

Step Two of the *Immersed in Christ* Faith Formation Series



## **BE A DISCIPLE**

*By listening to the voice of God*

*Daily Reflections for Ordinary Time I*  
Year A, 2014

**IMMERSED IN CHRIST**  
**FAITH FORMATION SERIES**

**AN INTENSIVE, FIVE-STEP JOURNEY**  
**IN MAKING REAL**  
**THE PROMISES OF OUR BAPTISM**

**BY FR. DAVID M. KNIGHT**

## Explanation: A Moment for Mystery:

Have you heard Jesus say, “*You are the light of the world!*”? Have you heard him say it to you? Really heard it? Do you really believe it?

He did say it. Word for word. To all of us (*Matthew 5:14*). But we may have heard it as if he were speaking on ground level. On the level of metaphor; not mystery.

If that is the way we heard it, we have never heard it. And if we have never heard it, the Gospel has not been preached to us. If we are not *immersed in mystery*, we are not immersed in Christ. We are only dabbling our feet in Christianity.

Imagine Jesus Christ standing before you. Looking into your eyes and saying, “*You are the light of the world!* I who am the Light of Life am sharing my Life with you. Now my Light is your Light. You are a mystery of light shining in the darkness. Let your light shine! Give glory to your Father in heaven!”

What does that do to you? How can you ever be the same?

God has given us *enlightenment*. And promised us more. To all who read his words he promises enlightenment. God promises. To everyone who reads. How can we stay away from a guaranteed source of mystical enlightenment? From a channel of light that is certified to deliver? Certified by Jesus Christ himself, “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.” How could anyone, offered the gift of divine enlightenment by Jesus himself, turn away from being a *disciple*?<sup>1</sup>

If we turn away, the *Liturgy of the Word* calls us back. In every Mass.

This booklet is meant to do two things: guide and encourage you as a “*disciple*” — that is, as an ongoing “student” of the mind and heart of Jesus Christ; and do it by deepening your appreciation for the *Liturgy of the Word* at Mass in a way that will help you to get more out of the readings.

The Church’s instructions on liturgy tell us:

*The liturgy of the word must be celebrated in such a way as to promote meditation .... in which the Word of God is taken into the heart by the fostering of the Holy Spirit and response to it is prepared by prayer.”*<sup>2</sup>

To “promote meditation” this booklet offers reflections on the readings for every day during Lent, and for Weeks 5-9 of “Ordinary Time.”

On Sundays the Gospel is set by the cycle: Year A is *Matthew*; Year B *Mark*; Year C *Luke*. The first reading is chosen to match the Gospel, and taken from anywhere in the Old Testament. The *Responsorial* gives us the theme of it and the Gospel.

On weekdays in “Ordinary Time” the Gospel readings are the same every year. From Week One through Week Nine we read the Gospel of Mark. From Monday of Week Ten through Week Twenty-One we read Matthew. From Weeks Twenty-Two through Thirty-Four Luke. John comes in during Christmas and Lent.

This year we are focusing on the first reading, which covered *Hebrews* through Week Four. Week Five begins with the first chapter of *Genesis*, the first book of the Bible. An exciting beginning.

These reflections are meant to be deep and challenging. They take us to the roots of our faith and call for fruits worthy of the gift of divine life that we received in Baptism. Some thoughts may be shocking. In *Acts* evangelization typically began with an event that shocked by raising questions that could only be answered by the Gospel. May God grant that these reflections will raise questions in our hearts that will make us look for

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<sup>1</sup> To be a *disciple* it is not enough to “follow Jesus.” The word “disciple” means “student.” Those Jesus called in the Gospels to be “disciples” he called aside for special instruction (*Mark 4:34*).

<sup>2</sup> *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, 2000, no. 56; *Documents of Vatican II: The Church*, no. 11.

answers by reading the Good News more attentively than we ever have before! May God move us to read them with an open mind.

These reflections “zoom in” on whatever there is in the lectionary readings that speaks to the theme of *discipleship*, “*metanoia*,” the “complete makeover” of mind and heart and direction that is the purpose and focus of Lent. We read them to be challenged.

Reflection on Scripture is *discipleship*. It is accepting the gift of Light. If we read and reflect on the word of God we will experience the *enlightenment* promised to us at Baptism. The Church believes:

*In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven meets his children with great love and speaks with them. And the force and power in the word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church.*<sup>1</sup>

These reflections simply aim to help us listen for the voice of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Vatican II, “Liturgy,” no. 33.

February 9, 2014

## THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF YEAR A

### We Are the Light of the World

#### Inventory

Is anything wrong with our society? Closer to home, is there anything wrong in your family life? In your work situation? In your social life? Do you ever blame God for any of it? After all, we say that he is our “maker... the Lord our God.” Doesn’t that give him some responsibility?

#### Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* calls us to “worship the Lord... bow down in the presence of our maker.” We “bow down” before him in adoration because he is awesome, all powerful, the one who gave and is giving us right now our very existence. For this we owe him respect and trusting obedience: “He is the Lord our God.”

The *Opening Prayer(s)* build on this: “Father, watch over your family... keep us safe... all our hope is in you.” God, as the Giver of existence, is all present. He is in all things, sustaining them in existence, giving them power to act. So we say, “No thought of ours is left unguarded, no tear unheeded, no joy unnoticed.” We do say he has assumed responsibility for our well-being. So why are things such a mess?

The prayers *Over the Gifts* and *After Communion* focus on God helping us through the “bread and wine” which, having become the Body and Blood of Christ “give us nourishment” and “make us one in Christ.” How does that solve our problems?

The *Communion* prayer ends with a surprise: “Help us to bring your salvation and joy to all the world.” God is making it *our* responsibility to straighten things out on earth. That changes the meaning of “all our hope is in you.” Now it means we are trusting in him to *help us do* what needs to be done. We are the world’s only hope, and our hope is in what God empowers us to do.

The prayers point to the way he does it through the Mass. His Body and Blood “give us nourishment” and “make us one,” united in faith, mutual support and action. But there is more. We must not overlook the power in the *Liturgy of the Word*. God nourishes, strengthens and unites us through his word:

*The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since from the table of both the word of God and of the body of Christ she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life, especially in the sacred liturgy.*<sup>1</sup>

Now it all comes together: God’s answer to the darkness of the world is to put his light in us and send us out to “give light to all in the house,” everywhere we are: at home, at work, in social and civic life. Jesus said, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” But since we are his body, he is in the world as long as we are. He said to his disciples, “You are the light of the world.” We are sent out “to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide their feet into the way of peace.” For this we need to be students of his word.<sup>2</sup>

#### We need to shine

The *Responsorial (Psalm 112)* gives the key to all the readings: “*The just are a light in darkness to the upright.*” Those Christians who are “just,” who live by what they believe, are a “light in darkness” to anyone

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<sup>1</sup> Vatican II, “Revelation,” no. 21.

<sup>2</sup> *John 9:5; Matthew 5:14-15; Luke 1:79.*

who is “upright” enough to be open to truth. Jesus said, “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice,” and “Whoever listens to you listens to me.”

Whatever religion people follow, if they are in contact with God, they can communicate with anyone else who knows God. John said, “Whoever knows God listens to us.” And if we know God, we will listen to anyone else who does. Light does not reject light. And when believers are unified in light, they are a force to contend with.<sup>1</sup>

**Isaiah 58:7-10** puts the emphasis on living the light. In us it shines through our actions. We Christians, especially Catholics, are certainly at fault for not sharing our faith in words. We are embarrassed to show devotion. We don’t take seriously enough the warning of Jesus, “Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.” But our greatest failure is in living out the faith in action.<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah says, “If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech...” We may accuse ourselves of these sins on the personal level — if we ourselves take advantage of others, lie, or destroy acquaintances’ reputations. But do we take responsibility for the ways we as a nation oppress and exploit others economically? Do we repeat the accusations against politicians and public figures that are proliferated on the internet and in the media without checking them out? Do we listen to those talk shows that with a thin veneer of humor are nothing but negative humor and hate? Hate divides, and is the work of the devil. Those guided by the Spirit follow the principle St. Ignatius of Loyola enunciated so well:

*Every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor’s statement than to condemn it. Further, if one cannot interpret it favorably, one should ask how the other means it. If that meaning is wrong, one should correct the person with love. And if this is not enough, search out every appropriate means through which, by understanding the statement in a good way, it may be saved.<sup>3</sup>*

How much would this practice alone help to heal the divisions between “conservatives” and “liberals” in the Church? Not to mention politics!

