

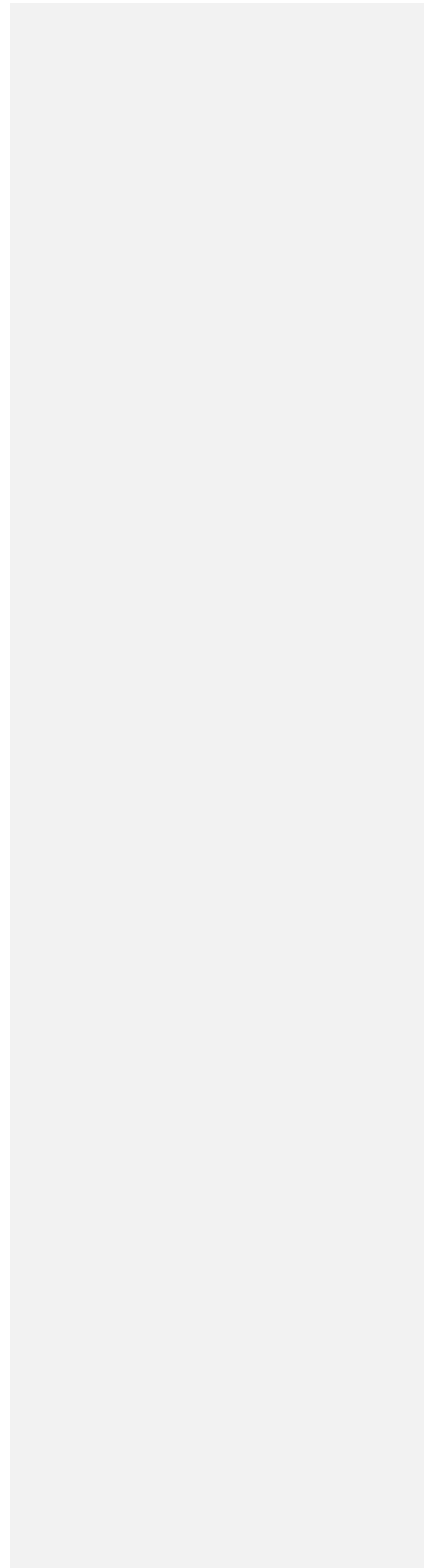


Be a Priest

Minister as Christ to every person you deal with

**MEDIATING THE LIFE OF GOD TO OTHERS
THROUGH EXPRESSION**

by David M. Knight



WELCOME TO LIVING THROUGH LOVING!

During these first weeks of “Ordinary Time” we focus on *mediating the life of God to others*. We do this by giving visible expression to the invisible life of God within us.

These reflections focus on showing us how to exercise the priesthood we received at Baptism. They are meant to motivate and support us in *ministering* to one another.

There is only one priest, Jesus Christ. But everyone who “becomes Christ” by Baptism is a “priest in the Priest.” Every baptized Christian is a priest. Every one of us was commissioned, consecrated and committed by anointing with chrism at Baptism to let Jesus himself act and minister through us as *priest*. This is the Good News: when we minister to each other, it is not just we, but Christ who ministers in us.

Ministry is always sacrifice. To give someone a minute, an hour of your time is to give a minute, an hour of your life. And there is no greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for a friend.

St. Paul exhorted the baptized: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God.” Wherever our live bodies are, we are sacrificed to letting Jesus minister through us. Through our bodies. We do this by giving physical expression to his love, his truth, his invisible life within us.

These are reflections on the Scriptures read at Mass during weeks 11 to 21 of Ordinary Time. They focus on the call to ministry. For those of you who have adopted *Reaching Jesus — Five Steps to a Fuller Life* as a plan of life, they are a follow-up to Step Four: “Being a Priest.”

Live, love, and enjoy! In His love,

David

FEAST OF THE MOST HOLY TRINITY (YEAR A)

“To Know the Mystery of Your Life...”

Inventory

How central to your spirituality is the doctrine of the Most Holy Trinity? How much are your actions and choices influenced by what God actually is: three Persons in one God? How does this trinity of Persons enter into your prayer?

Input

We were baptized — that is, received the gift of Life as Christians — “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” It is logical to expect we would live in awareness of and interaction with those three Persons from then on.

This awareness is cultivated by the one greatest sustaining force of our Christian life that Jesus established in the Church: the Mass. We should notice how.

We *begin* the Mass “in the name...” of the Three Persons, making the “Sign of the Cross.” We *end* invoking the Three Persons again in the final blessing.

The *Greeting* quite commonly used is: “The grace of the *Lord Jesus Christ*, and the love of *God*, and the communion of the *Holy Spirit* be with you all.”¹

The *Kyrie* is not Trinitarian, since “*Lord... Christ... Lord* have mercy” are all addressed to Jesus. But the *Gloria* is, acclaiming “God the *Father* almighty... *Lord Jesus Christ*, only *Son... with the Holy Spirit*.” Likewise the *Profession of Faith* states in turn what we believe about the “one God, the Father,” the “one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son,” and “the Holy Spirit, the Lord...”

The *Opening Prayer (Collect)* “is usually addressed to God the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit. It concludes with a Trinitarian [the longer] ending.” That is: “Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit.....” The *Prayer over the Gifts* and *After Communion* “end with the shorter conclusion,” usually just “Through Christ our Lord.”

In *Eucharistic Prayers II, III and IV* the Holy Trinity is mentioned four times, carefully positioned in the same four places in each one: at the beginning, the middle and the end. The two “middle” namings (the first and second *Epiclesis*) bracket the *Consecration (Institution Narrative)*, around which “the Church has arranged the entire celebration of the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*.”²

Eucharistic Prayer II begins: “*Father*, it is our duty... through your beloved *Son... by the power of the Holy Spirit*.” And we name both Father and Son when we “call down” the Spirit: first on the bread and wine, then on the Church:

First Epiclesis: “*Lord [Father]*, you are holy... let your *Spirit come upon these gifts... so that they may become for us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus*.”

Second Epiclesis “We offer you, *Father*, this life-giving bread... *may all of us* who share in the body and blood of *Christ* be... in unity by the *Holy Spirit*”

The same pattern appears in *Eucharistic Prayers III and IV*.

Finally, every *Eucharistic Prayer* climaxes in the *Doxology*: “Through *him [Jesus]*, with him, in him, in the unity of the *Holy Spirit*, all glory and honor is yours, almighty *Father*, forever and ever.”

The *Rite of Communion* begins with the *Our Father*, then goes on to address the “*Lord Jesus Christ*,” asking for “peace and unity” which are the work, the sign and the fruit of the *Spirit*. Although the Spirit is not mentioned by name, the Holy Spirit’s presence pervades the “communion in the Spirit” that characterizes the *Rite of Peace*

¹ *2Corinthians* 13:13. In the Mass, the French, German and Spanish change it to “the love of God the Father.”

² U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 2003, nos. 54, 72, 77, 89.

and the “wedding banquet of the Lamb.”

Concluding Rites: The Mass which began with the Sign of the Cross “in the name...” of the Three Persons, ends with a cruciform blessing in the name of the same Three in One: “the *Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit*.”

Why this insistence on naming the Three Persons? Today’s *Opening Prayer* tells us: “*Father, you sent your Word to bring us truth and your Spirit to make us holy. Through them we come to know the mystery of your Life.*”

Knowing God is what our Christian life is all about, because the more we know him, the more we will be like him. To grasp the mystery of the Trinity is to realize that God cannot even be conceived of except as love. And human life cannot be lived authentically except in *relationship* with others. We will explain this.¹

“I AM WHO AM LOVE”

In **Exodus 34:4-9** Moses had asked God, “Show me your glory.” God did:

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in *steadfast love*....”

“Steadfast love” is perhaps the best translation of the Hebrew *hesed* and *emet* — also rendered as “kindness and fidelity” or “grace and truth.” It appears 171 times in Scripture. Scholars call it a “virtual definition of God.”

Earlier, when Moses asked him his “name,” God defined himself as:

“I AM WHO I AM.... Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’.... This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.”²

It took the revelation of the Trinity — God as Father, Son and Spirit, three Persons in one Nature — to show us how and why these two definitions are one and the same. “I AM WHO AM” is identical with “God is love.”

When God said, I AM WHO AM, he was saying that he is Being Itself. God doesn’t *have* being, like we creatures do. God *is* Being.

If I can “see the hand in front of my face,” I know there is nothing in it that says it has to be there. It is pretty obvious my hand doesn’t have within itself the cause of its own existence. It doesn’t *have to* exist. Neither do I. If I had never begun to exist, the world would make just as much sense as it does now. In fact, there was a time when I did not exist, and there will come a time when I no longer exist on earth as I do now. There is simply nothing in me that says I *have to* be.

This is true of everything we see. But if so, then we know already that for what exists to make sense, there must be somewhere Something or Someone whose existence is self-explanatory. Something that has within itself the cause of its own being — whose Being differs from ours in this, that, if we could see it as it is, we couldn’t even ask, “Where did this come from?” It would be something whose existence would be so obviously self-explanatory we would just say, “Of course!”

In other words, someone who, if asked, “What, who are you?” could answer, “I AM WHO SIMPLY AM.”

We cannot imagine such a Being, but we know there is one. Otherwise there is no explanation for anything else that exists, and we can give up thinking right now. Or confine our thinking to figuring out how things “work” without trying to understand what things “are.” This is to focus on “physics” and ignore “metaphysics,” (what is “beyond physics”). And, in fact, that is the prevailing option in our culture. We settle for *technology*, the science of how things *work*, and just don’t think about *philosophy*, (“love of wisdom”) which is the science of what things *are*. The truth is, our discoveries in technology are so fantastic, and add so much to our lives here and now, that we may not even notice a need to ask the ultimate “why.”

¹ *John* 17:3: “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” *1John* 3:2: “Beloved, we are God’s children now... when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” *1John* 4:8, 16: “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

² *Exodus* 3:14-15; 34:6. See the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* on *John* 1:14.

Not, at least, until the inevitability of death makes us wonder about what life really is in the first place! That leads us to think deeply about being. And that leads inevitably to God.

Starting with the fact that in God, *what* he is and *that* he is are one and the same — his “essence” explains his “existence,” because it is simply his nature to *be* — we can reason to all sorts of other necessary conclusions about God which would constitute a course in metaphysics. It is enough to just state one: if God is Being Itself, God must be One in himself without any differentiation that comes from the addition of parts — because there is nothing outside of Being Itself but non-being, and adding what is nothing cannot make any difference!

So how is it possible to have three Persons in one God if none can have anything, any quality or power, another doesn't? How does that make sense?

The answer is that what makes the Persons different is not that one has something the other does not, but that they differ in their *relationship* to one another. Skipping what could involve hundreds of pages and hours of reflection, let us just say that the reality of any relationship consists in *interaction*. (My relationship with anyone is as deep, inclusive, etc. as my interaction with that person and defined by it). So Father, Son and Spirit are defined by the way they *interact* with each other. This interaction is what makes them what they are as distinct Persons. It is of the very nature of God to be three Persons interacting with each other.

This means that when God said “I AM WHO AM,” he was saying, although we did not know it yet, “I am the One whose very Being consists in an interaction between different Persons.” To “see God” is to see three Persons in an ongoing interaction with one another that defines them as Father, Son and Spirit. And what is that interaction? In a single word, it is Love.

The Father sees his own Goodness and Being and utters what he sees in a “word” of knowledge. From all eternity, the Father has been saying, “God!” That Word, the Truth of the Father, is the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son.

The Goodness of God perceived and expressed as Truth inevitably involves Love. The Spirit of Love “proceeds from the Father and the Son,” who would be unthinkable without the Spirit. The Spirit would be impossible without them. Love depends on, implies, goodness recognized as truth. The Being of God is three Persons interacting with each other in mutually recognized Goodness, Truth and Love. Shorthand: “God is love.”

Conclusion: that Being who has to be, who has within Itself the cause, the source, the inevitability of its own existence, is a Being whose reality involves *relationship*. What does this tell us about human beings created “in the image of God”? Does “being human” require “being in relationship”?

God sent his Son

We can speculate all we want about life and being — and grow in wisdom through it — but God has simplified things. **John 3:16-18** tells us: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” To believe and accept Baptism is to give up whatever our contingent, temporary life holds for us in order to let Jesus Christ live *with us, in us and through us* as his risen body on earth. This makes us sharers in his divine, eternal life, and in the *relationship* he has with the Father and Spirit. And calls us to have the same relationship with other people that Jesus chooses to have. To be fully human is simple: it is to “become Christ.”¹

Live by the Spirit

2Corinthians 13:11-13 makes things practical: “Live in harmony and peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you.” The Father, Son and Spirit’s relationship with each other is harmony and peace. So union with God and seeking union with each other are required for authentic human life.

Insight

Do you need deep philosophy to accept that God is love? Does knowing that help?

Initiative: *Look for Goodness, Truth and Love in all your experiences.*

¹ John 13:34, 15:12, 17:11-23. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 792-798.

June 16, 2014

MONDAY OF THE ELEVENTH WEEK (of Year A-2)

The *Responsorial Psalm* proclaims trust in the power of powerless ministry: “*Lord, listen to my groaning*” (*Psalm 5*).

In **1Kings 21: 1-16** Ahab and Jezebel use ruthless, unjust power to kill and rob an innocent man. And they get away with it — until tomorrow’s reading! Then their fate encourages every victim of injustice who prays “*Lord, listen to my groaning*” to trust that God will indeed bring about justice — but by his own means, not in dependence on human force and violence. Those, however, who, like Ahab, do rely on human force and violence are eventually destroyed by it, as Ahab was.

In **Matthew 5:38-42** Jesus teaches us what true power is. It is the power of unconditional love: “Do not resist an evildoer... turn the other cheek; give your cloak as well; go the second mile. Give to everyone who begs... do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow...” This is the only power that accomplishes lasting good on earth. It is the power Jesus used to redeem the world.

Jesus made this clear as soon as his disciples had accepted him unconditionally as Savior:

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering... and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Jesus saved the world by “enduring evil with love” — by accepting whatever suffering the sins of the world laid on his shoulders and “loving back.” He saved us as *Priest* accepting to be *Victim* with love. And anyone who wants to minister with Jesus must do the same:

...deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it (*Matthew 16: 13-28*).

This is love that is more than human. It is shocking, scandalous. Peter rejected it immediately in the name of us all: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” But Jesus insisted with vehemence:

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.

The world is not saved by ordinary human goodness, but by God’s own divine, incomprehensible love active on earth. This is the love we must accept and strive to embody in Christian ministry. To live out our baptismal consecration as “*priests in the Priest*” we must “die to ourselves” in order to say with St. Paul, “I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me.” To every person we deal with we say, “This is my body, given up for you” in ministry and love.

Initiative: Be a priest: Let Christ express his love through you in every encounter you have with every person, all day long. Give life through love.

June 17, 2014

TUESDAY ELEVENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* sets the tone for all Christian forgiveness: “*Be merciful, Lord, for we have sinned*” (*Psalm 51*).

In **1Kings 21: 17-29** God has mercy on Ahab although his sin was abominable: “There never was anyone like Ahab for... doing what is displeasing to the Lord.” Nevertheless, God mitigated his punishment.

When we ask God to “have mercy,” we are asking him to “come to our aid out of a sense of *relationship*” (the meaning of “mercy”). We offer God — our Father — no reason for him to do this except his love and our need: “*Be merciful, Lord, for we have sinned.*” God forgives because this is what God chooses to do. There is no reason for it except our need and his love. That is why there is no limit to his forgiveness. How could there ever be insufficient motive for God to forgive when there was never any motive to begin with except God’s infinite love? Our prayer is just to declare our need: “*Be merciful, Lord, for we have sinned.*”

In **Matthew 5:43-48** Jesus commands us, to love each other as “children of our Father in heaven.” We must set no more limits on our forgiveness of others than God sets on his forgiveness of us. Why? Because we are children of God. Therefore, Jesus teaches, “You must be *perfect*, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

This is more than human. We naturally “love our neighbors” — friends, relatives, fellow-citizens, those with whom we are bonded in some kind of relationship — and “hate [or ignore] our enemies.” But because we are children of the Father, we must accept as brothers and sisters all whom God calls to be his children. We must have “mercy” on all; love and forgive every person on earth unconditionally “out of a sense of *relationship*.” Why? Because God does, and we are God’s children. We receive from God, not just human life, but his own divine life. We are divine. “We must therefore be *perfect*, just as our heavenly Father is perfect.”

The teaching of the Church is unambiguous about this:

All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the *fullness of the Christian life* and to the *perfection of love*.... Every Catholic must therefore *aim at Christian perfection*.... (Vatican II, *Church 11*, 40; *Ecumenism 4*).

This is impossible, of course, if we rely on our own human efforts. We can only love as Christ, the “only Son of the Father,” by *being Christ*, “sons and daughters *in the Son*,” *fili in Filio*. The mystery of Christian love is a mystery of sharing in the divine life and nature of God. This is also the mystery of Christian ministry. It is the foundation of our trust.

Initiative: Be a priest. Love as Christ in every dealing with every person.

June 18, 2014

WEDNESDAY ELEVENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* encourages us: “*Let your hearts take comfort, all who hope in the Lord*” (*Psalm 31*).

What Elisha asked Elijah for in **2Kings 2: 1-14** is the key to all ministry: “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” The only authentic way to minister is *as Christ*, letting Jesus act with us, in us and through us. And the only way to act as Christ is to act by the Spirit of Christ given to us:

He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father.... “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth.”

The gift of the Holy Spirit is a pure gift, but it is a promised one. In Eucharistic Prayer IV the Church professes that God sent the Spirit as his “first gift to those who believe.”

The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.... And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever... the Spirit of truth.... You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.... He will teach you everything.... He will guide you into all the truth (John chapters. 14-16).

This is the foundation of confidence for all who minister as Christ: “*Let your hearts take comfort, all who hope in the Lord.*”

In **Matthew 6: 1-18** Jesus teaches that to be a good Christian it is not enough to keep all the rules and practice all the observances the Church commands. If we just do what everybody is expected to do we will not know if we believe in Jesus personally ourselves or just because we were brought up Christian and have never had a reason to change. To know God and Jesus as *our* God, one with whom we are in personal relationship, we have to “pray to the Father in secret,” privately, and express our faith in personal choices unique to ourselves. This is the only way I can know that my religion is *my* religion instead of just “conformity by inertia.”

Jesus said, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you *friends*, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” Servants do what they are supposed to do; friends act out of union of mind and heart with their friend. If we only do what we are “supposed to do” as Christians we do not know Christ. We are “worthless slaves”(Luke 17:10). To minister *as Christ* we must be in touch with the Holy Spirit in our hearts and act in union with him.

Initiative: Be a priest. Look inwards and express what is there.

June 19, 2014

THURSDAY ELEVENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* invites us to look at what God has done and take courage: “*Let the just rejoice in the Lord*” (*Psalm 97*).

Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 48: 1-15 is a litany of the manifestations of God’s power through Elijah. He “arose like a fire” to “restore the tribes of Jacob” through “prophecies of doom” and promises of healing supported by awesome acts of power.

The Gospels identify John the Baptizer with the promised return of Elijah: “With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous.”¹ But in the new Elijah God showed his power in a different way. He revealed the mystery of God’s greatest power: the power of love acting, not through violence and force, but through surrender and sacrifice. John was killed in a preview of Christ’s own death to show that Jesus was going to save the world in an unexpected way: “I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.”² The “new Elijah” was the forerunner of a new and unexpected kind of Savior.³ It is in this new spirit of gentleness and “enduring love” that Christians minister as Christ. It is to this we look when *the just rejoice in the Lord*.

Matthew 6: 7-15 teaches us that the secret to praying well is to make Jesus’ priorities the priorities of our own hearts. First, we should desire above all things that God in his transcendent majesty be adored and glorified: “Hallowed be thy name!” Then that on earth his kingship should be established and his will be done as perfectly as it is in heaven. Finally, that in heaven we will all be gathered together at the “wedding banquet of the Lamb, where Jesus will be the delight, the “bread” of the banquet and all will be experiencing together the “peace and unity” of his kingdom in total reconciliation with God and with each other. There we will all be forgiving each another as God is forgiving us, in unrestricted mutual love.

Jesus did not give us the *Our Father* as a formula of words to be memorized,⁴ but as an interior stance of the heart to be cultivated. Teresa of Avila says the words of memorized prayers can be “meditation” if our way of saying them is deep and reflective. If it is not, she says it is not prayer at all, “no matter how much the lips move.” All true prayer is prayer in the “secret” of the heart.

Initiative: Be a priest. Unite your heart to Christ’s in prayer and action.

¹Luke 1:17. ² Matthew 17:12. ³ See Monday, above, and Mathew 16: 13-28. ⁴ The wording differs in *Luke* 11:12.

June 20, 2014

FRIDAY ELEVENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* assures us when things look bad: “*The Lord has chosen Sion for his dwelling*” (*Psalm 131*). The Church is the new Sion.

In **2Kings 11: 1-20** God seems to be showing his care for his people through the violence and wholesale slaughter that characterized political turnovers in the Chosen People!

The Jews were no different from other primitive societies in this. And they were really not that different from modern societies. Certainly no country in history has ever killed as many people as quickly and as indiscriminately — men, women, children, old and sick — as the United States did in the saturation bombings and atomic attacks of World War II. And no industrialized country in the world equals us today in state-sponsored executions. Most modern countries have abolished the death penalty entirely. But even many American Catholics still approve of juridical killing, in spite of its condemnation by the Pope and the united American episcopacy.

In the United States the public separation of Church and state is sometimes confused with a private separation of religion and politics. People vote for their economic advantage, or for what they perceive as “national security,” without asking the deeper questions about social justice, international exploitation and unjustified use of force. For the Jews, however, formally allied to God by covenant, church and state were one. In the Jewish Scriptures God appears to take an active part in politics. We are given the impression that God brings about the fall of bad kings and the rise of better ones, sometimes through unspeakable brutality, as in today’s reading.

Scripture scholars teach us not to identify God’s revelation with our first impressions. We must discern the *content* of the inspired word in the light of the *cultural form* of its expression. Rather than spend time analyzing the present text, we pass on to **Matthew 6: 19-23**, in which Jesus teaches his own way of guiding governments. It is not through force, using the powers of this world, but through the power of truth and love alone. For this the starting point is to identify the *focus of our desires*: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Your heart’s focus will determine what you see. What you see will determine where you go. “If your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light.” If “the light inside you is darkness” you will stumble and stray to your own destruction and the detriment of all you deal with. “*The Lord has chosen Sion for his dwelling*” but we must attend to his presence and light within us.

Initiative: Be a priest. Focus on the light Jesus brought into the world.

June 21,2014

SATURDAY ELEVENTH WEEK

In the *Responsorial Psalm* God promises fidelity to David: “*Forever I will keep my love for him*” (*Psalms* 88).

In the Judean kings the pattern seems to be that God is faithful to David’s line but they are unfaithful to him. Jehoram “did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.” “Yet the LORD would not destroy the house of David because of the covenant that he had made with David.” Ahaziah, Jehoram’s successor, let his mother Athaliah minister to him as “his counselor in doing wickedly.”

In **2Chronicles 24: 17-25** Joash becomes king and remains faithful to God as long as he has the ministry of the prophet Jehoiada. He even restores the temple that had been desecrated by his predecessor. But in his forties, after Jehoiada died, Joash “abandoned the Temple of the Lord... for the worship of idols.”¹

Joash’s son Amaziah “did what was right in the sight of the LORD, yet not with a true heart.” After first following the prophet who ministered to him he later “set up [the gods of Edom] as his gods, and worshiped them.” His son Uzziah, at sixteen, was ministered to by Zechariah, “who instructed him in the fear of God.” But “when he had become strong he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was false to the LORD his God.” His son, Jotham, “became strong because he ordered his ways before the LORD his God.” But his son, Ahaz, worshipped the Baals.² How explain this pattern?

The good prophets who *ministered* to the kings kept them faithful as long as they listened. Without their ministry the kings went astray. But in the Gospel Jesus gives a more basic reason: *faithful* love is *undivided* love. If we are influenced in our decisions by anything except God, we are infected with idolatry.

In **Matthew 6: 24-34** Jesus says, “No one can serve two masters.” He tells us not to worry about food, clothing, or life itself. For true security, “Set your hearts on God’s kingdom first, and on his righteousness, and all these other things will be given you as well.” Any dividedness in the goal toward which we direct our lives is like a crack in a wall that can bring the whole building down. If we allow any desire except loving and serving God to get a hold on us, there is no assurance for the future. Any one of us can join the ranks of those who have lost the faith.

In the absence of a personal prophet, we need to minister to ourselves and check for fatal flaws in the “breadth and length and height and depth” our love for God.³ To say like God, “*Forever I will keep my love for him,*” we must love with undivided hearts.

Initiative: Be a priest. Embrace the ministry of wholeheartedness.

¹ For the historical background details cited see 2Chronicles 21: 6-7; 22:3; 24: 2, 4, 18. ² For these details see 2Chronicles ; 25:2, 14; 26: 3-5,16; 27: 2,6; 28: 1-3. ³ Ephesians 3:18

June 22, 2014

Feast of The Body and Blood of Christ (Year A)

“A Food Unknown...”

Inventory

What do you know about Eucharist? What first comes to your mind when you hear the word? Is it “Communion”? or “the Mass”? In your mind, can they be separated?

Input

Father Bernard Botte, O.S.B. died in 1980. He was a key figure in the efforts to renew the liturgy before Vatican II (1962-1965) and to implement the Council’s teaching in parish life afterwards. He tells us how the Mass was actually understood when he was growing up (he was born 1893). When he was in high school:

Every morning there was a Mass in the students’ chapel.... Even in the first row the only thing you’d hear [from the altar] was a murmur. The group rose for the Gospel [read in Latin], but nobody dreamed of telling us what Gospel it was.... The people’s missal did not exist. You could lose yourself in any prayerbook at all, but we were pulled out of our drowsiness from time to time by the recitation of a few decades of the rosary... The only time we could pray with the priest was after Mass when the celebrant, kneeling at the foot of the altar, recited the three “Hail Marys”... and the prayers prescribed by Pope Leo XIII. Receiving Communion at this Mass was out of the question. For that matter, no one seemed to notice a relationship between Mass and Communion.... In the two parishes of my home town... Communion was distributed before Mass, after Mass, or in the middle of Mass, but never at the moment indicated by the liturgy... Communion was distributed every fifteen minutes.... A priest would come out of the sacristy and interrupt the celebrant in order to take a ciborium out of the tabernacle. The celebrant then was allowed to continue the Mass until he was disturbed once again by the ciborium being returned to the tabernacle.... When one of my sisters asked Monsignor Lalieu (a doctor in theology and an author of a book on the Mass) about the best time to receive Communion, he recommended she receive before Mass and then offer Mass in thanksgiving for Communion! This sounds strange to us, but we ought to keep in mind the ideas then current. Mass was no longer the prayer of the Christian community. The clergy prayed entirely in place of and in the name of the community. As a result, the faithful were only remotely involved and paid attention to their own personal devotion. Communion appeared to be a private devotion without any special link to the Mass.... The only time the faithful prayed together was when the rosary was recited aloud.... Pope Leo XIII had prescribed the recitation of the rosary during Low Masses of [October, the “month of the rosary”]. Eucharistic piety had evolved toward adoration and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. The summit was Mass with exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.

Father Botte describes the lamentable state of theology, Scripture study and preaching (“the clergy had nothing to say except for moralizing sermons”), and concludes: “The liturgical movement was born out of a reaction to this situation.”¹

On August 20, 1914, five days after Fr. Botte was discharged from World War I army service, Pope Saint Pius X died. He had taken a first step toward liturgical reform by recommending daily Communion when possible, and directing that little children should be allowed to make their First Communion as soon as they reached the age of reason. He issued “an instruction on church music which struck at current abuses and aimed at the restoration of congregational singing of the Roman plainchant.” He also “strongly urged daily reading of the Bible — but here the pope’s words did not receive so much heed.”²

Today’s feast, known as *Corpus Christi*, is “the very first papally sanctioned universal feast in the history of the Latin Rite.” It was established by Pope Urban IV in 1264. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote two hymns for this feast: *Pange Lingua*, and *Verbum Supernum Prodiens*. We know the last two verses of each as the *Tantum Ergo*, and

¹ *From Silence to Participation*, Pastoral Press, National Association of Pastoral Musicians, 1988, pp. 2-8, 24.

² Butler’s *Lives of the Saints*, Christian Classics, 1990.

the *O Salutaris Hostia*, used for Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.¹

The *Opening Prayer(s)* show Communion as inseparably connected to Christ's sacrifice in the Mass: "Lord Jesus... you gave us the Eucharist as the memorial of your suffering and death." We also speak of the "sacrament of your body and blood" both as *Jesus "living among us"* and "a sign that even now *we share your life*" (*Prayer after Communion*). Eucharist, then, speaks of a "real presence" of Jesus both among us and in us. By dying and rising with Christ in Baptism (celebrated in Eucharist), we ourselves became his real body, his true flesh and blood. It follows that we are committed to "offer to our brothers and sisters a life poured out in loving service." Our baptismal consecration as "priests in the Priest" and "victims in the Victim" pledges us to this. What more does today's liturgy teach us about the Mass?

A Food Unknown

In **Deuteronomy 8:2-16** Moses told the people: "The Lord your God... fed you in the desert with manna, a food unknown to your ancestors." We have seen how the same thing could be said about Eucharist. For our recent ancestors, it was truly "a food unknown."

Not entirely, of course. They knew enough to adore Christ truly present "under the appearances" of bread and wine. But they knew next to nothing about what these appearances symbolize and speak of. Nor did the priests. Fr. Botte again:

In the mind of a university professor, "liturgy" was the ceremonial part [the "rubrics," red-print directions in the altar book] of worship emptied of its real content. The goal [of seminary training] was to prepare clerics for correctly carrying out ritual acts... Only it is regrettable that no one ever thought of explaining the liturgical texts and showing the spiritual riches they contain...

Neither the classes of theology, nor those of Scripture, nor those of the liturgy offered material for preaching. The clergy had nothing to say except for moralizing sermons.... They preached out of duty, because it was prescribed, just as they observed the rubrics.

Stop. In today's Church that recognizes the baptismal consecration of *all* the faithful as "priests," anything negative said above about the training and attitude of clerics will have a matching application to the laity. Those who share in Christ's priesthood by Baptism participate equally with the ordained priests in celebrating the communal act that is the Eucharistic celebration. If the laity are not deeply, knowingly and spiritually involved, the Mass will not be for the community what it should be.²

And we have seen the effect of that. How many have just dropped out?

