 6:16)*. It is the moment Peter recognized the identity of his master, that Jesus made Peter the rock of the Church and gave him the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Peter's profession of faith in this case showed he was the natural leader of the apostles. Therefore, Jesus' choice of Peter to be head of the Church was a natural choice, fairly and reasonably.

Despite Paul's persecution of the early Christians, Jesus chose him into the rank of the apostles. Through Paul, Jesus and his message were brought to the gentiles and thus Paul became the apostle of the gentiles and was considered a symbol of the universal Church.

Both Saint Peter and Saint Paul reminded us of looking ahead, looking beyond the gloomy past. After his repentance, Peter could see beyond his denial of Jesus three times.

Paul could see beyond his persecution of the early Christians, admitting his wrongdoing in the past. Both did cooperate with the grace and power of God. Both suffered misery and difficulties because of Jesus. Today's Acts of the Apostles recorded Peter was imprisoned (Acts 12:4-6) and how the angel of the Lord rescued him miraculously (c. 7-11).

Saint Paul's letter to Timothy tells us from the prison, God's power did help him to go through (2 Tm 4:17-18). Like Saint Peter and Saint Paul, the starting point of our faith life must begin with the realization that we are human beings with flesh and blood, that is, we are weak and fragile. However, it is in the realization that we are weak and fragile and God's power can possess us.

That is the starting point for our developing and mature faith life. After his denial of Jesus three times, Peter dared not pride himself as before, not sure if he would not falter any longer (Mt 26:33). This time, Peter sincerely admitted Jesus knew everything. As for Paul, after he fell to the ground, he surrendered the one who asked why he had persecuted the Christians. This time, Paul could ask earnestly: *What is it I must do, sir? (Acts 22:10).*

Today we celebrate the providential plan of God, who transformed two men into his instruments. In fact, God can transform the weakness and imperfection of anyone so that he or she can fulfill his work. God's way is truly wise and intelligent in calling Paul to be his apostle of the gentiles so that today the Church could become the universal church. We also thank God for having appointed Peter to be leader that the Church could maintain its unity, except when people separate themselves from the Church. History has proved this that when people chose not to remain united with the Church which Christ himself instituted; they continued to be divided into different factions.

For practical application, when we plan to go on vacation, we might want to go to the Vatican, the capital of the Church in order to be strengthened in the faith in the Church. Standing at Saint Peter's square, with two giant colonnades, we would have a feeling as if the Church is extending her arms to embrace her children coming from all over the world.

A prayer for the unity of the Church:

***Oh God, we thank you for having sent your Son Jesus to establish the Church on the foundation of the apostles and the rock of Saint Peter.
Give the Church more apostles of the gentiles, enthusiastic and fervent as Paul.
Grant wisdom and courage to successors of Peter to guide the Church, floating on the sea of life to the peaceful port. Amen.***

ASKING TO CONTEMPLATE THE GLORY OF GOD'S KINGDOM

Transfiguration of the Lord, Year A, B, C

Dn 7:9-10, 13-14; 2Pt 1:16-19; A = Mt 17:1-9 (B = Mk 9:2-10; C = Lk 9: 28b-36)



In the Old Testament, God appeared to his people in a cloud, in a bush and in the desert. As God appeared to Moses and Elijah in a cloud, Jesus was transfigured in a cloud before the apostles on a mountain (Mt 17:1-2; Mk 9:2; Lk (:28-29). Therefore, the cloud was considered the symbol of God's appearance in the Old Testament time. Jesus realized his passion and death would leave a painful experience for Peter, James and John who would witness his Gethsemane agony.

Therefore, he took the apostles to the top of the mountain and transfigured himself before their eyes to show them the glory of his kingdom and to bolster their faith in the prospect of his suffering and cross. The mountain suggested in tradition for the Transfiguration is Mount Tabor, in southern Galilee, only 1850 feet high, but it looks steep when looking up from the bottom.

A spiral road has been built for taxi drivers to take pilgrims to the top of the mountain. At that time, Jesus must have used his spiritual power to lift himself and the apostles up. Why was there presence of Moses and Elijah in the transfiguration (Mt 17:3; Mk 9:4; Lk 9:30)? According to the Jewish tradition, Moses was considered as the gathering and unifying author of the Pentateuch, representing the Law; and Elijah was considered the greatest prophet in the Old Testament, representing the prophets. Also according to the Jewish tradition, Moses and Elijah would return at the end of time. Thus, the presence of Moses and Elijah was intended to help the apostles realize Christianity to be founded by their Master would not be separated from what was

written in the Old Testament and thus to help them to be assured to follow their master without being in a quandary.

Similar to the transfiguration, the prophet Daniel in a vision saw a similar scene, also using the word *Son of man* (Dn 7:13) like Jesus used in the Transfiguration. However, the word Son of man, which Daniel used, meant a certain super individual. In the gospel, Jesus reserved to himself the title Son of Man, implying his divinity and his human nature. As for the Ancient One whom Daniel referred to (Dn 7:9, 14) implied the one who uttered a voice: *This is my beloved Son* (Mt 17:5; Mk 9:7; Lk 9:35), meaning God the Father in the transfiguration scene. Jesus showed the three key apostles Peter, James and John the glory of his kingdom so that they might be steadfast in their faith on Good Friday and helped keep the faith of their fellow apostles. Yet in the courtyard of the high priest, out of fear, Peter denied his Master three times.

Blessed is Peter, when he heard a cockcrow, recalling Jesus' prediction, he *broke down and began to weep* (Mk 14:72). His tears flowed out as if he repented, saying to his Master: How could I deny you when I had asked your permission to stay on the mountain to behold the glory of your kingdom? Besides, a moment before, I just drew my sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's slave, and yet how could I be so cowardly? Thus, the realities of the Transfiguration: the cloud, Jesus' clothes becoming dazzling white, the presence of Moses and Elijah, the voice spoken from the cloud are aimed to help the apostles realize the agony and cross of their Master would not be a failure, but a transformation: from the cross to the resurrection. After the Transfiguration, Jesus told the apostles not to tell anyone about it until the Son of man had risen from the dead. According to the gospel, the apostles kept his words but still wondered what rising from the dead meant?

After the resurrection, Peter related the Transfiguration to his faithful community and mentioned a voice from heaven: *This is my Son, my beloved, with whom, I am well pleased* (2Pet 1:17).

That is the voice of the Father, which Saint Mark related in his gospel: *This is my beloved Son. Listen to him (Mt 17:5; Mk 9:7; Lk 9:35)*. On this Transfiguration, the Church wants to teach us two truths. First, Jesus has two natures: divine and human nature.

Secondly, someday, we shall participate in the glory of God's kingdom. How honored and comforted, when we, his disciples, carry within ourselves a body with sickness and sinfulness, disease and death, yet can share in the glory of his resurrection. Saint Peter, in his religious uplift, asked Jesus to stay on the mountain as to able to contemplate the glory of his kingdom and to be immersed in the heavenly scene.

He did not realize it was not time for him to stay up there yet. He had to go down the mountain again, to bear witness to the Lord, to suffer and die with him, before he could go up the mountain again. That is the way of Christianity: Through the cross to the resurrection. Being Jesus' disciples, how can we go a different way?

Prayer asking to contemplate God's glory:

***Lord Jesus, as you transfigured yourself
to show the apostles the glory of your kingdom,
grant that I may feel your presence
in this life, so that I may rest assured to follow you
and that I may see your glory in the life to come.
Be my hope and my longing. Amen.***

'MY SOUL PROCLAIMS THE GREATNESS OF THE LORD'

Assumption of Mary, A

Rev 11:19a - 12:1-6, 10ab; 1Cor 15:20-27; Lk 1:39-56



Reading the bible, we can see Saint Luke has a high regard for the dignity of women for they play an important part in his writings and in the work of preaching of the gospel by Jesus and the apostles in the early church. In today's gospel, Saint Luke spoke highly of two women: Elizabeth and Mary, for they played an important role in the economy of salvation.