It is in **Matthew 5:13-16**<sup>4</sup> that Jesus tells us we are the “light of the world.” At the same time he tells us we are the “salt of the earth.” In the Bible salt brings out the taste in food and preserves it. Metaphorically, it is that which keeps human relationships peaceful and makes speech gracious and intelligent.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus says salt is “good for nothing but to be thrown out” when it goes flat. But light is useless when it is invisible, hidden “under a bushel basket.” So he says to us who know him, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

This is the answer to the mess the world is in. Christians need to let the light that is in them shine in the darkness. We need to speak out the truth revealed to us. And let it become visible in our actions. Jesus identifies letting the “light shine” with people seeing our “good works.” Not to give us credit for them — that doesn’t seem to enter his mind — but to “give glory to your Father in heaven.” In heaven. Our “works” should visibly be inspired by ideals so far above ground level, beyond cultural human values, that people will recognize we are empowered “from above.” By our Father in heaven.

Letting our light shine doesn’t begin in the marketplace, the voting booth or in the ranks of political protest. It begins at home. In our circle of closest friends. If we don’t share the light of our insights and personal experiences of God with those nearest and dearest to us, something fundamental is lacking in our Christian life and ministry.

How many fathers share with their sons and daughters, not what their children should think about God, but what they themselves *feel*? How many children have any clue what their parents’ real experience of God is? How

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<sup>1</sup> John 18:37; Luke 10:16; 1John 4:6

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 10:32-33.

<sup>3</sup> *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 22: “Presupposition”; tr. George Ganss, S.J., Loyola Univ. Press, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> In Year A the Sunday Gospels are from *Matthew*. Weekday Gospels are from Mark until Week Ten.

<sup>5</sup> Job 6:6; Baruch 6:27; Mark 9:50; Colossians 4:6.

many people share this with their friends? With those they date? How many of our neighbors know anything about our religion or what it means to us?

For that matter, how many spouses talk deeply with each other about their experience of God? Or lack of it? (To show one knows what is missing is already to reveal faith and hope). Would it be far-fetched to say that a root problem in Christianity is that Christians don't swell the light by *expressing* faith, hope and love in family life?

And what kind of circle of friends do you have if you are not eager to come together regularly to discuss the Scripture and share your responses to it? If all you have in common is drinking, TV, sports and small talk — or even large talk that shies away from God — you aren't real friends to each other. You are just casual acquaintances in the departure gate, whiling away the time until your flight is called.

In **1Corinthians 2:1-5** Paul tells us what Christian communication is. We don't exclude intellectual conversation — no one was more "theological" than Paul — but we aren't really sharing as Christians in the "communion of the Holy Spirit" until we go beyond "the persuasive force of 'wise' arguments" and build each other up with the "convincing power of the Spirit."

Why do we find it so threatening to pray together? To talk about the fruits or failures of our prayer? Don't we have a common God? Don't we share the same Father? Isn't Jesus the Teacher, Friend and Lover of us all? Weren't we all given the gift of the Spirit who dwells in our hearts? So why do we exclude the Father, Son and Spirit from our conversation as if they were weird relatives we are ashamed of?

Think of what we don't find it weird to talk about: enslavement to business; the idolatry of sports; the insanity of conformity to the culture; the trivia of style in grooming, dress and housing; addiction to the latest technology. If this is the level on which we share, this is probably the level on which we live — suffocating under our own bushel basket. Do something about that!!

## **Insight**

*If it is true that "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34), where does this put you?*

## **Initiative:**

*Fill your heart with the words of Scripture. Fill your mouth with them too.*

**February 10, 2014**

**Monday, Week Five, Year 2**

*Lord, go up to the place of your rest.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 132)*

**1Kings 8: 1-13** faces us with the core mystery of Christianity, already present in God's dealings with Israel. The mystery is the interaction between the divine and the human; the Infinite and the finite; the Unlimited, Indivisible, Inexpressible Truth of God revealing Itself to the limited intellects of humans totally incapable of understanding anything except in partial, fragmentary concepts. Trying to understand God with a human intellect is like someone taking still shots with a narrow-lens camera of the whole 360-degree horizon exploding in a volcanic eruption. We just "can't get the picture."<sup>1</sup>

The mystery is that God can communicate anyway and reveal himself to humans. In today's reading, and several times in the Old Testament and New, his presence was accompanied by a luminous cloud, the *shekinah*, so bright the Scripture calls it "dark."<sup>2</sup>

Now that the mystery of grace is revealed, we know that those who share in the divine life of God also share in God's own act of knowing. That is what the "gift of faith" is. It is called the "dark light" of faith because what we see by faith we see "indistinctly, as in a mirror" through the incomplete, distorting "still shots" of our human intellects. But we are still seeing by the light of God himself, and it is the most certain knowledge that exists.<sup>3</sup>

God has "translated" his Infinite Truth into human words that were recorded in the Scriptures. They are available to us. Today. We can read the human translation of God's thought whenever we want, with no "bright cloud" keeping us at a distance. God's presence filling the Temple is no more awesome than God's own Truth available to us in a book, "a dwelling" where his Truth "abides forever."

The Jews welcomed God with jubilation into the house they had built for him.

*All the people of Israel assembled.... So they brought up the ark of the LORD.... sacrificing so many sheep and oxen that they could not be counted or numbered.*

Should we not be just as eager to welcome his words into our minds and hearts? To read his words in Scripture? Give them a "dwelling place" in our hearts? Let them bless us by their presence in our awareness? How can any of us who are in our right minds fail to become *disciples*; that is, *committed learners* whose lifestyle is *built around* reading and reflecting on God's words?

**Mark 6:53-56** tells us that "wherever Jesus put in an appearance.... all who touched him got well." If the touch of his hand did that to bodies, what will the touch of his words on our mind do for our hearts and souls? Are we ready to "enroll" as his disciples?

**Initiative: Think about the power of truth.** What has knowledge of nature, history, science, technology done for human life? What can knowledge of God do?

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Isaiah* 55:6-11; *Matthew* 11:25-30; *Hebrews* 1:1.

<sup>2</sup> See *Exodus* 19:9; 24:15-16; *Matthew* 17:5.

<sup>3</sup> *1Corinthians* 13:12; *2Corinthians* 3:1-18. See the "dark light of faith," John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, chapters 9-10, where John quotes today's passage. See also the 14<sup>th</sup> century classic on which centering prayer is based, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Image Books. ed. William Johnston).

**February 11, 2014**

**Tuesday, Week Five, Year 2**

*How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord, mighty God!  
(Responsorial: Psalm 84)*

In **1Kings 8:22-30** Solomon is over-awed that the Infinite Greatness of God would come to dwell in his temple:

*O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below.... Can it indeed be that God dwells among humans on earth? If the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain you, how much less this temple that I have built!*

Solomon sees the temple, not just as a place where God is, but as a place where people can *interact* with God. It is a “place where you have decreed you shall be honored.” People will come to worship there. He asks God to “listen to the petitions... which they offer in this place.” God is not infinitely distant. In his temple he “dwells among humans on earth,” inviting us to meet him there and interact with him.

This is a faint preview of the way God “bridged the gap” between him and us when God the Son took flesh in Jesus to be among us as a human being. When Jesus was on earth, people could hear God speaking to them with a human voice, see him listening to them with human ears. They could reach out and touch him, feel him touching them. We still can. This is the mystery of Christianity: the divine and the human in physical contact, “God with us.”

It is true that, as ongoing Creator, God dwells in everything he made, giving it existence, power to act, being the taste in the coffee, the beauty of the flowers, empowering the movement of every bodily limb. “In him we live and move and have our being.” But this is not the same as *interacting* with him, person to Person. That is the gift of God revealing himself first in his words and then in the fullness of his Word made flesh.<sup>1</sup>

For real, human-divine interaction, God is more available in the Bible than in the Ark of the Covenant or in Solomon’s temple. The Church teaches: “In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven *meets his children* with great love and *speaks with them*. And the force and power in the word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church.”<sup>2</sup>

So why would anyone neglect to seek him out, fail to *commit* to discipleship, to meeting with God regularly through reading and reflection on his word?