Fr. Botte gives the heart of the problem:

The priests of the nineteenth century were not responsible for the veil which the use of Latin had hung between the altar and the nave, but they did nothing to break through this curtain.... Regardless of where we place the responsibility, the harm was profound.... The faithful had nothing more to sustain their faith than substitute nourishment, and they lost the meaning of certain values.... This is the heart of the matter. The Mass was a personal obligation for each Christian, imposed arbitrarily by a positive law of the Church. Forgotten was the idea that Sunday Mass is the central meeting of the people of God where all the faithful come together to hear the word of God and to be nourished by the bread of life.... Left to themselves, the faithful became more and more isolated in a religious individualism and narrow moralism whose ideal was to have each one work on personal salvation by avoiding mortal sin.

One look at the congregation during a partially-filled Sunday Mass is enough to convince us this false theology

¹ Kevin Knight, *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2010, and *Wikipedia*. See www.newadvent.org.

² See Vatican II, "Sacred Liturgy," nos. 7 and 11: "Pastors of souls must, therefore, realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, their obligation goes further than simply ensuring that the laws governing valid and lawful celebration are observed. They must also ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite and enriched by it." I once quoted this in a retreat to priests, after which the bishop commented to me: "Well, you lost them on that one, but keep trying!"

has not yet been overcome. Where do the people sit? All together, as would be taken for granted at a family meal? Or spread throughout the church, “isolated in a religious individualism” that lets each one participate on their own terms?

Is it taken for granted that all sing, as they would at a birthday party? Or do many see this level of participation as an option of personal choice?

Why do some still fear to take the host in their hand at Communion? We know the custom of receiving on the tongue dates from the days when the laity were considered unworthy to touch the host. Or even to enter the sanctuary. Much less to consider themselves equal participants with the clergy in the communal worship of the Church. This is a surviving sign of the old theology in which “the clergy prayed entirely in place of and in the name of the community. As a result, the faithful were only remotely involved and paid attention to their own personal devotion.”

Some Catholics will fight to retain the bells that were and again are rung during the “Consecration” at Mass. Whether one is pro or con, all should know that both the historical and current reason for them is rooted in the congregation’s presumed ignorance about the Mass. So speaks Rome:

From a long and attentive catechesis and education in liturgy, a particular liturgical assembly may be able to take part in the Mass with such attention and awareness that it has no need of this signal at the central part of the Mass....The opposite may be presumed in a parish church, where there is a different level of liturgical and religious education and where often people who are visitors or are not regular churchgoers take part. In these cases the bell as a signal is entirely appropriate and is sometimes necessary... in order to elicit joy and attention.¹

In other words, the bells are an admission of failure. But if the shoe fits....

“My flesh, for the life of the world”

In **John 6:51-58**: Jesus says, “I myself am the living bread come down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

His hearers found this hard to accept. And so should we, if we are not aware that the only way bread can become the body of Christ is through the mystery of Christ’s Incarnation, death and resurrection. God himself could not just take bread and declare it a human body. That would be a contradiction in terms. Any “nature” is a structure ordered to *operate* in a certain way, and bread cannot act as human. But once God the Son took flesh as a human being and acted in his human nature until he could say, “I glorified you on earth by *finishing the work* that you gave me to do,” then “transubstantiation” became possible.² To exist “in flesh and blood” today, all Jesus needs to do is be *present* in a way that speaks of and makes present to us all he said and did in the body he had while on earth. If he had never had a human body, or had not used it to unite us to himself in the mystery of his dying and rising, there would be no way bread and wine could become a human body. But once Jesus did what he needed to do in his body, God can make exist *now* as his true flesh and blood anything that can *express* the life he lived and still lives for us. Bread and wine are apt signs to express that.

When we receive Communion, we should be conscious that this is the fruit — and can only be the fruit — of the sacrifice we have celebrated during the *Eucharistic Prayer*. Without that sacrifice, it would be impossible. That is why we do not “give Communion” ordinarily except within the celebration of Mass.

One bread, one body

1Corinthians 10:16-17 gives a reason why bread is an apt sign to express the meaning of Jesus’ life: The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Bread is many grains of wheat made one as bread — as we are many individuals made one body in Christ. We would do well to ponder what else bread and wine can symbolize.

¹ See The Congregation for Divine Worship, Volume 8 of its official publication, *Notitiae*, in 1972. For arguments pro and con, google “ringing of bells during Mass.”

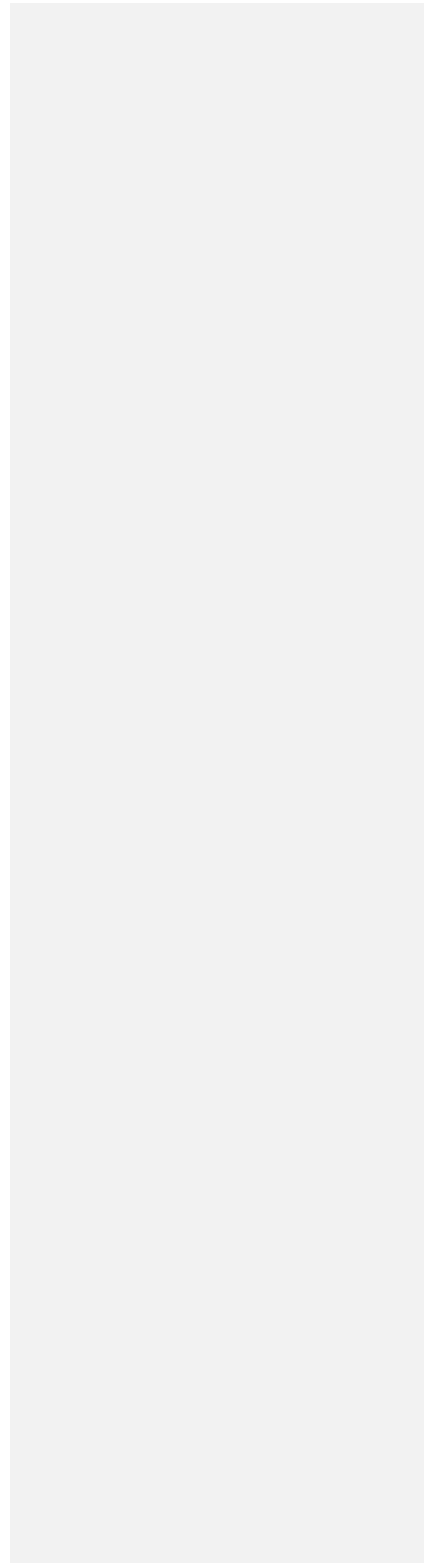
² *John 17:4*. See also *John 19:30*.

Insight

Mass is the communal act of the whole Church and of all who are present.

Initiative:

Participate in Mass as actively and fully as the presiding priest does.



June 23, 2014

MONDAY TWELFTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* encourages us to pray with hope even when our own sins have caused our problems: “*Help us with your right hand, O Lord, and answer us*” (*Psalm 60*).

2Kings 17: 5-18 shows us what happens when we don’t follow “the manufacturer’s instructions.” God’s People are invaded, defeated, and reduced to slaves. “This happened because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God.” God’s laws are the “operator’s manual” for sharing human life on this planet. To ignore them invites disaster.

The wars, the terrorism, the violence in our streets that we experience are not a *punishment* from God. But God’s word assures us again and again that they are the natural consequences of our refusal to live as he taught us — both as individuals and as a nation. We suffer the consequences of global poverty and social unrest which themselves are consequences of our failure, both now and in the past, to live authentically as Christians. But God will still help us if we turn to him: “*Help us with your right hand, O Lord, and answer us.*”

In **Matthew 7: 1-5** Jesus warns us that we may be looking at the wrong sins. “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” All sin is damaging, but some sins devastate society — and those are the ones we seem least concerned about. At least, they never seem to come up when we confess our sins; certainly not in the Sacrament of Reconciliation! How do we *minister* as Christians to the poor, the imprisoned? Do we address the *causes* of poverty? Of war? Are we complacent about just locking people in cages instead of converting the whole prison system to serious rehabilitation? Are we willing accomplices in the official revenge our state takes against those children of God who are judged guilty by fallible juries of killing other children of God? Do we applaud their execution? Does God their Father applaud it?

God does not promise that ordinary morality will save the world. But Christian morality can — if like Jesus we dedicate ourselves to *ministering* to all people with the love of God himself. The truth is, only love works. Jesus died to convince us of this. When we “die to ourselves” to live as Christ and let Christ live in us, the world will be transformed. Do we believe the prayer we were taught to say? “Send forth your Spirit, Lord, and our *hearts* will be regenerated. And you will *renew the face of the earth!*” If we “take the log out of our own eye” and *live out our Baptism*, we will “see clearly” what else needs to be done.

Initiative: Be a priest. Minister with love to all people and encourage this.

June 24, 2014

TUESDAY TWELFTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* invites us to look with awe and wonder at what God has done and is doing for us and to praise him for his love: “*God upholds his city forever*” (*Psalm 48*).

The Israelites of Samaria were defeated and enslaved by the Assyrians. **2Kings 19: 9-36** tells us King Sennacherib invaded Judea and “captured all the fortified cities of Judah” up to Jerusalem. Then the Lord promised King Hezekiah of Judea through Isaiah the prophet: “The king of Assyria shall not come into this city.... That very night the angel of the LORD set out and struck down one hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians.... Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left [and] went home,” confirming the people’s faith: “*God upholds his city forever.*”

Faith is most recognizable as faith when there is little evidence to support it. To know we believe in God as the God he really is, we have to go beyond what appears or appeals naturally to us as humans. We have to believe and trust in God’s power and God’s way of using it:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55: 8-9).

In **Matthew 7: 6-14** Jesus calls us off the “beaten path” of our cultural assumptions about what is the right and acceptable way to think and act. He calls us to leave the main road and take the steep, narrow path up the mountain: “It is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

There are plenty of “cultural Christians” who water down the Gospel to make Christianity compatible with the “American way of life” (or Hispanic or Vietnamese way; or any other culture’s way) because they want to “fit in.” They know that to live or affirm Christ’s values to people who are caught up in the culture is to invite mockery and hostility. Jesus warns us that in ministering to others we must be careful where we “throw our pearls.” But we must be equally careful not to lose them! Discretion can become self-deception: what we don’t reveal to others can become invisible to ourselves.

The essence of ministry is *self-expression*. We must give physical, human expression to the invisible, divine faith, hope and love in our hearts — not with naiveté, but with courage, trusting in God’s support: “*God upholds his city forever.*”

Initiative: Be a priest. Express your faith to all whom it will not harm.

June 25, 2014

WEDNESDAY TWELFTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm*, points out the way to happiness on earth as well as in heaven. “*Teach me the way of your decrees, O Lord*” (*Psalm 119*).

After Hezekiah, the next two kings “did not walk in the way of the Lord.” Then came King Josiah, who “did what was right in the sight of the Lord.” **2Kings 22:8 to 23:3** tells us that in his time the high priest Hilkiah “found the book of the law in the house of the Lord.” When it was read to Josiah he was shocked to learn how unfaithful the people were being to their covenant with God. So he gathered “all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, and all the people... [and] read in their hearing all the words of the book... that had been found.” He renewed the covenant, promising to keep God’s commandments “with all his heart and all his soul... [and] all the people joined in the covenant.” In return God promised Josiah, “your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring on this place” because of the infidelity of the two kings before him and the four who followed him, which brought on the Babylonian captivity foretold by Isaiah:

Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the LORD” (2Kings 20:17).

The two books of Kings are a story of fidelity to God bringing happiness, and of infidelity bringing disaster. They warn everyone with common sense to pray, “*Teach me the way of your decrees, O Lord.*”

In **Matthew 7: 15-20** Jesus shows us how to distinguish good teachers from bad, false prophets from true: “You will be able to tell them by their fruits.” This is a key to all ministry: if people accept our ministry, it will be because they see in our lives evidence that we are united to Jesus Christ, and that he is ministering through us. Sacramental ministry is an exception; Catholics believe Jesus promised to act through these particular seven acts regardless of the sanctity or sinfulness of the minister. (The word “sacrament” means both “mystery” and “oath of commitment.” Jesus “pledged” himself to do what the sacraments express). But *how much* people profit from the sacraments, and how often they will want to receive them, does depend a great deal on whether or not the minister appears to have the heart and mind of Jesus.

First in priority in the formation of ministers, then, is live, personal, ongoing interaction with Jesus Christ. Union of mind and heart with him is the soul of Christian ministry. “*Teach me the way of your decrees, O Lord, that I may live them.*”

Initiative: Be a priest. Seek union of heart with Jesus Christ.

June 26, 2014

THURSDAY TWELFTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* vividly describes the invasion and destruction of God's holy city. Still it encourages us to keep praying, "*For the glory of your name, O Lord, deliver us*" (*Psalm 79*).

2Kings 24: 8-17 records the beginning of the end for Jerusalem and Judah — at least until the end of the Babylonian exile.

Jehoiachin became king of Judah, but "he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, just as his father had done." The predictable took place: King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon besieged Jerusalem, took Jehoiachin prisoner, and

carried off all the treasures of the house of the Lord, and ... carried away all Jerusalem, all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand captives, all the artisans and the smiths; no one remained, except the poorest people of the land.

When we see the history of God's People in "fast forward," we wonder that they could be so stupid! Every time they abandon the way God taught them, they bring disaster on themselves. But they never seem to learn.

Before we get too judgmental, we should ask what we ourselves have learned — as individuals and as a nation. Do we clearly see that by pursuing the false values and shortsighted goals of our culture we are destroying ourselves and the way of life we cherish? Do we see greed and unrestrained sexual indulgence as unpatriotic? Do we call government cover-ups, "spin" and foreign policies of exploitation and violence acts of treason that betray the common good of the nation? Do we know that prosperity and peace are unattainable over the long run without observance of God's law? If not, we are as blind to the lessons of history as the Jews were.

In **Matthew 7: 21-29** Jesus warns us:

Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand.... It fell — and great was its fall!

Does that make us read and reflect on God's word as if the quality of our lives depended on it? Does it makes us want to minister to others like rescue workers after a hurricane or during a flood? Do we really believe that if we love others and want them to be happy, the best thing we can do for them is teach them to know and love God? Do we even minister to our own children this way, convinced this is more important than providing them with a money-making education?

If we are failing, the Scripture still encourages us to pray, "*For the glory of your name, O Lord, deliver us.*"

Initiative: Be a priest. Offer people what they really need for happiness.

Feast of The Sacred Heart of Jesus (Year A)

Rejoice in the Gifts of Love

Inventory

What is your basic feeling about God? Is it fear? Gratitude? Trust? Love? Do you relate easily to the words Jesus spoke to St. Margaret Mary: “I am going to make my home in your heart, where we can talk and enjoy each other’s company?”¹

Input

The *Opening Prayer* puts the message of this feast in a nutshell: “We rejoice in the gifts of love....” On December 27, 1673, Jesus appeared to Margaret Mary Alacoque, a nun of the Visitation Convent in Paray-le-Monial, France, showed her his heart, and gave her the message that people should focus on his love. At the time, the teaching of the devout but destructive bishop of Ypres in Holland, Cornelius Jansen (1585-1638), had injected into the Church “a pessimistic view of the human condition and a reverential awe of the ‘Holy,’ resulting in a very serious and morally rigorous interpretation of Christian life.”² Traces of Jansenism have survived to modern times — or perhaps there is just a common tendency among humans to base religious practice on fear of divine severity and to nurture it by teaching and preaching focused on sin and its punishment. But the phenomenal spread of devotion to the Sacred Heart, sustained by the popularity of the image shown to Saint Margaret Mary, has worked powerfully against that infection.

In the pastoral-theological contest of love against fear, a key piece on the board was the reception of Holy Communion. It is hard for us today to imagine how Catholics used to feel about Communion. We need to know that “In the middle ages, and later under the influence of Jansenism, Communion was a rare occurrence for the ordinary Catholic. Daily or very frequent Communion was looked down upon as extraordinary and even improper.”³ Jesus used the skills of his bargaining heritage to change this by making a “come-on” promise through Margaret Mary, rewarding all who would receive Communion “on the first Friday of nine consecutive months.” He knew that afterwards many would just continue — and then gradually begin to say, “If I can do it on the first Friday, why not every Friday?” And then, with a little prompting of grace, say, “Why just Friday? Why not every day?” And so the custom grew into daily Communion, and like all new things aroused opposition from the more rigorously-minded. “The Jesuits encouraged Catholics, including those struggling with sin, to receive Holy Communion frequently, arguing that Christ instituted it as a means to holiness for sinners, and stating that the only requirement for receiving Communion (apart from baptism) was that the communicant be free of mortal sin at the time of reception. The Jansenists, in line with their deeply pessimistic theology, discouraged frequent Communion, arguing that a high degree of perfection, including purification from attachment to venial sin, was necessary before approaching the Sacrament.”⁴

God used the opposition, as he frequently does, not only to increase clarity through debate, but eventually to arouse intervention from Church authority. In this way the wave started by devotion to the Sacred Heart in 1673 grew until it crested in St. Pius X’s Eucharistic decree, December 20, 1905, officially approving and encouraging daily Communion for everyone: “Frequent and daily Communion, which is strongly desired by Christ and the Church, is open to all the faithful of Christ. *No one who is in the state of grace and comes to the table of the Lord with a good attitude and devotion can be prohibited from receiving.*” Yea Jesuits!

¹ Quoted by Sister Pat McCarthy, C.N.D., in her column for the Rhode Island *Providence Visitor*, June, 2010.

² See “Jansenism,” *New Dictionary of Spirituality*, Liturgical Press, 1993.

³ See St. Pius X in *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*

⁴ “Jansenism,” Wikipedia.

To the more rigorously-minded of our day, the Feast of the Sacred Heart is a reminding celebration of the love by which God defined himself to us, and of the proof of love that he asked all of us, through Peter, to give him: “If you love me, *feed my sheep*.” Eucharist is a good place to begin.¹

“A Tale of Two...”

Deuteronomy 7:6-11 reminds us that the whole story of God’s dealing with the human race is a “tale of two cities.” The first is the city (society, culture) God wants us to build on earth according to his specifications — the “Kingdom of God,” which in heaven will be the “New Jerusalem.” The second is the city we keep trying to build according to our own specifications. The building materials are attitudes, values, assumptions, beliefs, patterns of behavior. The parts of the city are the family, the Church, business, politics, social life. Each part is being built at any given moment out of both God’s materials and ours, according to both his plan and ours. And we are the ones making the selection.

This reading is about two perspectives:

You are a people sacred to the Lord your God; He has chosen you from all the nations on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

That is the perspective of God’s love, a free gift which does not depend on how good people are. That is the perspective St. Pius brought to Communion.

Deuteronomy seems to include the perspective of the “bad guys,” the Jansenists, who focused on the harsh God who “repays with destruction those who reject him.” But that is because we read the words from their perspective. The Scripture does not mean that God “repays” the unfaithful with destruction; it means that to reject God is the very definition of destruction. In his love, God warns us against it. The *Responsorial (Psalm 103)* unifies both views: “*The Lord’s kindness is everlasting to those who fear him.*” To understand, think of “fear” stripped of all feelings of fright. A loving awe.

“Come to me...”

In **Matthew 11:25-30** Jesus says that from a human perspective no one can know God as he really is: “No one knows the Father but the Son.” Then he adds: “and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” *In Christ*, sharing in his divine life by grace, and in his divine act of knowing by faith, we see God from the divine perspective of Jesus himself. And so he says, “Come to me!” You who “are weary and find life burdensome.... Your souls will find rest. For my yoke is easy, my burden light.”

If we find the laws of the Church burdensome, we do not understand them. We are interpreting them and applying them to real life according to a human perspective — like the Jansenists and the bishop who inspired them — not according to the mind and intention of God. We can apply to this the principle of St. John of the Cross: “Where you don’t find love, put love and you will find it.” Look at every law as an expression of God’s love. That is the first rule of interpretation. Imagine Jesus speaking the words of the law while showing you his heart as in the vision to St. Margaret Mary. If that is unimaginable, at least you know what the law does not mean!

“My yoke is easy” does not exclude demands for heroic love. The heart Jesus revealed is enflamed with

¹ On the Vatican web site, www.vatican.va, follow: Resource Library - Official Acts of the Holy See - *Actae Sanctae Sedis* for Vatican decrees dating back to 1865. After deploring the “cooling of devotion” and “the pestilence of Jansenism,” the decree continues: “The virus of Jansenism, which infected the souls even of good people, refused to disappear.... Even some well-regarded theologians thought daily Communion could be allowed to laypersons only rarely and subject to several conditions.” There are “well-regarded theologians” today who still think Communion should be denied to some people, even though there is good reason to believe they are “in the state of grace” and coming to the table of the Lord “with a good attitude and devotion.”

passionate love and surmounted by a cross. Crucifixion can be the crown of love. It is still easier than tepidity.

1John 4:7-16 takes the perspective of divine knowledge found in us and revealed in action:

Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

That is clear. A teacher who does not love cannot teach us about God — except by repeating the words of someone who does, and even then there is risk of distortion. If we do not love, we do not know God and we must not dare to teach as ministers in the body of Christ. Members of the body cut off from the heart are dead and deadening.

If a minister seems to lack love, we must not judge. But we must not listen gullibly. The Jansenists were sincere. And devout. As was Bishop Cornelius Jansen himself. But St. Pius X calls them a “pestilence” and a “virus” in the Church Their perspective was, and is today, that of the Pharisees, who “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.” That is not the perspective of love. Not the perspective of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who made this promise to “priests” through St. Margaret Mary: “I will give them the gift of touching the most hardened hearts.” That promises “posterity” to all who minister from love and in love.¹

Initiative: Contemplate Christ’s heart. Let love take you from there.

¹*Matthew 23:4; John 15:16.* The twelve “promises” of the Sacred Heart are taken from the writings of St. Margaret Mary examined by the Sacred Roman Congregation of Rites previous to her beatification.

June 27, 2014

FRIDAY TWELFTH WEEK Same day)

The *Responsorial Psalm* laments lost Jerusalem: “*Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!*” (*Psalm 137*).

When King Nebuchadnezzar deported the citizens of Jerusalem to Babylon “no one remained, except the poorest people of the land.” Still he left Judah a king, Jehoiachin's uncle, whose name he changed to Zedekiah. But in **2Kings 25: 1-12** Zedekiah continues the pattern: “he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, just as Jehoiakim had done.” And that did it. “Jerusalem and Judah so angered the LORD that he expelled them from his presence” (2Kings 24: 17-20).

Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonians (Chaldeans) came back. They captured Zedekiah, slaughtered his sons before his eyes, put out his eyes and took him to Babylon. They “burned the house of the Lord... and all the houses of Jerusalem... broke down the walls around Jerusalem... [and] carried into exile the rest of the people who were left in the city... all the rest of the population.” Jerusalem was no more. The history of God's People had reached its lowest point, the Babylonian exile (*Psalm 137*; and see *Matthew 1:17*).

By the rivers of Babylon
there we sat and wept,
remembering Zion....
If I forget you, Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither.

Why did this happen? Because their kings, one after another, mis-ministered to the people by leading them away from God, and because the people neglected the ministry of keeping each other faithful to God's law. They ignored the “manufacturer's instructions” in the way they used the life God gave them.

Are we doing the same thing — as individuals? As families? As a nation? If so, we can expect the same predictable, inevitable results: the ruin of our personal life, our family life, our civic life and freedom. We ourselves are bringing it about through the “ministry of death” — for which it is enough just to neglect the ministry of life.

In **Matthew 8: 1-4** a man with incurable leprosy says to Jesus, “If you choose, you can cure me.” Jesus replies, “I do choose. Be cured.” For Jesus no evil is incurable. He will choose to save us — if we choose to approach him as Teacher and Lord.

We can't ask God to keep us alive while we are shooting ourselves in the head, which is what we are doing when we come to him as Healer and abandon him as Teacher. To speak to God as God we have to listen to God as God. Listen, learn and obey. It is not enough to ask Jesus to choose. We have to choose. This means choosing his way of life.

Initiative: Be a priest. Take responsibility for ministering to give life.

June 28, 2014

SATURDAY TWELFTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* asks God with trust to turn and come back to “those places that are utterly ruined.” We can never be so bad or bad off that God cannot or will not help us. “*Lord, forget not the life of your poor ones*” (*Psalm 74*).

If we ever think that the Church — or our society — is in bad shape, **Lamentations 2: 2-19** will give us terms to describe it worse than we could ever imagine. The whole book is a vivid description in graphic images of “how the Lord in his anger has humiliated daughter Zion!”

The Lord has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions; her children have gone away, captives before the foe.... He has thrown down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel.¹

God was not the cause of Israel’s suffering. God’s People chose to free themselves from his reign and his laws. This immediately enslaved them to sin, and their sins bore the natural fruit of conduct contrary to reason, right order and love. The Book of Lamentations describes that fruit in terrifying physical images which give only a hint of the more terrifying spiritual devastation that produced them. And at the heart of this was the failure of those called to minister:

The visions your prophets had on your behalf were delusive, tinsel things. They never pointed out your sin to ward off your exile. The visions they proffered you were false, fallacious, misleading.

Jesus came to bring about the ultimate restoration. He is the true Light of vision to walk by. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life.² But **Matthew 8: 5-17** shows us that Jesus counts on us to continue his ministry on earth. It is in us and through us that people will contact Jesus and he will minister to them.

A centurion came to Jesus, begging him to heal his servant who was “lying at home paralyzed.” When Jesus offered to come, the centurion said Jesus did not have to be physically present to heal: “For I also am a man... with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes.” Jesus then healed “long-distance” by a word of command.

Today Jesus sends *us* as his ministers to all in need, but not long-distance. In us Jesus is physically present, ministering in and through us as his real body on earth. By sending us Jesus can be present throughout all space and time, giving more than physical healing. He heals spiritually, saves, guides, strengthens and comforts through *ministry*. This is his answer to the prayer, “*Lord, forget not the life of your poor ones.*” He responds in us.

Initiative: Be a priest. Let Jesus act in you and through you where you are.

¹ Lamentations 1:5. ² John 14:6.

FEAST OF PETER AND PAUL

Vigil Mass (from June 28)

For the glory of your name, O Lord, deliver us.

(Responsorial: Psalm 79)

Acts 3:1-10: Everyone knows the story of a pope who said, commenting on this text amid the riches of the Vatican, “Peter can no longer say, ‘Silver and gold have I none.’” A saint replied: “No, and neither can he say, ‘Rise and walk.’”

Since the remark is attributed to various saints, it may be just legend, but it makes us think: how do money and ministry mix?

No one questions the need parishes and dioceses have to pay salaries, provide services and put up necessary buildings. The question arises when buildings, their ornamentation, or the lifestyle of priests and bishops, project an image of wealth. When does the magnificence of a church make us see it less as a place of worship and more as an art museum? Or as proof to ourselves and others, where the Church has a poor and immigrant past, as in the United States, that Catholics have “arrived”? Apart from obvious needs for funding, can a rich Church minister as well as a poor Church? Jesus apparently thought not:

Proclaim the good news.... You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag, or two tunics, or sandals....¹

Ministry in the Church has repeatedly been renewed by “mendicant” religious orders, such as the Franciscans, Dominicans and Jesuits, who all, in their beginnings, at least, followed these instructions almost literally. And it is constantly in need of renewal.²

Most important of all is the “first law of ministry,” which Jesus gave to Peter in **John 21:15-19**: “If you love me, *feed my sheep*.” When Church officials are more intent on making rules and enforcing them than on facilitating access to Communion, something is wrong.

Galatians 1:11-20 is an essential text for reconciling the “ordinary *magisterium*” of the Church with *prophetic witness*. In the wake of the Protestant Reformation, Catholics became fixated on obedience to the pope as proof of orthodoxy. The phrase, “*Roma locuta est, causa finita est*” (“Rome has spoken; the discussion is over”) was interpreted in practice in a way that silenced the Spirit. It shocks us to hear Paul insist that he “did not receive from a human being” what he preached, “nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” It was only “after three years” that he “went up to Jerusalem” to compare notes with Peter. In *ministry* authority and charism either respect or ruin each other.

Initiative: Listen when God speaks. Discern what makes you open to his voice.

¹ *Matthew 10:7-10.*

² For example, it is only by a dispensation from Rome that Jesuits can accept “stipends” or any remuneration at all for Masses or any ministries, since this is forbidden by the Jesuit Constitutions.

June 29, 2014 (extra)

Feast of Peter and Paul replaced the:

THIRTEENTH Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

Practical Guidelines for Ministry

Inventory

What are my feelings toward those who minister in the Church (both clergy and lay)? How do I perceive people who minister? How do I respond to them? Do I recognize the mystery of Christ in them?

Attitude and assumption test: When you read “minister in the Church,” did you think only of those who minister in the church? Or did you think of all in the Church who minister, whether through parish ministries or not?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* invites us not only to have joy, but to express it: “*All nations, clap your hands. Shout with a voice of joy to God.*” So do the *Responsorial Psalm* — “*Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord*” (*Psalm 89*) — and the *Communion Song*: “*O bless the Lord, my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.*” Clearly, this Mass invites us to see and to celebrate God’s goodness to us.

What goodness do we single out? In the *Opening Prayer* we ask God: “*Free us from darkness and keep us in the radiance of your truth.*” And in the alternative *Opening Prayer* we ask him: “*Form our lives in your truth, our hearts in your love.*” We see our joy, then, as rooted in *truth* and *love*, both of which are God’s gift to us, a share in his own goodness communicated to us.

How does God share his truth and love with the human race? The *Prayer Over the Gifts* focuses the answer on the *sacraments* and on *service*. The sacraments give God’s life to us, and we communicate it to others in service: “*Through your sacraments you give us the power of your grace. May this Eucharist help us to serve you faithfully.*” The *Prayer After Communion* has the same focus: “*Lord, may this sacrifice and communion give us a share in your life and help us bring your love to the world.*”

As this leads us to expect, the *readings* will alert us to recognize God’s truth and love shared with us through the service, the ministry, of people he has united with himself. And they invite us to become one with Christ ourselves so that we might communicate his truth and love to others.

Serve the Servers

2Kings 4: 8-16 is a preview of what Jesus will say in the Gospel: “Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward” The woman who gave hospitality to Elisha was rewarded with the gift of a child. Later the child died, and then Elisha came again and did something we see today as an image of Jesus uniting us to himself on the cross to restore our life (compare this to the 2nd reading):

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed... he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm.