God intervened in a very special way in the case of Saint Elizabeth who conceived and gave birth at her old age. Therefore, when Zachariah heard that Elizabeth would conceive and bear a son, he found it hard to believe. He must have burst into laughter. He was punished for that unbelief by having been made mute, unable to speak until Elizabeth gave birth to their son. As for Mary, she was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. When the angel announced that her cousin Elizabeth had conceived in her old age, Mary set out in haste to visit Elizabeth, not to boast of her conception of the redeemer, but to serve her elderly cousin.

The gospel today tells us that Elizabeth raised her voice in glorifying God for the visitation of Mary: *For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy (Lk 1:44)*. Mary also raised her voice to glorify God for all the favors God has done in her in the canticle of praise - *Magnificat: My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked upon his lowly servant. From this day, all generations will call me blessed; the almighty has done great things for me. And holy is his name (Lk 1:46-49)*.

The Canticle of Mary has been a theme for myriads of people to meditate and contemplate. It has been the source of inspiration and consolation to ponder for so a great number of people, especially the humble of heart even though they are highly educated and the poor in spirit even though they are wealthy. The fact that Mary acknowledged great things God has done in her does not diminish her humility. It was merely an acceptance of the truth, as somebody put it: humility is the ability to accept the truth even when it hurts. The fact that Mary mentioned great things God had done in her was not to boast of her motherly role of the Messiah, but in order for all generations to praise God and glorify his name.

On the feast of the Assumption, let us ask Mary to teach us how to praise God and to give thanks to Him. In our prayers, did we ever raise our voice to glorify God and give thanks to Him for all the favors, blessings and gifts he has done for our family and ourselves? Some of the gifts we received are the gift of life when we were born into this world, the gift of our family: father, mother, brother and sister and relatives, the gift of faith we received in baptism, the gift of freedom to work and to practice our faith. Each one of us has received different favors, different gifts from God either big or small.

The important thing is to discover the gifts God has given to us in order to be appreciative of his gifts and to thank him for the gifts. To have gifts and not to admit that we have gifts might be fake humility, not true humility. To have gifts and talents and think that they come from us is to usurp God's power and glory. With faith, we believe that everything we have including life, faith, health, talents, food, job and housing comes from God. In our everyday prayers, if we only complain, lament, and blame God, then we virtually forget God's gifts, or we demand too much from God. When we only complain to God and blame Him for those bad things, we do not see the bright side of life. As a result, our mind is clouded by negativism: negative attitude, thinking and words. Only when we live in gratitude, can we see the bright side of life.

We do not need to receive big gifts to be thankful. Every day there are many opportunities and occasions for us to offer our words of thanks: to thank God for a beautiful and sunny day, to thank God for a good night sleep, to thank God for a good job, to thank God for a good meal. Some people dare not thank God for a good meal for fear of losing the virtue of self-sacrifice and penance. When we need to make sacrifice and do penance, then we go ahead to do penance and make sacrifice. When we need to enjoy something good and healthy, then we should enjoy.

For the early Christians, attending mass meant giving thanks. Through a symbol of thanksgiving and gratitude, we offer to God bread and wine, the fruits of our labor that will become the body and blood of Jesus. Therefore, by an act of thanksgiving, our offering to God will be united with the body and blood of Jesus, offered to God, as our gift of thanksgiving and gratitude.

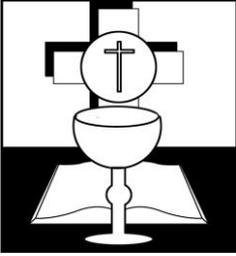
A prayer asking Mary to teach us how to give thanks to God:

*Oh Mary, full of grace!
 You raised your voice to praise God
 for the blessings you received,
 not to boast of yourself,
 but for people to praise God for your blessings.
 Teach me how to give thanks to God,
 for the blessings and gifts God has given to me
 not only for big gifts, but also for small ones. Amen.*

BECAUSE BY YOUR CROSS, YOU HAVE REDEEMED THE WORLD

Exaltation of the Cross, A, B, C

Nm 21:4b-9; Phil 2:6-11; Jn 3:13-17



Today with the Church, we celebrate the feast of the exaltation of the cross. Before the coming of Christ, the cross was afraid of because it was a form of punishment for criminals. Today the cross has become the sign of hope and triumph for many Christians. That is why Saint Paul stated: *We preach Christ crucified – a stumbling block to Jews, and an absurdity to gentiles; but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1Cor 1:23-24).* The Gospel reminds us of a horrible incident that happened to God’s people in the desert on the way to the Promised Land. When the people complained, blaming God for their lack of food and water, God punished them by sending poisonous serpents, which bit them to death.

Then with mercy, God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and hang it on a pole so that when anyone who had been bitten, and looked at the bronze serpent, he/she would live (Nm 21:4b-9). Jesus considered the hanging of the bronze serpent in the desert as a sign that he would be hung on the cross ‘*so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life’ (Jn 3:15).* Saint Paul also preached about Christ crucified to the Philippians: *It was thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on the cross (Phil 2:8).* Sacred Scripture tells us that salvation comes to humankind through the cross. The cross of Christ and his resurrection cannot be separated because resurrection comes from the cross and eternal life from the resurrection. That is why the Church can speak of the triumph of the cross.

Those who believe in Christ must accept the cross as a means of salvation. However, he/she must not stop here but must go beyond the cross, beyond suffering in order to find out the real meaning for carrying the cross. Due to a connection between the cross and resurrection, Christ invited us to take up our cross and follow in his footsteps (Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23).

At a certain seminary in a certain country in the past, seminarians were taught to place a crucifix beside the pillow as to reflect on the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection before falling to sleep. After the ordination to the priesthood, that priest still keeps his habit to place the crucifix by his pillow. When he does not find the crucifix, he felt he missed something precious, finding it difficult to sleep.

The liturgy of the word today reminds the faithful of the faith foundation: through the cross, comes the crown of resurrection, waiting for those who could finish the race. For the faithful, the cross has become a symbol of great love, which God reserves for his people. That is why Saint John Newman could write: *The cross of Christ calls all human values into question by revealing a love powerful enough to bridge the terrible gap between life and death.*

Looking around, we can see so many people are carrying their cross: the cross of illness and disease, and the cross of different kinds of handicap: physical, psychological and emotional. Some have taken all kinds of medication for years yet they still suffer. Others have been going to the doctors and hospitals on and off so often, but their suffering remains. Many people are carrying their crosses of anxiety and worry and fear and misunderstanding all their lives. Many people are carrying their crosses of poverty and hunger.

Today we pray asking the Lord to make their land fertile so that people can grow their food. Many people are carrying their cross of discrimination. Today we ask God to be their strength and hope. Many people are carrying their cross of persecution for their faith in God even in our times in different parts of the world. Today we ask the Lord to be their comfort and strength and courage. For people who are carrying

their cross of separation, today we pray that they may be united with their loved ones. For people who are carrying their cross of divorce, today we pray asking the Lord to heal their wounds.

Finally, we pray asking the Lord to strengthen and encourage those who are carrying all those crosses that they may transform their crosses from instruments of failure and despair into the instruments of hope and victory and redemption.

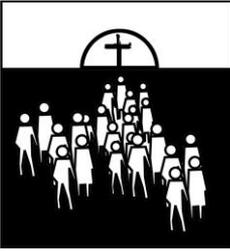
A prayer for those who are carrying their crosses of their lives:

*Oh Lord Jesus, Son of God, incarnate!
For love of humankind.
You did suffer and carry your cross
due to the sins of humankind, including my own.
Give strength and comfort to those,
who are carrying their crosses in their lives:
cross of illness, suffering in body, mind, soul and spirit.
We ask you to alleviate the burden of their crosses
and transform them into instruments of redemption.
Come, Lord Jesus, come into my life and stay with me.
Be my strength, my hope, my joy, my consolation
and my salvation. Amen.*

ASKING TO BE LISTED WITH THE CHOSEN

Solemnity of All Saints: A, B, C

Rev 7:2-4, 9-14; 1Jn 3:1-3; Mt 5:1-12a



Today the universal Church celebrates the solemnity of all saints. With times past, the Church has recognized the holiness of certain men and women and has granted them the title of saints. There are certain saints who had once led sinful life and failures as we do, before they made their decision to obey God's commandments and follow the way of the Gospel.