In **Mark 7:1-13** Jesus tells us it is possible even for instructed Christians to “nullify God’s word.” They do it by focusing, not on the words of Scripture, but on “the traditions” handed down to them that they continue to hand down to others. These “traditions” are not what we mean by the living Tradition that is a source of Church doctrine. They are the second-hand exposure to Christian belief that we get from teachers and preachers who may or may not be themselves in continuing, live contact with God’s word. The only defense against this is to read the Bible ourselves, alert to the mind and heart of the Person speaking the words.

**Initiative: Do I feel the difference** when I read God’s words prayerfully myself?

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 17:28; John 1:1-14; Hebrews 1:1-3.

<sup>2</sup> Vatican II, “Liturgy,” no. 33.

## Wednesday, Week Five, Year 2

February 12, 2014

*The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 37)*

In **1Kings 10:1-10** the queen of Sheba admires Solomon for his wisdom. She “came to test him with subtle questions” on many topics, and “King Solomon explained everything she asked about.” But what made her “breathless” were

*the palace he had built, the food at his table, the seating of his ministers, the... garb of his waiters, his banquet service, and the holocausts he offered.*

It seems she was impressed, as much by the externals of affluence, protocol, good taste, and orderly administration as by Solomon’s knowledge and judgment. She praised his “wisdom and prosperity” in the same breath, concluding, “Happy are... these servants of yours, who stand before you always and listen to your wisdom.”

When people visit the Vatican some are impressed and others are shocked by these same things: the apparent wealth, the beautiful works of art, the uniforms and protocol of the Swiss guards and attendants, the beautiful vestments and ceremonies at Mass. They imagine the Pope must dine on the best of food and wines. To some this speaks of wisdom; to others, of worldliness. Which is it?

Let’s look for the answer in what Jesus says in **Mark 7:14-23**. The Pharisees and experts in the Law were accusing his disciples of “eating with defiled hands” because they did not follow Jewish protocol in the way they washed their hands, food from the market, “cups, pots, and kettles.” When Mark wrote, the non-Jewish Christians were eating food that was not kosher.

Jesus said, “Nothing that comes in from outside can make a person impure. That which comes out of a person, and only that, constitutes impurity.” Mark adds: “Thus he declared all foods clean.”

*Wicked designs come from the deep recesses of the heart: acts of fornication, theft, murder, adulterous conduct, greed, maliciousness, deceit, sensuality, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, an obtuse spirit. All these evils come from within and make a person impure.*

Jesus is telling us everything depends on what the externals in a person’s life *express*. This warns us not to judge from externals—either way. We should not be impressed by dress, protocol, riches, or the visible signs of success, whether in popes, presidents or corporate executives. Nor should we condemn anyone for these. We look to the heart.

It is true that Christians recognize riches, prestige and power as *dangers*. Those who let themselves be treated as if they were more important than others easily begin to believe they are. Jesus told his disciples to avoid that:

*The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you... but do not do as they do.... They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats... and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi.... The greatest among you will be your servant....*

When we see people accepting prestige and power, we should not judge them. We should pray for them.

**Initiative: Examine your own heart.** Do you enjoy prestige? Status? Power?

**Thursday, Week Five, Year 2**

**February 13, 2014**

*Lord, remember us, for the love you bear your people.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 106)*

**1Kings 11:4-13:** Solomon was wise. But wisdom doesn't do us any good if we don't live by what we know. Solomon's downfall was his attraction to foreign women. God had told the Israelites not to enter into marriage with Gentiles, those who worshipped other gods, "for they will surely incline your heart to follow their gods." Solomon ignored the warning and, sure enough, when he was old, "his wives turned away his heart to other gods; and his heart was not entirely with the LORD his God." For this God took away the kingdom; not from him, but from his son, all but one tribe, which he left because of his promise to David.

This naturally raises the question of inter-marriage between Christians and non-Christians, or between Catholics and Protestants. On the books, Church law forbids marriage between a Catholic and any non-Catholic (Canons 1086, 1124). But the bishop can, and normally does, give a dispensation from the law. As a result, what we call "mixed marriages" are so commonplace in the United States that we just take them for granted. Is this good?

Custom should not blind us to the obvious. If two people do not share fully the same faith, it is impossible for them to share themselves with each other on the deepest level of their being. They are not united in accepting all that is most deep and important in life. That is still true, even if a particular couple may give communal expression to those elements of the faith that they do hold in common more openly and completely than many married couples who are both Catholic. Any minister who has dealt with spouses in spiritual direction or on retreats can testify to the pain a fervent believer feels when a spouse cannot share the same relationship and experience of God, no matter how deep the other's own relationship is. This is also true, of course, when two Catholics are just not on the same level of faith, hope and love.

If neither spouse is into religion deeply enough to feel this, then the problem does not exist. But much greater problems do.

The answer is not for the bishops to stop granting dispensations. Top-down rigorism is not a pastoral solution.

In **Mark 7:24-30** we see how Jesus handled a woman of another faith.

First, he seemed to be insulting: When

*she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter, he said, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."*

But she was not insulted. Jesus led her to agree, with no feeling of inferiority, that the Jews were God's Chosen People: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then Jesus rewarded this act of faith by healing her child. He didn't push her to become a Jew. It wasn't her time or his. Her good will was enough.

When people respect the Catholic faith but are not moved to join the Church, Catholics respect them. Our job is to love, to open doors, not build barriers. We let them share as much of our faith as they desire, participate as much as possible in our worship and prayer, and leave conversion to God.

**Initiative: Have you experienced faith in non-Catholics?** Do you look for it?

## Friday, Week Five, Year 2

February 14, 2014

*I am the Lord, your God: hear my voice.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 81)*

**1Kings 11:29 to 12:19:** The Mass readings (29-32) omit the explanation of how Jeroboam became king. After one failed revolt, he went into exile in Egypt. Solomon's son Rehoboam succeeded him. The people asked him to "lighten the hard service your father placed on us, and we will serve you."

*Rehoboam took counsel with the older men... They answered, "If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever."*

*But he disregarded the advice that the older men gave him, and consulted with the young men who had grown up with him and now attended him.*

They advised him to go for power:

*You should say to them, "My little finger is thicker than my father's loins. Now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions."*

Predictably, the people revolted. Ten tribes made Jeroboam their king, leaving David's family in charge of Judah and Simeon, combined into one.

The lesson is obvious. Authorities who ignore the voice of the people, and follow their little circle of advisors entrenched in power, are asking for trouble. Enlightened government, whether in Church or state, requires enlightenment by God. Catholics seek this through prayer over Scripture and the guidance of the universal Church, speaking most recently in the documents of the second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which was the last gathering of the bishops from all over the world. The Council urged bishops to seek advice and "helpful collaboration" from laity and priests alike.<sup>1</sup>

But this collaboration requires that all, clergy and laity, be *disciples*, people formed by prayer, study and reflection. The Council was insistent on this. And in today's Church pastors are dealing with laity educated as never before in the history of the world.

What **Mark 7:31-37** points out is the connection between *hearing* and *speaking*. When Jesus opened the ears of the deaf-mute, "he was freed from the impediment and began to speak plainly."

The first reason why Christians cannot and do not bear witness to Christ as they should is that they aren't really listening to him. The ones Jesus sent out on mission were those he had chosen—and who committed themselves—to be *disciples*; that is *learners*.<sup>2</sup>

If we want to speak with the words of Christ, we have to open our ears to Christ speaking. We hear him speaking in the Scriptures, in the teaching of the Church, in spiritual writings, and with the voice of the Spirit when we pray. We need to make listening part of our lifestyle. Then we are disciples.

**Initiative: Choose enlightenment.** Decide when you will read, reflect, consult.

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Apostolate of the Laity*, nos. 10, 16, 20, 28-32; *Decree on Priests*, nos. 7, 12, 22; *The Church in the Modern World*, no. 21; *Pastoral Office of Bishops*, nos. 16, 28.