Whenever anyone ministers to us, we should recognize, not just a prophet but the crucified and risen Jesus ministering. And we should respond with gratitude appropriate to this mystery. In every kindness shown us we recognize the kindness of God: “*Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.*”

Life through death

Romans 6: 3-11 teaches us the central mystery of our redemption. We live in Christ because through Baptism we died in Christ on the cross. We share in Christ’s divinity because he united our humanity to his on the cross and took us down to the grave with him in death so that he might raise us up with himself in his resurrection.

We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.

This is why we are redeemed. It is why our sins are not just *forgiven*, but *taken away*. Mere forgiveness does not change what we are. Forgiven or not, I am still the person who did whatever I did. But the mystery of our redemption is that as “Lamb of God” — sacrificed for us and uniting us to himself in the sacrifice — Jesus *takes away* the sins of the world. All who have been incorporated into his body by Baptism were “in him” when he died on the cross; died in him and then rose purified in him *without any record of sin*. Paul says, “For a dead person has been absolved (dedikaiwtai: to be “set free, made pure”) from sin” (Romans 6:7). The one who sinned died. The one who lives now in Christ is a “new creation” living a new life, without any record or history of sin (2Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). This gives us a new self-image:

Christ died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. *Consequently, you must think of yourselves as dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus.*

It is contrary to our faith to carry around the burden of past sins. Those sins were annihilated in the death of Christ. They no longer exist. This makes *joy* a profession of faith for us: “*Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.*”

A mystery of identity:

Matthew 10: 37-42 proclaims our identification with the risen Jesus. As St. Augustine taught, speaking to the baptized, “*We have become not only Christians, but Christ. Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ!*”(quoted by John Paul II in *The Splendor of Truth*, no. 21). The words of Jesus are: “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.” Whether we minister or are ministered to, it is the same mystery of Jesus giving and receiving in the members of his risen body on earth. Carrying this mystery into the “end times,” St. Augustine teaches that in heaven “there will be but one Christ, loving himself.” It begins on earth.

Then Jesus gets specific and says that if we recognize and serve prophets because they are prophets, we will receive “a prophet’s reward.” If we welcome and serve righteous people because they are righteous, we will receive “a righteous person’s reward.” He may just be giving examples for emphasis, but he also may be establishing a *principle*, which is that the benefit we receive from interacting with anyone will depend on how much we recognize the truth of that person’s *identity*. If we serve our fellow human beings as humans, we will enter more deeply into our own humanity. But if we recognize and serve them as *Christ* we will enter more deeply into the life of grace we have as *Christians*.

Christian ministry is humanitarian, but never just humanitarian. It is the lived experience of being Christ to others, recognizing Christ in others, serving Christ and being served by Christ in others.

When we ask God in the *Opening Prayer*: “*Free us from darkness and keep us in the radiance of your truth.... Form our lives in your truth, our hearts in your love,*” we are recognizing that *ministry is mystery*. To be fully Christian in our ministry we must love in the light of revealed truth. Our love must come from our faith-enlightened perception of truth, express the divine truth of what we are and others are, and lead others into faith-inspired truth and love.

That is why ministry has to be nourished by “word and sacrament.” Ministers, to be authentic, must constantly seek deeper union of mind and will and heart with Jesus Christ by doing those things that let the life of grace expand within us. Ministers are not pipelines but fountains: to bring light and love to others we must be filled ourselves with light and love. In ministry we don’t just transmit; we share. So first we ask Christ to share with us. In the *Prayer After Communion* we ask: “Lord... give us a *share in your life* and *help us bring* your love to the world.”

Jesus did not choose people who were particularly bright, educated or virtuous to be his co-workers. But before he sent them out as ministers, they did have to become his *disciples*; that is, his *students*. Jesus can and will use anyone to give life to the world; but that person first has to accept life from Jesus. “We cannot give what we do not have.”

That is why the death of Christ into which we were baptized in order to live in Christ must continue in us as a constant “dying to self” to live for God and others in love. “While we live, we are *always being given up to death* for Jesus’ sake, so that the *life of Jesus may be made visible* in our mortal flesh” (2Corinthians 4:11). A commitment to ministry commits us to grow in the experienced joy of holiness: “*Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.*”

Insight

What can I do that will make me more able to minister as Christ?

Initiative

Pray constantly, “Lord, do this with me, do this in me, do this through me.”

June 30, 2014

MONDAY THIRTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us that *remembering* is fundamental to Christian life and the “ministry of light”: “*Remember this, you who never think of God*” (*Psalm 50*).

In **Amos 2: 6-16** (the book we read this week) the prophet urges the people to look at their present situation in the light of the past and the future. He calls them to confront what they are doing, to take an honest look at the reality of their lives.

Because their focus is on making money, they are not paying attention to how many people they are hurting. Like us, they affirm principles of justice and compassion, but their first priority is profit. If it comes to a choice between the economic good of the company — or of the institution they work for (including church institutions) or of the country as a whole — they will put profits over people. Their first loyalty is to company finances, not to employees who have served conscientiously and well: they will “sell out” the “virtuous man for silver.” To put the institution on a slightly better financial footing (not one necessary for survival) they will make decisions that take away jobs and require the poor to leave homes and family connections to relocate: they “sell the poor man for a pair of sandals,” imposing major hardships on others for minor benefits to themselves. They use their influence (in our society their vote) to favor the interests of the rich and powerful over the good of the general population: they “trample on the heads of ordinary people and push the poor out of their path.”

They justify this by arguing that making the rich richer does not make the poor poorer. Amos says, “Look back. See what this thinking has brought about in the past.” He points to the Amorites. We reflect on what brought about the French revolution, Communism and terrorism. To ignore the universal, all-embracing love that God teaches is to invite universal, all-encompassing disaster. “*Remember this, you who never think of God.*”

Jesus came to save our lives from all that diminishes them in this world and the next. But we must cooperate by ministering with him. Why do so few devote themselves to this?

In **Matthew 8: 18-22** Jesus is up front about the potential cost of ministry. We must be prepared to sacrifice financial security, even the roof over our heads, and social acceptance, even going against the expectations of our families! “Leave the dead to bury their dead.” These are extreme examples, but Jesus is telling us to measure our appreciation of the goal by our acceptance of the price, even if we are never actually called to pay it. And reflect on the alternative.

Initiative: Be a priest. Put ministry to people first, whatever it costs.

July 1, 2014

TUESDAY THIRTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* expresses confidence based on understanding of God: “You are no God who loves evil... But I, through the greatness of your love, have access to your house.” So we pray with trust, “*Lead me in your justice, Lord*” (*Psalm 5*).

Amos 3: 1 to 4:12 tells us God doesn't try to hide from us his intentions or the principles that guide his actions. Two people who “take the road together” know where each intends to go. We know it means something when “the lion roars in the jungle” or “the trumpet sounds in the city.” So we should take seriously the warnings God gives us. God doesn't “do anything without revealing his plans to his servants the prophets.” Why? Because the prophets are precisely God's messengers to us. Theirs is the “ministry of light.” They are sent to open our eyes to truth we need to see.

We can refuse to listen to preachers or to take seriously the prophets. We can close our eyes to history and to the significance of what is happening around us. We can ignore God's warnings. But we cannot reverse the sequence of cause and effect or stop the truth from being true. Sooner or later we will encounter the reality of all that we deny, because sooner or later we will have to confront God, and God is reality. By refusing to take seriously the truth of his words we are choosing to live in unreality. We can refuse to look ahead at the effects our decisions are going to have, but closing our eyes does not protect us from danger, as many an ostrich has learned, if the legend about them is true! Amos says to those who will not listen, “Israel, prepare to meet your God.” This says to us all, “Prepare to meet reality,” because sooner or later you will, whether you prepare or not.

Matthew 8: 23-27 reveals and reminds us of a reality we tend to forget: that God is still present and powerful, even when he appears to be absent and inactive. Jesus was asleep in the boat during a storm so violent the waves were actually swamping the boat. The disciples had enough sense to wake him up, saying, “Save us, Lord, we are going down!” But even they were not prepared for what he actually did. When he calmed the sea with a simple word, they were “astounded and said, ‘What kind of man is this?’”

We know what kind of man Jesus is: God himself made flesh. But we still try to save ourselves by listening to every word but his. When we see we “are going down,” Jesus is not asleep; we are. We need to awaken each other through the “ministry of light” and rely on his word.

Initiative: Be a priest. Awaken yourself and others to hear God's word.

July 2, 2014

WEDNESDAY THIRTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us it is what we do in our lives, not what we say in our religious ceremonies, that gives us the experience of being one with God: “*To the upright I will show the saving power of God*” (Ps. 50).

Amos 5: 14-24 calls us to make a conscious and conscientious connection between what we say and do: being *conscious* of what we are saying when we pray; being *conscientious* about living out what we express to God in worship.

There should be no distinction between our *religion* and our *spirituality*. “Religion” (inauthentic) can be a “system” or structure of beliefs and practices that do not really engage our conscious mind and heart in deep, personal response to God. We can just affirm what we are taught to believe without thinking about it very much. We can take part in religious ceremonies, saying the words, doing the actions, without being alert that we are speaking to God or communicating with him person-to-person. Even the priest presiding at Mass can read the words of the prayers without consciously and personally addressing God as present. Teresa of Avila says that if we are not conscious of who we are when we speak to God, and to whom we are speaking, it is not prayer at all, “no matter how much the lips move.” All true prayer is conscious, person-to-person interaction with God present and listening.

The “ministry of light” consists in giving conscious expression to the divine life of God within us: letting our faith, hope and love “take flesh” in words and actions that become increasingly consistent with each other. We listen to our words to live them out in action. We look at our actions to see if they verify our words. This is both the expression and the experience of God’s presence in us: “*To the upright I will show the saving power of God.*”

Not everyone is comfortable being conscious of God’s presence. In **Matthew 8: 28-34**, when the citizens of Gadara realized that Jesus had divine power, they “implored him to leave the neighborhood.” Maybe they were afraid they might lose more pigs! More likely, they were just afraid of the unknown. They wanted to just keep living on ground level, without delving into what might be above or below them. They were not interested in mystery nor open to it. Are we like them?

The “ministry of light” opens our eyes and others’ to what is most real and least visible: God’s presence and action within us. When we let God express himself in and through our physical words and actions “*we show the saving power of God.*”

Initiative: Be a priest. Express mystery in consistent words and actions.

July 3, 2014

THURSDAY THIRTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives us some reasons for dealing more readily with God. An example: “*The judgments of the Lord are true, and all of them are just*” (*Psalm 19*).

In **Amos 7: 10-17** the priest Amaziah attacked Amos for prophesying King Jeroboam’s death. He rejected Amos’ message because: 1. if the king listened to Amos he would take away his livelihood as priest of a forbidden worship; and 2. Amos dissolved his security in being on the king’s side, saying his government was about to be abolished.

For the same reasons we resist God’s word and the “ministers of light” if: 1. they call us to give up something we are attached to or to do something we are averse to; or 2. their message makes us feel fear or anxiety. If we don’t “feel good” about the message, we stop listening to the messenger. That is as stupid as turning off a doctor who says we will die if we don’t change something in our lifestyle!

The *Responsorial Psalm* reassures us: “The law of the Lord... revives the soul... is to be trusted.... The precepts of the Lord gladden the heart... give light to the eyes.... The decrees of the Lord are more to be desired than gold....” To believe this frees us to hear God more readily.

Matthew 9: 1-8 gives us an example of how Jesus was attacked in the Gospels for the same reasons Amos was. His chronic adversaries were the *priests* whose power-base he threatened, the members of the “law and order” party (the *Pharisees*), and the self-appointed “doctrinal police,” the *scribes*, who made themselves the defenders of Jewish orthodoxy. They were all flawed with fundamentalism, as are the enemies of the “ministry of light” today.

There are Jewish fundamentalists, Muslim fundamentalists, Protestant Bible fundamentalists and Catholic “magisterium” fundamentalists. They all reduce religion to a few doctrines or laws, simplistically formulated, while refusing to see them in the broader and deeper context of their religion’s true spirit — much less in the light of God’s own mind and compassionate heart.

The scribes saw the boundaries of their comfortable world called into question when Jesus, a man, forgave sin. They saw their power threatened when the crowd “praised God for giving such power,” not just to Jesus, but “to men.” This was an unacceptable mystery: God empowering humans to act in his name by his living Spirit within them, shattering slavery to frozen doctrines and laws. This is fearful to fundamentalists. But to all who are open to mystery, “*the judgments of the Lord are true, and all of them are just.*”

Initiative: Be a priest. Let God’s own light shine in your words and acts.

July 4, 2014

FRIDAY THIRTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us what should preoccupy us: “*One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*”¹

Amos 8: 4-12 denounces those who are more interested in making profits than in being prophets! Anyone preoccupied with making money will be led inevitably, if unconsciously, to “trample on the needy and try to suppress the poor people of the country.” Jesus warned: “No one can serve two masters... God and wealth. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”² The fact is, we tend to follow the inclinations of our hearts, recognized or not. Our judgments are prejudiced by our desires.³ So we need to stay in touch with our hearts, monitor our desires and work against the disordered attachments we have to the things of this world. *Psalm 119* highlights this:

Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain. *Turn my eyes* from looking at vanities.... *May my heart* be blameless in your statutes, so that I may not be put to shame.... *If your law had not been my delight*, I would have perished in my misery.⁴

Amos says the worst consequence of neglecting the word of the Lord is that we will be deprived of it:

I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread... but of hearing the words of the Lord.... They shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.

The worst deprivation is the absence of ministry. That is why Jesus explicitly consecrated all of us *prophets* and *priests* in Baptism: to be “ministers of the light” to one another.

In **Matthew 9: 9-13** it is the religious outcasts and sinners who respond to Jesus, prompting him to observe, “Those who are [think they are] well [think they] have no need of a physician.” Those who seek healing are those who know they are sick. The point is that, paradoxically, religion can keep us from seeing how irreligious we are! If we are “faithful” without being “faith-full” in the external observances of our religion, this can keep us from calling our hearts into question and asking whether we really love God and one another.

True Christians are “ministers of light,” not ministers of the law. The important thing is not to do what the law says, but to understand God’s mind and heart behind the law.⁵ The only way to keep the law faithfully is to interpret it in the light of God’s love. This is the ministry of light. *We do not live by laws alone, but by every word that comes from the heart of God.*

¹ Deuteronomy 8:3; *Matthew* 4:4; and see *Psalm* 119. ² See *Matthew* 6: 19-24. ³ 1Kings 11:2. ⁴ *Psalm* 119: 36-37, 80, 92. ⁵ Nehemiah 8: 8-12; Deuteronomy 6: 20-25; *Matthew* 11:7.

Initiative: Be a priest. Express your heart and God’s heart in every act.

July 5, 2014

SATURDAY THIRTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives us a key to God's word: "*The Lord speaks of peace to his people*" (*Psalm 85*).

In **Amos 9: 11-15** the prophet reveals the *goal* God has in mind in calling people to live by his word: "I mean to restore the fortunes of my people. . . . They will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them, plant vineyards and drink their wine, dig gardens and eat their produce." In other words, "*The Lord speaks of peace to his people.*" The *Responsorial Psalm* continues: "peace for his people and his friends and those who turn to him in their hearts."

If we feel at times that God's laws are burdensome, we have Jesus' word for it that they are far less burdensome than life without them:

Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.¹

If we find God's laws burdensome, it is because we are not looking at their *goal*, at what they aim at. If we seek to identify the *purpose* of every law God gives us, and observe each one in a way that *achieves* its purpose, we will find all of his laws life-giving, sources of joy and peace. Then we will say from experience, "*The Lord speaks of peace to his people.*"

In **Matthew 9: 14-17** Jesus gives an example of this. The disciples of John the Baptizer were shocked because while they fasted and the Pharisees did too, Jesus' disciples did not. And they may have been asking, without saying it, why Jesus himself did not fast. Fasting went with being holy. Holy people fasted.

Jesus answered by asking what the *goal* of fasting is. The purpose he proposed was to feel physical hunger in order to recognize, experience and express our soul's hunger for God — and specifically for himself as the "bridegroom." While Jesus was physically with his disciples, they felt no need to fast.

Jesus went on to say he was changing the nature of all religious acts. The "new wine" of his new Way² required "new wine skins." But since every nature is determined by its end, to change the nature of religion Jesus had to change its purpose. Jesus re-designed religion to make himself, his own person — and God revealed through Jesus as Father and Spirit — the focus of every religious act we perform. The goal of every Christian law and observance is not "morality," or "asceticism," but *personal union* with God. The "ministry of light" keeps this focus in explaining every law.

Initiative: Be a priest. Express yourself to God in every religious act.

¹ *Matthew* 11: 28-30. ² Christianity is just called "the Way" in *Acts* 9:2; 18: 25, 26; 19: 9, 23; 22:4; 24: 14, 22.

July 6, 2014

FOURTEENTH Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) The Focus of Ministry is God

Inventory

If you had to use one adjective to describe God, what would it be? What tells you God is like this? How have you experienced God being like this to yourself?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* celebrates God's "loving kindness" — because of which God's "praise reaches to the ends of the earth."

In the *Opening Prayer*, God's kindness is recognized in the "obedience of Jesus," through whose death and resurrection God "raised a fallen world." Based on this we look to God as the one who will "free us from sin and bring us the joy that lasts for ever." It is not surprising that the *Responsorial Psalm (Ps. 145)* proclaims: "*I will praise your name forever, my king and my God!*"

Prince of Peace:

Zechariah 9: 9-10 holds up before us the vision of a world in which war and the instruments of war which give such a sense of power to weak human beings will be no more: God will "banish the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; the warrior's bow shall be banished, and he shall proclaim peace to the nations." Only God will rule: "His dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth." He will do this through his chosen one, the Messiah whom we now know to be Jesus. And he will do it without earthly power and violence: "Shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, meek and riding on an ass," the mount of those who come in peace, not on a horse, the warrior's pride.

The Church sees this prophecy fulfilled in Jesus and quotes it in the liturgy for Passion (Palm) Sunday, when Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph to die, and God "through the obedience of Jesus, your servant and your Son, raised a fallen world." This is the God of "loving kindness," who evokes from us the cry, "*I will praise your name forever, my king and my God!*" For he is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. The Lord is good to all and compassionate toward all his works" (continuation of *Psalm 145*). This is the spirit of Jesus.

The Spirit of Christ:

St. Paul tells us in **Romans 8: 9-13** that this is the spirit that must be in us, and it is the Spirit of God who

dwells in our hearts: “Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” This is the Spirit of “the one who raised Jesus from the dead,” and this same Spirit will raise us above the attitudes and values of “the flesh” — the destructive assumptions and practices taken for granted in all human cultures and societies. Paul writes, “If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” In this he is echoing Jesus: “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” This is the ultimate refutation of those who espouse the violence of war. But it also applies to all of our day-by-day aggressive and defensive behavior that is motivated by fear, obsession with security and addiction to power — anything that leads us to act in ways not in harmony with the “loving kindness” of God.

“Come to me...”

In **Matthew 11: 25-30** Jesus gives his own echo of the *Responsorial Psalm* “*I will praise your name forever, my king and my God!*” He exclaims, “*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.*” Small children are spontaneously shocked when anyone is slapped, hit or even yelled at. At least they are until, at a very early age, they become “wise and learned” in the ways of human society. The “street wise” in our culture — whether the street be Wall Street, Madison Avenue, Pennsylvania Avenue or a back alley in the Bronx — quickly adapt to the ways of this world. Then the way of the Spirit is “hidden” from them. They do not have the “loving kindness” of God because they do not know the Father or the Son: “Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. And they will do this because they *have not known the Father or me*” (John 16: 2-3).

The way to the Father is through union with the heart of Christ:

“No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.... Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

We “know God” by “letting the same mind be in us which was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2: 5-9); that is, by letting the Spirit conform our hearts to the gentle, nonviolent, peacemaking, unifying spirit of Christ’s heart. This is the key to holiness. This is the key to ministry. This is the key to Christianity (see John 13: 1-12; 14: 15-26; 15: 9-15).

The way of the priest is love. Jesus was Priest by being Victim. We can only be “priests in the Priest” by offering ourselves as victims in him. It is his sacrificial love, revealed in us, that leads the world to respond, “*I will praise your name forever, my king and my God!*”

Insight

Have you experienced God’s “loving kindness”? Is this what draws you to him?

Initiative

Try to detect how your milieu — at school, at work, in politics, even in family and social life — inclines you to achieve power and control through violence — of thought, word and action. Respond by looking at the heart of Christ.

July 7, 2014

MONDAY FOURTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* focuses our hope on God's heart: "The Lord is kind and merciful" (*Psalm 145*).

This week we begin the prophet Hosea. In **Hosea 2: 16-22** God reveals that his love for his people is *spousal love*: the love of the bridegroom for his bride. Above all it is *faithful* love: when his spouse is untrue, God will not let her go:

I am going to lure her and lead her out into the wilderness and speak to her heart. There she will respond to me as she did when she was young!

When God revealed his inmost self to Moses, his identifying characteristic was "steadfast love and faithfulness," which we translate as "kindness and fidelity," "grace and truth," or just "enduring love." These words are "a virtual definition of God,"¹ and no images express them better than the images of God as Father and as Spouse. What is unique about God is that his love never ends. He never gives up on us. The worse we are, the more he pursues us. The more unfaithful we are to him, the more faithful he is to us. This is the message of Hosea. It is the message of hope that should characterize all Christian ministry.

If we really know God we will relate to him as Spouse. "On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, 'My husband.'" To bring people to this is the goal of Christian ministry.²

Matthew 9: 18-26 shows us three characteristics of Jesus that should inspire and guide all Christian ministers. First, the official's request shows that something about Jesus made people believe he *wanted to help*. That was his first priority. Christian ministers do not turn people away because they are in violation of some Church law. The minister always finds a way to help, even if it means bending the rules just short of the breaking point. The first and over-riding rule of all pastoral ministry is "Feed my sheep!"³

Secondly, Jesus was *approachable*. The woman in the crowd had the courage to reach out and touch him. So far as we know, Jesus never turned anyone away for not respecting his time-schedule or approaching him when it was inconvenient!

Finally, Jesus *never gave up on people* or underestimated what they were capable of. The crowd laughed at him when he said, "The little girl is not dead." But because Jesus believed he could bring her to life, he did bring her to life. So can we.

Initiative: Be a priest. Minister from hope in a way that encourages hope.

¹See Exodus 33:12 to 34:6 and the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* on John 1:14. ²For Teresa of Avila the summit and goal of our interaction with Christ is the "spiritual marriage." See *The Interior Castle*. ³John 21:15-17.

July 8, 2014

TUESDAY FOURTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us that idols are “the work of human hands. They have mouths but they cannot speak... ears but they cannot hear.” But “*the house of Israel trusts in the Lord*” — who both speaks and hears, and enables us to hear and speak back (*Psalm 115*).

Hosea 8: 4-13 tells us that if we set up governments or churches — which are both intended to enhance the quality of life on earth — without listening to God’s purposes, they are in fact idols, and will be destructive. God says his own people

set up kings, but not with my consent, and appointed princes, but without my knowledge. With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction.... They sow the wind, and they will reap the whirlwind.

Americans support government; and probably most support religion. But in both, are we listening to God with intention to respond to him? If not, both are “the work of human hands,” idols for our own destruction. If we are listening to God with intent to serve him, this will in fact, serve us also. But if we just want to serve ourselves without paying any attention to what God says is for our good, we will destroy ourselves.

We who attend church should ask ourselves constantly what we are looking for. Are we going because we want to “get something out of it” or because we are want to put something into it? Are we intent on serving God or hoping that God will serve us by doing us favors?

This is crucial in *ministry*. If public servants in church or government make idols of their own self-interest, they thwart our hopes and God’s.

In **Matthew 9: 32-38** Jesus makes a mute able to speak by casting the demon out of him. He enables us all to *respond* to God by *freeing* us from the sin and selfishness that enslave us. He frees us from all that makes us unable to *hear* God’s words and *speak* in answer to them with words of decision and choice.

Jesus does this by “*touring* all the towns and villages” — being omnipresent on earth today in the members of his body — “*teaching... and proclaiming*” through us everywhere the “*Good News*” that God is moving to establish his reign of truth and love over every area and activity of human life on earth. With us, in us and through us as his body, Jesus is present and involved in religion, politics, business, education, social and family life. We are the “laborers sent out to the harvest.” Our ministry is to “*cure*” individuals and society of “*all kinds of diseases and sicknesses*” — to make all things whole again under the reign of God so that all might enjoy “life to the full.”

Initiative: Be a priest. Seek only to serve. Let Christ act through you.

July 9, 2014

WEDNESDAY FOURTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* urges us to “remember the wonders the Lord has done, his miracles, the judgments he spoke” so that we will “*Seek always the face of the Lord*” (*Psalm 105*).

Hosea 10: 1-12 predicts consequences of Israel’s infidelity so dire that the people will “say to the mountains, ‘Cover us!’ and to the hills, ‘Fall on us!’”¹ But as always, Hosea’s message is a message of hope. He encourages the people:

Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.

All Christian ministry is a ministry of hope, because God is good. God is kind. God is faithful. And God has the power to save us. “His judgments prevail in all the earth,” as the rest of *Psalm 105* details. We are called to live in joy: “Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.” To rejoice always, the secret is, *Seek always the face of the Lord.*”

The truth is, God doesn’t wait for us to seek him; he seeks us out to save us. In **Matthew 10: 1-7** we see him answering the prayer he urged in yesterday’s Gospel: “Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest”:

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples.... These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions.... Proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Christian ministry is a ministry of hope because it is the embodiment of God’s “kindness and fidelity,” of his “steadfast love.” No matter how far we stray from God, he will keep seeking us out:

If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?²

This is the spirit that animates Christian ministers. We are not just storekeepers waiting for customers to come to us. Christians are animated by missionary zeal. The love that should be evident in our ministry, embodied in our actions, is the love of Jesus the Good Shepherd, who knows intimately every person on earth; who cares enough to die for each and every one; and who will never stop until all are safe:

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.... I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also.³

God’s love is all that gives hope on earth. It is the burden and the blessing of Christian ministers to embody it.

Initiative: Be a priest. Give hope to everyone through love.¹See also *Luke 23:30*. ²*Matthew 18:12*.

³*John 10: 14-16*.

July 10, 2014

THURSDAY FOURTEENTH WEEK

In the *Responsorial Psalm* we pray, “*Let us see your face, Lord, and we shall be saved*” (*Psalm 80*).

Hosea 11: 1-9 gives an answer to one of our principal motives for sinning. The answer is, “I am the Holy One in your midst, and I have no wish to destroy.”

We sin because we think religion destroys what is human. We think keeping God’s laws will take away our enjoyment of life. And many Christian ministers have led us right into this trap by emphasizing all the things we must *not* do. When we balked, because they made morality look miserable, they tried to scare us through the “narrow gate” by telling us that if we didn’t accept religion’s diminishment of life in this world, God would destroy us in the next. They left us a choice between bad and worse. God’s answer to this is, ‘Stop being fixated on my laws; *look at me!* I am God. I don’t think like human beings. I have no wish to destroy life or diminish it.” Jesus said, “I came that they might *have life*, and have it *to the full*.”¹

God says through Hosea:

They have not understood that I was looking after them. I led them with reins of kindness, with leading strings of love. I was like someone who lifts an infant close against his cheek.

We need to judge God’s laws by God, not God by his laws. Until we understand him we understand nothing: “*Let us see your face, Lord, and we shall be saved*”

Jesus does say, “Enter through the narrow gate.” But immediately before that he says:

Everyone who asks receives... who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. If your child asks for bread, will [you] give a stone?... How much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!²

To “enter through the narrow gate” is to stop focusing on the “channel” marked out by laws and chart our course by the “fixed star” of Jesus himself, aiming at pleasing him in everything we do. There is nothing more “narrow” than a straight line — or less constricting. “*Let us see your face, Lord, and we shall be saved*.”

In **Matthew 10: 7-15** Jesus sends his disciples out on a mission of life and hope: “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” These are ministries of healing, life-giving love. If we find anyone who “will not welcome [us] or listen to [our] words,” before we “shake off their dust from our feet” we should ask if we are really preaching the Good News. Are we showing them the true face of Jesus? “*Let us see your face, Lord, and we shall be saved*.”

Initiative: Be a priest. Show the face of Christ in everything you say or do.

¹John 10:10. ²Matthew 7: 7-14;

July 11, 2014

FRIDAY FOURTEENTH WEEK

In the *Responsorial Psalm* we proclaim in harmony with our final reading from Hosea that we are ministers of a repentance that is a gift of God and a source of joy: “A pure heart create for me, O God Give me again the joy of your help; with a spirit of fervor sustain me.... *and my mouth will declare your praise*” (*Psalm 51*).

Hosea 14: 2-10 urges us to say to God, “Take all iniquity away, so that we may have happiness again” — and in our joy, “offer you our words of praise.” Hosea is a strong call to repentance; but his whole book is good news. Through his prophet God promises his people, and therefore us, and all who turn to him:

I will love them with all my heart.... What have [they] to do with idols any more when it is I who hear [their] prayer and care for [them]?

All of God’s promises to Israel were fulfilled when God himself came in Jesus, God the Son made flesh, to be one of us, dwell among us, join us to himself in mystical union as members of his body, take us down into death with himself on the cross through Baptism so that our sins might be annihilated, and raise us up with himself to live in the light and power of his Spirit as his redeemed and redeeming body on earth. This is the Good News. And we are ministers of it to one another and to the world. We are called and consecrated by Baptism to be “priests in the Priest,” members and ministers in Christ, mediators of divine life to one another, heralds of hope and messengers of joy. “*O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise!*”

In **Matthew 10: 16-23** Jesus warns us, however, that we will not always be perceived as messengers of joy:

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.... You will be hated by all because of my name.

People are afraid to hear God’s word, afraid of what it might call them to be. They are afraid to enter into deeper relationship with God, because they do not know him or Jesus. “They will do this because they have not known the Father or me.” That is why we are sent — to make him known.¹

If we and our ministry are rejected, our response must be that of Jesus: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” The price — and the fruit — of ministry is unconditional love: love like God’s; love that makes visible the love of God that we proclaim. His “new commandment” to all who would minister in his name is, “Love one another *as I have loved you.*”² This is the key to all ministry.

Initiative: Be a priest. Love with a hope that gives hope.

¹John 8:19, 14:7, 16:3, 17:25; 1John 3:1. ²Luke 23:34; John 13:34, 15:12.