There should be billions of saints of God in heaven. In their entire life, they did not do anything exceptional, except their day-to-day ordinary things for the love of God. As recorded in the reading from the book of Revelation, saint John in his vision saw before him 144,000 those sealed (Rev 7:4), those new Israelites, those faithful Christians of Christ. The number 144, 000 is a symbolic number, fully high, symbolizing those who were saved. Saint John also saw a multitude of people: robed in white, carrying those branches (Rev 7:9). These are martyrs coming from all nations and all walks of life in society. The reason why today the Church instituted the feast of all Saints is to celebrate all saints, including anonymous saints, including our ancestors and relatives.

The liturgy of the word of the solemnity of all Saints reminds us that every Christian on earth must face certain trials, temptations, and sufferings. In addition, every Christian, in fact everyone wants to be happy. Therefore, happiness is something we all want and look for. Yet we would be surprised and stunned when hearing that those who are blessed or happy in today's Gospel (Mt 5:1-12) are those whom people would consider unhappy, miserable and pitiful. They are those who are poor in spirit, even

though they are well to do and materially rich. To be poor in spirit means to detach from material goods, and to trust in God. To live the spirit of poverty is not to depend on material things, but trust in God's power.

They are also the sorrowful, the meek, the merciful, the clean of heart, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for holiness, those who are persecuted for justice's sake. To live the Beatitudes is to become perfect and holy and to attain true happiness. There are saints considered as exceptional individuals, set apart from the common people because they had history and achievement left behind. Many other saints were like us, carrying within themselves weakness and failures. In addition, they have tried to keep God's commandments, the way of the gospel and the Beatitudes.

The lives of saints are role models for us to see where the way of holiness and justice are, where the destiny of life is. We need examples of virtues to follow. That is the reason why the Church canonized saints. Unfortunately, in our times and our society, there is lack of role models to follow. We can see few people dare to go against the societal trend. The trend of society is individual freedom from attachments to family and religion. People are afraid of doing something good and right according to the call of conscience and the conviction of religion, afraid of losing friends and jobs.

In that kind of culture, even parents do not want to remind their grandchildren of what is right, lest they might be labeled as conservative or their parents are not pleased.

One of the reasons that youth of our time are vulnerable to law breaking and demoralization is because they do not find role models, or persons of moral principles in the neighborhood and in the church and in society to look up to. On the contrary, when young people see people of high prestige in the community, people of high position in society and in the church who are also involved in dope and corruption, how can they want to rise? To

enter their children's rooms, parents will see what their children are hanging on the wall. Who are their children's role models? What are they hanging on the wall? Are they pictures of saints or pictures of corrupt individuals? Thus in the family or in the community, there are a need for someone to be a pillar of the family or society for young people to lean on for maintaining their faith identity.

If becoming a saint is like the way of Saint Teresa of the child Jesus, then everyone can become a saint. Saint Teresa did not do anything exceptional. She just did ordinary daily works in an exceptional way. Men and women, old and young people, even children can do ordinary daily works in the family, in their office and factory in an exceptional way for the glory of God, in union with the work of Jesus. Anyone can offer to God their crosses of sickness and suffering in body, soul and spirit for the love of God in atonement for our sins and the sins of the world.

Today we ask all saints, especially the saints we honor in a special way to intercede for us before God. When we honor the saints, we glorify God for his power and grace has done wonders in them. With their intercessions, we ask God to touch our lives and spirit and transform our lives.

A prayer for being included in the list of the chosen:

***Oh, Lord our God!
You are the glory of your saints
and the hope of the Christians.
Grant that we may realize that
happiness of the Christian is not in this life
but found in the next life.
Teach me to store treasures in heaven.
We ask you to be our hope in this life
and our glory in the life to come. Amen.***

MAY THE SOULS OF THE FAITHFUL DEPARTED REST IN PEACE

The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, Year A

Wis 3:1-9; Rom 6:3-9; Jn 11:17-27



In countries with four seasons, November falls in the middle of the season of fall – the season of yellow leaves. In the midst of yellow leaves, there are dotted with crimson red leaves. That is why poets and painters have used a lot of paints and colors to describe the beauty of fall. Those who do not know how to paint or write poems, but just with a dreaming spirit, can drive away from home hours and hours to watch the fall leaves. Wow, how gorgeous fall colors are! How beautiful the fall is! However, very soon, the leaves will fall down and the creatures will go to sleep. The fall anticipates the death of leaves, flowers and grass. It makes people think of the death of man.

For those who do not believe in the afterlife, then death is a failure; death is an end and nothing else. For them, there is only winter without spring. For those who believe in the resurrection, death is not a failure, or an end. Death is merely a change of life, from this life to the next. Death is not a failure because Christ through his death overcame death through his resurrection: *Now that we have been justified by his blood, it is all the more certain that we shall be saved by him from God's wrath (Rom 5:9).* Thus, death is not final, but only the end of life on earth as the Preface of the Commemoration of all the Faithful Departed proclaims: *Life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death, we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven.*

Before the Second Vatican Council, we had often heard of hell. After the Council, we have seldom heard of hell and purgatory.

To mention hell, it is not meant here to scare anyone. In fact, in the Old Testament, the book of Maccabees also reminds us of offering sacrifice to pray for the dead in purification from sin: *It was a holy and pious thought. Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin (2Mc 12:45-46)*. In the New Testament, Jesus himself said about hell a number of times (Mt 5:22, 29, 30; Mt 10:28; Mt 18:9; Mt 23:33; Mk 9:43, 45, 47; Lk 12:5). He also mentioned the darkness outside (Mt 25:30); a place of eternal punishment (Mt 25:46); a place of wailing and grinding of teeth (Lk 13:28); the abode of the dead (Lk 16:23); a place where the last penny must be paid (Mt 5:26; Lk 12:59).

Purgatory tells us about God's mercy and forgiveness. In fact, if there was no purgatory, then God is indeed strict and merciless. If there was no purgatory, but only paradise and hell, then it is really scary since after death, if one does not go up to heaven, then one must go down to hell. There is no place in between to be purified. If there was no purgatory, then there is no need to pray for the deceased, no need to ask for mass intention offered for the repose of this soul or that soul. On our pilgrimage to the house of God, the faithful do not travel alone, but with the people of God: with Mary and the saints in heaven, with the faithful on earth and with the souls in purgatory.

According to the Doctrine of the Communion of Saints, Mary and the saints in heaven can intercede for the faithful on earth. The faithful on earth can be in communion with one another by prayers, good examples, sacrifices and good works. The faithful on earth can also offer prayers, sacrifices and good works to pray for the souls in purgatory. The teaching on prayers for the souls in purgatory is called the Doctrine of Communion of Saints by the Councils of Nicea II, Florence and the Council of Trent. It is called vital fellowship with our brethren by Vatican II (The Church - Lumen Gentium # 51).

Thus, our Catholic faith is supported to the utmost it could be by the intercession of Mary and the saints in heaven, by the prayers and support of the faithful on earth. Even when we die, we are

still supported by their prayers. Catholic tradition reminds us of praying for the souls in purgatory. However, the souls in purgatory cannot help themselves. The souls in purgatory rely on the prayers, sacrifices and works of charity of the faithful on earth offered for their intentions. So even in their rest, the deceased are not alone. The deceased are still remembered in their pictures, their legacy, and their stories and by our prayers and good works for them. To know as such, to know after death, we are still supported by prayers and good works of other Christians would warm our hearts as such.