<sup>2</sup> *Matthew 9:37 to 10:5; Luke 10:1.*

## Saturday, Week Five, Year 2

February 15, 2014

*Lord, remember us, for the love you bear your people.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 106)*

**1Kings 12:26 to 13:34:** Jeroboam, though he was chosen by God to be king, led his people to worship false gods. His reasoning was:

*If this people continues to go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the LORD at Jerusalem, the heart of this people will turn again to King Rehoboam of Judah.*

*[So he] made two calves of gold. He said to the people... "Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." He put one in Bethel, and the other in Dan.... He also built temples on the high places, and made priests from among the people, who were not Levites*

We ask how the people could be stupid enough to forget their history, ignore all that the prophets had preached to them, and go against God's revelation and commandments. But then we have to ask why people today stop going to Catholic churches, forsake the one Sacrifice offered there that has replaced all others, forget the fifteen hundred years of history before Protestantism existed, ignore all the deep theology, and spiritual writings that have enlightened the world for two thousand years, break off communion with all the Catholic martyrs, saints and mystics, and embrace Christian sects with no foundation in Scripture, history, theology or mystical experience. And they "make priests from among the people," who are not accredited by any connection with the Apostles or the bishops who followed them.

Worse: some reject Christianity itself to devote themselves with uncritical gullibility to "myths... that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith."

*For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.<sup>1</sup>*

There is not much difference between today's defectors and those whom Jeroboam was able to sway so easily to the worship of false gods. Both groups could undoubtedly plead the excuse of disgust with unfaithful or incompetent priests and ministers. But it is not the priests they abandon. It is their sacred history and covenant with God.

If they were *disciples*, students of Scripture, religious doctrine and history, they would not put so much credibility in those who "desire to be teachers... without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions."<sup>2</sup>

A difference between **Mark 8:1-10** and the parallel multiplication of loaves in *Mark 6:31-44* is that the disciples have a lesser role. The initiative comes from Jesus (8:2-3), and Jesus does not say to the disciples, "You give them something to eat." He just asks how many loaves they have and multiplies them. This "focuses attention on Jesus who alone can satisfy the need for bread."<sup>3</sup> It reminds us that our faith always depends on Jesus, not on humans.

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<sup>1</sup> *1Timothy 1:3-7; 2Timothy 4:3-4.*

<sup>2</sup> *1Timothy 1:6-7.*

<sup>3</sup> See the 1968 *Jerome Biblical Commentary*.

**Initiative: Look beyond** humans to Jesus' words and presence in the Church.

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: WEEK FIVE

**The Fifth Week of Ordinary Time:** From Job, who questions while remaining faithful to God, to Solomon and the succeeding kings who depart from the Covenant in significant ways, to Jesus who is totally faithful, we see that ours is the choice to open ourselves to the favor of God's life extended to us.

**Invitation:** To be aware of our Father's loving invitation to us.

**Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion,** for each statement below: "Do you see this in the Scripture reading? What response does it invite?"

**Sunday:** [God] is acting with us, in us and through us to continue the divine work of Jesus Christ on earth. To be *aware* of this is to enter into the *new identity* we received at Baptism. If we are conscious that we have *become Christ*, we are naturally impelled to try to understand how Jesus thinks, what his attitudes, values and goals are, so that we can cooperate with him acting in us and through us as his body on earth.

**Monday:** Now that the mystery of grace is revealed, we know that those who share in the divine life of God also share in God's own act of knowing. That is what the "gift of faith" is.

**Tuesday:** When Jesus was on earth, people could hear God speaking to them with a human voice, see him listening to them with human ears. They could reach out and touch him, feel him touching them. We still can.

**Wednesday:** Jesus is telling us everything depends on what the externals in a person's life *express*. This warns us not to judge from externals—either way.

**Thursday:** Our job is to love, to open doors, not build barriers.

**Friday:** If we want to speak with the words of Christ, we have to open our ears to Christ speaking. We hear him speaking in the Scriptures, in the teaching of the Church, in spiritual writings, and with the voice of the Spirit when we pray. We need to make listening part of our lifestyle. Then we are disciples.

**Saturday:** There is not much difference between today's defectors and those whom Jeroboam was able to sway so easily to the worship of false gods.

### Responses:

**Choose to use Jesus as the Savior he is.** Commit to learning from him.

**Think about the power of truth.** What has knowledge of nature, history, science, technology done for human life? What can knowledge of God do?

**Do I feel the difference** when I read God's words prayerfully myself?

**Examine your own heart.** Do you enjoy prestige? Status? Power?

**Have you experienced faith in non-Catholics?** Do you look for it?

**Choose enlightenment.** Decide when you will read, reflect, consult.

**Look beyond humans** to Jesus' words and presence in the Church.

February 16, 2014

## THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF YEAR A

### Hearing and Living the Word of Life

#### Inventory

Do you think the human race needs guidance in how to live? What about yourself? Where do you look for it? Where has it led you?

#### Input

The author of the *Entrance Antiphon (Psalm 30)* speaks in the singular, calling God “my rock of refuge, a stronghold to save me.” He asks God, “Lead and guide *me*.” This invites each of us to ask, “Do I see God’s word as just guidance for the human race or the Church in general, or have I accepted it, embraced it as my personal guide, to give direction to my own individual life?”

The *Opening Prayer(s)* recall God has promised to “remain forever” with those who “do what is just and right.” But we have to consciously “live in your presence.” The wisdom of God’s “loving plan” for the human race “took flesh in Jesus Christ.” But what “changed human history” was “his command of perfect love.” If we accept to live “perfect love” we will “reflect God’s wisdom” to all around us and “bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”

#### We Can Choose

**Sirach 15:15-20** tells us it is our choice. We can choose to keep God’s command of perfect love or not. We can choose life or death — for ourselves and our society. Scripture promises that “whichever we choose, it will be given to us.” God’s word assures us, “If you choose you can keep the commandments.” To say we can’t is a cop-out.

We can’t do it by our own strength. Jesus’ “new commandment” of perfect love is to “love one another as I have loved you.”<sup>1</sup> Who is able to do that? Even for the easier commandments, Scripture doesn’t guarantee we can keep them all immediately, just by choosing to. That goes against human experience. Even the pros don’t expect to make a touchdown on every play — or to score at all if they don’t practice.

The choice to keep the commandments is the choice to train for it.

This is the choice to be a *disciple*. The word “disciple” doesn’t mean “follower.” Becoming a disciple is what makes us *able* to become a follower. A “disciple” is a “student,” an “apprentice Christian” (even though we never actually graduate until we die).

An apprentice is a learner (cp. *aprender* in Spanish and *apprendre* in French: “to learn” both from the Latin *apprehendere*, to “grab.” An apprentice is someone who is trying to “get it”). Jesus gives us his “command of perfect love,” and we just don’t “get it.”

Not to be discouraged; the first Pope didn’t get it either when Jesus first announced it (see *Matthew* 16:21-23). But that is what time is for. If we just keep trying, eventually we will keep all the commandments. But — and this is extremely important — we have to consciously *choose* this from the outset. We have to “set our hearts” on it. If we sincerely choose the end, we will begin using the means that will enable us to achieve it. One of the first and most essential means is to begin to *read the word of God*. Only a fool would expect to succeed in

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<sup>1</sup> *John* 13:34; 15:12.

anything without reading the instructions. But that is commonplace with us!

## We Can Choose

In **Matthew 5:17-37**, and in all of the “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus is rewriting the Ten Commandments to conform to the “law of perfect love.” He does it by changing the goal of the Commandments. Instead of teaching good human behavior that will allow communities to live together in peace, his New Law gives guidelines for living on the level of God himself. Jesus’ version of the Commandments teaches the attitudes and values of God’s own divine heart. And the assurance of Sirach — “If you choose you can keep the commandments” — although it was not meant to apply to these, is still valid, because now we have the power that comes from sharing in God’s own divine life by grace.

Scripture often speaks as if “grace” and the Holy Spirit were not given before Jesus came. They were, of course, because God “who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,” was already giving people what would actually be won only through the death and resurrection of Jesus. But these were not recognized or understood until the “grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” was proclaimed and the Spirit was made manifest at Pentecost.<sup>1</sup>

The gift of grace (sharing in God’s divine life) is implicitly proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount, because the ideals Jesus teaches there are simply beyond what human nature of itself can accept or live. If the most we can hope for is to enjoy the good life on this earth, with perhaps the continuance of essentially the same thing in some form after death, there is no motive or justification for the level of love Jesus teaches here.

Everyone condemns murder, because it disrupts society. But Jesus says we must, with our wills, at least, renounce even the anger we feel, because God does not nurse grudges. We cannot call a fool a fool, because in the eyes of God no one is just a fool. It is not enough only to refrain from harming others. Nor can we just ignore those who don’t like us. We have to seek reconciliation with anyone who holds something against us.