July 12, 2014

SATURDAY FOURTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* bases ministry on confidence that the Lord has all power: “*The Lord is king; he is robed in majesty*” (*Psalm 93*).

As we begin **Isaiah**, chapter **6: 1-8** shows us his ministry beginning in the presence of the glory of God:

I saw the Lord seated on a high throne, his train filled the sanctuary; above him stood seraphs... and they cried out to one another in this way, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

In response to Isaiah’s fear, one of the seraphs touched his lips with a live coal taken from the altar and said, “See now, this has touched your lips, your sin is taken away!”

It was then that God said, “Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?” And Isaiah answered, “Here I am, send me!”

To speak as God’s ministers we must know: 1. we have been chosen and sent by God; 2. we are not worthy to minister in his name; we are sinful; 3. God has in some way purified us of our sinfulness — not entirely, but “our lips,” so we can proclaim to others his forgiveness and his power to purify them as well. 4. we are sent as the weak ministers of God’s overwhelming power; as the sinful but chosen messengers of his awesome holiness. Ministry is something we should neither presume nor refuse to do. We minister because we are called. We are called because God has chosen to call us. All ministry begins in the majesty of God, and the majesty of God is its end: “Holy, holy, holy Lord! Heaven and earth are full of your glory!” This is what we live and breathe for: “Father! Hallowed be thy name!”

In **Matthew 10: 24-33** Jesus tells us to minister without fear, conscious of the glory that sends us and the glory that will receive us:

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body If any declare themselves for me in the presence of men, I will declare myself for them in the presence of my Father in heaven. But those who disown me in the presence of men, I will disown in the presence of my Father in heaven.

As ministers of Jesus we begin and end before the throne of God, where the angels are proclaiming, “Holy, holy, holy Lord! Heaven and earth are full of your glory!” If we experience rejection as disciples, we are simply like our teacher:

who, though he was in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.... Therefore God also highly exalted him... so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend... and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.¹

The bottom line is, : “*The Lord is king; he is robed in majesty.*”

Initiative: Be a priest. Look to God, not to what is apparent on earth.

¹Philippians 2:6-11.

July 13, 2014

FIFTEENTH Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

We are Called to Nurture Seeds with “Steadfast Love”

Inventory

Have you ever wondered why God’s words seem to have such a small effect on people? Why, after two thousand years of Christianity, is there still so much injustice and violence in the world? Where is the “reign of God”?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* celebrates the joy of seeing God’s glory: “*In my justice I shall see your face, O Lord; when your glory appears, my joy will be full*” (Psalm 16). But the *Responsorial Psalm* reminds us that the joy of seeing God’s glory is conditional on being “good ground” receptive to his word: “*The seed that falls on good ground will yield a fruitful harvest*” (Psalm 64). The reign of God waits on the response of humans.

In the *Opening Prayer(s)* we profess our belief that the Father’s “light of truth guides us to the way of Christ.” This way leads through “a world filled with lights contrary to your own.” And so we ask that “all who follow him may reject what is contrary to the Gospel,” so that “your love may make us what you have called us to be.” The *readings* develop this theme.

Good seed:

Isaiah 55: 10-11 makes it clear that God’s word is fertile seed: “My word... shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” The problem is not with God’s word, with God’s teaching, God’s instruction, God’s guidance. The problem is with us and our response to God’s word. But before we look at the readings which explain this, we should first stop and affirm the basic, underlying, immutable truth which we need to keep in mind always: *God’s word achieves its purpose*. It is good seed. “*The seed that falls on good ground will yield a fruitful harvest.*”

Creation waits

Romans 8: 18-23 acknowledges the reality of our present condition in this world. Even though (see last Sunday’s reading) we are “in the Spirit,” and “the Spirit of God dwells in us”; even though we are “led by the Spirit of God [and] are children of God... and joint heirs with Christ”; even though we know that “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God”; still, we also know “that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” Our spirits have been set free by grace, by our sharing in the divine life of God, but as long as we are in the flesh of our bodies in this world, we are subject to the world’s physical influences. We are surrounded by the spirit of this world embodied in words, actions, patterns of behavior that influence, entice and inhibit us, so that we cry out with St. Paul, “I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members!... Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

The answer, of course, is, “Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. And even though his way leads through “a world filled with lights contrary to his own” we know that “all who follow him” are empowered to “reject what is contrary to the Gospel,” so that his love “may make us what he has called us to be.” God’s word has power to save. “*The seed that falls on good ground will yield a fruitful harvest.*”

Good and bad ground

Matthew 13: 1-23 explains why God’s words do not always bear fruit. Jesus is not a unilateral Savior. He wants the human race to play an active part in its own salvation. God doesn’t scoop us up like inert matter and deposit us in heaven. This would discredit God the Creator by saying that the human nature he designed could be corrupted so totally by sin – by human action — that even God’s divine power could not make it truly operative again.

The “parable of the sower” gave the people of Jesus’ time the surprising revelation that God would not establish the Kingdom without human cooperation. Jesus tells us what blocks our response to his word: 1. *enslavement to the “beaten path” of culture* which makes the Gospel message unintelligible to us, something we simply cannot relate to; 2. *failure to reflect deeply* on his words until they take root in *decisions* (the “rocky ground” of shallow listening); and 3. *attachment of heart* to the things of this world (the “thorns” that “choke the word”).

Conscious of this, Christian ministers, if they want their ministry to be effective, must both model and foster 1. *emancipation from the culture* through radical acceptance of Jesus as Savior; 2. the *discipleship* of deep reflection that leads to personal choices; and 3. commitment to a life of *continual conversion* (change) in *prophetic witness* against the darkness and destructive practices of established human society.

For the seed to grow, however, the ministers must build and maintain the “good ground” of Christian *community*, where seeds can be cultivated and grow together. This is the work of all who are *priests* by Baptism.

If we live out the five commitments of our Baptism by doing all of the above, then God’s power, working in and through us as *stewards of the kingship* of Christ, will establish the Reign of God on earth: “a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace” (Preface for the Mass of Christ the King). We will “renew the face of the earth.” “*The seed that falls on good ground will yield a fruitful harvest.*” Then, “*when his glory appears, our joy will be full.*”

(For a development of the five commitments of Baptism, see *Reaching Jesus — Five Steps to a Fuller Life*. The Parable of the Sower is explained in *His Word*. Both books are available through www.immersedinchrist.com).

Insight

Do I believe things will change if people take God’s word seriously? Will I do it?

Initiative

By word and, above all, by example, encourage people to reflect seriously on God’s word every day, responding with choices.

July 14, 2014

MONDAY FIFTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us that our aim in religion and ministry must be first to so live that we will be able to see and understand the mystery of God. “*To the upright I will show the saving power of God*” (*Psalm 50*).

Last Saturday’s reading was a “flashback” to the vision that sent Isaiah to prophesy. Now in **Isaiah 1: 10-17** he begins his message by calling Israel (and us) to “lay the ax to the root of the tree”¹ — to re-examine the root of our religious observance, the *goal* that gives direction, meaning and value to all we do: “Cease doing evil; learn to do good. Make justice your aim!”

We can perform religious acts aimlessly, just doing them because we are supposed to, without any goal in mind except obedient conformity. And in our ministry to one another we can stop short here. We can encourage our children and each other to “go to Mass” without teaching them (or asking ourselves) *why* the Church calls us there, or what our *goal*, our focus, should be while we are participating in the Eucharist. Then we are “just there,” “fulfilling our obligation,” and God says to us through Isaiah, “What care I for the number of your sacrifices?... Trample my courts no more!”

It is true that in itself the Mass always has the value of the offering Jesus made on the cross, since it is the same offering made present. But its value *to us* is greater or lesser in proportion to our active participation in the celebration. If we don’t know what we are supposed to be doing at Mass, and do not try to do it, Mass will be a “dead” experience for us, and we will make it deadly for others. So Isaiah urges us, “*Listen* to the instruction of our God.... *learn* to do good. Make justice your *aim*.”

In **Matthew 10:34 to 11:1** Jesus clarifies his goal, which is also the goal of the Mass. It is not to make us “feel good”: “Do not suppose that my mission on earth is to spread peace, but division!” Jesus came to call us into “crisis,” to make us choose, not just between good and bad, but between the good and the perfect. He calls us to “lose our lives” on the level of the ordinary human fulfillment that might be our goal now and to aim instead at “life to the full.”² In all our religious observances, especially the Mass, we should be intent on “dying” to our accepted level of life in order to live on the level of God through graced union with Jesus Christ. And this must be our aim in ministry to others. To water down the Gospel is to pollute the water of Baptism, whose saving power is seen only by those who aim at “life to the full.” “*To the upright I will show the saving power of God*.”

Initiative: Be a priest. Embody “life to the full” and share it.

¹Matthew 3:10. ²John 10:10.

July 15, 2014

TUESDAY FIFTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* calls us to trust that God will achieve what is humanly impossible: “*God upholds his city forever*” (*Psalm 48*).

In **Isaiah 7: 1-9** the “bottom line” is, “Unless your faith is firm, you shall not be firm!”

It is hard to win people through ministry to seek “life to the full.” People are inclined by culture and by human inertia to settle for less: to settle for a religion than makes them feel adequately secure in an adequately good relationship with God. Why break out of bounds to do more than we have to? Why seek “perfection” if just keeping the commandments is enough to be “saved”?¹ Why go to Mass every day if we only have to go once a week? Why read the Scriptures if no Church law says we have to? Why make retreats, attend parish missions or join discussion groups? Why read more about religion when we have completed the religious education classes required for First Communion and Confirmation? Why seek the “more” when enough is enough?

Isaiah prophesies victory against these odds and all others that seem hopeless. But the real battle is

not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil....²

In our ministry against these forces we need to believe with the same faith and hope Isaiah demanded of Ahaz, “*God upholds his city forever.*” “Unless your faith is firm, you shall not be firm” in urging yourself and others to seek “life to the full.”

In **Matthew 11: 20-24** Jesus gives a dire warning about the consequences of complacency. He says it will be worse for the “good” people who had the true religion God gave his People — and who settled for that instead of accepting the “more” Jesus offered — than for the non-Jews of Tyre and Sidon who did not know God’s word, and even for the unspeakably corrupt people of Sodom!³

Woe to you, Chorazin.... Bethsaida! If the miracles worked in you had taken place in Tyre and Sidon, they would have reformed in sackcloth and ashes.... I assure you, it will go easier for Sodom than for you on the day of judgment!

Who rejected Jesus? It was above all the public “law observers,” the Pharisees, and “the chief priests and the elders of the people!” — those who were just good enough to think they were good enough. Who accepted him? The “tax collectors and the prostitutes” who knew they needed more.⁴ Those who reject “life to the full” will be left in the living death of stagnation.

Initiative: Be a priest. Never despair of urging people to the “more.”

¹Matthew 19: 16-26. ²Ephesians 6:12. ³Genesis 13:13, 19: 1-25. ⁴Mt. 21:23-32.

July 16, 2014

WEDNESDAY FIFTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives an assurance we need to heed when the Church appears hopelessly corrupt or ineffective: “*The Lord will not abandon his people*” (*Psalm 94*).

In **Isaiah 10: 5-16** God declares he is going to humble Assyria, at whose hands God’s People had suffered defeat and oppression because they refused to live as God’s had taught them. God accepted that Israel should get what they deserved from Assyria, since it could call them to conversion, but God saw that Israel’s conversion was not what Assyria intended. “Rather, it is in [Assyria’s] heart to destroy, to make an end of nations....”

Furthermore, Assyria did not recognize that God was in charge. “For he says, ‘By my own power I have done it, and by my wisdom.’” Therefore, “When the Lord has finished... [what he decreed for] Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride.”

At times it appears God is allowing evil to triumph over his Church. Usually, except for the most blatant persecutions, the Church brings her humiliation on herself by not being faithful to the principles of the Gospel or to her mission, especially to the poor. And sometimes it is because the Church’s ministers themselves — bishops, priests and laity — have acted as if they had all the knowledge and prudence required to live up to their responsibilities as pastors, teachers, parents and workers of every kind. Every Christian is called to minister in a variety of ways. But every Christian needs to do so in conscious, humble dependence on God and collaboration with others. If they do not, “*the Lord will not abandon his people*,” but it may look like he has!

Matthew 11: 25-27 reminds us that we are called to do what is divine and we can only do it through union with Jesus. Only Jesus, God the Son, can truly know God as “Father.” And the only way he can “reveal him” to creatures is to give us a share in his own divine life and knowledge. We know God as Father because we are *fili in Filio*, sons and daughters in the unique and only begotten Son. Because we are *in Christ*, we call God “Abba” as he does.¹ And *in Christ* we are called to bear the *fruit* of divine life, “life to the full.” But we can do nothing of divine value unless Jesus does it with us, in us and through us.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.²

Humble union of heart with Jesus Christ is the absolute essential for the ministry of “life to the full.”

Initiative: Be a priest. Stay conscious of Christ acting in and through you.

¹Galatians 4:6. ²John 15:5.

July 17, 2014

THURSDAY FIFTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us we are never alone and unaided in our struggles: “*From heaven the Lord looks down on the earth*” (*Psalm 102*).

Isaiah 26: 7-19 acknowledges that of ourselves we can do nothing:

It is you who have accomplished all we have done.... Salvation we have not achieved for the earth, the inhabitants of the world cannot bring it forth.

But what God does is infinitely beyond anything we could have achieved as humans:

O Lord, you mete out peace to us.... Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. Awake and sing, you who lie in the dust!

Jesus came that we might “have life and have it to the full.” This is the fullness of life both human and divine, and only Jesus can give it. But he gives it through the members of his body on earth who minister “through him, with him and in him.” To be faithful to our baptismal consecration as “priests in the Priest” we need to call people, not to a good, decent, human way of life, but to live in constant, conscious mystical union with Jesus Christ. This is to live out the *mystery of grace*, the “favor of sharing in the divine life of God.” When we feel like crying out, “My soul yearns for you in the night,” we need to remember not only that “*from heaven the Lord looks down on the earth*,” but that he is present, living and active *within us*. This is “life to the full.”

Jesus never promised to take trials and suffering out of life. That is why the world rejected him as Savior. But in **Matthew 11: 28-30** he promises that life in union with him — even carrying the cross with him — is easier and more peaceful than life apart from him. Whatever the world lays on our shoulders, if we come to Jesus with it, he will make it easier to bear: we will find “rest for our souls.” And as challenging and radical as his teaching is, what Jesus himself asks of us is in fact “easy” and “light” compared to life not guided by his principles.

People will find this easier to believe if we, as his ministers, take care always to be “gentle and humble of heart.” Christian ministry seeks and is built on “unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.”¹

This is ministry that reveals the Jesus who gives “life to the full.”

Initiative: Be a priest. Be gentle and humble; treat everyone with kindness.

¹1Peter 3:8.

July 18, 2014

FRIDAY FIFTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* reminds us that God is the Lord of death and of life: “*You saved my life, O Lord, I shall not die*” (Isaiah 38).

In **Isaiah 38: 1-22** God grants Hezekiah a “stay of execution.” Hezekiah is going to die, but God delays his death by fifteen years. And as a sign that he will do this he delays the setting of the sun for a few hours. Neither death nor night is cancelled; both are simply delayed. And Hezekiah mourns the truth that all life is terminal in his lament: “My dwelling, like a shepherd’s tent, is struck down and borne away from me. You have folded up my life, like a weaver who severs the last thread.” If Hezekiah said, “*You saved my life, O Lord, I shall not die*,” he would have had to add, “At least, not yet.”

Jesus changed all this. He said, “Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die,” and “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.”¹ In Masses celebrating Christian death the Church proclaims, “For your faithful people life is changed, not ended.... [Jesus] chose to die that he might free all people from dying.”² When we say, “*You saved my life, O Lord, I shall not die*,” we mean it absolutely. Jesus did not just delay the coming of night; he abolished darkness forever. In the “new Jerusalem”

there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun.... The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.⁴

Jesus came that we might “have life, and have it to the full” — now and forever!³

In **Matthew 12: 1-8** Jesus reveals that he is not just another prophet calling people back to observance of the Law. He is “Lord of the Sabbath” and Lord of the Law itself. He came to establish a New Covenant and a New Law — one that would be, not just the “manufacturer’s instructions” for getting the most out of human life, but a law for living “life to the full,” divine life, life on the level of God.

This is why Christians must never fall into the “ministry of moralizing,” just insisting on good human behavior that avoids sin. Christian ministry that does not constantly hold up the vision of “life to the full” soon reverts to the nitpicking legalism of the Pharisees who couldn’t see the forest for the trees or understand love as anything but law. Christian ministry is love calling us to love, divine life calling us to be divine, Christ calling us to *be Christ*.⁵ “When we say, “*You saved my life*,” we mean “transformed.”

Initiative: Be a priest. Be Christ calling others to be Christ.

¹John 11:26; 6:51. ²Prefaces I and II for Christian Death. ³Revelation 22:5; 21:23. ⁴John 10:10. ⁵See St. Augustine, quoted above for 12th Sunday.

July 19, 2014

SATURDAY FIFTEENTH WEEK

In the *Responsorial Psalm* we pray for what we know is already a fact: “*Do not forget the poor, O Lord*” (*Psalm 10*).

As we begin to read **Micah** with chapter **2: 1-5**, we see that in response to “those who plan iniquity” and injustice against others, God is also “planning” against them. The *Responsorial Psalm* asks, “Why, O Lord, do you stand aloof? Why hide in times of distress?” But God is not standing aloof and doing nothing while the “wicked harass the afflicted.... and boast, ‘He will not avenge it; there is no God.’” While we pray, “*Do not forget the poor, O Lord*,” God is already saying, “Behold, I am planning against this race an evil from which you shall not withdraw your necks!” The Psalm continues: “You do see! You behold misery and sorrow, taking them into your hands. On you the unfortunate depend; you are the helper of the fatherless.”

This gives a guideline and a focus for Christian ministry — one dramatically exemplified in our times in the famous “option for the poor” taken by the Latin American hierarchy in their meetings at Medellín and Puebla in 1968 and 1979. This decision brought down a storm of American-supported violence in Latin America against clergy, nuns and lay ministers from “those who plan iniquity and work out evil” in the high places of business and government.¹ But the Church has no choice; she also hears the cry, “*Do not forget the poor.*”

In **Matthew 12: 14-21** it is the Pharisees who are “planning iniquity”: “They began to plot against Jesus to find a way to destroy him.”

The “Pharisee party” is alive and well in the Church, and always has been, beginning with the “judaizers” in the time of St. Paul. People who find power and security in a religion focused on law-observance are constantly denouncing Christian ministers who try to offset the deadly legalism of those who “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others [while] they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.” Those whose primary concern is to make Christ’s “yoke easy” and his “burden light” for the wounded and weak in faith — the “bruised reed” and the “smoldering wick” — will be “dragged before governors and kings” — and Church authorities — to answer interchangeable charges of heresy and liberalism!² But the true spirit of the Church continues to be expressed in her prayer: “*Do not forget the poor, O Lord.*”

Initiative: Be a priest. Hear the cry of the poor and nurture them.

¹For details of American-supported violence in Latin America, see Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *School of Assassins*, Orbis Books, 1997, and Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints*, Crossroad, 1997: “November 16,” “December 2,” and “December 11.” ²Matthew 23:4; 10:18.

July 20, 2014

SIXTEENTH Sunday of Ordinary Time

Let God Give Life Through You

Inventory

Do I ever get angry because people resist my efforts to help them, to minister to them? Do the apathy and resistance I see in people incline me to violence of word or action? How do I use whatever power I have?

Input

The liturgy today focuses our attention on God's restraint. He does not use power against the slow and the sinful precisely because he has all power — and the infinite wisdom and love that make him (and him alone) able to use it well.

The *Entrance Antiphon* establishes our relationship with God on the basis of his goodness to us: “*God himself is my help. The Lord upholds my life.... I will praise your name for its goodness.*” The *Responsorial Psalm* highlights forgiveness, without which God could not be good to our sinful human race: “*Lord, you are good and forgiving*” (*Psalm 86*). And the *Opening Prayer* (with Alternative) acknowledges how far we are from God's level by asking God to let us grow: “*Fill us with your gifts; let the gift of life continue to grow in us, drawing us from death to faith, hope and love*” [the acts of God's life within us]. Specifically, we ask God to “*keep us watchful in prayer and true to his teaching*” until we become like him and his “*glory is revealed in us.*” We see ourselves and God under the light of hopeful contrast.

God's Power

Wisdom 12: 13-19 gives us an insight into God: “*Your might is the source of justice; your mastery over all things makes you lenient to all.*” God refrains from using his power because he has so much. God's justice, so different from ours, is characterized by patience and leniency precisely because he has unlimited power and “mastery over all things.” We, who do not have such power, act precipitously and are quick to employ violence precisely because our power is so limited that we are insecure. When we are threatened we strike out — usually before we have to.

God is not like this. The *Responsorial Psalm* addresses God as “*good and forgiving... abounding in kindness to all who call upon you... merciful and gracious, slow to anger.*” We obviously have something to learn from this. And Jesus insists upon it (see the parable of the unmerciful servant: Matthew 18: 21-35).

Our Weakness

Romans 8: 26-27 takes our weakness for granted. Any time we use power, our presumption should be that the results will be disastrous! The reason is that we have so little *knowledge* of all the facts in any situation; so little *understanding* of the issues involved, and of the minds and hearts of the people we are dealing with, their background, woundedness and true intentions; and so little *wisdom* to help us appreciate all the values involved and see everything in perspective, that we should live in doubt of our ability to make prudent judgments about

anything! And if our response involves the use of power, we can do damage. St. Paul says we “do not know how to pray as we ought.” We don’t even know what to ask for!

This could be paralyzing. But, like it or not, we have to make decisions — sometimes decisions that carry authority (which is power) and will affect other’s lives. So what do we do?

The first thing is to use power as little as possible and violence never. But when we must make decisions that have potential to damage, if we are humble and call on God, “the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness” and “intercedes for the holy ones according to God’s will.” When Paul says, “The one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit,” he may be referring to God or he may be talking about those who try to discern the movements of the Spirit in their hearts. Christians aware of their weakness do not rely on reason alone; they try to follow the guidance of God. And this is given to us in the “gifts of the Holy Spirit”: *Knowledge, Understanding, Wisdom and Counsel*. To decide and to act without trying, at least, to use these gifts is stupid. And stupidity combined with power it is dangerous. That is why we ask in the *Opening Prayer*, “Fill us with your *gifts*; let the gift of life continue to grow in us, drawing us from death to *faith, hope and love*.”

The Patience of Power

This gives us an insight into the patience and forbearance of the planter Jesus describes in **Matthew 13: 24-43**. Since the planter represents Jesus himself, he knows that there will be a harvest; the bad seed in the field cannot prevent that. So he doesn’t have to risk losing some good seed by rooting out the bad. Jesus is basically telling us that no one can destroy any seed he has planted unless the seed wants to be destroyed.

He shows the same patience in the parables of the mustard seed and leaven. The life of God is in the Church. It is growing. And it will grow until “the birds of the sky come and dwell in its branches.” God’s life is *active*, like leaven. It is at *work* with divine power. And it will continue to transform human life on earth “until the whole batch is leavened.” There is no reason to panic, to push, protect or promote by power and force. Let God work through our ministry with the power of his patience and love.

Insight

Do I see a connection between humility and patience? Humility and love?

Initiative

When fear or impatience inclines you to push things or to use power, surrender all power to God and pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance. Give life by loving.

July 21, 2014

MONDAY SIXTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives the key to experiencing God: “*To the upright I will show the saving power of God*” (*Psalm 50*).

Micah 6: 1-8 shows God defending himself against those who feel betrayed by him — as we sometimes do when we have been going to church, saying our prayers, doing the things our religion prescribes, and God permits something terrible to happen to us. We get mad at God. We did our part; why didn't God do his? Some people break off relationship with God over this. If we are tempted to condemn them, let the one who has never suffered tragic loss or pain cast the first stone!

The ultimate answer to this was given by Jesus, who saved the world by dying on the cross and laid down the principle from the beginning: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus did not promise to save us from suffering. When, contrary to everyone's hopes and expectations, he announced that this was not his mission as Messiah, Peter objected forcefully in the name of us all, and Jesus answered just as forcefully (see *Matthew 16: 21-27*). This is the reason he was (and still is) rejected and crucified.

Micah doesn't take us this far. He just says we cannot expect to experience the fruit of religion unless our religion is also our deep *spirituality*; that is, an ongoing interaction of mind and heart with the mind and heart of God. Just “doing what we are told” is religion without spirituality. Micah puts authentic response to God in a nutshell: what God requires of us is to “do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” This is the way to experience God: “*To the upright I will show the saving power of God.*”

In **Matthew 12: 38-42** the “scribes and Pharisees,” who made the prescriptions of the law their preoccupation, ask Jesus to work some striking miracle as a “sign.” We find this same phenomenon today in many people whose religion stops short with doctrinal orthodoxy and law observance: they tend to fixate on the latest visions, private revelations and “signs in the sky” to feed their devotion instead of going deep into the mysteries of faith. Jesus says the one sign he will give is the visible presence of his life in the members of his body on earth. They are the visible “sign of Jonah” and proof of Christ's resurrection. To reveal Jesus in ministry is to live on a level so divine that our behavior cannot be explained except by the divine life of Christ within us. Through “*the upright*” on this level God will show the *mystery* of his “*saving power.*”

Initiative: Be a priest. Reveal Christ alive in you by expressing his love.

July 22, 2014

TUESDAY SIXTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* expresses what we expect from God! “*Lord, let us see your kindness*” (*Psalm 85*).

Micah 7: 14-20 gives us some characteristics of the ministry we hope for from God as our Shepherd.

First we ask him: “Shepherd your people with your staff.” We ask God to *lead and guide* us. We want direction, and we want it from God.

Then we ask him to *nourish* us: “Let them feed... as in the days of old.” We remember that things were good for us when we listened to God’s word and were enlightened by his Spirit.

We ask him to let us see and *experience his power* saving and helping those whom he shepherds: “Show us wonderful signs.” God doesn’t just point the way; he empowers us to follow it.

We ask him to “remove guilt” — not just to “pardon,” but to “cast into the depths of the sea all our sins.” Through his death Jesus, “Lamb of God,” purifies us, *takes away* our sins, make us truly clean in heart and mind and soul.

Finally, we trust God to be the God of *steadfast love and fidelity*: “You will show faithfulness to Jacob and grace to Abraham.” This is “a virtual definition of God” in the Scripture (see Monday, week 14 above.) It encourages us to pray with confidence always, “*Lord, let us see your kindness.*”

In **Matthew 12: 46-50** Jesus identifies us with himself — as sons and daughters of his own Father. “Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is brother and sister and mother to me.” This means he also identifies us with himself as the Good Shepherd: as his ministers:

Whoever listens to you listens to me.... You are the light of the world.... Do you love me?... Feed my sheep (*Luke 10:16; Matthew 5:14; John 21:17*).

So we must *lead and guide* each other as shepherds, *nourish* each other, trust in God to do *marvelous things* through us. And we must show that for us the sins of those who repent have been *taken away*, they don’t exist, even as part of their “record.” Above all we must model God’s *steadfast love and fidelity*.

It may surprise us that Jesus included the word “mother” when he said, “Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is brother and sister and mother to me.” But it means we must be for him in his body on earth all that we trustingly expect Mary, as his mother and ours, to be for us! That gives us another model for ministry! “*Lord, let everyone see and experience your kindness in us!*”

Initiative: Be a priest. Let Jesus shepherd his sheep and *show his kindness* with you, in you, and through you.

July 23, 2014

WEDNESDAY SIXTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* alerts us to look for *hope* in *Jeremiah*, whom we will read for the next two weeks: “*I will sing of your salvation*” (*Psalm 71*).

Jeremiah 1: 1-10 first calls Jeremiah himself to have confidence as God’s minister: “Have no fear... because I am with you... See, I place my words in your mouth!” But the call to confidence also extends to us. Jeremiah is sent, not just to “root up and to tear down,” but above all “to build and to plant.” Ministry from God is always a ministry of promise, a ministry that gives hope based on confidence, not in what we can do, but in what God intends to do.

Typically, the role of the prophets was to identify the *cause* of whatever diminishment of life and happiness the people had brought on themselves (and the cause was always a failure to believe and follow God’s words) but also, out of their divinely-inspired knowledge of God’s *steadfast love and fidelity*, to give *hope* with the promise of deliverance. “Repentance” in the Scriptures is a joyful word, because the call to repentance is always accompanied by the *promise* of the gift of a new level and richness of life that only God can give. This is what every Christian minister should keep in mind when calling people to change.

Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed ... A new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh (*Ezekiel 18:31; 36:26*).

In **Matthew 13: 1-9** Jesus says his words are like seeds sown to give life a “hundred or sixty or thirty-fold.” The power of God is in his words. Jesus said it: “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” And the early Christians referred to his teaching as “the word of life” (*John 6:63; Philipians 2:16; 1John 1:11*).

But God does not save us unilaterally. We have to cooperate. The survival and fruitfulness of the seed — even of God’s word — depends on the kind of ground that receives it. We need to keep this in mind as ministers: not just to avoid becoming discouraged with ourselves, but also to remind us to teach people how to prepare their hearts to hear God speaking to them, and how to make his words bear fruit in their lives. The attitudes and values implanted by the “beaten path” of culture, often unrecognized, can make us impervious to Jesus’ words. Listening only superficially, without deep thought, can keep them from taking root. Attachment to the passing but present gratifications of this world can choke out our initial responses. As workers in Christ’s vineyard we have to break ground, water and hoe as well as sow seed.

Initiative: Be a priest. Without discouragement keep “*singing of salvation*.”

July 24, 2014

THURSDAY SIXTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* urges us to keep remembering that all our good comes from God “*You are the source of life, O Lord*” (*Psalms 36*).

In **Jeremiah 2: 1-13** God speaks to Israel as his bride: “I remember the devotion of your youth, how you loved me as a bride, following me into the desert.” In those days, “Sacred to the Lord was Israel,” and “evil would befall” anyone who touched her.

But then, God says, “your ancestors... went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves.” In particular he reproaches those anointed to *minister* (as we were at Baptism) as “prophets, priests and kings”:

The priests did not say, “Where is the LORD?” Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets... went after things that do not profit.

The people’s mistake was double: first, they neglected God’s teaching: “They have forsaken me, the source of living waters.” Then they turned to false teachers: “They have dug themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that hold no water.”