On this all souls Day, we offer our prayers for all souls, the souls of our ancestors, the souls of our relatives and friends, and the souls of the deceased especially poor souls. On All souls day of 2003, Pope Paul II reminds us: *It is an essential duty to pray for the souls departed, even for those who have died in God's grace and friendship; they still need final purification before entering the heavenly banquet (Pope speaks Nov 2, 2003).*

The fourth Commandment teaches us to honor and respect our parents. If we are grateful to our parents when they were alive, we must remember them among the dead by offering mass and prayers for them. We ask God, with his mercy to forgive their sins and bring them to enjoy happiness in his kingdom as Jesus promises: *Everyone who looks upon the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life (Jn 6:40).* According to the church tradition, today the faithful are encouraged to visit the cemetery in order to pray for those who have passed away, especially the souls of our ancestors, grandparents, parents, relatives and friends. In addition, in November, the month of all souls, we remember the faithful departed in our prayers.

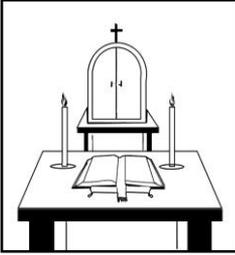
A prayer for the repose of the souls of all the faithful departed:

*Oh all mighty and powerful God!
You are the glory of the saints
and the hope of all Christians.
Forgive the faithful departed their sins.
Let your eternal light shine on them.
Grant that I may remain in your house
when I am alive and until I die.
Do not let me be separated from you. Amen.*

ENTERING THE HOUSE OF GOD

Dedication of Saint John Lateran: A, B, C

Ez 47:1-2, 8-9, 12; 1Cor 3:9-11, 16-17; Jn 2:13-22



Philosophers as well as theologians always seek to find out where and how God is present in the universe. Man knows God is present everywhere, but man also reserves some special place for God's presence in a special way. In the Old Testament, the temple and the ark of the covenant were considered special places for God's presence as God said: I have chosen and consecrated this house that my name will be there forever (2 Chr 7:16; 1Kgs 9:3) [1]. That is the reason why Jesus was upset with the moneychangers because they had made God's house of prayer *a market place* (Jn 2:16).

In the New Testament, we have the church and tabernacle where the Blessed Sacrament is kept. We know Jesus is present everywhere, and he is present in the Eucharist. That is the temple of his body where Jesus is present as he said (Jn 2:21). Today we celebrate a place of worship, because the Lateran basilica, the cathedral church of the bishop of Rome, symbolizes all the catholic churches in the world.

The church symbolizes two important things. The church symbolizes *unity and community* [2], gathering the faithful in the one mystical body of Christ to pray, worship and give thanks and offer petitions. The church also symbolizes *continuity and tradition, keeping in touch with our past and together facing our future* [3] to face changes and challenges in society and in the church. Looking back to our past, for instance our parish was established in year so or so and our church building was built by father so or so. Some people think God is present everywhere and they think there is no need for them to go to church to pray and

worship. We must realize that man needs outward signs to help stir up inner feelings. We also need religious symbols to bring them into spiritual level and to stir up religious feelings. If we were angels without a body, we do not need symbols. However, we are human beings with a body; we need symbols such as church, altar, statues, lights and candles in worship in order to stir up faith and religious feelings. Thus if we think we can keep our faith inside ourselves without going to church, then we are deceiving ourselves. To come to church to worship, our faith is supported by the faith of other faithful. When we worship in public, people with strong faith can help strengthen people of weak faith.

To come to church to pray and worship, the faithful are nourished and strengthened by the word of God in the bible and the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. At the end of the week, when we are exhausted spiritually, we come to church again to be strengthened and nourished by the word of God and the body of Christ.

The Catholic Church is to be consecrated to be a public place of worship. In the church, Jesus is present in the Eucharist in the tabernacle. A sign that shows Jesus' presence in the Eucharist is a red lamp in the sanctuary near the tabernacle. Therefore we Catholics need to show our faith when we come to a catholic church.

We also need to learn from people of other religions to see how they express their faith, when they go to their places of worship. For instance, the Jews always show respect for their temple and the altar for offering their sacrifice. They always give thanks to God for their temple and the altar of sacrifice. When the Muslims enter their place of worship, they have to take off their shoes in order to show respect.

For Catholics, the church building is the center of our faith life. The church is the place where we often come to pray and worship either every day or every week to listen to the word of God and receive the body of Christ. Besides time of public worships and

prayers, the faithful can come to church at other times to pray. When mother Teresa of Calcutta was asked how she got her strength to continue to serve poor children in India, she answered she received her strength from the Eucharist. And she spent hours and hours praying before the Eucharist. Other Christians also came to church to pray, sitting there in a corner by themselves, contemplating Jesus' presence in the Eucharist and letting their hearts talk.

Before the Eucharist, Jesus invites: *Come to me all you, who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden light (Mt 11: 28-30)*. A certain woman who told a certain priest she had often sneaked in a church to seek strength and consolation for her miserable life.

The church is a place where the faithful come to receive the sacraments of baptism, first communion, penance, confirmation, matrimony and anointing. When we die, our body is brought to the church for the celebration of the funeral mass. Thus, it can be said the faithful is reborn in water and the Spirit in the church and died in the church.

A prayer for the love of God's house of prayer and worship:

***Lord God, you are present everywhere.
Especially you are present in the church
where the Blessed Sacrament is kept.
We thank you for our parish church.
Grant that we may love the churchy
and find in your house of prayer
the source of strength and comfort and hope. Amen.***

[1]. Ideas are borrowed from *Homilies Sunday and Weekday Masses*. Liturgical Commission, Diocese of Lansing, Michigan, Oct. – Dec. 1979, p. 322.

[2]. *Homilies Sunday and Weekday Masses*. Liturgical Commission, Diocese of Lansing, Michigan, Oct. - Dec. 1977, p. 313.

[3]- Ibid

REBORN FREE OF ORIGINAL SIN

Solemnity of the IC of Mary, Year A

Gen 3:9-15, 20; Eph 1: 3-6, 11-12; Lk 1:26-36



Today the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church celebrate the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. The Immaculate Conception means that from the time of conception in the womb of Elizabeth, Mary was preserved from original sin by a special favor of God. Also from the time of her existence, Mary was filled with grace. That was why the angel Gabriel greeted Mary: *Hail Mary, full of grace (Lk 1:28)*. It is not found in scripture that Mary was conceived without sin. However, the scripture implies it. One implication is God passed sentence on the serpent that tempted Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit of the tree: *I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers (Gen 3:15)*. The serpent mentioned here was Satan. The woman mentioned was Mary. The Immaculate Conception took place nine months before the birth of Mary.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary proclaimed in 1854 by Pope Pius IX states: *From the first instance of her conception, the Blessed Virgin Mary was, by the singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, and in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of mankind, kept from all stain of original sin (Ineffabilis Deus, Dec 8, 1854)*.

When Mary appeared at Lourdes in 1958, saying: *I am the Immaculate Conception*; she confirmed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. This convinced us that Mary was conceived without the original sin. Our belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary is connected to our belief in the original sin. The effect of our baptism is similar to the Immaculate

Conception. By baptism, the Christian was reborn in water and the Spirit, i.e., liberated from the original sin. Today's gospel according to Saint Luke is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah: *You shall conceive and bear a son and give him the name Jesus (Lk 1:31)*.

Why did God have to keep Mary from original sin? The reason was: it would be a shame if his Son had been born out of a sinful woman. Sometime ago, a Baptist minister gave a talk to a group of about 800 Catholic priests at the University of Steubenville in Ohio in the nineteen eighties. Before that, he thought the Catholic Church had overemphasized the role of Mary. Then he began to search the scripture, and he found out that God's favor of her was recorded in the Bible. Afterwards he could pray: *Hail Mary, full of grace (Lk 1:28)*.