Why? Because God loves and seeks relationship with every person.

Later (vv. 38-42), Jesus forbids us even to defend ourselves or our property against an aggressor. Why? Because “perfect love” values others and a good relationship with others above all created things: one’s property, time, and even one’s physical life. This goes beyond the commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus’ New Commandment is, “Love one another *as I have loved you*.” He revealed the essence of “perfect love” on the cross. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”<sup>2</sup>

We don’t have space to show how the whole “Sermon the Mount” translates the “command of perfect love” into concrete, daily actions.<sup>3</sup> But today’s reading shows us Jesus transforming the morality of sex and marriage into a morality of love.

Jesus is not talking about sex. He is talking about how we should look at other persons and ourselves, and live love for both. The ideal is to respond as a whole person to whole persons. If we limit our appreciation or desire for another to just one part or aspect of what that person is, this is not perfect love. And if we want to gratify only part of what we are — some particular appetite or part of our body — that is not perfect love for ourselves. If it comes to a choice, we need to sacrifice the part for the sake of the whole rather than lose the wholeness and integrity of our being through absorption in one part.

Jesus rejected the “divorce on demand” sanctioned by the Law. Only the husband could demand it, because the wife was considered his property. And for the same reason, if one spouse had sexual relations with an unmarried person, it was adultery for the wife, but not for the husband: she was his property; he was not hers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *1 Timothy* 2:4. See *John* 1:14-18, 7:39; *2 Corinthians* 13:14.

<sup>2</sup> *John* 15:13.

<sup>3</sup> For this see my book *Make Me a Sabbath of your Heart*.

<sup>4</sup> See Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church — Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*, Liturgical Press, 2008, pp.185-187.

Jesus went beyond all this by changing the end (and therefore the nature) of marriage from whatever its human benefits were to the goal of growing into perfect love. This is the “steadfast love and fidelity” that is the love that defines God himself. If the spouses are learning to love, even a crucifying marriage is a success.

## **The Spirit Empowers**

**1Corinthians 2:6-10** calls this the wisdom of the “spiritually mature,” not a wisdom “of this age.” The New Law of Jesus is something “eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor the human heart conceived.” It is the level of life “God has prepared for those who love him” and want to love others with his own “perfect love.”

But we can live it. God has “revealed this wisdom to us through the Spirit,” who “scrutinizes all matters, even the depths of God.” The *Responsorial (Psalm 119)* says it all: *Happy are they who follow the law of the Lord.*”

## **Insight**

*Do you see all morality now as an effort to live on the level of God?*

## **Initiative:**

*Read Scripture daily, trying to understand how God thinks. He is telling us.*

**Monday, Week Six, Year 2**

**February 17, 2014**

*Be kind to me, Lord, and I shall live.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 119)*

**Begin James 1:1-11:** The author's use of the title "servant" and his tone of authority suggest a church official. He might be the "brother [same word as cousin] of the Lord" who was the leader of the Jewish community in Jerusalem that Paul acknowledged as a "pillar" of the Church. In the West, the Roman tradition identified him with James, son of Alphaeus, one of the Twelve, but "in the East, the liturgy, the Fathers and subsequent tradition have rejected that identification," as do most non-Catholic biblical scholars. Among today's Catholic experts the Roman view "is now largely abandoned."

*What gives the letter its distinctive quality is a concern that the faith of the recipients be not merely theoretical or abstract, but implemented in action, in every aspect of their lives. In a situation where trials and temptations abound, and where the poor suffer at the hands of the rich, James exhorts them to joy, endurance, wisdom, confident prayer, and faithful response to the liberating word of God in a hostile world as they wait for the coming of the Lord.<sup>1</sup>*

Does James begin with more comfort or more challenge? He says: "Count it pure joy when you are involved in every sort of trial." Why? "Because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance." And you should all desire to "let endurance come to its perfection, so that you may be fully mature and lacking in nothing."

What James is assuming here is that all Christians really want to "be fully mature and lacking in nothing." That is, that they want to *grow* spiritually and arrive at the "perfection of love." This is a dubious assumption, even though the bishops at Vatican II taught it should be taken for granted:

*It is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.... Every Catholic must therefore aim at Christian perfection.<sup>2</sup>*

Any preacher or teacher who assumes this has been assimilated into Catholic culture is making a big mistake. As big a mistake as assuming that all who *believe* in Christ are *disciples*. Disciples are "students." The only disciples Jesus has are those who are committed to *learn*. And "committed" means they have chosen a *concrete* way to grow into knowledge of Christ's mind and heart.

It takes *wisdom* to choose this. So James continues: "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God... and it will be given you." But he adds: "Ask in faith, never doubting." Perseverance depends on commitment; commitment depends on faith. Do you believe Jesus will enlighten you? And that his Light is Life? If not, where do you seek life?

In **Mark 8:11-13** Jesus refuses to work an impressive miracle to give the Pharisees a sign. The sign he gives is the Church living visibly as his body, alive with his life. The miracle is, he empowers us to persevere as *disciples*.

**Initiative: Believe in the miracle.** Commit to regular reading and reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> See the 1968 and 1990 editions of the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*.

<sup>2</sup> *Decree on Ecumenism* no. 4; *The Church* no. 40.

**Tuesday, Week Six, Year 2**

**February 18, 2014**

*Happy the people you teach, O Lord.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 94)*

**James 1:12-18:** James makes three points: 1. God tempts no one. “Rather, it is the tug and lure of our own passion that tempts every one of us.” 2. If we “hold out to the end” against trials and temptations, we will “receive the crown of life the Lord has promised to those who love him.” 3. God “wills to bring us to birth with a word spoken in truth.” In other words, the power to “hold out” comes from God, not us. And it comes through his *word*. Again we have the identification of Light and Life.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.... But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.*

This is a call to *discipleship*. But to keep the call from being just a “voice crying in the wilderness,” lost in space, we have to bring the call down to earth by *answering* it in time and space. In our own time and space. *When* will we “devote ourselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”? If we want Christ’s word to give us life, when, concretely, will we read it? And *where*? What place is most conducive to reflective reading and prayer? Is it available? Every day? At what time of day? For how long?<sup>1</sup>

Unless we *commit* ourselves to a when and a where, in time and space, we are simply kidding ourselves if we think we have accepted Christ’s call to be his disciples. So do it. Now. Yeah!

Why? Because everything in Scripture tells us this is the choice between Life and death.<sup>2</sup>

In **Mark 8:14-21** we see what Jesus had to cope with. His disciples were not over-bright. They often did not understand what he was talking about.

By the “yeast of the Pharisees” Jesus means the Pharisees’ “evil influence that can spread like an infection.” The Gospel identifies it with their “teaching” and their “hypocrisy.” The Pharisees wanted to teach without learning; they were closed to everything Jesus said that went beyond their narrow understanding of the Law. They were hypocrites who pretended to listen to him but were in reality only “spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the authority of the governor.”<sup>3</sup>

Every preacher and teacher who goes beyond the teaching people learned in grade school and the rigid legalism of the unexamined rules they were told to obey under pain of eternal damnation encounters the “leaven” of the Pharisee party in the Church today. These are the “doctrinal and liturgical police” whose lack of higher education is matched only by their unwillingness to learn. They listen only to denounce. Let *disciples* “beware of the yeast of the Pharisees.”

**Initiative: Ask yourself** if you really want to learn from Jesus? Prove it.

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:1-14; Matthew 3:3; Acts 2:42.

<sup>2</sup> See Deuteronomy 30:10-20; Psalms 56:10-13; all of Psalm 119; Proverbs 13:13-14; John 5:24; Acts 13:46-49.

<sup>3</sup> The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 1990; Matthew 16:12; Luke 12:1; 20:20.

## Wednesday, Week Six, Year 2

February 19, 2014

*Those who do justice shall live on the Lord's holy mountain.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 15)*

**James 1:19-27:** The “yeast of the Pharisees” is essentially their refusal to *listen and live* by God’s word, combined with blind denial they are doing this. Pharisees have no self-doubt. Any insecurity they feel, they turn into anger and condemnation of others.

So James says: 1. “Be quick to hear, slow to speak” in condemnation. 2. “Humbly welcome the word,” especially the word that “takes root” in some interior movement of your heart. You always have more to learn. 3. “Act on this word. If all you do is listen to it, you are deceiving yourselves.” That is what opens the Church to the charge of “hypocrisy” from those who don’t even want to hear God’s word.