We see the same thing happening today: people fail to listen at Mass; they don’t read and pray over Scripture or participate in retreats and adult religious education. Then when they find “no meaning” in the religion they grew up with, they turn to other churches, movements and popular gurus, even to the non-Christian traditions. We can blame ourselves for not ministering to each other as we should. But the bottom line is plain faith in God’s word: “*You are the source of life, O Lord*.” Either we believe it and look for life in the Church Jesus gave us, or we dig cisterns for ourselves, “broken cisterns that hold no water.”

In **Matthew 13: 10-17** Jesus applies to religion the principle: “If you don’t use it, you lose it.”

To those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

We all “have” grace and gifts from God. If, however, we don’t acknowledge them, but act instead as if we “had nothing,” then we will lose what little faith, hope and love were ours instead of growing into the fullness of life. Jesus said, “I came that they might have life, and have it to the full!” His religion is not set up for those who just want the minimum. To ministers who are “lukewarm, neither cold nor hot,” Jesus says, “I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (*John 10:10; Revelation 3: 14-22*). Anyone whose sights are set for mediocrity can neither hear God’s words nor communicate them to others, because God’s words are not intelligible to those whose “heart is sluggish” (*Psalms 119:32*).

Initiative: Be a priest. Lift up your heart and everyone else’s “to the Lord.”

July 25, 2014

FEAST OF ST. JAMES, APOSTLE

Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy.

(Responsorial: Psalm 126)

In **2Corinthians 4:7-15** Paul pinpoints the essence of Christian ministry: it is *transparency*. He says we are “always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, *so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested* in our body.” We are “constantly being given up to death... *so that the life of Jesus may be manifested* in our mortal flesh.” Real Christian ministry is not what we do; it is what we let Christ do in us and through us. The essential act of ministry is *surrender*. Its “load bearing” prayer is “*Thy will be done,*” in me, through me, by me, here and now, “*on earth as it is in heaven.*”

Just before this passage Paul said, “We do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord... For God... has shone in our hearts to bring to light *the knowledge of the glory of God* on the face of Jesus Christ.” And the goal is “so that the grace bestowed in abundance on more and more people may cause the thanksgiving to overflow for the glory of God.” *Hallowed be thy Name!*”

A fellow Jesuit once told Father Joe Doyle, an extraordinary spiritual guide and director of retreats, that he didn't have confidence directing retreats because “I feel I don't know what I'm doing.” Joe's answer was, “That's when I have the most confidence: when I don't know what I'm doing.” He was thinking like Paul: “We hold this treasure in earthen vessels, to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us.” That is the authentic experience of *ministry*.

Matthew 20:20-28 gives us the key experience of inauthentic ministry: it is anything self-serving, especially any exercise of ministry that seeks *prestige* and *power*. That is what the mother of James and John, Peter's fishing partners nicknamed by Jesus the *Boanerges* (Sons of Thunder), was asking Jesus to give them. Seeing her in action, we know where their thunder came from!¹

Jesus turned their fault to our gain. He gave us a fundamental principle that should (but doesn't) eliminate all pomp, protocol and “careerism” in the Church:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant...

If we notice ambition in the priests and bishops, we should remember that they come out of the same culture as the laity, and carry the same distortions into ordination that laity carry into marriage and business. What takes a military, corporate or just “stuck up” face in laity takes a “clerical face” in them. Knowing the allure of prestige and power, we should fervently join in the Mass prayer for “our pope, our bishop, and bishops and clergy everywhere.” They need it.

Initiative: Treat prestige and power like cancer. If inoperable, keep in remission.

¹ See *Mark 3:17; Luke 5:10.*

July 25, 2014 (extra)

FRIDAY SIXTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Verse* promises that God will keep seeking out his lost sheep: “*The Lord will guard us like a shepherd guarding his flock*” (*Jeremiah* 31; see verses 10-13 and *Luke* 15:4).

Jeremiah 3: 14-17 describes God restoring happiness to those few of his people — “one from a city, two from a clan” — who turn back to him. As a key element in the renewal, God will provide *ministers*, “shepherds after my own heart, who will shepherd you wisely and prudently.”

“Shepherds” makes us think of ordained ministers, nuns and “lay professionals” who are the working core of pastoral ministry in church institutions. But this is too narrow a focus. We were all consecrated to ministry when we were anointed at Baptism to be “priests, prophets and kings.” The Jewish priesthood is abolished. There is only one Priest now, Jesus, and all who are “in Christ” by Baptism are “priests in the Priest.” The sacrament of Holy Orders does make a difference, but only within the one priesthood of Jesus (see *Hebrews*, chapters 6-10; *1 Peter* 2:9; and St. Thomas Aquinas on *Hebrews* 8:4: “Only Christ is the true priest, the others being only his ministers” in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, no. 1545).

Jesus replaced previews with presence. The Jewish priests were a preview of the priesthood of Jesus. The Ark of the Covenant — of which Jeremiah says, “It shall not... be remembered or missed; nor shall another one be made” — and the Temple which replaced it were both previews of God’s presence in his new Temple, the Body of Christ risen and real in his members on earth (*John* 2 18-22; 4: 19-24). And when God promises in the chapter used for the *Responsorial*, “I will put my law *within them*, and I will write it on their *hearts*” he is saying that God’s ministry is moving indoors, into the heart.

Fr. John McKenzie explains *Jeremiah* 31:33-34:

Charismatic leaders such as prophets and priests, who instruct the people in the obligations of the law of Yahweh, will not be necessary in the new covenant. Yahweh will teach each individual Israelite as he taught the prophets and the priests (*Dictionary of the Bible*, under “covenant”).

Ministers are still necessary, but now all are ministers to each other. Jesus speaks in and through them. And his Spirit speaks to the hearers in their own hearts (*Matthew* 10:20; 12:32; *Acts* 10: 44-48; *Galatians* 3:20). In Christ’s body “*The Lord will guard us like a shepherd guarding his flock.*”

(For **Matthew 13: 18-23** see Wednesday above).

Initiative: Be a priest. Embody Christ to the body of Christ. Express his life.

July 26, 2014

SATURDAY SIXTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* affirms a truth we should all experience: “*How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord, mighty God!*” (*Psalm 84*). The readings tell us that we have a part in creating and maintaining the appeal of God’s house to others.

Jeremiah 7: 1-11 warns us not to assume that we or others will find God in the Church just because he is there. Whether we are talking about the church buildings or the Church that worships in them, the *experience* that we have of God’s presence in the Church will depend on the *expression* that we give of his presence in our hearts. We need to reveal in words and actions the divine life of God that is in us.

If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another.... then I will dwell with you in this place.

If we are not recognizable as “temples of the Holy Spirit” in our words and actions, God will ask about the “temple made with hands,” “Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers?” (*Mark 11: 15-17; 14:58*).

Some who no longer assemble with the community on Sundays complain that the Church has an “edifice complex” — wanting us in the building instead of worshipping God somewhere else in a way that appeals to us more. The answer is “both-and”: we need to worship God everywhere and always, alone and with others, in private prayer and communal celebration, but always “in spirit and truth” (*John 4: 19-26*).

The problem with communal worship is that not all who are there are willing to come out of themselves enough to make it truly communal. People come to church on their own terms, to participate fully, partly, or hardly at all. Not all sit together. Not all sing. Not all answer the responses as if they meant them. Not all even listen attentively to what is being proclaimed. Not all are there to *minister* to one another. God’s presence is obscured by those who are not really present themselves to what is happening.

In **Matthew 13: 24-30** Jesus teaches it is not God’s fault that God is not always visible in the Church. “While everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat.” If we are lulled into complacency, we and others become counter-witnesses to Christ. Instead of a live community of faith we become dead and deadening to others.

A remedy for this is to be constantly intent on *ministering* to each other. To give we have to be aware of what we have. If we are aware, we will make others aware. Then we will all see and say, “*How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord, mighty God!*”

Initiative: Be a priest. Be aware of God’s life in you and express it.

July 27, 2014

SEVENTEENTH Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

Seek, See and Show the Face of God

Inventory

If God offered to give you anything you desire, what would you choose? Take a minute. Choose.

Done? Now ask yourself if what you chose is what you are experiencing (or showing) the most desire for in your life now.

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* promises “a home, power and strength” to God’s people. It invites us to ask what kind of power we would be at home with; what we would like strength to do. In the *Opening Prayer* we respond by asking for *wisdom*: to “see and cherish the gifts that surround us” — creation, life, all that God touches — and to “use wisely the blessings” God has given to the world. The *Responsorial Psalm* celebrates the gift of God’s guiding law: “*Lord, I love your commands*” (*Psalm 119*).

The Gift of Wisdom

In **IKings 3: 5-12** Solomon chooses the one gift that will give him everything else of value. He chooses *wisdom*, which St. Thomas Aquinas defines as “the habit of seeing and appreciating everything in the light of our ultimate goal.” He also defines wisdom as “a taste for spiritual things” (from the Latin for “wisdom,” *sapientia*, which comes from the root *sapor*, “savor” or “taste”). These come down to the same thing: if we see everything in the light of knowing and loving God, our ultimate goal and destiny in life, then we will have an appreciation for all that leads us closer to God. Then we will say from the heart, “*Lord, I love your commands*.”

“Look to the End”:

Romans 8: 28-30 tells us that our goal, the end and destiny we should look to in order to guide our lives with wisdom, is to “be Christ” and to grow into perfect likeness to him in word and action — “For those God foreknew he also predestined *to be conformed to the image of his Son*” (and see *Ephesians 4:11-16*). The goal of the New Covenant is not that we should just keep the Law; it is that we should *be and live as Christ*. The seal of the New Covenant is not the symbolic blood of sacrificed animals, but the living Body and Blood of Christ which we eat and drink as a sign that we are taking his own divine life into our bodies to live as Christ’s real body on earth. For Christians, *wisdom* is to live as Christ: “*Lord, I love your commands*.” Jesus’ command is “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is, perfect” and “Love one another just as *I have loved you*” (*Matthew 5:48; John 13:34*).

Enlightened Investment

In **Matthew 13: 44-52** Jesus tells us that real wisdom is to appreciate the goal of union with Christ so much that we will live for nothing else! “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and *sells all that he has* and buys that field.”

The simple truth is that God gives All for all. The only way we really know how much something is worth to us is by the price we are willing to pay for it. If we are only willing to give a little bit to possess God completely, then we only appreciate God a little bit. As Karl Rahner said, “We do not know we really believe in the two birds in the bush until we let go of the one bird in the hand.” So when God promised Abram the posterity that he saw as fulfillment in life, he told him to leave everything that gave security and fulfillment to his life here and now: ““Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (*Genesis 12:1*). When he left everything for the promise, Abram knew he believed. And when we seek only to “know, love and serve God” and to become more and more “*conformed to the image of his Son*” in everything we do 24-7-365, we will know we have *wisdom*. Then we can say with conviction, “*Lord, I love your commands.*”

Is this discouraging? Jesus tells it is a sixty-minute game. We have time to grow. At the “end of the world” the wise will be sorted from the foolish (see also *Matthew 24:44* to *25:13*). At the end of our lives we will be called to say “Yes” to God with our whole heart by saying yes to the apparent loss of everything else at death. This is literally to “sell all” for the pearl of great price. And it is the act that brings love to perfection.

Christian ministry is to prepare people for this. It is *never* to simply maintain the *status quo* of morality or religious observance. Ours is the ministry of *life*, and to live is to change. To live is to grow. The wise are always opening themselves to the new and to the “more.” “Every scribe who is instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a house who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old.” Only those can say truly, “*Lord, I love your commands*” who want to “comprehend... the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge... to be filled with all the fullness of God” (*Ephesians 3: 18-19*). True wisdom is to seek always the “perfection of love.” True ministry is to lead people to this.

Insight

How can you strive consciously for the “perfection of love” in your life? How can you “use wisely the blessings” God has given to you in this world in order to grow into the goal of perfect likeness to Christ?

Initiative

Put a “yeast of change” into your daily life: something that makes you think; prayer that leads you to respond in choices, a plan for spiritual growth.

July 28, 2014

MONDAY SEVENTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* asks us: “*Have you forgotten God who gave you birth?*” (*Deuteronomy 32: 18-21*).

Jeremiah 13: 1-11 tells us what the essential is for preserving our integrity, beauty of soul and usefulness in ministry: it is closeness to God: union of mind and will, coordination of heart and action with the heart of Jesus.

God had Jeremiah buy a new loincloth and wear it around his waist for a while. Then he told him to bury it in the ground for several days. When he dug it out it was “spoiled, good for nothing.” Then the Lord said, “Just as a loincloth clings to a man’s waist, so I had intended the whole house of Judah to cling to me... to be my people, my glory, my honor and my boast. But they have not listened.”

To be the instruments of Christ in ministry to one another and to the world, the first requirement is *holiness* – defined here as “union with Jesus Christ,” being united with him in our understanding, desires and action. This is rooted in the mystery of grace, the mystery of our sharing in the divine life of God. We cannot minister as the body of Christ if we have *forgotten God who gave us birth* as his body in Baptism:

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing (*John 15:5*).

In practical terms, this means our first preoccupation in becoming or training ministers should be *spiritual formation*. We are ready to live a “spiritual life” from the moment we realize that *something is going on* between ourselves and God and decide to get involved in it. Spiritual formation shows us how.

Matthew 13: 31-35 continues to teach that the operative element in ministry is God’s life in us. A mustard seed is “the smallest of all the seeds.” All it has is life. But, allowed to develop, that life will make it a tree in which the “birds of the air come and shelter.” If divine life is growing in us, we will form *Christian communities* in which all who seek to live the life of grace will feel at home and find a home of shelter, nourishment, mutual inspiration and love (see *Psalms 84:3; 104:17*). A “community” is a “common unity” of commitment *expressed* in ways all understand.

A Christian community is never self-enclosed, but like “leaven in the dough” works for changes within society until the whole world is transformed. Christians who have not *forgotten God who gave them birth* act as “leaven” at home, school and work. They minister as Christ himself to everyone on earth until society is “leavened all through.”

Initiative: Be a priest. Constantly ask Jesus to act with, in and through you.

July 29, 2014

TUESDAY SEVENTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* focuses our hope on what God is, not on what we are: “*For the glory of your name, O Lord, deliver us*” (*Psalm 79*).

In **Jeremiah 14: 17-22** we see the true role of the prophets. It was to confront the people with the *cause* of their affliction — which was their departure from the way of life God had shown them — and at the same time to give *hope* through the proclamation of God’s “steadfast love.”

Jeremiah prays, “Lord, we do confess our wickedness and our ancestors’ guilt: we have indeed sinned against you.” But his focus is more on what God is than on what humans have done. He continues, “*For your name’s sake*” — because of who you are — “do not reject us. . . . Do not break your *covenant* with us.” Jeremiah holds out hope based on Scripture’s definition of God as *steadfast love and fidelity* — that is, on God’s *nature* as God has revealed himself — but also on the *historical* fact and event of the covenant God made with his People. “Because of what you *are* and because of what you have *done*, have mercy on us.”

This is the role of Christian ministers: to give expression to what God *is* by letting Jesus, risen and living in them, express his true self through their words and actions, and to make it evident that in and through them Jesus is continuing the ministry he performed on earth: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (*Hebrews 13:8*).

In **Matthew 13: 36-43** Jesus explains that it is not his fault or God’s that there is so much sin and error in the world. Jesus did indeed “sow good seed in his field.” There is nothing wrong with the authentic teaching of the Church. And the power of God’s life (grace) is not only still at work in her ministry and sacraments; it is even visible in the “good seed” of those who are faithful. But in the world, and even within the Church, “the enemy” comes and sows “weeds among the wheat.” We should expect to find some sin and error, both in ministers and in those ministered to. In each of us there is a mixture of good and bad, truth and falsity, sin and saintliness. If we try to “cast out” from the Church all who are sinners, or just to exclude them from ministry, we will have to reject everyone, including ourselves! Jesus’ way is to let the “weeds and the wheat” grow up together, to withhold judgment until time reveals the deep — and final — orientation of each one’s heart. In the end God’s glory will be revealed: “Then the virtuous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” *for the glory of his name*.

Initiative: Be a priest. Let the “good seed” of grace express itself in you.

July 30, 2014

WEDNESDAY SEVENTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives ministers a needed foundation for hope: “*God is my refuge on the day of distress*” (*Psalm 59*).

In **Jeremiah 15: 10-21** the prophet protests that he is harming no one, yet “all of them curse me.” And the reason is precisely his closeness to God: “Your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O Lord.” Closeness to God sometimes means alienation from other people: “I never took pleasure in sitting in scoffers’ company; with your hand on me I held myself aloof, since you had filled me with indignation.”

God does not promise to stop the persecution; he just assures Jeremiah it can’t hurt him: “They will fight against you but they will not overcome you, because I am with you to save you and to deliver you.” This reminds us of Jesus’ promise to the disciples he sent out on mission:

You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers... and they will put some of you to death.... But not a hair of your head will perish!

Either “perish” does not mean for Jesus what it does to us, or the disciples were all bald! (*Luke 21: 16-19* and see *9: 23-27*).

This is the paradox of Christian ministry: the love that impels us (*2Corinthians 5:14*) to minister to others often excites the hostility that alienates us from them. But we don’t need to be accepted — or even to remain physically alive — to enjoy “life to the full.” We will all be perfectly one with each other at the “wedding banquet of the Lamb.” Until then, life on this earth is both an invitation and an obstacle to the perfect “peace and unity of his kingdom” (see *Revelation 19: 6-9* and the *Communion Rite* of the Mass). Christian ministry is simultaneously a source of peace and conflict (see *Luke 10: 5-6; 12: 51-53*). That is why we need to keep recalling, “*God is my refuge on the day of distress.*”

In **Matthew 13: 44-46** Jesus tells us we can only enter into the kingdom of heaven by giving “all for All.” To buy the treasure field, we need to sell all we have. For the pearl of unique beauty we must trade every pearl in our collection. Christian ministry is free (*Matthew 10:8; Isaiah 55:1*). But what our ministry offers costs more than anything on earth; in fact, it costs everything on earth, including life itself. But we only know how much something is worth to us by what we are willing to pay for it. We see Christ’s death as the measure of his love for us, and he made our ministry to others the measure of our love for him (*Romans 5:8; 8:32; John 14:31, 21:17; 1John 3:16*). We do not know God as God until we give all for the All he is.

Initiative: Be a priest. Give freely but ask all for the All you give.

**July 31, 2014 (Feast of St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, to whom Pope Francis belongs!)
THURSDAY SEVENTEENTH WEEK**

The *Responsorial Psalm* reminds us to trust in God for the fruits of ministry: “*Blest are they whose help is the God of Jacob*” (*Psalm 146*).

The fruit of Christian ministry depends on two things not under the minister’s control: *grace* and *free will*. That is why we cannot expect results to follow simply the law of cause and effect. Good ministry does not necessarily bear good fruit. We plant and water, but God makes grow — if the seed falls on good ground (*1 Corinthians 3: 5-15; Matthew 13: 3-30*).

Jeremiah 18: 1-6 focuses on *grace*, or the action of God on the hearts of those to whom we minister. “Grace” just means “favor.” It can mean the *abiding gift* of sharing in the life of God, which is salvation (*habitual grace*); or a *momentary boost* of light or strength to help us act (*actual grace*). The passage presents God as a potter molding clay on his wheel. “Whenever the vessel he was making came out wrong... he would start afresh and work it into another vessel.” It concludes: “As the clay is in the potter’s hand, so you are in mine, House of Israel.” Although what is most evident to us are the effects of human choices, the truth is that God is in control. He respects human freedom — which means he allows us to sin even when it damages us and causes suffering to others — but he is still in control, and in the end he will triumph. We acknowledge and ask for this when we pray as Jesus taught us, “*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” And in our ministry we seek above all to act in union with Christ within us, so that his grace might work through us.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing (*John 15:5*).

Matthew 13: 47-53 reminds us that Christian ministry is cooperation with the living Spirit of God whose action we can never predict.

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit... The wind blows where it chooses... but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

Christian ministry is not just teaching static doctrine or patently explicit laws. The good minister must be in touch with the Holy Spirit at work in the Church, constantly discovering and communicating “what is new and what is old.”

This is why we cannot always judge new movements or directions in the Church. “The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet” that brings in all kinds of things. Some may not be clear until “at the end of time the angels separate the wicked from the just!” “Do not quench the Spirit” (*1 Thessalonians 5:19*).

Initiative: Be a priest. Be open to the Spirit of God in yourself and others.

August 1, 2014 (Feast of St. Alphonsus Ligouri, founder of the Redemptorists)

FRIDAY SEVENTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* invites us to have confidence when our ministry arouses hostility: “*Lord, in your great love, answer me*” (*Psalm 69*).

In **Jeremiah 26: 1-9** the prophet is threatened with death by his own people for preaching what they do not want to hear. This is something we must be on guard against, both in giving and receiving ministry. Those who are not ready for the message will attack it and then turn on the messenger:

Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you (*Matthew 7:6*).

On July 4, 1859, Fr. Eli Lindesmith with his “catechism classes and Sunday school publicly celebrated Independence Day” near Canton, Ohio. He wrote that the non-Catholics were “astonished, and desired to hear more from me, and more about us Catholics.” They started inviting him to speak in “school houses and town halls and even Protestant churches,” which he did “on the condition that the Pastors and church authorities, school directors and town councils gave their consent.” But some Catholics, “who had lately come from Europe, and who had not yet learned what we can do and ought to do in free America” were “perplexed.” Some, “even priests,” said: “He will create disturbances, we shall be persecuted; they will burn our churches as they did in Philadelphia in 1844.” They denounced him to the bishop and spread rumors he had left the Church and “was now a Protestant preacher.” Why? Because he acted “out of the box” (which here means “as moved by the Holy Spirit”), and many people are threatened by anything new (*The Amazing Father Lindesmith – Chaplain in Indian Country*, by James Kolp, St. Raphael Center, Canton, 2004, info@catholicbook.net). That is why some Catholics called Vatican II “Protestant” and left the Church, while some still among us resist union and shared worship with other Christians. The Catholic “Pharisee party” condemns any thought or action “out of the box” with fundamentalist fervor! The ministry of peace arouses conflict!

In **Matthew 13: 54-58** when Jesus preached in his home town the people were “astonished” (cp. “perplexed” above). He wasn’t “the carpenter’s son” they were used to, and they could not adjust to the change. In this case they rejected the message because of the messenger.

All Christian ministry is God acting through human instruments. To make it more acceptable, we have to be as godlike as possible in word and action, but without ever refusing to minister because of our faults.

Initiative: Be a priest: Follow the Spirit in spite of the flesh.

August 2, 2014

SATURDAY SEVENTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* continues with *Psalm 69*: “*Lord, in your great love, answer me.*” The first reading is our last from Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 26: 11-24 opens another dimension of ministry to us: ministry to the ministers. Jeremiah “had a protector in Ahikam son of Shaphan, so he was not handed over to the people to be put to death.” We should never think everyone is opposed to our ministry.

One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but speak... no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people (*Acts 18: 9-10*).

We need to be aware God is moving many to support us — and also of the need all Christian ministers have for support and encouragement. By nature our ministry arouses opposition, because it calls everyone, Christian and non-Christian alike, to a level of thought and action that is beyond the human. Jesus said:

If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world--therefore the world hates you (*John 15:19*).

But even in the best of us something of “the world” resists the Gospel. This is why it is so important for all Christians — especially those who are trying to live out their baptismal consecration as *priests* through ministry — to come together for mutual support in *community*.

A Christian “community” is a “common unity” of faith and commitment that is *expressed* in language or symbols understood by all. To support each other, then, we must be willing to go out of our way to give *expression* to our faith, our hope and our love in the presence of one another. It has to be clear and unmistakable to all that they are not alone in what they believe, in the ideals they are trying to live up to, in the work they are trying to do.

The first place to do this, of course, is at Mass. We need to minister to all who are there by celebrating enthusiastically, with “full, active, conscious” participation in the mystery being expressed in words, in gestures and in song. But we also need to give more particular, personally creative expression in small-group discussions and shared prayer.

The vulnerability inherent in revealing our inner selves to others may frighten us. So **Matthew 14: 1-12** reminds us that the perfection of ministry is found in the “perfection of love,” and there is “no greater love” than to “lay down one's life for one's friends” (*John 15:13; Hebrews 2:10; 1John 4:18*). John the Baptizer's ministry brought him death. Ours calls us to the “dying to self” involved in self-revelation.

Initiative: Be a priest. Form community through mutual self-expression.

August 3, 2014

EIGHTEENTH Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

Give the Gift You Have Received

Inventory

Do you think of God as the provider of all that is good, or just as the alternative to something worse? Do you come to him out of fear, obligation or desire? Do you serve him out of duty or out of expectation? What do you expect from God? Is your habitual attitude what the Psalm in this Mass proclaims: “You *satisfy the desire* of every living thing?”

Input

This Mass could change our whole perception of God. The *Responsorial Psalm* establishes the theme: “*The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs*” (Psalm 145). That is why in the *Entrance Antiphon* we reach out to him with desire: “Lord, do not be long in coming!” In the *Opening Prayer(s)* we ask God to “be close to us... restore us to life... keep us safe.” And we declare, “Gifts without measure flow from your goodness to bring us your peace... Our life is your gift... Only your love makes us whole.” The God the Church presents to us here is a God to be desired, to be sought, a God to get as much of as we can — in short, a God who “*answers all our needs.*” This is the God we will know and enjoy in heaven. Why not begin now?

The Free Gift:

In **Isaiah 55: 1-3** the Lord says, “Come to me, all you who are thirsty, who have no money; come without paying and without cost. Why spend your money for what fails to satisfy?” This is a God who gives and who wants to give. Why don’t we want to receive?

It is basically because we don’t believe him. We don’t believe that what he offers is what we really desire. We don’t believe that God “satisfies the desire of every living thing.” We have some desires we don’t think we will satisfy through deeper relationship with God. In fact, we are not sure that a deeper relationship with him will give us anything we actually desire. Some of us may believe this as adults, but how many teenagers do? Ask any teenager in church, “What do you expect to get out of Mass?” and see what answer you get. We don’t have to ask; it is written in their body language.

Or we don’t think we will get anything from God “without paying and without cost.” And Jesus seems to back us up in this. He says we have to give all for All, sell everything we have for the treasure buried in the field, be willing to lose our lives in order to find Life. This doesn’t sound like a free lunch.

There are two answers to this. The first addresses the *level* of gift or of life that we want. On the lower levels, all of God’s gifts are free. What do we pay for our existence? For the air we breathe, the sun and the moon, the

beauty of nature, the fruits of the earth? What does it cost us to talk to God? We don't "pay by the hour" for interviews with him. What does it cost us to read his words? There is no tuition at all for the most life-enhancing education on earth. What does it cost us to receive Communion? To be nourished by the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ? To those who accept this free gift Jesus promises two others: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood *have eternal life, and they abide in me, and I in them*" (John 6:54). This isn't a free lunch; it's a free luau — with no end and no hangover!

The second answer takes up the meaning of "free." Is food free if you have to reach up and pluck the fruit off the tree? Is money still free if you have to lean over and pick it up off the ground? By this relative standard, what God gives to those who choose him is free even if it costs us our life. This brings us back to our original question: Do we really believe God "*answers all our needs,*" that he "*satisfies the desire of every living thing*"?

"For I am convinced..."

St. Paul did. In **Romans 8: 35-39** he declares himself "convinced" that the gift of Christ's love is so overwhelmingly satisfying for those who experience it, that nothing could ever persuade them to relinquish it.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This makes us ask whether we are living our "religion" in a way that lets us experience this love. If we are, then we will say that what God has given us is "free" at any price.

"One does not live on..."

The *Alleluia* verse recalls the first temptation of Jesus, which was to give people what they *thought* would satisfy them instead of what really does: "One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God" (see Matthew 4:4). Now in **Matthew 14: 13-21**, Jesus gives a preview of the bread that does satisfy. The "multiplication of the loaves" was a preview of Eucharist, the living Bread, the gift of Jesus himself. Here bread and word are combined: Jesus is the Word of God made flesh; the Word of knowledge uttered by the Father from all eternity (see *John* 1: 1-18). And he said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!" "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." (*John* 6: 35-51). Truly, "*The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs*

Insight

Has this Mass converted me to a different understanding of God? Do I see him as fulfilling all my desires? What choices of mine express this conversion?

Initiative

Be a priest. Give God to others as a gift.

August 4, 2014 (Feast of the Curé of Ars, patron of pastors)

MONDAY EIGHTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* begs: “*Teach me your laws, O Lord*” (*Psalm 119*).

In **Jeremiah 28:1-17** Jeremiah’s conflict with the prophet Hananiah reminds us of the painful truth that even among those who have taken up the loving work of ministry in the Church there can be disagreement and outright hostility. How do we know who is right?

God’s action against Hananiah teaches all of us as ministers to call our own teaching into question. The Holy Spirit’s work is unity. If we speak up against another voice in the Church, it should be with fear and reluctance, and only after the “search and research” of examining our own heart and going deeply into whatever doctrine is in question. In the *Responsorial Psalm* we find signs to look for in ourselves to know whether we are authentic:

1. Does God’s law give me *delight*? (v. 7, 11, 14, 24, 35, 74, 79, 103)
 2. Do I *meditate* on God’s word deeply? (v. 15, 97-100, 104, 105).
 3. Am I looking for *boundaries* or the *boundless* mystery of who God is? (v. 18, 20, 27, 32-37, 41, 81, 82, 96, 120, 123).
 4. Do I focus on keeping laws or on God’s “steadfast love,” seeking *relationship* with him? (v. 58-59, 94, 122, 124, 146).
 5. Do I keep laws for approval, or do I make responsible *decisions* in applying law, standing up for the truth sometimes even against authorities? (v. 19, 45, 4, 134, 157, 161).
 6. Do I interpret every law in the light of its goal and Jesus’ desire that we should have “life to the full”? (v. 45 *bis*, 50, 56m 93, 172, 175 and *John* 10:10).
 7. Do I interpret laws in the context of the overall theology and tradition of the Church, being so “Catholic” that I sometimes “have more understanding than all my teachers” because I look farther back than they do? (v. 42, 44, 53, 90-91, 98-100, 111, 130, 139, 142, 143, 144).
 8. Am I committed purely to truth as such, listening *to people*, not just *for errors* to condemn? (v. 68, 70, 78).
 9. In my professed loyalty to Church teaching, do I “pick and choose,” ignoring challenging statements about social justice or wealth and focusing on obvious moral laws and “housekeeping” rules? (v 101, 113).
 10. Do I give my primary allegiance to the truth as such, not to any “party” in the Church? (v. 63, 69 *bis*).
- Finally, do I keep begging with humility, “*Teach me your laws, O Lord*”?