There are those who consider the Church's emphasis on Mary and her role as distant from reality, since she was far removed from the rest of the population. We are told she was conceived without original sin. Then she conceived the Savior miraculously through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, men cannot imitate her feminine character. Those married women cannot imitate her virginity. [1]

However, all of us, men and women, old, young and children can imitate something out of her. What we can imitate her is, her openness to the word of God and his will by responding to the message of the angel: *I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say (Lk 1:38)*. Another virtue we can imitate Mary is her humility. She had no ambition to become mother of the Messiah as other Jewish women did. Her humility made it possible for her being chosen for the divine motherhood.

Today when we reflect on the Immaculate Conception of Mary, we must also meditate on our own rebirth to the life of grace at baptism, and ask ourselves some important questions. Do I keep the immaculate beauty of my baptism? If I have lost it, do I seek to regain by penance and by prayers? Do I call upon Mary to help me in striving to do God's will? [2]

As Mary and the people of the Old Testament waited for the first coming of the Lord into the human history, we are waiting for his second coming at the end of time. However, we do not know when he will come again at the end of time to justify ourselves. Thus, it is more realistic to wait for his personal coming into our lives in a more profound way and personal way. With Mary, we ask Jesus to come into our lives with his grace.

Prayer asking Mary for help to avoid sin:

Hail Mary, full of grace!

You are preserved from the original sin at conception.

Teach me to reform my life

as your message of Fatima pointed out.

Give me helpful grace so as not fall into temptation

but live in peace and grace with God. Amen.

[1]- Ideas borrowed from Devine, G. *If I were to preach*. Staten Island: Alba House, 1974, page 10.

[2]- Ideas borrowed from Liturgical Commission. *Diocese of Lansing, Michigan, Oct. - Dec. 1979, page 351.*

FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF THE MODEL FAMILY

Holy Family of the Year A.

Sir 3:2-7, 12-14; Cor 3:12-21; Mt 2:13-15, 19-23



The Church established the feast of the Holy Family in 1921 when family life had been undermined. On the feast of the Holy Family, patron of the Catholic family, we are asked to study and imitate each member of the Holy Family. According to God's providential plan, Saint Joseph was chosen to be the foster father, taking care of the Holy Family. Scripture says very little about Saint Joseph, only saying briefly that he was a descendant of David, a just man and a man of faith. When finding out that Mary was with child, Joseph did not want to denounce her for fear of defaming her, decided to leave her quietly.

Thus, we can see Joseph was a very considerate man. While thinking in that frame of mind, the angel of the Lord appeared to him, saying: Have no fear about taking Mary as your wife. It is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child (Mt 1:20). Joseph immediately accepted it with faith without question. Then in a dream, the angel of the Lord appeared to him again, telling him to get up and bring the child and his mother to flee to Egypt in order to avoid the massacre planned by King Herod. Joseph arose and did as the angel told him. When Herod died, the angel of the Lord appeared once again telling him to bring the child and his mother back to Nazareth. Joseph brought the child and his mother to Nazareth living in the devout and harmonious family according to the wise counsels of the book of Sirach in the Old Testament prescribed for each family member. So we can see, through listening, Saint Joseph knew when to act, when to move, and when to stay.

When giving birth to Jesus in a poor circumstance, unable to find lodging, Mary accepted it with faith. No complaint of hers was recorded in scripture. When having to bring Jesus to flee into Egypt along with Joseph, Mary did not complain. When presenting Jesus in the temple, Simeon predicted the child to be a sign that will be contradicted (Lk 2:34) and his mother would be suffering as a sword to pierce her heart (Lk 2:35). Scripture does not say a word of reaction in this case from Mary. Only when the Holy Family went to the Temple, and lost his Son, Mary raised her voice to remind him gently of not letting his parents know about his staying behind. When Jesus explained to his parents that he had to do his Father's will, then his mother was ready to accept his word.

According to the scripture: His mother kept all these things in her heart (Lk 2:51). Fulfilling the mission that God the Father gave, Jesus returned to Nazareth. Jesus lived in such a moderate lifestyle in thirty years that neighbors did not see anything different about them, thus saying: Is not this Joseph's son (Lk 4:22; Jn 6:42). They also asked one another: Isn't Mary known to be his mother (Mt 13:55). As son, Jesus was obedient to them (Lk 2:51) and progressed steadily in wisdom and age and grace before God and men (Lk 2:51). The lessons Mary and Joseph teach us today are to follow the will of God, to put our faith and trust in God's providential care (Lk 2:52). The reward for those who live and follow God's will is peace of mind. Mary and Joseph also taught us to be patient and accept one another in faith. On this feast of the Holy Family, the Church uses a reading from Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians to advise members of the family to treat one another with: mercy, kindness, humility, meekness and patient and to forgive one another (Col 3:12-13).

Which husband, which wife who does not want to be treated that way? Parents are called upon to be concerned for the total welfare of their children. Husbands and fathers are called upon to be responsible especially for the safety of their children as Saint Joseph was. Wives and mothers are called upon to follow the example of Mary to provide emotional and spiritual support for

family members. Children are called upon to obey, honor and respect their parents as the Book of Sirach points out (Sir 3:2-6, 12-14). The fourth commandment also teaches children to honor their parents.

Today the family members are called upon to create a family atmosphere of piety and harmony according to the wise advices of the book of Sirach pointing out for father, mother and children. Thus, we can see a model family is the family who has the spirit of fear of the lord. A model family is the one who does not mix up with roles: father for mother, mother for father. The family is called upon to bring God into their lives so that God may be in control. We need to bring God to our family life so that God can travel with us and be in charge of our family life. To go to mass and worship on Sunday as family and pray together and eat together as family are necessary and important for the success of family life.

Survey shows that those families that eat together and pray together at least a few times a week are considered as happy families or at least they can avoid possible breakdown. The second Vatican Council in its Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity states: The family will fulfill this mission if it appears as the domestic sanctuary of the Church by reason of their mutual affection of its members and the common prayer that they offer to God (Apostolicam Actuositatem).

Prayer for the happiness of family life:

Lord Jesus! You chose to be born in the family of the blessed mother and the fostered father as to teach humankind a lesson about the importance of the family. May each member of my family know how to follow the example of the holy family: love, generosity, care and forgiveness. Come and establish your sovereignty over my family. Send your angels to watch over and protect my family. Amen.

**SPECIAL DAYS' CELEBRATION
FOR EAST AND SOUTH EAST
ASIAN PEOPLE**

IN THANKSGIVING FOR THE PAST YEAR

Year End Mass: A, B, C

Is 63:7-9; 1 Cor 1:3-9; Lk 1:39-55



At the end of the lunar year, we gather here to give thanks to God for all the gifts God has given to us during the last year. Time belongs to God. One cannot go ahead of time, and cannot prolong time. When busy with works in office, factory or at home, one feels time goes fast. When unoccupied,

one feels time pass by slowly. However, time still passes by regularly, neither fast nor slow. If we ask those who work in the US, they all say time goes fast. Looking back and forth, a weekend is here already. They also say they have just come to this country, and now it has been 20, or 30 years already.

Today we give thanks to God for all the gifts God has given during the last year: material, mental and spiritual gifts and favors. The three scripture readings of today touch upon the theme of thanksgiving. In the book of the prophet Isaiah, he reminded God's people of all favors (Is 63:7), his mercy (v.7) and his kindness (v.7) and all the things God had done for them and his love and pity (v.9) towards them. The responsorial psalm today also tells us: *Praise the Lord for the Lord is good (Ps 135:1); for alone does great wonders for his mercy endures forever (v. 4); for he remembers us in our abjection (v. 23), for he gives food to all flesh (v. 25).* As for Saint Paul, he gives thanks to God for the favors he has done for the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:4).