James urges *awareness*. We need to keep ourselves conscious of “the face we were born with”; that is, of the *new identity* we received through the rebirth of Baptism. Being aware of ourselves as divine, living by God’s life because we have “become Christ,” is the first step.

James says we forget God’s word because we “do not put it into practice.” Conscious action cultivates awareness. Spiritual *formation* requires repeated exposure to God’s word combined with repeated decisions to put it into action.

James says, finally, “Don’t sweat the small stuff.” Look at what is important and live that first of all. “Looking after orphans and widows in their distress and keeping oneself unspotted by the world make for pure worship.” Pharisees focus on little rules and insist on keeping them without “peering into freedom’s ideal law.” They ignore the damage their rigid legalism does to people in distress. And they “stone the prophets” who call them to break with the spotted “world” of their cultural conformity. Pharisees resist change.<sup>1</sup>

In **Mark 8:22-26**, before Jesus cured the blind man he “took the blind man’s hand and led him outside the village.” It is very hard to see with the eyes of Christ if we are blinded by the “lights of the city”; that is, by all the assumptions, attitudes, allurements, intimidations and activities impressed on us by our culture. We tend to “go with the flow.”

Newton’s First Law of Motion is *inertia*: “Every object in a state of uniform motion tends to remain in that state of motion unless an external force is applied to it.” We can also apply this to the inertia of *thought*: “People who think uniformly with everyone else tend to keep thinking that way unless some outside influence is applied to them.”

Jesus is the “outside influence.” He comes from beyond this whole created world, “takes us by the hand” to give us courage, and “leads us outside” the constricting sphere of our peer group to open our eyes. He takes us apart, to “*the Lord’s holy mountain*.”

But it is a gradual process. Jesus has to touch our eyes repeatedly before we “see everything clearly.” Enlightenment requires *commitment to discipleship*.

**Initiative: Schedule excursions** “outside the village.” Times to reflect. Retreats.

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<sup>1</sup> *Matthew 23:23-39.*

**Thursday, Week Six, Year 2**

**February 20, 2014**

*The Lord hears the cry of the poor.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 34)*

**James 2:1-9** makes it sound like the Church is against the rich. That is not true. James says, “If you show favoritism”—to anybody, rich or poor—“you commit sin.” And his reason makes us think: “Your *faith in our Lord Jesus Christ glorified* must not allow of favoritism.” Where is he coming from?

We are the glorified Jesus. At Baptism we were incorporated into his body on the cross. We died in him and went down into the grave with him. Then God the Father asked us if we wanted to go back to earth and live a new life. He said we could do that if we went back up the way we came down: *in Christ*. If we accept to ‘present our bodies as a living sacrifice’ to Christ in Baptism, so that he can rise from the dead in us and continue to fulfill his mission on earth in our bodies, through all we do, we can go back. But we go back with a new identity, having “become Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

This means that everyone who is “in Christ” has the dignity, the status, of the risen body of Jesus Christ, of a son or daughter of God himself. Nothing added to this adds anything significant enough to notice! If we “show favoritism” to anyone because of accomplishments, wealth, position, power, or even sacramental ordination, we are implicitly denying the presence of the risen Jesus in all. Jesus insisted on this:

*The scribes and Pharisees... love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven.... The greatest among you will be your servant.*<sup>2</sup>

We don’t really observe this teaching in the Church. Pastors and bishops naturally pay more attention to the opinions of the rich and influential than to the suggestions of “ordinary” people. And we do give to clergy and bishops the special titles and preferential protocols the “world” gives to military officers, corporate executives and other “important” people, even though Jesus said it should be different in his Church. This is just another example of being “like those who look at themselves in a mirror... and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.” We forget who and what we are.

**Mark 8:27-33** should keep us from feeling too bad about not accepting the Gospel completely. When Jesus told his disciples how he was really going to save the world, Peter himself, the first pope, could not accept it. Jesus told him, “Get out of my sight, you satan! You are not judging by God’s standards but by human standards.”

Like the blind man Jesus cured through repeated treatments, the Church also grows slowly into clear understanding of his word. We all need to *commit* ourselves to persevering discipleship.

**Initiative: Never think** you have understood Christ’s teaching completely. Keep reading and reflecting on his words and example. Be a *disciple*.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Romans* 6:3-4; 12:1-10; *2Corinthians* 5:17; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 795.

<sup>2</sup> *Matthew* 23:1-12.

**Friday, Week Six, Year 2**

**February 21, 2014**

*Happy are those who do what the Lord commands.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 112)*

**James 2:14-26** is an argument for saying James wrote late enough to know people were misinterpreting Paul's teaching about justification by "faith alone," because he contradicts the exaggerated version of this that makes "works" unnecessary. "It was largely because of this apparent contradiction that Luther wished to exclude James from the canon [list of books in Scripture inspired by God]."<sup>1</sup>

James is blunt:

*What good is it to profess faith without practicing it? Such faith has no power to save one, has it?... Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

We have no difficulty agreeing with that. But it is commonplace for Christians to accept all sorts of things Jesus taught without even thinking about putting them into practice. What, for example, do people actually *do* about any words they have heard read or preached at Mass? Do we listen with one hand on the ignition, ready to start up and move in response to what we hear. Is this your own mind set?

Discipleship, being a "student" of Jesus, is not a head trip. Everything he teaches is for living. If we aren't reading or listening with the question in our minds, "How can I put this into practice?" we won't get the real point of his words. We will be focusing on some fringe ideas without really confronting his message.

That is why the standard (but not only) form of Christian *meditation* has three steps: *Read, Reflect* and *Respond*. The third step is the key. If Jesus' words don't sink roots in us down to the level of *decision-making*, we are receiving them in "shallow ground." And if, over time, they don't make us feel inner *conflict* because we realize they are being "choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of the world," their "fruit will not mature." We are not mature in the faith until we dedicate ourselves to the *mission* of Christ and of the Church. And the first step into mission is to make our lifestyle bear *prophetic witness* to the Gospel by "raising eyebrows" in our culture: questions that cannot be answered without it.<sup>2</sup>

And James above all is insistent on the *ministering love* without which our faith is sterile.

*If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?*

This applies even more to supplying *spiritual* needs by giving *expression* to our faith, hope and love in physical words and actions in fulfillment of our baptismal consecration as *priests*.

In **Mark 8:34 to 9:1** Jesus simply says two plus two makes four: "What will it profit to gain the whole world and forfeit life itself? What will you give in return for your life?" Those who can add will give him all.

**Initiative: Measure your faith by your actions.** How strong is it?

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<sup>1</sup> *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. The Lutherans no longer follow Luther in this.

<sup>2</sup> *Matthew 13:1-23; Luke 4:18*.

**February 22, 2011**

## **The Chair of St. Peter, Apostle**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 23)* “*The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want*” lifts up our eyes to heaven. This feast brings them down to earth. We are celebrating the “Chair” or official function of St. Peter in the Church and of those elected to represent him in continuing it: the bishops of Rome.

This confronts us with the central mystery of Christianity: the Word made flesh, God made human in Jesus Christ.

This is also the central mystery of the Church: a human organization that is also the divine body of Christ. A community of sinful human beings, governed by sinful human beings, that nevertheless proclaims itself — and is — “holy” and guided by the Holy Spirit.

For all the centuries of the Church’s life, both in abstract theology and in practical spirituality, the pendulum has swung back and forth between the divine and the human, emphasizing one at the expense of the other, both in Christ and in the Church. The Church’s answer, both in doctrine and in constantly reformed practice, has been to keep reaffirming the ancient formula: Jesus is “fully human and fully divine.” And in the measure that it is possible, so is and must be his Church.