In **Matthew 14: 13-21**, when John is murdered Jesus “withdraws” with his disciples to a “lonely place where they could be by themselves.” We cope with persecution by prayer.

But the crowds follow, and Jesus obeys the rule he gave us, “If you love me, *feed my sheep!*” (*John* 21: 15-17). This rule must govern every pastoral policy and decision. It is the touchstone of authentic ministry.

Initiative: Be a priest. Look for God in laws and see laws only in God.

August 5, 2014

TUESDAY EIGHTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* is a summons to hope: “*The Lord will build up Zion again, and appear in all his glory*” (*Psalm 102*).

Jeremiah 30: 1-22 begins by agreeing that those who say things are hopeless are right! “Yes, the Lord says this: ‘Your wound is incurable, your injury past healing.’” At any time or place in the Church we can say, “Your pain is incurable. So great is your guilt, so many your sins....”

But for Christians, as for Israel, our hopelessness is the foundation of our hope. If we trust in any wisdom or virtue we have, or in any initiatives, pastoral plans or projects we devise, we are doomed. Jesus said that even he, apart from the Father, could “do nothing.” And we can “do nothing” apart from Jesus (*John 5: 19, 30; 8:28; 15:5*). So as ministers of Christ we always have reason to despair and we never have reason to despair.

Jeremiah’s prophecy goes on to say that God not only can cure what is incurable, but that he intends to. In this spirit we come to Jesus today like the leper who said, “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.” The Gospel tells us Jesus said, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately his leprosy was cleansed” (*Matthew 8: 1-3*).

Jesus does not promise such immediate, visible and dramatic results every time we pray. But his “I do choose” is his lasting stance. It is a consequence and manifestation of the “steadfast love,” the enduring “kindness and fidelity” that are the core of God’s glory and in Scripture the “virtual definition” of his being (see *Exodus 33:12 to 34:6* and the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* on *John 1:14*). If we know God our ministry will be always a ministry, not of human optimism which can leave us disappointed and disillusioned, but of divine hope. Our trust is based, not on what we see, but on what we know. And we know “*the Lord will build up Zion again, and appear in all his glory.*”

In **Matthew 14: 22-36** we have an image of the early Church called to trust. Jesus has ascended into heaven — “up into the hills by himself to pray” — and his disciples are in the boat (the Church) “battling with a heavy sea” and the “headwind” of opposing cultural attitudes and values. They feel threatened, abandoned and alone — just as we do today!

Then Jesus comes to them, walking on the water. But as in his resurrection appearances, they do not recognize him (*Luke 24: 15, 31; John 2: 4, 7*). They think he is a ghost. When Jesus calls out, “Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid,” Peter risks his life to find out if this is true. Ministry lives by trust that is realized in risk and confirmed in encounter.

Initiative: Be a priest. Accept any risk to encounter the living Jesus.

August 6, 2014

Feast of the Transfiguration (Year A)

The *Responsorial (Psalm 97)* proclaims: “*The Lord is king, the most high over all the earth.*”

In the *Anamnesis* or “remembering” after the *Institution Narrative* (“Consecration”) we remember the three key events of redemption: the *death, resurrection* and *ascension* of Jesus, with the ascension’s implicit promise that Jesus will “come again.”

2Peter 1:16-19 tells us that Jesus’ “transfiguration” (transformation of appearance) was a preview of the “honor and glory” into which Jesus entered by these three events and a promise of his “coming”:

When we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the Sublime Glory itself spoke to him and said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

Peter tells us this so we will know that

his divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.¹

In other words, for encouragement:

You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

In Eucharist we “remember and make present” both the past and the future. We are present to the “end time” prophesied in **Daniel 7:9-14**: “I saw, coming on the clouds of heaven, one like a son of man..., On him was conferred sovereignty, glory and kingship... which shall never pass away.” Jesus quoted these words when the high priest said to him, “I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” For Jesus to make this claim when it was obvious God had abandoned him to the power of his enemies amounted to saying he needed no divine affirmation of his messiahship; that he could not *not be* the Messiah; that he was God. The high priest saw it immediately:

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?” They answered, “He deserves death.”²

It is significant that in **Matthew 17:1-9** the three Transfiguration witnesses, “Peter, James and his brother John,” were the same who would see Jesus weak and crushed in his agony in the garden. When our faith is tried by Jesus’ apparent powerlessness against the forces of evil, we need to remember the preview and promise of his glory.³

To those with faith, every Eucharist is a Transfiguration experience. We see the presence of Christ shining through the appearances of bread and wine. We see him in the host crucified, risen and returning. We see divine life shining through the human appearance of all who receive Communion. We are already present at the “wedding banquet of the Lamb.” “*Through him, with him, in him... all glory and honor...forever!*”

Initiative: See the divine in the human, wherever it is.

¹ Verse 3 above.

² See *Matthew* 24:30, 26:64-66. Cf. *Revelation* 5:12, 7:12.

³ *Mark* 14:33. And see 5:37.

August 6, 2014 (extra)

WEDNESDAY EIGHTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* promises: “*The Lord will guard us, like a shepherd guarding his flock*” (*Jeremiah*, ch. 31).

Jeremiah 31: 1-7 gives us an insight into God’s heart that should be the guide and underpinning of all our ministry to others: God simply delights in our well-being — always, no matter how we have acted toward him. He doesn’t hold grudges, has no desire to punish, no compulsion to make us “pay” for our sins. If God ever wants to “teach us a lesson,” that is *all* he wants to do: teach us, with no overtones of punishment. God will do good for any and everybody at any time in any way they can accept, regardless of what they deserve from him. Memories never moderate his giving.

Israel had brought suffering and disaster on herself by deserting the way of the Lord. Jeremiah described it vividly — and in the Old Testament style, adapted to the preconceptions of his hearers, he spoke as if God had sent their sufferings in punishment for their infidelity. But as soon as Israel is ready to repent and turn back to God, all God focuses on is how good and beautiful and happy his people can be: “You shall be rebuilt.... Adorned once more... you shall go out dancing gaily.... plant vineyards!” He is just happy for them.

All ministry subjects us to the risk of rejection. Failure hurts, and when we fail to convert people or make them better, we can get angry. That is because we are measuring justice instead of lavishing love. We need to simply join God in saying, “I have loved you with an everlasting love” — and rejoice in all well-being.

Matthew 15: 21-28 shows us Jesus breaking his own rules. His mission, and that of his disciples before his resurrection, was just to the “lost sheep of the House of Israel” (*Matthew* 10: 5-6). But when a Canaanite woman keeps crying out to him, “Son of David, take pity on me!” he subordinates his policy to her need. He looks, not at her nationality or religious orthodoxy, but at her faith in him: “Woman, you have great faith! Let your wish be granted.”

Ministry in the Church has to be guided by policies. But we should never let policy prevail over personal response to the faith, hope or desire visible in another. We ask, not whether a person is “in good standing,” but only whether someone is asking for help to know and experience God’s love. Jesus did not say, “If policy permits, feed my sheep.” He said, “If you love me, feed my sheep.” That includes his “other sheep” who don’t quite fit in the fold (*John* 10:16, 21:17). We feed them all.

Initiative: Be a priest. Give to everyone who asks, guided by God’s love.

August 7, 2014

THURSDAY EIGHTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* asks: “*A pure heart create for me, O God*” (*Psalm 51*).

Jeremiah 31: 31-34 brings our readings from Jeremiah to an ecstatic climax. It describes our relationship with God in the “new covenant” sealed in Christ’s blood and confirmed by the gift of his Spirit: “*Deep within them I will plant my law, writing it on their hearts!*”

In the Church, the new covenanted community established by Christ,

There will be no further need for neighbor to try to teach neighbor, or... say, “Learn to know the Lord.”
No, they will all know me, the least no less than the greatest.

The Holy Spirit *creates a new heart* in every believer at Baptism. Every member of the Church is an anointed, consecrated, divinely appointed *priest, prophet* and *king*, or *steward* of Christ’s kingship. There are no “non-priests” in the Church, no one who does not have the gift and call to bear prophetic witness, no one whom Jesus has not made his “steward,” responsible for fostering the reign of God on earth (*Matthew 24:45*). Baptism commits and empowers us all to fulfill the triple function of Jesus *Priest, Prophet* and *King*.

This does not mean there is no need for us to minister to each other. We must, but as *equals to equals*. We teach one another, but we don’t claim the *status* of “teacher,” because Jesus said, “you have [only] one teacher [Jesus], and you are all students.” There are different functions and gifts, but “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (*Matthew 23:8; 1 Corinthians 12:7; Romans 12: 4-8*). Bishops and ordained priests have particular functions of teaching and stewardship (*Titus 1:7*), and there are different degrees of *authority* in the Church. But to attach degrees of *dignity* to differences in authority or function is to violate the teaching of Jesus (*Matthew 23: 1-12; Luke 9: 46-48; 22: 24-27*). In the New Covenant those who teach are just fellow students reciting what they have learned, and those who learn are all teachers of what they have learned so far.

In **Matthew 16: 13-23** Jesus gives Peter the authority to keep the Church united and faithful to his teaching. But Peter’s first act is to oppose God’s way of saving the world! “This must not happen to you!” Popes sin and err, as do bishops, priests and laity. Jesus “guarantees” some *ministries* (infallible definitions of dogma, the sacraments), but not the holiness or wisdom of any *minister*. To downplay the role of laity by thinking there is something “higher” about the hierarchy or clergy is the sin of clericalism. We are all equally called and consecrated to minister in different ways. So *all* of us pray, “*A pure heart create for me, O God*”

Initiative: Be a priest. Live out your baptismal consecration to ministry.

August 8, 2014 (Feast of St. Dominic, Founder of the Dominicans)

FRIDAY EIGHTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Verse* proclaims God as God: “*It is I who deal death and give life*” (Deuteronomy 32; 35-41).

Today (only) we read **Nahum**, who prophesies in **[1:15] 2:1 to 3:7** the defeat of Nineveh, who had ravaged Israel: “Look! On the mountains the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace!”

Often God seems to “stand by” and let it happen when we make war, oppress and violate others. This is because God also stands by his decision to give people free will. Free is free: to do good or evil, to heal or hurt. But God has not given up control. In his time and in his way he moves against evil and he triumphs. No one can really harm those who are faithful to him. God saves them even in death and destruction. The life God gives, no one can take from us (*Matthew* 2:20; 6:25; 18:8; 19:17; *Luke* 21: 16-19; *John* 3:16; 5: 18-29; 6: 27-58; 10: 10, 28; 11:25). God makes that clear: “*It is I who deal death and give life.*”

In **Matthew 16: 24-28** (and in yesterday’s Gospel) Jesus reveals the true mystery of life and death, weakness and power. He reveals the mystery of his own unique, divine and totally unexpected way of saving the world: he is going to win through defeat, gain life for us by dying, and conquer evil by loving those who do evil. And anyone who wishes to join him in the mission and ministry of saving the world must do it on the same terms: “take up their cross and follow” his example.

We “take up our cross” by *accepting* whatever suffering falls on our shoulders and *loving back*. We try to avoid suffering and to free others from it, but when it comes — as in a free and sinful world it will — we *endure it with love*. We respond with love, not with violence, even to those who would kill us. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

This is the key to Christ’s way of saving the world. Peter, in the name of us all, immediately rejected it (see yesterday’s Gospel). Jesus’ own People (also in the name of us all) rejected him as Messiah because he calls us to endure suffering with love instead of protecting us from suffering. Jesus’ remedy for sin in the world is to endure the consequences of others’ sin and *love back*. This is not the kind of Savior we want. But it is the only one there is. To minister with him we must be “victims in the Victim” as well as “priests in the Priest.” We “present our bodies as a living sacrifice” to God for the world (*Romans* 12:1). “*It is God who deals death and give life.*” We give life by accepting death — in every way.

Initiative: Be priest and victim: Trust in no power but truth and love.

August 9, 2014

SATURDAY EIGHTEENTH WEEK

The *Responsorial Psalm* calls us to a trust that transcends time: “*You will never abandon those who seek you, Lord*” (*Psalm 9*).

In our single reading from **Habakkuk (1:12 to 2:4)** God answers a question we keep asking throughout history: “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?” (1:1). God’s answer is that we should not ask “how long,” but trust him: “There is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.” No matter how bad things are, or how inactive God seems, we keep re-affirming our hope: “*You will never abandon those who seek you, Lord.*”

In **Matthew 17: 14-20** a man addresses the same question to Jesus specifically as a Savior who is not saving: “Lord, have mercy on my son.... I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.” What is different in this story is that the disciples are included. The father expected them to be able to heal. And in fact, Jesus had sent them out with this power. “Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness” (*Matthew 10:1*). So why have they failed?

Why do the disciples of Jesus seem to be failing today? Why has the Church not been able to heal society of its compulsion to keep destroying itself, throwing itself into “fire and water” by blind economic practices that keep packing tight the powder keg of poverty all over the world until it explodes in violence? Why have Christians not reformed the prison system, which responds to crime with a simplicity so primitive it could be called savage: just locking people in communal cages that become “universities of crime”? Why do church-going supporters of the death penalty believe that by killing those who kill they are showing respect for life? Why do we still prefer to make war against those who hate and attack us instead of asking ourselves (and them) what we are doing that makes them hate us so much? Why do we who are urged constantly to keep “changing our minds” through “repentance” (*metanoia*) prefer to demonize our enemies with propaganda instead of searching our own souls?

When the disciples asked Jesus why they were unable to heal he said, “Because you have so little trust. If you had faith the size of a mustard seed....” We need to read yesterday’s Gospel again and accept Jesus’ way of saving the world. Then we will be able to minister to society.

Initiative: Be a priest. Be willing to lose your live to save it and others.

August 10, 2014

THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR (Year A)

“Lord, be true to your covenant”

Inventory

If you were a Jew, would you find it exciting just to know that you belong to a People who have a *Covenant with God*? As a Christian, are you aware that you belong to a covenanted People? How does this affect your life?

Input

In the *Entrance Antiphon* we ask God, “Be true to your Covenant.” All the Old Testament readings this week are going to deal with the mystery and history of God’s Covenant with his People. And we will see how the *Eucharistic Prayer* at Mass “remembers” and celebrates his “new and eternal Covenant” with us.

The *Opening Prayer* begins by “naming” God, identifying him, not only as “almighty and ever-living,” but also as our “Father.” The *Eucharistic Prayer* also begins this way: giving thanks for God’s great deeds in the *Preface* that culminates in the acclamation, “Holy, holy, holy....” and continuing, “Father, you are holy indeed, the fountain of all holiness.... and all creation rightly gives you praise.”

We continue in the *Opening Prayer*, “Increase your Spirit within us.” In the double “*epiclesis*” — the “calling down” of the Spirit right before and after the “Consecration” (the “words of institution” from the Last Supper)¹ that is the center of the *Eucharistic Prayer* — we will ask God to send his Spirit, first “upon these gifts” of bread and wine, “that they may become the Body and Blood of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.” Then, after the words of institution, we ask the Spirit to “come down” again, but this time on the *Church*, that we may be “brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit.” The key to understanding the *Eucharistic Prayer* is in the word *union*: union with Christ in his self-offering; union with all the members of the Church in the “communion in the Holy Spirit” that is the fruit of that offering. We will see this more fully in the days ahead.

In the *Responsorial (Psalm 85)* we ask that through this celebration of Eucharist we might *understand, appreciate, and live* by the mystery we are remembering: “*Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.*”

Mystery of the holy

1Kings 19: 9-13 gives a foundation for the “*naming*” or identification of God that is the first element of the *Eucharistic Prayer* — which typically begins, “Lord, (or “Father”) *you are holy indeed*” (*E.P.* II, III). In this cardinal passage for understanding the experience of God, Elijah recognizes that nothing created can really be an adequate expression of his presence. The “Lord” is not in the whirlwind, the earthquake or the fire. But after them all Elijah heard “a tiny whispering sound.” A better translation is probably “a sound of sheer silence.” When Elijah “heard this he hid his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.” Then God spoke to him.

With the *Eucharistic Prayer* we enter into the deep mystery of the Mass. We are no longer just a group of people assembled in a church building, in our own time and space. We are the Church itself, the real presence of Christ, present to and making present in time but timelessly, the once-and-for-all but eternally enduring event of

¹ *Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24 Luke 22:19-20; 1Corinthians 11:23-26.*

the redemption of the world.

Essentially, the Church is the historically continuing presence in the world of the incarnate Word of God... Therefore the Church is most tangibly and intensively an “event” where (through the words of consecration/institution) *Christ himself is present* in his own congregation as the crucified Lord and resurrected Savior, the fount of salvation, where *the Redemption makes itself felt in the congregation by becoming sacramentally visible*. Where the “New and Eternal Covenant which he founded on the cross is most palpably and actually present in the holy remembrance of its first institution.

Therefore the celebration of the Eucharist is the most intensive event of the Church. For by this celebration Christ is not only present in the Church’s liturgical solemnity as the Redeemer of his body, as the salvation and Lord of the Church, but in the Eucharist *the union of the faithful with Christ and with one another is also most tangibly realized*. Inasmuch as the celebration of the Eucharist is the sacramental anticipation of the heavenly marriage banquet, the *final, eternal form* of the community of saints *shines forth even now* in this solemnity, just as *the source of the Church, Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, is present in it*.¹

We should enter into the *Eucharistic Prayer* as Elijah entered into the presence of God when he “hid his face in his cloak and stood at the entrance of the cave.” We should be overawed as we identify God as “holy indeed,” beyond all holiness that can be portrayed, imaged, described or intellectually comprehended. This is the background of everything we celebrate in the *Eucharistic Prayer*.

Jesus is holy

After the preview of Eucharist in the “multiplication of loaves,” **Matthew 14:22-33** presents Jesus again as someone beyond human understanding. The disciples may not recognize him clearly yet as God, but they see him as certainly and mysteriously more than an ordinary human. Their profession of faith, “Truly you are the Son of God,” in itself probably meant nothing more than “You are the Messiah.” But in the context it was a preview of the resurrection. It reflected people’s recognition and non-recognition of the Jesus when he appeared to them after the resurrection. The disciples thought he was a “ghost.”

The point for us is that Jesus is not just human but God, and he was not taken away from us at death, but is still with us — no matter how much the Church or any individual in it seems to be “sinking.” He is not bound by human laws of time and space. He is God. We affirm this at the beginning of the *Eucharistic Prayer*: ‘Lord, you are holy indeed...’

Holiness revealed

Romans 9:1-15 reveals the loving holiness of God as made visible in his dealings with the Israelites:

To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises... the patriarchs, and from them... comes the Messiah. Blessed forever be God, who is over all. Amen.

This is the way the opening words of *Eucharistic Prayer IV* “name” the holiness of God: “Father, we acknowledge your greatness. *All your actions show your wisdom and love*.” Eucharist is a *remembering*. When Jesus said at the Last Supper, “Do this in remembrance of me,” it was in the context of recalling the Covenant and all the “great deeds” it included: “This is the blood of the Covenant. This cup is the New Covenant in my blood.”²

In the *Eucharistic Prayer*, what we remember above all is the greatest deed of God, the one that “showed his wisdom and love” more than all others: the death and rising of Jesus that brought humanity into the new and final union with God that constitutes the New Covenant. This is the union of sharing in God’s own life,

¹ Karl Rahner, S.J., *The Episcopate and the Primacy*, Herder (New York, 1962) or *Quaestiones Disputatae 4*. See in this last line the Eucharist as “source and summit” of the Christian life. The *Rite of Communion* in particular is an embodied anticipation of the “marriage banquet of the Lamb,” proclaimed in the lines quoted from *Revelation 19:9*.

² *Luke 22:20* says “new covenant.” *Matthew 26:28* and *Mark 14:24* include “new” in variant readings. The liturgy adds “and eternal” (in Latin) but this is not in the Gospel texts.

becoming the body of Christ himself by Baptism, being one body with all other humans who share in the gift of God's divine life.

This union was brought about in the only way it could be: by our *dying* with and in Christ, so that our sins would be, not just "forgiven" but "taken away" in the annihilation of death. Jesus had to be offered and die as the "Lamb of God" for this to be made possible. It became actual for each one of us when, in Baptism, we "presented our bodies as a living sacrifice to God" to be Christ's body; to die as his sinful body on the cross and rise as his purified body to let him live in and through us again on earth. We went down into the waters as into a grave, and we rose out of them a "new creation," having "become Christ" through the gift of incorporation into his body as sharers in his own divine life.¹

This means we ourselves are "holy." The New Covenant is not just a "contract," an agreement, or a set of mutual promises. It is the mystery of being *made one* in a way no mere agreement of minds and wills can unite persons. It is the mystery of being made one with God and with each other through sharing in one and the same life. And it is the Life of God. "This cup is the new covenant *in my blood*."

This is the mystery we celebrate in the *Eucharistic Prayer*. No wonder we begin, "*Father, you are holy indeed... the fountain of all holiness... and all creation rightly gives you praise.*"

Insight

What more do you see in the Eucharistic Prayer than you saw before?

Initiative:

Enter into the Eucharistic Prayer with awe, conscious of the holiness of God.

¹ *Romans 12:1; 2Corinthians 5:14-21; Galatians 6:15; Catechism of the Catholic Church, 795.*

August 11, 2014

MONDAY NINETEENTH WEEK

Heaven and earth are filled with your glory.

(Responsorial: Psalm 148)

Begin Ezekiel 1:2-28: We find here verification of what a Scripture professor said: “Ezekiel never saw anything on this earth.” Or never talks about it.

Ezekiel is like abstract art. The worst thing you can do is ask the painter of an abstract piece, “What is it?” It isn’t meant to be a picture of anything that exists. It is meant to produce a *reaction* to a certain aspect of reality: to give a perception of beauty or of ugliness. To produce joy or sadness, optimism or pessimism. Or something else. Abstract art is the imaging of an abstraction, of something about beings that “abstracts” from the whole, concrete reality of what any particular one of them is, in order to “say” or portray something about their reality that we would miss in a more “realistic” reproduction.

Of course, the artist might say an abstract painting is more realistic than a conventional picture would be. And Ezekiel would agree.¹

Don’t try to “imagine”—get an image of—what Ezekiel says he saw. Read the *Responsorial Psalm* instead. That expresses, in part, at least, the reaction Ezekiel wants to produce. And that reaction is a partial response and perception of the reality of God.

Heaven and earth are filled with your glory. Praise him in the heights. For his majesty is above earth and heaven. Praise him, all you his angels, all kings of the earth and all peoples. For his name alone is exalted.

For today, let’s just leave it at that. But don’t leave it. Do it. Praise him.

We need to praise him. Big time. because if we don’t, **Matthew 17:22-27** will throw us as it did Jesus’ disciples.

They could not accept what he told them: “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men who will put him to death.” (They didn’t even hear “He will be raised up on the third day”). At these words “they were overwhelmed with grief.” Why?

It was because his “defeat” and death at the hands of his enemies contradicted what they thought and hoped he was. They Messiah they perceived him to be was just human: one who conceivably could be defeated, but whom God would protect from death. If they had known Jesus as “Son of God,” they would have known that death could not defeat him “because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.”²

Jesus corrected Peter about this by reminding him whose Son he really was.

Initiative: Don’t stop with a human perception of Jesus. See him as he is.

¹ The author knows nothing at all about abstract art, as these comments may have demonstrated. But what is said here about abstract art, true or false, helps to understand Ezekiel!

² *Acts 2:24*.

August 12, 2014

TUESDAY NINETEENTH WEEK

Do not forget the poor, O Lord.

(Responsorial: Psalm 10)

In **Ezekiel 2:8 to 3:4** God gave Ezekiel “a written scroll” and said to him, “Eat this scroll that I give you.” And in his mouth “it was as sweet as honey.”

Ezekiel doesn’t tell us what was in the scroll; just the reaction it produced in him. This should tell us that, abstracting from the words we read in any particular passage of Scripture, whatever they say, we should find them “sweet as honey.”

God’s words, whether they speak of sin and death, pain and calamity, or of God’s love and goodness to us, are always words of life and love. That has to be our conviction as we read them.

And in our ministry to others, regardless of what we have to say, we must keep in mind that the Jesus who speaks through us is *always* “gentle and humble in heart....” and that his “yoke is *always* easy,” and his “burden *always* light.” At least compared to any alternative.

Our job, as his ministers, is to make it so, to the best of our ability. It is the “scribes and Pharisees” who “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others.”

And who are the “scribes and Pharisees” today? They are those official, recognized and approved teachers of religion and staunch defenders of the “laws of the Church” who, by being fundamentalists in doctrine and legalists in practice, are driving people out of the Church every day. When we see that happening, we know they have missed the true “taste” of the word of God.¹

There is no virtue in accepting all ministers as trustworthy, any more than there is in trusting all bankers, doctors and elected officials. We usually ask around. With ministers Jesus gave us a “litmus test”: “By their fruits you will know them.” Saint Paul specifies: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” That is what to look for.²

In **Matthew 18:1-14** Jesus gives two more criteria: The first is rejection of prestige and power: “Whoever becomes humble like [a little] child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

The second is concern to bring back into the warmth of the community those who have “strayed.” Jesus told Peter: “If you love me, *feed my sheep*.” So we look for ministers who nurture the weak and wandering. Is it “in character” with Jesus or not to re-phrase his words as: “It is not the will of your heavenly Father that a single one of these little ones should ever be denied Communion?” Will you be the one who dares?

Initiative: Don’t judge that another is in “mortal sin” unless you can swear to it.

¹ See *Matthew* 11:29-30 and all of chapter 23.

² *Galatians* 5:22-23.

August 13, 2014

WEDNESDAY NINETEENTH WEEK

The glory of the Lord is higher than the skies.

(Responsorial: Psalm 113)

Ezekiel 9:1-22 tells the angel to mark as approved “all those who moan and groan over all the abominations that are practiced within Jerusalem.” What did Jesus consider “abominations”? The sin of the woman taken in adultery? The sin of the Samaritan, divorced five times and living with a man not her husband? Or the sins of the religious authorities in Jerusalem who plotted his death? The sins of the scribes and Pharisees he raged against in *Matthew*, chapter 23:

They tie up heavy burdens (hard to carry) and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. They love places of honor at banquets and in the synagogues, greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation 'Rabbi.'

We should bewail all sins. But who today are guilty of “abominations” in the Church? Those whose unchosen sexual orientation makes them unable to find the comfort of physical affection in marriage, and whom we condemn for the kind of solace they seek? Or the uncondemned in high places who have coldly and knowingly placed child abusers in positions where they can prey upon the innocent? What sins “cry to heaven”—the sins of the divorced and remarried, or the sins of the ordained who refuse them Communion without “lifting a finger” to help them? Or the little clique of “backlash restorationists” who “sin against the Holy Spirit” by trying to frustrate the goals of the last worldwide gathering of bishops to seek the Spirit’s guidance through open dialogue, prayer and consultation at Vatican II?

On what foreheads would you look for the X?

Matthew 18:15-20 is one of the most ignored instructions in the Gospel. Anyone who ever “reports” someone to a pastor, bishop or pope without a one-on-one confrontation beforehand sins against it. Authorities who condemn authors or remove bishops without sitting down and discussing the issues on a “level playing field” and revealing all and every denunciation or report made against the accused likewise sin against the will of God as Jesus declared it here. Bishops and popes have the authority to “declare bound and loosed.” But to do so without proper procedure is abuse of power. It is an “abomination.”

The correct procedure is to *pray together* before discussing any issues that divide us. It is almost never done. Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.” When do those in conflict in the Church “gather together”? If we can’t join each other in anything else, we can always “join our voices” in praying together. Jesus said, “Whatever you ask, it shall be granted.” Why not try it?

Initiative: Follow the Gospel. Jesus is a better guide than current custom.

August 14, 2014

THURSDAY NINETEENTH WEEK

Do not forget the works of the Lord!

(Responsorial: Psalm 78)

Ezekiel 12:1-2 lays it out very simply: “You live in a rebellious house. They have eyes to see but do not see, and ears to hear but do not hear.” But generalities are useless. Specifically, how would this apply to our time?

At the inaugural convention of the American Catholic Council in Detroit, June 12, 2011, an estimated 2,000 reform-minded Catholics stood *en masse* to endorse a 10-point Catholic Bill of Rights and Responsibilities. Speaker after speaker articulated the participants’ frustration at growing clericalism in the church and what they viewed as sustained efforts by church authorities to slow down or reverse many of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

Citing this *does not imply agreement or disagreement*. It simply presents a concrete challenge to “see and hear.”

Speakers criticized the way bishops have handled clerical sex abuse; the church’s treatment of gays; lack of consultation with the laity; mismanagement of church funds and property; closings of parishes and sales of the closed churches to pay off diocesan debts; and politicization of the Eucharist by some bishops who threaten to withhold Communion from insufficiently pro-life politicians.

I repeat: Citing this *does not* imply the author’s agreement or disagreement. We just cannot shut our ears to concerned Catholics who “moan and groan” over what they perceive, rightly or wrongly, as “abominations that are practiced within the Church.” Their examples:

Restorationism: Speakers and participants widely shared the view that under Benedict XVI and John Paul II, there has been a serious backpedaling on many Vatican II teachings and reforms. To name just a few: liturgical reform, lay participation, church engagement in the world, consultation in church decision-making.

Hierarchical authoritarianism: A revival of episcopal threats of excommunication or other church penalties as a response to dissent in matters open to serious debate.

Clericalism: more concern for priestly and episcopal prestige and power than for pastoral care and service. This is a growing issue in numerous areas of church life.¹

The “rebellious house” are not those who raise these issues, but those who refuse to listen and look at them with openness.

Should these spiritual *Reflections* raise such “political” issues? Can our spirituality be authentic if we have “eyes to see” but close them to what is going on around us? Can it?

It is not against the Gospel to “see, judge and act” in response to issues in the community of God’s People. Jesus did, though the religious authorities had him killed for it. **Matthew 18:21 to 19:1** tells us what is against the Gospel: it is the refusal to forgive. We don’t *reject* anyone for sin. We raise issues and work for reconciliation. With love.²

Initiative: See, Judge, Act with Jesus whose love is the Way, Truth and Life.

¹See *National Catholic Reporter*, June 21, 2011.

²“See-Judge-Act” was the formula of the ecclesiastically approved “Catholic Action” movement between World War II and Vatican II.