In the *Magnificat*, Mary raised her voice to give thanks to God for he has done wonderful things in her (Lk 1:46-55). Then ideas of thanksgiving described in thanksgiving act of the foreigner for being cured of leprosy in the Gospel of 28 Sunday, Year C or ideas of thanksgiving described at Thanksgiving Day in America can be used.

Along with thanksgiving, we should not forget to ask God to forgive for the times we have wasted our time, for our failures, our shortcomings in the past year.

A prayer of thanksgiving and asking for pardon:

*Oh, Lord our God! You are lord of time, day, month and year.
You are lord of all things and living things.*

We thank you for the time, talent, possessions and health of last year.

*Forgive my failures and shortcomings of last year
so that I may enter the New Year with good spirit. Amen.*

ASKING GOD FOR NEW YEAR'S BLESSINGS

Lunar New Year's Eve Mass: A, B, C

Nm 6:22-27; 1Thes 5:16-26, 28; Mt 5:1-10



Thought and Vietnamese common literature contain ideas of time such as: *Time is money; time passes by like a weaver's shuttle. It passes on and on without waiting for anybody.* Often times when we look forward, it is long. When we look back, it is fast.

People say it was a certain day ago that we were so and so, and now it has been twenty years, thirty years already. When busy with works or schedule of activities, we feel time go fast. When at spare time or under no pressure, we feel time go slowly. Whether one feels time go fast or slow, time still go steadily. One cannot go ahead of time, nor can one prolong time.

Whether the lunar new year comes early or late, whether spring comes earlier or later than last, one has to follow the cyclic patterns of season in order to welcome the moment of time transition at the zero time at the New Year's Eve, the moment of seeing the old out and welcoming the new year in. The Vietnamese in the past considered the New Year's Eve as the sacred moment, uniting heaven and earth. Approaching the New Year's Eve, people waited in order to harmonize with the united moment of heaven and earth, speaking and doing nothing. At the approaching moment of the New Year's Eve, people clapped their hands or let off fireworks: *bang, bang. bang. boom..* for celebrating the New Year's Eve. To let off fireworks according to Vietnamese folklore is to ward off evil spirits. Some people thought, the louder the fireworks explode, the more frightened the devil is. Therefore, they let off big fireworks.

The Vietnamese address Heaven as Mister. Vietnamese Catholics consider Mr Heaven as God. Only God is the lord of time and space. God is the lord of all seasons: spring, summer, autumn and

winter. God has power over the rain, the sunshine, waves and storms as the celebrant prays at the New Year's Eve mass: *Oh Lord, our God! You are the first and the last, the beginning and the end of all things. In this moment of the New Year's Eve, we lift up our mind and spirit to you. We ask you to grant us a year full of blessings.*

The gospel of today is about the Eight Beatitudes. In the New Year, every one wishes one another beautiful things; the Church also uses scriptural words that contain words of blessings from God. While people wish one another wealth, riches, and luck, God wishes blessings on those who live the Beatitudes of which one blessing is for those who are poor in spirit. Is it a contradiction? One RCIA student told a priest saying: *Father, when you preached on the Eight Beatitudes, I could not accept them because what Jesus taught in the Beatitudes are opposing to the human viewpoints.* However, I continued to attend mass, listening to the preaching of the word of God. Now I have been accepting the Beatitudes. Each time I attended mass, I felt at peace.

Jesus blesses those who live the Beatitudes. They are not only blessed in this life, but also blessed in the after-life. That happiness is peace in the heart. To have God's blessings is to have everything in this life and the next. Some people might misunderstand that Jesus wants people to live in poverty and difficulty. In reality, Jesus came to liberate people from poverty. Jesus said: *Come, you have my Father's blessing! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink (Mt 25:34-35).*

People also think the Church uses the first Beatitude to advocate a life of poverty. In fact, the Church does not maintain so. Pope John Paul II once criticized the US policy of embargo that made poor people of Cuba poorer, lacking the minimum means for human dignity. Before that, on the New Year 1998, the Pope called for the globalization of economy development and it must be interconnection of nations, not for individual interest and action. The pope also urged rich and powerful nations eliminate debts for poor nations. Thus, the Church does not advocate

poverty in fact, but poverty in spirit, that is, the evangelical spirit of detachment from worldly possessions.

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Saint Paul wishes them: *May the God of peace, make you perfect in holiness. May he preserve you whole and entire, spirit, soul and body, irreproachable at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1Thess 5:23)*. In the book of Numbers, God commanded Moses to bless people as follows: *The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace (Nm 6:24-26)*.

Reading the Old Testament, we can see the chosen people bless one another in the name of God. The father also blesses his son as Raguel blesses his son-in-law Tobiah: *Good-bye my son. Have a safe journey. May the Lord of heaven grant prosperity to you and to your wife Sarah (Tb 10:11)*. Edna also calls upon God to bless her son-in-law: *Before the Lord, I entrust my daughter to your care. Never cause her grief at any time in your life (Tb 10:13)*.

Calling upon the Lord and his grace and power to wish somebody a happy new year is to place a person being wished under God's presence and protection. To wish one another in an audible voice would touch a person who is wished and make him/her try to live in a way that the wishful thinking may be realized.

For practical application, in this New Year we ask God to bless our grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters and relatives. We ask God to bless each one of us. We ask God to forgive our failures and shortcomings in the past year, for the times we have wasted time God has given and for our stinginess with time and misused time. We ask God to forgive us for the times we have not spent time with God and our family: parents, husband and wife and children; for the times we have not spent time with ourselves so as to think of our human destiny in relation with God, the creator.

A prayer asking God to bless us happy New Year:

Oh, Lord our God!

*You are god of all times and seasons,
of spring, summer, autumn and winter.*

We give you thanks, O Lord

for day and time, year and month you gave us the last year.

*Forgive us for the times we wasted time, were stingy with time
or time misused.*

*We ask you to sanctify the time we use
so that we may use our time properly
to give glory to your name. Amen.*

CELEBRATING THE LUNAR NEW YEAR ACCORDING TO GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE

Lunar New Year Day Mass, Form A

Gn 1:14-18; Phil 4:4-8; Mt 6:25-34



Carrying Vietnamese blood, people have two traditions to maintain in the Lunar New Year. Family tradition tells them to respect the elderly, to yield to the young, to wish New Year to the elderly and to give gifts to the children. Culture tradition tells them the way to celebrate the New Year with sticky rice cake with pork, pickled onions, red parallel scrolls. Particularly, Catholics also have another tradition, that is, to attend the New Year Mass for worship, thanksgiving and petition.

The gospel for the Lunar New Year Day, Form A, is the same as that of the eighth Sunday, of the Ordinary Time, Year A (Mt 6:24:34). In the gospel, Jesus teaches us not too worried about our livelihood to the point to forget God, not to have time for worship and prayers and works of charity. To worry too much about our livelihood might mean we lack faith in God's providential care. God takes care of the birds in the sky (Mt 6:26) and the lilies of the field (v.28-30) and he takes much more care of the human being (v.30).

In his letter to the Philippians, Saint Paul tells them and through them tells us: *Rejoice in the Lord always (Phil 4:4)*. A reading from the book of Genesis talks about God who created light: *Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate day from light. Let them mark the fixed times, the days and the years (Gen 1:14)*.

Light brings life to creatures: man, animals, grass, plants and trees. Man, animals, grass, plants and trees, all need light. Grass

and plants face towards light. To put a plant by the window, its branches will turn gradually towards the window as to get light.

Those who do not see the sunlight are down in spirit. To cope with that, a mechanism has been designed to project artificial light for people to see so that they might get up in spirit. God is the source of light.

Lunar New Year is a festival associated with the national culture. However, the faithful need to bring religious significance to the day of Tet, which means acknowledging God as God of the Spring and God of the New Year, God of time, month and year by bringing God to the celebration of the New Year. God of the spring also means acknowledging God as the source of light. When Jesus came, he brought the light of truth, the light of the Gospel to humankind.