Nothing calls this more into question than the papacy: the “Chair of Peter.” Pope Paul VI said, “The Pope... is undoubtedly the gravest obstacle in the path of ecumenism.”<sup>1</sup>

Peter, the first pope, has more recorded sins and errors than any other person in the Gospels. He comes across in the Gospels as a leader, yes, but with a right-to-wrong ratio of two to seven, with one split decision. He was right when he confessed Jesus to be the Messiah (twice). He was wrong when:

- *he rejected Jesus’ way of saving the world;*
- *he misunderstood the transfiguration;*
- *he presumed Jesus would pay a temple tax;*
- *he objected to Jesus’ washing his feet;*
- *he protested he would never deny Jesus;*
- *he slept during Jesus’ agony in the garden;*
- *he opted for violence when Jesus was arrested.*<sup>2</sup>

Peter showed cowardice, both in his denial of Jesus in the garden, and later, even after the strengthening of Pentecost, in his government of the Church. Paul reports he “opposed him to his face” for his hypocrisy.<sup>3</sup>

In **Matthew 16:13-19** Jesus praised Peter for his confession of faith: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” And he gave him “the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Peter’s first act after that was to reject Jesus’ teaching on an issue so vital that Jesus called him the devil! “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.” In this passage Peter spoke first as divine, then as human, almost in the same breath.

We don’t like to deal with the tension between the human and the divine in the Church. Most Catholics prefer to assume that all popes are holy men (we call them all “Your Holiness”) and that we can trust their judgment both in matters of doctrine and of Church government. But this in itself is a denial of the faith! My class learned in the fifth grade that “infallible” and “impeccable” are two different words, and that the pope is only infallible when he explicitly defines a doctrine “*ex cathedra*,” speaking from the “Chair of Peter” with all his authority, which he has done only twice in history. Many Catholics today keep proving they are “not smarter than a fifth

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<sup>1</sup> Speech to the Secretariat for Christian Unity, April 28 1967.

<sup>2</sup> See *Matthew* 14:20-31; 16:16, 22; 17:4, 25; 26:35, 40; *John* 6:8, 26:22; 18:40. The split decision was walking on the water with faith, and then almost drowning for lack of faith.

<sup>3</sup> *Galatians* 2:11-14.

grader.”

We simply must accept the human as well as the divine in the Church and in the papacy. Archbishop John Quinn, introduced his book *The Reform of the Papacy* by referring to John Paul II’s encyclical on Christian unity, *Ut Unum Sint*: “For the first time it is the Pope himself who raises and legitimizes the question of reform and change in the papal office in the Church. [He] calls for a widespread discussion of how this reform could be brought about....”<sup>1</sup>

A key forerunner in this process was Father J.M.R. Tillard, O.P., whose book *The Bishop of Rome* resulted from multiple ecumenical dialogues between Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Commissions seeking mutual understanding. There is a new desire for and movement toward unity. The problem is not the primacy of the “Chair of Peter,” but the way it is understood and exercised at present in Rome. “The present Catholic vision of the papacy magnifies the office. It makes the pope more than a pope.” A joint Lutheran-Catholic declaration accepts the tension between human and divine.

*The centralization of the Petrine function in a single person or office results from a long process of development.... The papal office can be seen both as a response to the guidance of the Spirit in the Christian community, and also as an institution which, in its human dimensions, is tarnished by frailty and even unfaithfulness.*

One obvious source of this, given perennial human sinfulness, is the corrupting force of *power*, whether possessed or desired. Bishop Geoffrey Robinson addresses this in his reflections on nine years of official leadership in dealing with child-abuse in Australia, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church*:

*Those years left an indelible mark on me.... A number of people, at every level, were seeking to ‘manage’ the problem and make it ‘go away’, rather than truly confront and eradicate it.*

*Through all this I came to the unshakeable conviction that within the Catholic Church there absolutely must be profound and enduring change. In particular... on the two subjects of power and sex.*

Do we want to hear this? Do we want to accept and deal with the ever-present human factor in the divine body of Christ on earth? Or do we prefer to just ignore it and hope it will “go away”? The Second Vatican Council answers:

*This Synod urges all concerned to work hard to prevent or correct any abuses, excesses or defects which may have crept in here or there, and to restore all things to a more ample praise of Christ and of God.*<sup>2</sup>

Catholics are so certain of God’s divine preservation and guidance of the Church that, as G.K. Chesterton said of Thomas Aquinas, we dare to walk on the very precipice of issues challenging our faith, confident that truth, if confronted, will always justify belief. Like St. Paul, like Pope John Paul II, like Bishops Quinn and Robinson, like Fr. Tillard and other theologians, we show our faith in the “Chair of Peter” by constantly calling those who sit on it to fidelity.

In **1Peter 5:1-4** it is Peter himself who invites us to see him, not as a monarch on his throne, nor as someone separated from us by exalted status in the Church, but as a “fellow elder,” identified above all as “a witness of Christ’s sufferings” and, like all who believe, a “sharer in the glory that is to be revealed.”

The glory he speaks of is divine. It is not to be established, projected or accepted in the Church in any human form here on earth. This warning is addressed specifically to the “elders,” which translates the Greek word “presbyters,” and is the preferred designation — in Scripture and in current Church theology — for those in Holy Orders whom we are accustomed to call “priests.”<sup>3</sup>

Peter says the clergy are to be “examples to the flock, not lording it over those assigned to you.” Obviously, the

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<sup>1</sup> Crossroad, 1999, pp. 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Tillard: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1986, pp. 8-9, 19. Robinson: Liturgical Press, 2008, “Introduction.” Vatican II: *The Church*, no. 51.

<sup>3</sup> See Bishop Patrick Dunne of Auckland, *Priesthood: A Re-examination of the Roman Catholic Theology of the Presbyterate*, Alba House, 1990, p, 110.

corrupting influence of power was already visible in the infant Church. If Lord Acton's axiom is true: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely," we should above all guard the clergy against this. Bishop Robinson warns: "To give great authority to a person who is incapable of handling it in a responsible manner [and how are candidates for priest or bishop screened for this?] is to invite problems.... Spiritual power is arguably the most dangerous of all.... If the governing image of how to act as a priest... is tied to the idea of lordship and control, then, no matter how benevolently ministry is carried out, an unhealthy domination and subservience will be present."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus warned his Church not to be like the "scribes and Pharisees who sit on the Chair of Moses." They "lord it over the flock" through *dress, titles* and *protocol*.

*They make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.,, love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.*

Father Bernard Häring, C.S.S.R., whose eye-opening work *The Law of Christ* makes him arguably the founder of modern Gospel-based moral theology, wrote that at the "very last session" of the Second Vatican Council:

*several cardinals, patriarchs, bishops, and some theologians, including myself, were gathered to discuss a final proposal.... that the Council Fathers should not return to their respective dioceses without first having solemnly pledged apostolic poverty and, above all, apostolic simplicity by renouncing all anti-evangelical titles.... Several hundred bishops were ready for this step. However, time was pressing and the proposal never came to pass."*<sup>2</sup>

When the hierarchy first began to assume the trappings of secular power — pretentious titles, imposing dress and a protocol that isolated them above the "common herd" — would Jesus have said to them, "Blessed are you, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven," or "You are an obstacle to me; you are thinking, not as God does, but as human beings do"?

Celebrating the Chair of Peter invites us to reflect on the alerts from these prophetic, ordained bishops and holy, approved theologians who are part of the *magisterium* of the Church.

**Initiative: What am I doing** to swell or shrink the sense of power in the Church?

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<sup>1</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Priesthood Imperiled*, Triumph/Ligouri, 1996, p.48.

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: WEEK SIX

**The Sixth Week of Ordinary Time** tells us to focus on faith in action, putting what we have heard from Jesus into practice.

**Invitation:** To really become disciples.

**Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion,** for each statement below: “Do you see this in the Scripture reading? What response does it invite?”

**Sunday:** *Discipleship* helps us to see sins we did not recognize as sin and so were not guilty of, but which nevertheless did damage.

By forgiving and accepting us unconditionally, Jesus both purifies us of sin and frees us from the fear of ever being alone. He is always *present* to us.

**Monday:** Disciples are “students.” The only disciples Jesus has are those who are committed to *learn*. And “committed” means they have chosen a *concrete way* to grow into knowledge of Christ’s mind and heart.

**Tuesday:** Unless we *commit* ourselves to a when and a where, in time and space, we are deceived if we think we have accepted Christ’s call to be his disciples.

**Wednesday:** James urges *awareness*. We need to keep ourselves conscious of “the face we were born with”; that is, of the *new identity* we received through the rebirth of Baptism.

Conscious action cultivates awareness.

Spiritual *formation* requires repeated exposure to God’s word combined with repeated decisions to put it into action.

**Thursday:** We all need to *commit* ourselves to persevering discipleship.

**Friday:** If Jesus’ words don’t sink roots in us down to the level of *decision-making*, we are receiving them in “shallow ground.”