August 15 2014

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary A Sign in the Sky

*The queen stands at your right hand, arrayed in gold.
(Responsorial: Psalm 45)*

Inventory

What does the doctrine of Mary's Assumption say about you? About the Church's ministry on earth?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* begins, "A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman...." Each one of the Church's six defined doctrines about Mary makes her a sign that says something about Jesus and about us. How many can you identify?¹

The Life-giving Church

Revelation 11:19 to 12:10 invites imagination through its imagery. Tradition sees the "woman" as the Church. If we look at her as *ministering* as St. Paul understood ministry, then by helping to communicate God's divine life to us, she is bringing Christ to birth and to "full stature" in all the members of his body on earth.²

Since in the Gospel of John, light and life are almost synonymous, we can see the Church as life-giving because she is "clothed with the sun," that is, with the light of Christ; the "splendor of truth."³

Some say the "moon under her feet" represents the transient nature of this world in which, like the phases of the moon, nothing is permanent. The Church, however, will last forever, and "the gates of Hades [the abode of the dead] will not prevail against it." The Church tramples underfoot the threat of the transitory. For this reason her ministry is not characterized by *fear of change*. The Church can deal with change, thrives on it, dances on it. Through change the "pilgrim Church" loses nothing, but grows and develops.⁴

This is in part because the source of her stability is a "crown of twelve stars." Her teaching has its origin in the revealed books of the twelve tribes of Israel, whose "names are written on her gates," and whose history is continued in her. And her roots go back in unbroken continuity to the Twelve historical witnesses to Christ, the "twelve apostles of the Lamb," whose names are written on the "twelve courses of stone" of her historical foundations. The light of the Church appears anew in every dawn, shining through the atmosphere and cultural conditions of each new age, but it is the same eternal light that shone undistorted in the Word made flesh, that the "darkness cannot overcome." For that reason her ministers, like "faithful stewards" do not fear to bring out and recognize as her "treasure" both "what is new and what is old."⁵

The Church is "in pain" as she "labors to give birth." Jesus said she would be:

¹ You will find the answers in my book, *Mary in an Adult Church*, available through www.immersedinchrist.com.

² *Galatians* 4:19; *Ephesians* 4:11-13.

³ See *John* 1:4; 8:12 and John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth*, chapter one. This chapter is mind-boggling.

⁴ *Matthew* 16:18; *Revelation* 1:18; 20:13-14.

⁵ See *Revelation* 21:12-14; *John* 1:5-14.

You will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world.¹

Ministry has its price. But the price is swallowed up in its reward.

The Mystery of Mary

In **Luke 1:39-56** Mary is a “sign” for Elizabeth, because “the baby stirred in her womb” and her own heart leaped with joy at the sight of “the mother of her Lord” coming to her. The “Lord” to whom she responded was, in fact, God himself, whether she knew this or not. And when people respond to Christian *ministers*, whether they know it or not, it is the divine life and action of God in the minister that they are sensing.

Mary, too, “knew without knowing” that the one within her would be exciting hearts forever. And that, in some way, her part in his saving activity would continue: “All ages to come shall call me blessed.”

Through Mary the “grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” came into the world. The “mystery of her ministry” (and ours) is that God asked her, not just to *do* something for him, but to *be* something for him—and for the human race—forever. She did not just give birth to God’s Son; she *became* the “Mother of God.” For as long as she lived. As long as she continued in existence. Forever.

And in this role she continues to cooperate in bringing Christ to birth and to “full stature” in those who become “children of God” and her children by “becoming Christ.” All who are incorporated into the body of Christ the Son by Baptism become true children of his Father and of Mary, his mother. Jesus declared it from the cross:

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.”

If we are blind to mystery, we will say Jesus just meant Mary should *treat* John as her son. And that God is “our Father” only in the sense that he *treats* us as if we were his children. And that in Baptism we are somehow saved *by Christ* without actually “becoming” Christ. None of this holds up theologically, because if we did not actually *die* in Christ, and go down into the grave *in him*, as Paul says we did, our sins are just “forgiven”—which does not change us—but not “taken away.” Then we are not intrinsically changed, not really purified, or truly *guiltless*, but God just chooses to treat us as if we were because of what Jesus did.” That is not what we believe.²

The mystery of our redemption is that by *becoming Christ* at Baptism, we became true members of the body that was “made sin” on the cross, truly died in that body with Jesus, truly had our sins “taken away” by that death which cancelled our life’s history of sin, truly became the “righteousness of God,” truly *rose* in Christ as a “new creation,” as true sons and daughters of the Father “in the Son” to carry on his messianic mission as true *prophets, priests and kings* in him who is uniquely *the Prophet, the Priest and the King*. And we are truly children of Mary, who is truly Mother of God and our mother.³

This is the mystery of Mary. And it is our mystery, because Mary is called in the Preface for the feast of the Assumption “the *beginning (initium)* and *pattern (imago)* of the Church in its perfection, and a sign of hope and comfort for your children on their pilgrim way.” This sentence is loaded! It means Mary is the *preview* and the *promise* of what the whole Church—all of us—will be when all have been made perfect in Christ at the end of the world. What we see and celebrate in her, we will see and experience in ourselves for all eternity. Her mystery teaches us ours.

The Sign in the Sky

¹ *John* 16:20-21;33.

² *John* 19:26; *Romans* 6:3-8; *Matthew* 23:27.

³ *2Corinthians* 5:17,21; *John* 1:29; *Galatians* 6:14-15.

1Corinthians 15:20-27 tells us Jesus rose from the dead as the “first in line” of all who are going to rise. His resurrection is the cause, promise and guarantee of ours. It is because he rose that we know for certain we will.

Just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life, but each one in proper order: Christ the firstfruits; then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ.

The mystery here is that to “belong to Christ” means to *be* Christ by belonging to his body in the same living way that our hands and feet belong to ours. That means that in the mystery of God’s timeless reality, when Jesus rose after his crucifixion, we rose in him. We are already the “risen body” of Jesus, and he is alive and acting in us now as in his own body. But imperfectly, because he has not yet grown to “full stature” in us through our total surrender of all we are to his guidance within us.

But we will. The “supplementary” sign of it is Mary’s Assumption. Sin is what brought humanity under the power of death. God raised up Jesus because, being God, “it was impossible for him to be held in its power.”¹ Mary, though human, was preserved from the power of sin; so God made it evident by taking her body into heaven that she was also preserved from the power of death. By the same realistic, mystical logic, we who have been *delivered* from the power of sin see in her Assumption the sign that we will be delivered from the power of death by resurrection. That means that, like Mary, we will at last be delivered *totally* from the power of sin as well. They go together. Mary’s Assumption is the “sign in the sky” that promises total victory over sin and death.

Insight

Mary is the “mirror of the Church.” What she is, we will become.

Initiative:

Don’t set limits to God’s power or your surrender.

¹ Acts 2:24.

August 15, 2014 (extra)
FRIDAY NINETEENTH WEEK

You have turned from your anger to comfort me.

(Responsorial: Isaiah 12:2-6)

Catholics are not afraid to see and admit sin in the Church. Our history includes popes who were lechers and murderers, bishops who were war-lords, and generations of priests ordained just for the financial benefits. Eight percent of the original “college of bishops” sold out Jesus for money (one out of twelve). The first pope cursed and swore that he did not know him (*Matthew 26:74*). Current history stinks of child abuse and bishops’ failure to correct it. We “moan and groan over all the abominations that are practiced within the Church,” as everyone who is human should. But does it frighten or discourage us? No.

In **Ezekiel 16:1-63**, after describing Israel’s sins in images so strong the Church expurgates them from the reading, God says: “Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you... I will re-establish my covenant with you, that you may know that I am the LORD... and be covered with confusion... utterly silenced for shame *when I pardon you for all you have done.*”

God says our greatest punishment will be the shame we feel when he responds to our sins with such overwhelming love. If we want to revenge ourselves on others who offend us, that is the way to do it. *You have turned from your anger to comfort me.* Our ministry is to “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.” But the bottom line is to comfort as we hope to be comforted.

Jesus’ teaching in **Matthew 19:3-12** should not be read in separation from *Matthew 19:16-30*. The texts are parallel in structure: Asked a question, Jesus gives an answer that shocks his disciples, who see it as impossibly unrealistic. Jesus agrees: it can only be accepted by those empowered by God to do so. The first teaching concerns marriage, and the Church reads it as a legal obligation. The second teaching concerns the renunciation of all possessions, and the Church has no legislation about that. But however we interpret them, they are parallel teachings. If either is stronger than the other, it is the repeated insistence on giving up all our possessions as a condition for accepting the Christian (that is, “perfect”) way of life.¹

Nothing in Canon Law itself bans from Communion those in marriages not recognized by the Church (the writers say this is a “conscience matter,” not a juridical issue). But they are often banned in practice by local policy, bred from an obsolete excommunication (deleted Canon 2319), and a pastoral fear of “scandal.” However, the Church has never refused Communion to those scandalously attached to wealth.

Initiative: Condemn sin with mercy. But don’t be blindly selective.

¹ See *Matthew 4:18-22; 5:40-42; 6:19-21, 25-34; 8:19-20; 10:9-10; 19:27-29; Luke 3:11; 12:33; 19:8; Acts 2:45;*

August 16, 2014

SATURDAY NINETEENTH WEEK

Create a clean heart in me, O God.

(Responsorial: Psalm 51)

In ministering to people, we are very aware of Jesus' words: "Woe to you scholars of the law! You impose on people burdens hard to carry, but you yourselves do not lift one finger to ease them." Our desire is always to let Jesus say in us and through us:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you... for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.¹

But sometimes Church law seems unrealistically hard. That is when we need to use the Church's "theology of law" and verify the "doctrinal level" of particular moral teachings.

In **Ezekiel 18:1-32** we have a classic example of how the Church's understanding of what is right and wrong was changed by the "consensus of the laity." The sin of "usury" that Ezekiel condemns twice here did not consist in charging *too much* interest on money. Pope Benedict XIV wrote in 1745 that the "*very nature*" of a *loan* "demands that one return to another *only as much as he has received*." The pope added; "Whenever sermons are preached or instructions on sacred doctrine given, the above opinion must be adhered to strictly. [If anyone] dares to write or preach the contrary... he should be subjected to the penalties imposed by the sacred canons on those who violate Apostolic mandates." As the laity ignored the directive and bishops chose not to enforce it, it was eventually reversed by "contrary custom" as explicitly recognized in Canon Law 26).²

The Church taught you could not charge "rent" for using money as you could for using a mule, because money didn't "work" for you. The bankers saw that the *nature of money* had changed from a simple "medium of exchange" to *capital*. In modern society money "works" for those who invest it. So you can charge interest for letting your money work for someone else. The principles remained the same, but the laity's better understanding of the words brought change to the Church's moral teaching.

While this was being worked out, however, popes, saints and scholars told the bankers they were guilty of mortal sin. Lateran III (1179) decreed that those who accepted interest on loans could not receive the sacraments or Christian burial. *Ministry* requires us to do our homework, keep an open mind, and not be dogmatic about what is non-infallible.

Matthew 19:13-15: The "Kingdom" belongs to children because they are *open*. Everything is new to them.

Initiative: Be suspicious of "heavy burdens." Look to see who imposes them.

¹ *Luke 11:46; Matthew 11: 28-30.*

² Google "*Vix Pervenit*," *Handbook on Islamic Banking*, and "Thomas Storck usury."

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: WEEK NINETEEN OF YEAR II

“What is it” that God is doing in your life? Is this what keeps you alive?

Invitation:

Recall the wonders and mercies of the Lord toward you each day.

Reflect on and pray over these insights: How could your Christian life benefit?

Sunday: Even reserved in the tabernacle, the Eucharist is inseparable from the action of the Mass, which makes present the action of Jesus giving his “flesh for the life of the world.” Eucharist expresses the “mystery of the history” of Christ’s life and death, and calls us to continue it.

Monday: The Messiah Jesus’ disciples perceived him to be was just human: one whose life and work could be terminated by death. That is why they could not accept the prediction of his passion.

Tuesday: God’s words, whether they speak of sin and death, pain and calamity, or of God’s love and goodness to us, are always words of life and love.

Assumption: The Church tramples underfoot the threat of the transitory. For this reason her ministry is not characterized by *fear of change*.

Wednesday: The correct procedure is to *pray together* before discussing any issues that divide us.

Thursday: We don’t *reject* anyone for sin. We raise issues and work for reconciliation. With love.

Friday: God says our greatest punishment will be the shame we feel when he responds to our sins with such overwhelming love.

Saturday: *Ministry* requires us to do our homework, keep an open mind, and not be dogmatic about what is non-infallible.

Initiatives:

Cultivate an underlying intention of always acting with, in and through Christ.

Don’t stop with a human perception of Jesus. See him as he is.

Don’t judge Don’t judge that another is in “mortal sin” unless you can swear to it.

Assumption: Don’t set limits to God’s power or your surrender.

Follow the Gospel. Jesus is a better guide than current custom.

See, Judge, Act with Jesus whose love is the Way, Truth and Life.

Condemn sin with mercy. But don’t be blindly selective.

Be suspicious of “heavy burdens.” Look to see who imposes them.”

August 17, 2014

THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR (Year A)

Mission to unity

Inventory

Where do you “find” God? Experience his presence? Feel you are seeing something of the mystery of what and who he is? Does the Eucharist help you do this?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* invites us to be conscious of God’s presence to us: “If we can be with you even one day, it is better than a thousand without you.”

In the *Opening Prayer* we beg to “love you in all things....” God is the Creator of everything we see, hear, taste and feel. But creation is an ongoing act. If God says, “Be...” he has to hold the note. Our existence, and that of every other person and thing, is an ongoing act of God present in them and acting, giving them their color and form, taste, hardness or softness, translating his goodness into created form. Everything we see is an encounter with God. This adds reverence and mystery, but also unity, to our perception of everything, especially every human being. God is in all. All are called to be one in God. We celebrate this in Eucharist.

In the *Prayer Over the Gifts* we declare that we, who receive everything we have and are from God, nevertheless have something to offer him. Our Eucharistic sacrifice is a “holy *exchange* of gifts.” When we choose to offer what God has created — the bread and wine that represent us in our created humanity — God responds by giving us the Uncreated Gift of his own divine Life and Self. He gives us back the bread and wine as the Body and Blood of Christ. To our own humanity he adds the “grace” of divinity. “In Christ,” as one with him, we are divine.

The gift that is the goal of all is *unity* — unity with God in Christ, unity with one another in Christ. In the *Prayer After Communion* we affirm: “By this sacrament you make us one with Christ.” And all who are one with Christ are one with each other. “By becoming more like him on earth” we overcome all that divides us, until we grow into and form that “perfect man” who is Christ brought to “full stature.”

This is the goal of life and grace: God’s “plan for the fullness of time, to *gather up all things in him*, things in heaven and things on earth,” that being made perfectly one with Christ and all of redeemed humanity, we should “come to share his glory in heaven.” We, his body brought to perfection as “one Christ, loving himself,” will be his glory. In Eucharist we celebrate the “making one” of all things in Christ.¹

“These I will bring”

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7 declares early the “catholicity” of the Church:

The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD.... these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer.... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

The word “catholic” means “throughout the whole” (*kata-holos*). In Christ’s acceptance of the Canaanite woman, a “foreigner,” in **Matthew 15:21-28**, the early Church was making clear to the fundamentalists of the Christian “Pharisee party” who resisted all change, that it was God’s intention from the beginning to bring the Gentiles into the People of God as full and equal members of the Church. To be “catholic” means to

¹ *Colossians* 1:10-27; *Ephesians* 1:3-10; 2:12-22; 4:1-16.

affirm and embrace the unity of a multiplicity of nations in the Church, each expressing and celebrating the same faith according to the concepts and tastes of its own culture. The “heresy of uniformity” is a denial of the Church as “one, holy, *catholic* and apostolic because, by a unity without diversity it distorts the mystery of God bringing together distinct things to be one in Christ.

Unity is the unifying theme of the whole *Eucharistic Prayer*: unity with Jesus offering himself for the salvation of the world; unity now with all who are saved in the oneness of his body on earth; and eschatological unity in the “peace and unity” of his kingdom to be experienced at the “wedding banquet of the Lamb.”

- “The *Eucharistic Prayer* begins with an *opening dialogue* [the three invitations and responses that introduce the *Preface*] that serves to *unite presider and assembly* in offering its Great Thanksgiving with their hearts lifted up. Thus at the outset the prayer is seen as the assembly’s prayer and not simply that of the presider who proclaims it in the assembly’s name.”

- “The *Acclamations* [“Holy, holy, holy...,” “Christ has died...,” Great Amen]... show that the prayer belongs to the *whole assembly*.”

- The *Sanctus* is also meant “to link the praise of God by the assembly to that of the heavenly liturgy [“all the choirs of heaven”] so that *with one voice all creation* praises God.”

- “The *Institution Narrative*... recalls not only what Jesus did at the Last Supper, but what the *whole assembly is doing* right now.” And we *acclaim* it: “Christ has died... is risen... will come again.”

- The *Anamnesis* is a remembrance of the three foundational events of the Covenant (Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension) that unites past and present by *making them present now* in “this life-giving bread, this saving cup.”

It is natural that the *Anamnesis* segues into the *Offering*: “We offer you, Father, this holy and perfect sacrifice, his body and blood...” because *anamnesis* is from the Hebrew *zikkaron*. It means “God makes a covenant; God establishes a sign of the covenant; the sign is *presented to God* so that God will remember and act once again according to the covenant...”

The point of re-calling to God the sacrifice of Christ is that its benefits may be made present to the faithful here and now... The formal remembering before God of the sacrificial life and death of Christ is therefore connected with the offering of bread and wine, through which [we ask that] the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice will be received in holy communion.¹

“We offer...” (plural) also “makes explicit the assembly’s sense of being *united to the redemptive act* of Christ.”

- The second *Epiclesis* calls down the Holy Spirit in a “petition for *unity among the worshippers* who will participate in the gifts” by Communion.

- “The *Intercessions* follow... These are not only intercessions for the living and the dead but expressions of *ecclesial communion* across time and space.”

- The *Doxology* joins Christ and the Spirit to the Father. We can also understand this to say that if we, the Church, act in *union with Christ* — “*through, with, in him*”— in all we do, held together in the “*unity of the Holy Spirit*,” we will effectively give “*all glory and honor*” to the Father as the risen body of Jesus on earth.

The “*Great Amen*” is the united response of the whole assembly to all that has been celebrated in the *Eucharistic Prayer*.

Jesus told the Canaanite woman his mission was “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But ever since Pentecost the words of Eucharist make it clear that his house “shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” God’s “plan for the fullness of time” was and is “to *gather up all things in him*, things in heaven and things on

¹ *Anamnesis* “is practically untranslatable in English. ‘Memorial,’ commemoration,’ ‘remembrance’ all suggest a recollection of the past, whereas *anamnesis* means making present an object or person from the past.” See John B. Ryan, “Eucharistic Prayers,” Peter Fink, “Eucharist, Theology of.” and Frank Senn, “Anamnesis,” in *New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter Fink, S.J., Liturgical Press 1990.

earth.” Only from the perspective of this achieved and to-be-achieved union of all creation in Christ can we understand the Mass.

“Apostle of the Gentiles”

The passage from **Romans 11:13-32** actually concludes:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!.... To him be the glory forever. Amen.

Paul rejoices to give God glory: “I glory in my ministry,” he says, which is to be the “apostle of the Gentiles.” He knows he was called “to make everyone see... the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.” The mystery is that “the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”¹

This was in fulfillment of Jesus’ command to the Eleven before his Ascension: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations [*ethne*: same word in Greek as “Gentiles”].

We “remember” the Ascension, together with Christ’s death and resurrection in the *Anamnesis*, right after the *Institution Narrative*. These are the three events which unify the world and are unified in Eucharist. In Baptism/Eucharist all die and rise in Christ. And before his Ascension Jesus gave his disciples the command to go out, “looking forward to his coming in glory,” and bring the whole human race together into the unity of his Church.

All three events recalled are actually present in the consecrated host, where Christ is present simultaneously as offering himself on the cross, rising from the dead and “seated at the right hand of the Father” to return again in glory. This is the Christ present to us on the altar, the Christ “We offer to you, God of glory and majesty....”

Insight

What unifying theme will help you follow more easily the Eucharistic Prayer?

Initiative:

During the Eucharistic Prayer immerse yourself in the mystery celebrated.

¹ *Ephesians* 3:1-10.

August 18, 2014

MONDAY TWENTIETH WEEK

You have forgotten God who gave you birth.

(Responsorial: Deuteronomy 32:18-21)

Ezekiel 24:15-24: Ezekiel's wife died suddenly. He surrendered, even in his grief, to letting God use this tragedy to give a message to the people. God told him not to observe the mourning customs so important in his culture. Then, when the people asked him why, he was to say, "You shall do as I have done, not covering your beards nor eating the customary bread..." It was a dramatic gesture to impress upon them how dramatic would be the ruin their sins were bringing about. Nebuchadnezzar was going to capture and destroy Jerusalem, and they would be deported as slaves without time or means to make mourning for their dead.

Thus says the Lord GOD: I will now desecrate my sanctuary, the stronghold of your pride, the delight of your eyes, the desire of your soul. The sons and daughters you left behind shall fall by the sword. Ezekiel shall be a sign for you: all that he did you shall do when it happens. Thus you shall know that I am the LORD.

In **Matthew 19:16-22** Jesus is also calling for a dramatic gesture. He begins by challenging a man's use of the word "good"—whether as applied to Jesus himself as "good Teacher" (*Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18*), or to the good we have to do to have eternal life (*Matthew*). Either way, Jesus' point is that, for Christians, "good" means "divine." Jesus is not just a "good" human teacher; God is speaking in him. And has to be, because what Jesus teaches is not just "good" human behavior; it is life on the level of God. Just keeping the Commandments is not enough. Jesus calls for a dramatic gesture to show we understand.

If you wish to be perfect [live the perfect life, Christianity], go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.

Jesus is talking about more than possessions. To follow him we have to give up everything human life holds out to us: not just "houses and fields," but "father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself." What he offers is the "pearl of great price." To possess it we have to trade everything, absolutely everything created that we cherish. Unless we give all, we won't realize that what we are being offered is All. "Eternal life" is not just human life prolonged. It is the Life of God himself, divine life. For this Life we must give our lives. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."¹

Actually, we make this dramatic gesture at Baptism, when we accept to "die" to this world in Christ and rise again to live in it only as his body on earth.

We need to understand this.

Initiative: Be aware that you gave up your life to let Christ live in you.

¹ *Matthew 13:46; 16:25; 19:29; Luke 14:26.*

August 19, 2014

TUESDAY TWENTIETH WEEK

It is I who deal death and give life.

(Responsorial: Deuteronomy 32:26-36)

In **Ezekiel 28:1-10** we see the basic strategy of the devil bearing its fruit. St. Ignatius of Loyola cracked the code: the devil wages a three-step campaign. He tempts us to two things that are not sinful in themselves; that are good, in fact. But if we acquire them, they will lead us into the sin of sins. It is brilliant.

First the devil tempts us to desire riches. The riches of Tyre described in chapter 27 make the artist, the architect, the merchant in us long to see it as it was. Tyre was glorious. In a perfect world, God would want everyone to be rich. But in the real world wealth is deadly.

Riches bring prestige, admiration, honors. Tyre was a city people came from all the earth to see and trade with. Prestige follows riches, and the devil's second step is to make us bask in it.

In an ideal world, we could not honor each other enough to satisfy God. God honors us beyond what we can believe. But when honors come from riches—not just money, but the “wealth” of our accomplishments—they go to our head. We think we earned them by our power. “Our” power, as if every breath we draw were not a new gift from God. We think we are the source of our power, our skills, our brilliance. God says:

Oh yes, you are wiser than Daniel, there is no secret that is beyond you. By your wisdom and your intelligence... applied to your trading, you have heaped up your riches; your heart has grown haughty from your riches.... you have thought yourself to have the mind of a god.

Then the devil closes the trap. We begin to see ourselves as the *criterion* of truth and goodness. Because are so smart, so good, whatever we think must be true; whatever we want must be good. That is to make ourselves God. That is *pride*.¹

This explains why Jesus says in **Matthew 19:23-30**, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Being rich isn't a sin; it is an obstacle. Jesus said it is such an obstacle that his disciples saw no way around it. They asked him: “Who then can be saved?”

Jesus didn't say they were exaggerating. He just looked at them and said, “For human beings this is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” When the same Nabuchadnezzar who razed Tyre threw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the fiery furnace, God kept them happy and healthy in the flames. Still, most of us would prefer not to depend on a miracle to be saved.²

Those who have money are not “rich” if they don't think they own it, and don't think it entitles them to privileges.

Initiative: Remember God is the source of your life and of all you can do with it.

¹ See the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, the “Two Standards” meditation, nos. 136-148.

² See *Daniel*, chapter 3.

August 20, 2014

WEDNESDAY TWENTIETH WEEK

The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

(Responsorial: Psalm 23)

Ezekiel 34:1-11: It does not shock us that God inspires a prophet to condemn the “shepherds of Israel.” Or that the Gospel writers lay chief blame for the murder of Jesus on the “chief priests, elders, scribes and Pharisees,” who were the authorities, official and unofficial, in Judaism. We admire Pope John Paul II for admitting to “a clear sense of my own human frailty” and inviting all Christians to pray for his own, personal conversion, which he called “indispensable for ‘Peter’ to be able to serve his brethren.” He declares himself

convinced that I have a particular responsibility... in *heeding the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which... is open to a new situation....* I insistently pray the Holy Spirit to shine his light upon us, enlightening *all the Pastors and theologians of our Churches, that we may seek—together, of course—the forms in which this ministry may accomplish a service of love recognized by all concerned.* This is an immense task, which we cannot refuse and which *I cannot carry out by myself.*¹

But when Archbishop John Quinn obeyed by writing his book *The Reform of the Papacy*, he knew Catholics would be shocked. He felt the need to explain:

Deeply embedded in the memory of the Church are the Protestant Reformers... who used the word “reform” to include rejection of the papacy...the priesthood...and other things.... Yet, paradoxically... the *Magisterium* of the Church has continually used the word “reform.” The Council of Trent enacted at least 96 specific directives explicitly entitled “reform”.... The first priority of Trent was Church reform.

And he quotes Vatican Council II:

Christ summons his Church to *continual reformation*, of which it is *always in need*, in so far as it is an institution of human beings on earth.²

Nevertheless, Catholics *feel* it is disloyal, disruptive and divisive if any author criticizes the bishops, the pope, or the current “way of exercising” authority in Church government.

But *think* about it: if we are one body, then the health of the whole depends on the proper functioning of each member. Bishops and priests, in particular, have a crucial role. If we do not *all* call them to fidelity, corruption sets in, members defect, and the whole Church sickens.

Now read *Ezekiel* again, asking—but with humility and love—how many of his words apply to bishops, priests, and Church ministers. We don’t *reject* them as “shepherds”; we just want them to *do* what Jesus told Peter: “*Feed my sheep.*” When we see them visibly united to Christ, we will say: “*The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.*”

Matthew 20:1-16: Jesus rewards effort, not time—if our efforts are love.

Initiative: Be involved in the reform of the bishops, priests, laity, and yourself.

¹ John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 1995, nos. 3, 4, 95, 96.

² Herder and Herder (Crossroad), 1999, pp. 36-37.

August 21, 2014

THURSDAY TWENTIETH WEEK

I will pour clean water on you and wash away all your sins.

(Responsorial: Psalm 51)

In **Ezekiel 36:23-28** the Lord says, “I will prove the *holiness* of my great name.” Our prayer, “*Hallowed be thy Name!*” *commits* us to *discipleship*, that we might know God and make him known. We *dedicate* ourselves to the *mission* of bearing *witness* to him when we continue: “*Thy Kingdom come!*” But our love reveals itself as the “steadfast love” of God when we *surrender* to letting Christ *minister* in us and through us with a defenselessness of expression that is undaunted and undeterred: “*Thy will be done!*”

For this we need encouragement. We find it in the *victory* Christ promises and that we ask for when we pray for the “end time”: “*Give us...* [the Bread of the banquet] *and forgive us...*” The “wedding banquet of the Lamb” requires a context of total mutual forgiving. In *Ezekiel* God promises this:

I will prove the holiness of my great name.... The nations shall know that I am the LORD when in their sight I prove my holiness through you.

The defectors will return:

I will... gather you from all the foreign lands, and bring you back to your own land.

As *disciples* the “truth will make us free” from a culture that “ensnares us with empty promises of passing joy”:¹

I will sprinkle clean water upon you to cleanse you from all your impurities, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

He will renew us within as *prophets*:

I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking [away] your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts.

We will live by the “gift of the Spirit,” following his living voice with love:

I will put my spirit within you and make you live [authentically] by my... decrees.

Then we will experience *victory* as *stewards of his kingship*. We shall

live in the land I gave your fathers; you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

These are the fruits of our *ministry* as “*priests in the Priest!*”

Not all ministers are faithful. In **Matthew 12:14-21**, Jesus is addressing “the chief priests and elders.” By implication, they were the ones who “ignored the [king’s] invitation... laid hold of his servants, insulted and killed them.” The king said they “were unfit to come.” High position in the Church guarantees a place in the liturgical celebration of the “wedding banquet” (the Mass), but not at the event itself!

Those who come to Mass appear to have accepted the invitation. But the king throws out those without a “wedding garment,” because they didn’t really come to celebrate a wedding. It is scary to think of how many at Mass are not really there to celebrate.

Initiative: Listen to the invitation. Keep conscious of what it promises.

¹ See *John* 8:32, and *Opening Prayer*, 14th Sunday of the Year.

August 22, 2014

FRIDAY TWENTIETH WEEK

Give thanks to the Lord, his love is everlasting.

(Responsorial: Psalm 107)

Ezekiel 37:1-14: Over and over again we have heard Ezekiel foretelling that the People's sins would bring down death and deportation. And it did. Those not slaughtered by the invaders saw their spouses and children die in exile. And died themselves.

But with God, death does not have the last word. The final, complete revelation of this was the Resurrection of Jesus. But here Ezekiel gives us a preview of what Christ's resurrection means for the rest of us: "See! I will bring spirit into you, that you may come to life."

The prophecy is not just about physical resurrection. The "death and deportation" we see around us in God's People today appears in the death of faith and hope, in the voluntary exile chosen by those who leave the Church, abandoning the Mass and those who assemble for it. God is saying, "See! I can bring spirit into you, that you may come to life."