A prayer asking God for New Year blessing:

***Oh Lord God! You are God of the spring.
On this Lunar New Year Day, we ask you
to bless our homeland, bless the Church of Vietnam
and the Vietnamese people in Vietnam and overseas.
Bless our grand-parents, parents, uncles, aunts,
brothers and sister and relatives.
Give peace and prosperity to our life. Amen.***

REMEMBERING GRAND-PARENTS, PARENTS IN PRAYERS

2nd Day of the Lunar New Year Mass, Year A, B, C

Sir 44:1, 10-15; Eph 6:1-4, 18-23; Mt 15:1-6



The second day of the Lunar New Year was designated as a remembrance day for remembering the ancestors: parents, grandparents and parents by the Vietnamese Conference of Bishops. The Vietnamese culture tradition teaches children to respect their grandparents and parents by such folk songs as: *A father's labor is like Thai Son Mountain. A mother's kindness is like water source. A good child's filial piety is to respect the parents.*

The Hebrew religious tradition was similar to the Vietnamese tradition as far as filial piety is concerned. The book of Sirach contains practical counsels, which the Jewish people in the Old Testament had accumulated to help their children live according to the examples of their goodness and virtues (Sir 44:10) of their ancestors.

In today's gospel, Jesus quotes God's commandment in order to answer the Pharisees and Sadducees about their ancestors' traditions. He quotes the book of Exodus and Deuteronomy's commandment to respect parents: *Honor your father and your mother (Ex 20:12; Dt 5:16).*

That is also the fourth commandment of Christianity. This fourth commandment teaches us to honor our parents, who gave us birth, brought us up and took care of us since infancy to adulthood. Saint Paul in his letter to the Ephesians also teaches us to respect our parents: *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for that is what is expected of you (Eph 6:1).*

At young age, one has not yet valued one's parents' labor. One considers what one's parents have done for oneself for granted.

At maturity, one has understood one's parent's labor of birth, upbringing and education.

Realizing as such, we find ways to express our filial piety towards our parents when they are still living. If we are grateful to the living, we are also grateful to the deceased by offering prayers for the repose of their souls, as to ask God's mercy to forgive their sins and lead our deceased grandparents, parents to enjoy happiness in his kingdom. Pictures of our ancestors: parents, grandparents and their noteworthy pieces of story must be kept for children and grandchildren to read and share with friends.

On the journey of faith going to the house of God, the faithful do not travel alone, but with the whole people of God: with Mary and the saints in heaven, with the faithful on earth and with the souls in purgatory. Thus, even when they lie down for good, parents and grandparents still have support from children and grandchildren with prayers. For us Christians, the deceased are not separated forever. Their children and grandchildren still remember their ancestors: grandparents, parents with pictures, prayers and their legacy. If grandparents and parents have passed away, then today children and grandchildren can go to the cemetery to visit their graves and offer the sacrifice of the mass for their souls. According to the Doctrine of the Communion of Saints, called living communion by the Second Vatican Council, then if our grand-parents and parents have gone up to heaven, then God will transfer the spiritual benefit of the mass and prayers to other souls in purgatory.

A prayer for ancestor: grandparents and parents:

Oh, Lord our God!

***You taught us how to honor our parents
as to be blessed from their goodness.***

***We ask you to bless our grandparents and parents
when they are living.***

***As for our deceased grand-parents and parents,
we ask you to let your light shine upon them. Amen.***

ASKING GOD TO SANCTIFY OUR WORKS

3rd Day of the Lunar New Year Mass

Gen 2:4b-9, 15; Acts 20:32-35; Mt 25:14-30



The 3rd day of the Lunar New Year was designated as a day when we the faithful ask God to sanctify our works. God created man with material needs. He gave man two hands and a brain so that man can work to satisfy his needs of survival and development and

service of humankind.

Today the faithful are gathered here in the church to give thanks to God for all the works done in the last year. We offer to God all works in the New Year: works in office and at home, united with the work of Jesus and in the spirit of prayer. We ask God to sanctify our work and help us find meaning and purpose in our work. We work not for the sake of work. We consider work as a means to help us survive, not as purpose and an end of life. We come to church asking the Lord to give us sufficient energy and we come back giving thanks for the work done.

The gospel for the 3rd Day of the Lunar New Year is the same as that of the 33rd Sunday of the ordinary time of cycle A (Mt 25:14-30). Thus, reflections on the gospel of the 33rd Sunday of cycle A might be used to develop further meaning of work.

A prayer asking God to sanctify our work:

Oh all-powerful God!

You did the work of creation in six days.

You set aside the seventh day for rest.

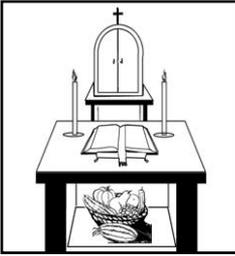
***We offer to you all the work we do today,
asking you to sanctify our work.***

***Help us find meaning and purpose in what we do
so that our work may be blessed. Amen.***

TO LIVE IN THE SPIRIT OF GRATITUDE

Mass of Thanksgiving: A, B, C

Is 63:7-9; Col 3:12-17; Lk 1:39-55



The Americans set aside Thursday of the fourth week of November as a day of Thanksgiving and rest. The special dish of Thanksgiving Day is turkey. Some gastronomic Vietnamese Americans modify and add spices like cutting turkey liver and gizzard, vermicelli, celery, cashew nut, mushroom and bread into small pieces, mixed with salt and pepper, then put inside the turkey, wrapped in oven paper. Then bake in the oven with 375°F in three hours. Fewer hours are for smaller turkeys. Thus, the meat would be tender, smell and taste good. American-born people should like it very much also.

American Thanksgiving is not a feast day in the Church. However, Catholics in America should bring religious meaning and spiritual sense to the celebration. In those countries without Thanksgiving Day set aside, a family and/or extended family may choose a certain day of the year as a day of thanksgiving to gather together to give thanks to the Almighty and to strengthen the family bond.

To celebrate Thanksgiving is the occasion to remind the faithful of favors and gifts: material, mental and spiritual, received from God. People tend to take for granted those things they have received. However, if they had to struggle to make ends meet, they would appreciate those favors they had received. To thank is to express a feeling of need, wishing to depend on God, and to remember those who have done us favors. That is the feeling of those who *drink water and remember its source* [1] or those who *eat the fruits without forgetting tree planters* [2]. That is the way to say that we need others. To remember others is to remember

God. God is the invisible and we do not know how to express our thanks. Therefore, we need to learn the way of expressing our thanks to other human beings as to express our thanks to God.

On this Thanksgiving Day, we remember the words of the prophet Isaiah who reminds people of giving thanks to God for all the gifts and blessings he has done for them (Is 63:7). Saint Paul advises the Colossians to treat one another with a spirit of gratitude towards one another: *Bear with one another; forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you (Col 3:13).*

As for Mary, she gave thanks to God for he had done wondrous things in her by going to the hill country to serve her pregnant cousin Elizabeth in her old age (Lk 1:39-44). When on earth, Jesus often taught his apostles to be thankful. When at dining table, Jesus took bread, gave thanks (Mt 15:36; Mk 8:6; Jn 6:11). When he instituted the Eucharist, he also took bread, giving thanks (Lk 22:19), then he took the cup, giving thanks (Mt 26:27; Mk 14:23).

Each one of us has many reasons to be thankful. Some of the gifts we must be thankful for are the gift of life, that is the gift of being born into this world as man or woman, the gift of faith we received at baptism, the gift of family, home, job, health, the food we eat and the liquid we drink, the beautiful country we live in.

Each one of us has also received different blessings and gifts such as verbal ability, skill in poetry, talent in singing, literature, arts, science, music, and sports. Talents and blessings given must be developed and used to serve humankind and glorify God. How about bad things that happened to us? Should we thank God or blame him for those? Often people complain against God and blame him for those misfortunes and diseases they endure or those things they do not have, yet others do. That is why their eyes are covered, unable to see the bright side of life or the lucky things they have received. As a result, people adopt negative attitudes such as jealousy, dissatisfaction, resentment even

against God as: *Creator why do you annoy me* [3] or *Creator why are you so mean and cruel* [4].