To those who are saying, "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off," God answers:

O my people, I will open your graves, if I have to, and have you rise from them. I will bring you back to your friends, your family and your Father's house, to the renewed Church that I will show you: the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, in splendor... holy and without blemish.¹

"See! I can bring spirit into you—and into the Church—that you may come to life together."

Those who believe "that there will be a fulfillment of what was spoken by the Lord," will see with their own eyes that "Nothing is impossible with God."²

Ministry lives by this hope.

In **Matthew 22:33-40**, Jesus tells us where ministry goes wrong, and how it can be re-empowered. A "Pharisee" asked him, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He was both a "scholar of the law," a "scribe," and a Pharisee, whose religious focus was on law observance. But Jesus refused to get into his mind-set by "rating" the different Commandments as laws. Instead he went "above and beyond" law by giving two *principles* which were too all-embracing to be treated as specific laws but included them all. He just said, "Love."

Ministry is distorted when we teach people to observe rules instead of making it the rule of our teaching to relate everything we do to consciously *loving* God and others. It is the Spirit of love that revives the "dry bones" of "rule-centered" religion.

Initiative: Think faith, foster hope, live love. Minister to give life.

¹ See *Genesis* 12:1; *Ephesians* 5:27; *Revelation* 21:2.

² *Luke* 1:37, 45; *Matthew* 17:20; 19:26.

August 23, 2014

SATURDAY TWENTIETH WEEK

The glory of the Lord will dwell in our land.

(Responsorial: Psalm 85)

Ezekiel 43:1-7 is the last reading from *Ezekiel*. It assures us, reminds us and calls us to keep reminding ourselves, that, regardless of what we see here and now, “*the glory of the Lord will dwell in our land.*”

Ezekiel’s first task was to prepare his fellow countrymen in Babylon for the final destruction of Jerusalem, which they believed to be inviolable. After that, his prophecy is characterized by the promise of salvation in a new covenant, and he is anxious to lay down the conditions necessary to obtain it. His final chapters are an utopian vision of the Israel of the future, rid of its past evils and reestablished firmly under the rule of the Lord.

We need this vision for the Church today. In the Gospel Jesus is going to blast the “scribes and Pharisees” again, and give directions to his disciples that seem to be unheeded. Lest this leave us with a negative feeling, we need to fill our minds, our imaginations, our dreams and desires with Ezekiel’s vision.

Perhaps no other prophet has stressed the absolute majesty of God as Ezekiel does.... Ultimately, says Ezekiel, whatever God does to or for humans is motivated by zeal for his own holy name. The new heart and the new spirit which must exist under the new covenant cannot be the work of humans; they too must be the work of God. By such teachings he helped prepare for the New Testament doctrine of salvation through grace.¹

The reading leaves much to imagination. Ezekiel just suggests: “a sound like the roaring of many waters,” and “the earth shone with his glory.” The temple was “filled with the glory of the LORD.” For details, read the verses of *Psalm 85*. They inspire.

In **Matthew 23:1-12** Jesus shows us what, in the area of *ministry*, the “work of humans” not united with God looks like. Jesus focuses on dress, “places of honor” at banquets and in church, honorary titles, and anything that makes us look important. The Vatican would have bishops pay no more attention to these directives than military officers and corporate executives do. The last two may have no choice. But bishops have more freedom, if they care to use it.

At the last session of Vatican II, several cardinals, patriarchs, bishops, and theologians gathered to discuss a final proposal to the Council: that the Council Fathers should solemnly pledge apostolic simplicity by renouncing all antievangelical titles such as “Honorary Prelate to His Holiness” (Monsignor). Several hundred bishops were ready for this step. However, time was pressing and the proposal never came to pass.²

Maybe next time.

Initiative: See everything human against a background of the glory of God.

¹ *New American Bible Revised Edition* Introduction to Ezekiel.

² See Bernard Häring, *Priesthood Imperiled*, Triumph Books, 1996, p. 48. To understand, google “Cardinal Rode photos” and “Protonotary Apostolic.”

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: WEEK TWENTY OF YEAR II

God who is beyond our imagining is the God who has chosen to dwell among us.

Invitation:

Seek wisdom, that you may not only live, but live consciously in, with and through God.

Reflect on and pray over these insights: How could your Christian life benefit?

Sunday: Ask how we are “making the most of the time” on Sundays (and other days) “in the light of our last end.” Our “last end” is to be caught up for all eternity in “loving God in all things and above all things.”

For Eucharist to give life as it can, we need to make the *celebration* “come alive.” That depends far less on the ordained priest than on all the baptized priests in the pews.

Monday: Unless we give all, we won’t realize that what we are being offered is All. “Eternal life” is not just human life prolonged. It is the Life of God himself, divine life. For this Life we must give our lives.

Tuesday: Those who have money are not “rich” if they don’t think they own it, and don’t think it entitles them to privileges.

Wednesday: Jesus rewards effort, not time—if our efforts are love.

Thursday: It is scary to think of how many at Mass are not really there to celebrate.

Friday: Ministry is distorted when we teach people to observe rules instead of making it the rule of our teaching to relate everything we do to consciously *loving* God and others.

Saturday: Jesus shows us what, in the area of *ministry*, the “work of humans” not united with God looks like. Jesus focuses on dress, “places of honor” at banquets and in church, honorary titles, and anything that makes us look important.

Initiatives:

Celebrate at Mass until everybody else is.

Be aware that you gave up your life to let Christ live in you.

Remember God is the source of your life and of all you can do with it.

Be involved in the reform of the bishops, priests, laity, and yourself.

Listen to the invitation. Keep conscious of what it promises.

Filter your impressions of others through love with hope based on faith.

Think faith, foster hope, live love. Minister to give life.

See everything human against a background of the glory of God.

AUGUST 24, 2014

THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR (Year A)

One People

Inventory

How do you feel about the Church? What is your emotional tone when you say “the Church”? What people are you thinking of? The hierarchy? The priests? Your grandmother? Your “drinking buddies”? People like Francis of Assisi, Dorothy Day and Cesar Chavez? In all of the above, who come first to mind?

Input

In the *Entrance Antiphon* we are obviously worried. “Save your servant who trusts in you.” Not everything we see around us, even (or at times especially) in the Church gives us confidence. But we know the answer to worry – all worry: “I call to you all day long.” If there ever comes a moment in the day when God is not there to call to, we will have something to worry about! Until then we find peace, confidence and security saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord.”

To have “mercy” means to “come to the aid of another out of a sense of *relationship*.” That is what today’s readings are all about: relationship with each other in the Church sustained by God. The Father has made us his own children. The Son has made us his own body. They have sent the Spirit to dwell in our hearts that we might all be “one body, one spirit in Christ.” The *Responsorial (Psalm 138)* sums up our faith and our hope: “*Lord, your love is eternal. Do not forsake the work of your hands.*”

In the *Opening Prayer(s)* we ask God to “make us one in mind and heart.” This is an echo of the “second *Epiclesis*” of the *Eucharistic Prayer*: that, having been made one body by participation in the death and rising of Jesus, we might be “brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit.” We repeat it in the *Prayer Over the Gifts*: “Merciful God, the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ made us your people. In your love *grant peace and unity* to your Church.”

This unity depends on union of *mind* and *will*, which in turn depends on communal recognition God’s *truth*: “All truth is from you, and you alone bring oneness of heart” (alternate *Opening Prayer*). The Church exists to unite and keep us united to God and to each other in communal acceptance of what God says is true and good.

One For All

In **Isaiah 22:19-23** God chooses Eliakim to have authority over his people: “I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open.”

In **Matthew 16:13-20** Jesus chooses Peter to have authority in his Church, using almost the same words: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Every right, and every authority, is given by God to enable the fulfillment of some obligation. Eliakim’s obligation was: “He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah.” That meant he was responsible for their well-being. And God would hold him accountable for it. The obligation Jesus laid on Peter was to “Strengthen your brothers” in faith and “Feed my sheep.”¹

Authority and obedience are just two sides of the same coin. Exercising human authority is an act of obeying

¹ See *Luke 22:31-32*; *John 21:15-17*.

God. If not, it is making oneself to “be like God,” presuming to “know good and evil” as only God can and does.

God’s creative *fiat* (“Let it be”) determines what things *are* by giving them existence in a nature he designed for a purpose. God, and God alone, determines the end and purpose of everything that is. Consequently, actions are good or bad in the measure that they foster or frustrate that purpose. When human authorities believe that their *fiat* can determine what actions or use of things will be “good or evil,” they are blindly assuming that they are “like God.” And many do, consciously or unconsciously, slide or fall into precisely this assumption.

Even parents, when their children repeat too tiresomely, “Why do I have to...?” sometimes make the mistake of saying, “Because I said so!” The parent may know this is shorthand for saying, “I can’t explain the reason to you now, but I am responsible to God for you. That responsibility obliges me to make some decisions, and when I do. God requires you to obey them.” But to give only the shorthand version can send a very wrong message. It may plant a destructive attitude in child and adult both. For Christians, commanding is essentially an act of obeying. And obeying human authority is an act of participating in the authority’s obedience to God. If not, it is idolatry.

All those to whom God gives authority in the Church are “servants of the servants of God.” This makes them, in an official and specific way, what every Christian is as a member of the body of Christ: a “one for the many.” All Christians anointed to Christ’s mission by Baptism have the responsibility as *priests* to nurture others and “build up the Church.” And as *stewards* of the kingship of Christ, to work for the common good. But some are also given *power* through authority. This lays specific burdens on their shoulders.

That is why we pray especially during the *Intercessions* for those in the Church who bear the heavy duty of authority.

After the second *Epiclesis*, conscious of the Spirit summoning us to unity, we reach out in the *Intercessions* to embrace one another as Church, and as Church to embrace the world.

We first pray by name for “*N. our Pope, N. our bishop,*” and we add, “*and all the clergy.*” We single these out, not because they are “more important” than the laity, but because our focus is on *unity*, and the first duty of authorities is to hold the Church together. *Authorities* are responsible for keeping the Church united; *leaders* for moving it forward. A leader does not have to have authority, and not all authorities have significant gifts of leadership. But because authorities have power, and because the way they use it has so much impact on the Church — and also because power puts them in so much danger of corruption — we pray especially for the clergy and bishops in every Mass.¹

In the liturgy we pray for the bishop of Rome by his nickname — “pope” which means “papa” — rather than by his sacramental title, “bishop.” This can make us forget that there is no distinct office of “pope.” Doing what the pope does is just an added function consequent on being ordained bishop of Rome. It is significant that when Jorge Bergoglio (now Francis) was elected in 2013 he referred to himself, not as “pope,” but as “bishop of Rome.”

Today, instead of ordaining someone bishop of Rome, we elect an existing bishop pope. This reverses Rome’s consistent refusal during virtually the entire first millennium to elect as bishop of Rome anyone who had been or already was bishop of another see. The first departure from this practice occurred in the election of Marinus II in 882.

In those days they took seriously

the repeated condemnations of the movement of a bishop from see to see, a prohibition that constituted canon 15 of [the Council] of Nicea [from whence comes the “Nicene Creed” that we use as our *Profession of Faith* at Mass, and] canon 5 of Chalcedon,... The Council of Alexandria (338) even called such a translated bishop an adulterer....

Translation was not considered simply a matter of canonical discipline. The legislation involved an implicit theology of the relationship of a bishop with his see and the sacredness and inviolability of their union....

¹ We would be fools to forget Lord Acton’s words: “Power corrupts....” We take them seriously and pray.

In summary: For centuries in the early Church “the relationship of a bishop to his church was seen as a spiritual marriage.” This theological understanding carried with it two implications: (a) “like the assent of partners in a marriage, the [local] church’s ‘yes’ must be freely given”; (b) the translation of a bishop to another see was prohibited except in very rare cases.¹

We need to pray for our bishop as spouses pray for each other. And we value our bishops for more than whatever gifts or talents they have. The bishops are our historical link with the community that first gathered around Jesus. Our connection with the bishop connects us vertically with all the bishops who preceded him, reaching back to the time of the apostles. Horizontally, it connects us with all the other bishops, and their churches, “throughout the world.” In one word, we need the bishops for *unity*.

If... I have become so close a friend of your bishop, in a friendship not based on nature but on spiritual grounds, how much more blessed do I judge you to be, for you are as united with him as the Church is to Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ to the Father, so that all things are in harmony through unity.... For if the prayer of one or two has such power, how much more has the prayer of the bishop and the whole Church.²

Insight

Why do we need to pray especially for the clergy and bishops at Mass?

Initiative:

During the *Intercessions*, pray for *union with* and *unity within* the Church.

¹ Michael Buckley, S.J., *Papal Primacy and the Episcopate*. Crossroad-Herder, 1998, pp. 90-94. The book came out of an invitation Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and now Pope Benedict XVI, extended to the author “to participate in the symposium sponsored by the Congregation on ‘the primacy of the successor of Peter.’” An earlier version of the book was published by the Vatican under the title “*Perpetuum Utriusque Unitatis Principium ac Visible Fundamentum: The Primacy and the Episcopate: Towards a Doctrinal Synthesis*,” © Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 1997.

² From St. Ignatius' *Letter to the Ephesians*, written around 110 A.D. It is used in the Office of Readings for the 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time.

August 25, 2014: (Begin 2Thessalonians)
MONDAY TWENTY-FIRST WEEK

Proclaim his marvelous deeds to all the nations.

(Responsorial: Psalm 96)

A psychological “growth game” is to have a group decide on something they want a person sent out of the room to do on return. When the one who is “it” comes back, the group tries to get the person to do what was decided, just by calling out “yes” or “no” in response to any blind action in the right or wrong direction. Experience shows that the person succeeds faster if guided only by “yes” rather than only by “no,” but succeeds fastest if guided by both.

Today’s readings are a “yes” and “no” for ministry. **2Thessalonians 1:1-12**, is a “yes.” “Paul, Silvanus and Timothy” are praising the ministry of the local church “because your faith flourishes and your mutual love increases—so much so that in the churches of God we can boast of your constancy and faith in persecution and trial.” The writers are saying, “yes, yes.”

We need to affirm one another for every good thing we see happening. Too often ministers, both laity and clergy, hear only complaints about what people perceive as bad. The “no’s” are helpful for guidance, but “yeses” more so. And best is a combination of both. Begin by saying “yes” every time you can find or make an opportunity to do so, because that is what is most lacking and most needed.

In **Matthew 23:13-22** Jesus takes his raging criticism of the ministry of the “scribes and Pharisees” to a deeper level. Last Friday he focused on dress, special seating at banquets and in church, honorary titles, and anything else that makes us look important. Today he “goes postal” over what keeps people from the “kingdom of heaven” or drives them away. “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees,” he says: “Hypocrites, spawn of hell, snakes, brood of vipers, blind guides, blind fools, full of hypocrisy and lawlessness like whitewashed tombs that are full of dead bones and all kinds of filth, offspring of those who murdered the prophets, how can you escape being sentenced to hell?”

Jesus was talking to the recognized ministers and most respected people in the church of his time, the “assembly of Israel.” He was yelling, “No! No!”¹

Sometimes you have to. These false ministers were “locking people out of the kingdom of heaven,” stopping them from going in. When anyone believed them, they made the new convert “twice as much a child of hell as themselves.” They were reversing priorities, focusing on what is done and forgetting what (or Who) gives it meaning and value. Against this we all have to shout, “No!”

Initiative: Affirm all who are trying. But don’t be silent about abuses.

¹ The Septuagint bible used the Greek *ekklesia* (our Latin word for church) for the *kahal* of Israel, the religious assembly of the Jews. See *Deuteronomy* 3:31; *Joshua* 8:35. “Church” (kirk, *Kirche*) is from the Greek *kyriakon*, “the Lord’s house” (John McKenzie, S.J., *Dictionary of the Bible*).

August 26, 2014

TUESDAY TWENTY-FIRST WEEK

The Lord comes to judge the earth.

(Responsorial: Psalm 96)

In **2Thessalonians 2:1-16**, the apostles are saying “no” to destructive ministries that are being taken for granted in the Church today. The apostles warn the Thessalonians not to be “shook up” or alarmed by any “manifestation of the Spirit (“oracular utterance”), or rumor, or letter claiming to come from us.”¹

But there is not much outcry today against the spate of private revelations (“oracular utterances”) from unapproved visionaries predicting dire punishments from God against those who commit selected sins; or against those spreading “rumors” about the laxity of faith and morals due to the “permissiveness” and “false direction” taken by Vatican II; or against preachers “claiming” to be “faithful to the *magisterium*” when they don’t even know what the word really means. (*Magisterium* is a “deadly weapon” in the hands of those who don’t distinguish between the “ordinary” and “extraordinary” exercise of the teaching office in the Church or the limitations of its authority). The apostolic writers say, “Let no one seduce you, no matter how.”

We would specify, “Especially if they come to you as wolves in sheep’s clothing.” Not everyone dressed in clerical attire or wearing the ring of a bishop can be trusted, as all history, from the Borgia popes to our era’s crass protectors of child abusers attests. Jesus says, “You will know them by their fruits.” We should add, the same is true for lay ministers. It is not ordination that corrupts; it is faulty formation, Phariseeism, prestige and power.²

In **Matthew 23:23-26** Jesus blasts those who “neglect the weightier things of the law: judgment and mercy and fidelity,” while concentrating on trivia. We can’t help thinking of the Roman Curia and bishops who, judging from the time and attention they give, are more concerned, about Eucharistic ministers “approaching the altar” for Communion before the (ordained) priests and deacons have received, than they are about the millions who no longer receive Communion at all because their “spiritual needs were not being met” in the Catholic church; in particular at Sunday Mass. The bishops have given massive support to the Vatican’s project to “latinize” the English translation of the Mass while the goals of their own potentially Church-transforming pastoral letter “Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us” (USCCB 1999) are hardly remembered. (Can you name them?) Is this a “gnat and camel” issue?³

Initiative: Be concerned. Love the shepherds. But be concerned for the sheep.

¹ Compare the old and new lectionary translations and the *New Jerusalem Bible*.

² *Matthew* 7:15-16.

³ See Thomas Reese, *National Catholic Reporter* online, 4/18/11.

August 27, 2014

WEDNESDAY TWENTY-FIRST WEEK

Happy are those who fear the Lord.

(Responsorial: Psalm 128)

2Thessalonians 3:6-18 may shock us:

Shun any believer living in idleness and not according to the tradition received from us.

This probably meant members who had stopped working for a living, because they believed Christ's return to be imminent, and were a problem in the community. But because of the distasteful history of "shunning" in Christianity and other religions, this shocks us.

The closest we come to "shunning" is the unofficial (therefore dishonest and cowardly) "excommunication" of those to whom we deny Communion for not being in "good standing" by norms of Church discipline, even though it would be rash presumption to judge them guilty of "mortal sin." But we treat them as if they were.

This is two-faced.

Parents try to keep their teenagers away from "bad companions" who drink and use drugs. But we don't "shun" the fraternity-sorority crowd who, according to one "graduate" from that milieu, "exist to form people to the conformism necessary for success in the corporate world." True or false, the charge should make us question peer groups whose socially acceptable customs are contrary to the all-embracing love shown by Jesus.

We should also weigh the authors and speakers we do and do not "shun." American bishops have banned fellow-bishop Geoffrey Robinson, former head of Australia's sex-abuse committee, from speaking on church property, because his book *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church*, (Liturgical Press, 2008) raises questions they don't want raised. On the other hand, Father John Corapi, who advertised himself as "faithful to the *magisterium*," was a favorite on Eternal Word Television and welcomed in conservative parishes all over the country until his religious order's investigative team declared him "unfit for ministry," having discovered that he "repeatedly abused alcohol and drugs," sex, and owned over \$1 million in real estate and luxury vehicles.¹

Those who proclaim most loudly their loyalty to the "*magisterium*" are most likely the ones least faithful to it.

In **Matthew 23:27-32** Jesus warns us against judging by externals. But externals are all we can judge by, since we cannot see into anyone's heart. So we must choose our externals. Law observance and participation in undemanding but comforting devotions are good; as are appointments to parish councils and ministries. But these were also the benchmarks of the "chief priests, elders, scribes and Pharisees" who hated what Jesus preached and plotted his death. Look for externals that are signs of the action of the Spirit.

Initiative: Live by the Spirit. Seek out others who do.

¹*SOLT News*, Official News Blog for the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity, July 5 2011. Reflect on St. Paul's balanced but passionately free stance toward the *magisterium* In *Galatians* 1:6 to 2:21.

August 28, 2014 (Begin 1Corinthians)
THURSDAY TWENTY-FIRST WEEK

I will praise your name forever, Lord.
(Responsorial: Psalm 145)

1Corinthians 1:1-9 shows us the kind of Christians Paul wanted to form.

First, he wants them to see themselves as “*sanctified in Christ Jesus*.” From earliest childhood, every Christian should be made aware of having a *mystical identity* that comes from being “in Christ.” We are “sanctified” by sharing in God’s own divine life by being incorporated into Christ’s body. *Nothing makes sense without the mystery of our identification with Christ.*

“*Called to be holy*”: To be a Christian is *per se* to be called to holiness; really, to *perfection*. Vatican II taught: “*All the faithful of Christ... are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity... Every Catholic must therefore aim at Christian perfection.*” It follows that “the work of *ministry*” is to bring every single person “to maturity, to... the full stature of Christ.”¹

For this we need to be “*enriched in every way, with all discourse and all knowledge*. Christian life is *learning*. Ministry must include forming people to be *disciples*, “students” of God’s mind.

“*So you are not lacking in any spiritual gift*”: the work of *ministry* is to make people aware of the “Gift of the Spirit,” and teach them to let it empower them to live lives of *prophetic witness*; lives that raise questions only faith can answer.

“*You were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus...*” Christian life is *koinonia*, communal sharing, which involves *expressing* our faith, hope and love to one another. To *surrender* to the Spirit by doing this is an act of *baptismal priesthood*.

“*He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord.*” We must persevere in ministry that helps others persevere as *faithful stewards* of the kingship of Christ, working to bring all together in unity and peace until he comes again.

Ministry that neglects to form people in any one of these ways is incomplete.

Matthew 24:42-51 focuses on our call to be “faithful, farsighted servants” to whom the Lord entrusts the care of his household, to “distribute to them their food at the proper time.” And adds, “Blessed is that servant whom the master on his arrival finds doing so.” Ministry is nourishing, nurturing, “feeding the sheep” as Jesus told Peter three times to do, “If you love me.”²

Nothing corrupts ministry faster than forgetting that 1. the focus must be on the *sheep*, on their needs. And that 2. our first duty is to *feed* them—not to reproach, correct, govern, discipline or call them to order. Those ministries only work when the sheep are well fed.

Initiative: Until all are one with Christ, count your ministry incomplete.

¹ Church no. 40; *Ecumenism* no. 4; *Matthew* 5:48; *Romans* 12:1-2; *Ephesians* 4:11-13; *Hebrews* 6:1.

² *John* 21:15-17.

August 29, 2014

FRIDAY TWENTY-FIRST WEEK

The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord.

(Responsorial: Psalm 33)

What is the “verbal wisdom” (*sophia logou, sapientia verbi*) Paul disclaims in **1Corinthians 1:17-25**? It is knowledge that is able to use words correctly in sentences without ever asking what the words themselves really mean. We do it all the time. For example what do we mean by the words we hear at every Mass: “the *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ?” The “*communion* of the Holy Spirit”? What does “Lord, have *mercy*” actually mean? How does Jesus “*take away*” the sins of the world? (Just *forgiving* sins does not take away guilt or change the one forgiven in any way). Why does Jesus have to be the “*Lamb of God*” to do it? Why do we say to Jesus, “you *alone* are the Holy One... the Lord... the Most High”?

Every one of these terms is incomprehensible unless we know the *mystery* each is expressing. If we are not awed and excited every time we hear them, we are still on the level of “verbal knowledge,” without having penetrated to the deep level of what these mean to those who have the gift of faith.¹

We need to repeat over and over, “All *ministry* is the expression and communication of *mystery*.” If we are just “helping people,” that is good, admirable, pleasing to God, and not nearly common enough in the Church or society; but it is not Christian *ministry*. And it “falls short” of what God wants us to do.

Matthew 25:1-13 makes the point that Christian life is a constant expectation of something *more*. The bridesmaids were waiting to welcome the groom. To wait is to be aware that something is coming. To wait “with our torches lit” is to wait with enough light to know what that “something” is. The “wise bridesmaids” weren’t just waiting for something. Their “something” was a “someone.” They were waiting for the bridegroom. They kept their torches burning, kept their light alive. When the shout came, “The groom is here! Come out and greet him!” they were ready.

It is easy to “doze off.” We all do. We all forget what we are waiting for, what life is all about. But if we are *nurturing* the light within us, continually supplying oil to our lamps by reading, reflection, discussing with others our experience of God, our understanding of the voices we have heard, we will be able to wake up without disorientation, aware that *the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord*.

Initiative: Share your oil with others. Ministry is keeping lamps lit.

¹ For “grace” see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1997; for “communion”; see nos. 946-962. The *Catechism* does not define “mercy,” which is “to come to the aid of another out of a sense of *relationship*,” but explains its exercise well in no. 2212. To understand how Christ “takes away” sin, read *Romans* 6:3-4; *2Corinthians* 5:14-21. For “you alone,” see Wednesday of Week Eleven and *Experiencing the Mass*, Abbey Press 2011, “The Gloria.”

August 30, 2014

SATURDAY TWENTY-FIRST WEEK

Happy the people the Lord has chosen to be his own.

(Responsorial: Psalm 33)

1Corinthians 1:26-31 takes us right down to the nucleus of our existence. Both the *metaphysics* and the *mystery* of the life we are living are summed up in the words:

God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

“God is the source of our life” means two things. First, it reminds us that there is no explanation in us or in the universe, none whatsoever, for the fact that we exist. There is nothing created that explains creation itself. Whatever the *process* was that produced the latest “update” of human nature or any other, something had to “be” to be updated. And even that which obviously is, just as obviously has nothing within itself to explain why it continues in existence. We exist only because, and as long as, God who said, “Let it be!” at the dawn of creation is continuing to say it. God’s living, ongoing creative “word” is the “source of our life”— at it “was in the beginning, is now and ever will be.”

So we have no more to “boast of” than the light that shines only as long as the electricity is on.

But “God is the source of our life” in a second way. God has come into us to live his own divine life within us. He joined us to himself in the body of Christ to act with us, in us and through us. This means we share in God’s own divine life. Now we live and can act “through him, with him, and in him.” Jesus, as God, is the source of our life,” both human and divine.

If God gives all the existence and power to our human actions, he is even more the “source” of everything we can do as sharers in his divine life. So when Paul writes: “Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful,” he is talking about something of no consequence at all. “Human standards” forget that no one has any wisdom and power at all unless it is being given at this moment by God. So no one has anything to boast of.

The bottom line is, if you feel “incompetent” to *minister* to others, wake up. You can’t be more nothing than nothing. We are all equal in that. And whatever God is making you, that makes you “really something.” Be that. *Happy the people the Lord has chosen to be his own!*

But use what God is giving you. Whatever you are, be it in *action*. In **Matthew 25:14-30** God doesn’t care what each one had to work with, just that they put it to work for him. *Ministry* is the purpose, meaning and joy of life.

Initiative: Be what you are. Do what you can.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: WEEK TWENTY-ONE, YEAR II

Our daily choices need to be rooted in our underlying commitment to become one in heart and mind with Christ.

Invitation:

Rejoice in your commitment. Choose everything based on that. Share with others a choice you've made.

Reflect on and pray over these insights: How could your Christian life benefit?

Sunday: At Eucharist we are *in* Christ's body lifted up at the *consecration-elevation* when the presider repeats Christ's words, "This is my body, given for you." Without the crucifixion, there could be no Eucharist. Had he not given his flesh on the cross, Jesus could not give us his "flesh to eat." Without joining him on the cross, we cannot join him at the table. The "curse" of Christ's death and the blessing of Eucharist are one and the same. We accept both or neither.

Monday: We need to affirm one another for every good thing we see happening. Too often ministers, both laity and clergy, hear only complaints about what people perceive as bad.

Tuesday: It is not ordination that corrupts; it is faulty formation, Phariseeism, prestige and power.

Wednesday: Look for externals that are signs of the action of the Spirit.

Thursday: Nothing corrupts ministry faster than forgetting that 1. the focus must be on the *sheep*, on their needs. And that 2. our first duty is to *feed* them—not to

reproach, correct, govern, discipline or call them to order. Those ministries only work when the sheep are well fed.

Friday: We need to repeat over and over, "All *ministry* is the expression and communication of *mystery*."

Saturday: God has come into us to live his own divine life within us, joining us to himself in the body of Christ to act with us, in us and through us. This means that "in Christ" we share in Christ's own divine life and act "through him, with him, and in him.

Initiatives:

Welcome opportunities to declare your Christian stance. Begin with Mass.

Affirm all who are trying. But don't be silent about abuses.

Be concerned. Love the shepherds. But be concerned for the sheep.

Live by the Spirit. Seek out others who do.

Until all are one with Christ, count your ministry incomplete.

Share your oil with others. Ministry is keeping lamps lit.

Be what you are. Do what you can

What has this booklet done for you?

These reflections were designed to help you understand better your baptismal consecration as *priest*: that is, as one consecrated and committed to *mediate God's life to others* by *giving expression* to the life of grace within you.

It will help to look back and review what you have seen, asking how you have responded in *choices* and how you might respond. Remember, the effectiveness of input is measured by the authenticity of output.

- Did you read these reflections? Did you spend time thinking about them?
- Did they help you understand and appreciate more “the breadth and length and height and depth” of love?
- What do you know about *ministry* now that you didn't know before?
- Did these reflections confirm you in your choice to live out your baptismal consecration as *priest in the Priest and victim in the Victim*?
- Did these reflections lead you to make any *decisions*; for example, to change something in the way you interact with other people or express your faith, hope and love to them?
- **More specifically...**
 - Do you have a clearer and deeper appreciation of the connection between *being Christ* by Baptism and *expressing* his life physically?
 - Do you see more clearly that the first and guiding law of all ministry is Jesus' command to Peter, “If you love me, ‘*Feed my sheep*’”(John 21: 15-17)? Do you understand how *legalism* violates this law?
 - Do you see more clearly that ministry is a process of growing and helping others grow into the “*perfection of love*” — both for God and others?
 - Do you accept that to minister as Jesus we must surrender to his “way of the cross,” enduring all, loving all, no matter what is done to us?
 - Do you understand that ministry is a “dying to self” to live totally for God and other people in love?
 - Are you determined to make your every interaction with people a ministry to them, trying to enhance their lives through love?



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