Only when we live in a spirit of gratitude, can we see those good things God has given to us. If we look around us, we can see so many people: hungry, miserable, suffering in body and mind. Is it that we are luckier than many people are?

For practical application, each day of our life, we should give thanks to God in words and actions. Gratitude must be the frame of mind and spirit we should have daily, hourly and minute by minute. For instance, we give thanks to God for a beautiful day, with warm sun light under the blue sky, dotted with white clouds, and gentle breeze and melodious sounds of birds singing. We give thanks to God for a good sound sleep, relaxing the mind. We give thanks to God for a good meal. Many people dare not give thanks to God for a good meal lest they would break a virtue of self-denial and sacrifice.

Traveling to the United States of America, visitors often hear words of thanks and sorry on their lips. A word of praise you say to anyone for anything, you would hear another word of thanks from him or her. If they touch somebody unintentionally, you would hear them say sorry'. Perhaps our acts of thanks to one another should remind us of thanksgiving to God. When Jesus healed the ten lepers, only one of them, a foreigner, returned to give thanks to him. Jesus asked: *Where are the other nine (Lk 17:17)*. Our thanks might be lip service if it does not come from the heart or not followed by action.

On a PanAm flight to the Vatican for the Second Vatican Council in October, 1962, Archbishop Fulton J Sheen, an eloquent preacher on TV saw a beautiful flight attendant on the flight, he whispered to her ear whether she had done anything to thank God for her beauty? Later on, she went to ask Archbishop Sheen what she would have to do to give thanks to God. Caught by surprise without preparation for an answer, Archbishop Sheen suggested that she should go to Vietnam to help Archbishop Cassaigne

serve lepers for a certain period. Feeling saddened by the suggestion, she left without saying good-bye to Archbishop Sheen. Then in 1963, it was reported in the Vietnamese newspaper that a flight attendant, young and beautiful, from PANAM volunteered to serve the lepers at Dilinh for six months. Is it a true report that she entered a convent after she had returned from Vietnam?

The mass is called the Eucharist in Greek. The Eucharist in Greek means to give thanks. Thus to offer the mass or the Eucharist means to give thanks. When the faithful in the early church attended the Eucharist, they had in mind a spirit of thanksgiving. For us catholic Christians, to come to church to attend mass is the best way to give thanks to God. Thus to give thanks to God without going to church to attend mass means we miss something important, short of meaning for the acts of thanks.

A prayer for knowing how to live in a spirit of thanksgiving:

***Oh Most Holy Trinitarian God,
our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.
We thank you for all the blessings you have given us.
With faith in you, we believe that everything we have,
comes from you.
Teach us to complain less and less and realize
that living a spirit of thanksgiving every day, hour and minute
must be our meditation. Amen.***

[1]. Vietnamese proverb

[2]. Ibid

[3]. In 'Cung Oan Ngam Khuc'

[4]. In 'Thuy Kieu' (English translation by Bùi Phụng in Vietnamese English Dictionary).

SMALL THINGS OF MARTYRDOM DONE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Andrew Dung-Lac, priests, martyrs, and his companions, martyrs. Year A, B, C

Gen 3:1-9; Rom 8:31b-39; Lk 9:23-26



The history of the church in Viet Nam recorded 53 edicts from Trinh and Nguyen lords or from kings of the Nguyen dynasty signed with instructions opposing Christianity with fierce persecutions of Christians, more severe each time. Historian Tertullian wrote: *The blood of martyrs is the seed begetting Catholics.* Throughout the periods of persecution of Catholics, the Church still existed and flourished. The history of Christian persecutions in Vietnam and around the world proved that.

The number of 117 martyrs in Vietnam was canonized because their names and history had been recorded. In reality, historians estimated the number of Catholics executed for their faith in God throughout Vietnam to be about 130,000. Among 117 martyrs canonized, are 96 Vietnamese (37 priests, 17 catechists, 1 seminarian and 42 laypersons); 11 Portuguese (6 bishops and 5 Dominican priests); 10 priests of the missionaries of Paris.

Added to the list of 117 martyrs in Vietnam was Andrew Phu Yen, a catechist, beatified afterwards. All accepted hardship at apostolic work and at the same time faced death in order to bear witness to the gospel. This fact made us think of the word of the gospel: *You are 'Rock,' and on this rock, I will build my Church, and the jaw of death shall not prevail against it (Mt 16:18).* In our days, there are no prohibitions against and persecutions of Christians as before, except in certain parts of the world. So in what aspect can we imitate those Christian martyrs? Through observation, one can see Christians are still being persecuted

tactfully and tacitly even in our days. The mass media such as newspapers, magazines, radios and televisions and websites often criticized the official teaching of the church, maintaining that the Church is out of touch, not following the current trend of the time.

They raised questions such as why the Catholic Church did not allow women priests, while a number of other Christian denominations have done so. Why did the church not allow married priests in order to increase harvesters for God's harvest, while there is a shortage of priests?

Why did the Church not allow artificial birth control methods while world population has increased rapidly? Why did the Church not allow divorce while other denominations have done so? Why was the Church so and so?

By raising those questions, the mass media has sowed doubt in the mind of Catholics, making those of weak faith confuse, weakening those with lack of understanding of the catholic teaching of the Gospel and the teaching of the Church. Under verbal attack and yet still loyal to their religious beliefs means the faithful are martyred partly for their faith if martyrdom to be understood as suffering for belief in God. Hearing words of slander against the Church and yet still loyal to their beliefs means the faithful are martyred partly for their faith.

Asked by fellow workers in office or factory why Catholics have to go to church every Sunday, while people of different religions do not have to and yet still loyal to their practice of faith, means the faithful are martyred partly for their faith. Living according to the Gospel and the official teaching of the Church, and being labeled as conservative, and yet still faithful in practicing their faith, means the faithful are martyred partly for what they believe.

Being busy with material things in life, and yet still being able to set aside time to educate their children according to the way of the Gospel even though being labeled as unrealistic, means the

faithful are martyred partly for their faith. Living a miserable life, suffering sickness and disease in body or spirit, and yet still faithful in serving God, means the faithful are martyred partly for their faith.

Having a job or friend or loved one lost, and still being faithful for the love of God, means the faithful are martyred partly for their faith. Hearing futile talks about the church and slanders against the Church and yet not participating, means the faithful are martyred partly for their faith. If martyrdom is to be understood as witness to the faith, then the above deeds done to keep faith, means dying to self a little.

It is not that easy for martyrs to go to execution grounds to be executed. In order to be able to accept death for their faith in God and love for God, the martyrs must have been faithful to God in small matters before, as to be able to be faithful to God in large matters.

That is the meaning of the word of the vine owner telling his servant: *Well done! You are an industrial and reliable servant. Since you were dependable in a small matter, I will put you in charge of larger affairs (Mt 25:21).*

Jesus' prediction that his disciples will be brought before kings and rulers in his account (Mt 10:18), is also understood before courts of public opinion and mass media.

By honoring the martyrs, the Church wants to tell the faithful that these are living examples, faithful to the faith, worthy for us to follow their examples. To go to church to attend mass in honor of the holy martyrs is to give thanks to God for granting firm faith to the martyrs as to plant seed for future generations.

To go and venerate the relics of the martyrs is to express our communion in the faith and ask them to intercede for us as to be faithful to our faith in small daily works.

A prayer for fidelity to faith:

*Oh Lord, God of our worship!
We give you thanks for the faith we received.
We pray for those who have been being persecuted,
ridiculed and discriminated against what they believe
in different parts of the world
that they may persevere in their faith.
Grant that I may be faithful to you
in all the adversities of life. Amen.*

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