We are not mature in the faith until we dedicate ourselves to the *mission* of Christ and of the Church.

**Saturday:** Like God, we have intelligence and freedom. Our minds can form words of knowledge and our free wills words of choice by which we “create ourselves” and determine who we are as *persons*.

### Responses:

**Accept people as they are,** before you try to help them change. God does.

**Believe in the miracle.** Commit to regular reading and reflection.

**Ask yourself** if you really want to learn from Jesus. Prove it.

**Schedule excursions** “outside the village.” Times to reflect. Retreats.

**Never think** you have understood Christ’s teaching completely. Keep reading and reflecting on his words and example. Be a *disciple*.

**Measure your faith by your actions.** How strong is it?

**Every morning** make the sign of the cross on your lips. Consecrate your speech to God. Ask him to speak *with* you, *in* you and *through* you all day.

## Saturday, Week Six, Year 2 (Extra)

February 22, 2014

*You will protect us, Lord.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 12)*

**James 3:1-10** zooms in on one member of the body, the tongue, and on the key role speech plays in human life. James says, “Anyone who is without fault in speech is a human in the fullest sense, able to control the whole body.” He compares the tongue to the minuscule bit by which we control a whole horse, or the small rudder by which we guide a big ship. A word spoken by the tongue is like “a tiny spark that sets a huge forest ablaze.” Talking not to be taken lightly. All words carry weight.

The power of speech is what makes us like God. God knows himself in his *Word* of knowledge, spoken from all eternity, which is the Son. He revealed himself in the Word made flesh, the “reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.... the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”

“In him,” the Word of God, “all things in heaven and on earth were created.... all things have been created through him and for him.” And “he sustains all things [in existence] by his powerful word.”<sup>1</sup>

Like God, we have intelligence and freedom. Our minds can form words of knowledge and our free wills words of choice by which we “create ourselves” and determine who we are as *persons*.

This is an ambivalent blessing: we can, by our free words of choice, make ourselves good or evil. We can enhance the lives of others or diminish them. We use our tongues to say, “Praised be the Lord and Father”; then we use it to curse people, though they are made in the likeness of God. Blessing and cursing come out of the same mouth.” James says, “This ought not to be.” But that’s the way it is. So what do we do about it?

We can become *disciples* who use our minds to learn God’s truth and appreciate it, our wills to put it into practice. But to make this effective, we need to speak a “word” of *commitment*. The “word” of our choice to learn from Christ has to “take flesh” in a set discipline of prayer and study.

**Mark 9:2-13** gives us motive. We can go “off by ourselves with Jesus... up a high mountain”—even if it is just in the seclusion of our bedroom—and contemplate him “transfigured before our eyes.” Seeing, reflecting on his glory, on all he has revealed to us, we will be moved to say with Peter: “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here!” And we will hear the Father’s voice calling to us: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

When the disciples came down the mountain they “continued to discuss” what Jesus had told them. And Jesus asked them questions about Scripture. He does the same with us when we get into dialogue with him and each other. And he gives answers. If we are committed to persevere as his disciples.

**Initiative: Every morning** make the sign of the cross on your lips. Consecrate your speech to God. Ask him to speak *with* you, *in* you and *through* you all day.

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<sup>1</sup>John 1:1-14; Hebrews 1:1-5; Colossians 1:14-20.

February 23, 2014

## THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF YEAR A

### Accepting the New Commandment

#### Inventory

Today, is it possible to be fully human without being “fully divine”? What, for a Christian, does it mean to “be holy”? What does it mean to “be perfect”? Can we?

#### Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* (*Psalm 13*) focuses us on God’s love and faithfulness: “I will sing to the Lord for his goodness to me.” This is the focus we ask for in the *Opening Prayer*: “Father, keep before us the wisdom and love you have revealed in your Son.” They are the same: the height of God’s wisdom and love were both revealed in the “foolishness” of the cross and Christ’s insistence that to be his disciples we must “endure evil with love” as he did.<sup>1</sup> The alternate *Opening Prayer* leads us to discipleship: “Faith in your word is the way to wisdom, and to ponder your divine plan is to grow in truth.” This is what the *Liturgy of the Word* invites.

#### Be Holy as God

**Leviticus 19:1-18:** We sometimes speak as if the God of the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament) and of the Christian Scriptures (New Testament) were two different Gods: the first a God of vengeance and violence; the second a God of mercy and gentleness. But they are one and the same God. It is just that when God reveals himself to humans, the pure light of his Truth and Being comes to us shining through the filter of human cultural assumptions and prejudices.

It is God’s pure light; and even when it “shines in the darkness,” the darkness “cannot overcome it.”<sup>2</sup> But we have to understand that, when God speaks through human beings, he speaks *as* those human beings speak. He doesn’t bypass their humanity and shine through them as through perfectly transparent glass that has no color of its own. If he wanted to do that, he would not use human instruments at all, but just make his own words appear on paper somewhere, or write them on a wall. Then they would be exactly the same for all time, and there would be no cultural influence on them except for the language they were written in. Some “people of the Book” (Jews, Christians and Moslems, who all believe in one God revealing himself in the words of the Bible) want to exclude the cultural influence by insisting on a “sacred language” which alone can authentically transmit God’s thought as no “vernacular” translation can. Whether we think God only speaks Hebrew, Arabic or Latin, we are misunderstanding the nature of revelation. God reveals himself equally in all languages and in none. He identifies with the person he is inspiring to write, and expresses himself in and through that person in a way consistent with that individual’s own culture and personality. Matthew’s mother, hearing his Gospel, would have recognized immediately, “That’s my boy!”

God makes sure, however, that there will be no distortion of what he is actually saying, even though we may have difficulty at times distinguishing the content from the form of its expression. This is particularly true when the “literary form” is storytelling or interpretation of historical events.

Sometimes, however, God speaks about himself and about who and what he is, in a way that seems to escape all the cultural filters like rays of the sun shining through a break in the clouds. Today’s reading is like that.

“Be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” This is pure God! Different cultures might understand differently

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<sup>1</sup> *1 Corinthians* 1:18-25; *Matthew* 16:21-25.

<sup>2</sup> *John* 1:5.

what “holy” means, but the principle stands in all of them.

When *Leviticus* gets concrete and goes into detail about it, we see both cultural elements and elements that transcend cultural limitations. The first of the omitted verses says, speaking absolutely, “Do not turn to idols.” That follows from the Great Commandment of all monotheistic religions that recognize God as God: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”<sup>1</sup> But the second half of the sentence, “or make cast images for yourselves,” was only a particular means to the first which, while necessary in a culture surrounded by people who worshiped statues, is no longer relevant in a culture like ours, where idolatry takes a different form. We make statues of heroes, beauties and saints, but we don’t worship any of them. Unfortunately, we don’t make statues of the values we do worship —power, technology, affluence, sex, sports, etc. — and so we do not recognize them as idols.

When God is quoted as assigning punishments for violations of particular commandments, these are not intended as revelations of the nature of God. They don’t say God is a punisher. They say, in language, images and actions that would help the people of the time understand, “This is really bad. If you do this, bad stuff is going to happen.” We do the same thing when we try to warn children away from dangerous actions by making up all sorts of fictitious consequences to scare them with because they can’t understand or appreciate the real consequences.

When *Leviticus* gets to the verses quoted in the reading, however, this is too far above every human ideal to be an expression of culture. God is telling us how to be “holy as God is holy”:

*You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart.... Take no revenge and cherish no grudge.... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

The reason given is, “I am the LORD.” This is how God is, so this is how we need to be. The *Responsorial* (*Psalms* 103) says, “*The Lord is kind and merciful*”; that is, “Be kind and merciful for I the Lord your God am kind and merciful.” No cultural filter here.

## Be Perfect in Love

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus takes the Old Law to a new level, transforming it from rules of good human behavior to guidelines for living on the level of God. But what he says in **Matthew 5:38-48** is already basically present in the reading from *Leviticus*. He simply makes more clear and explicit what it means to “be holy as I the Lord your God am holy.” It means, above all, to live out his command of “perfect love.” By the gift of sharing in God’s divine life (the definition of “grace”), we are called and enabled to “be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.” Since “God is love,” to be perfect like God is to be perfect in love.<sup>2</sup>

*Genesis* says God “looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good.” This is even more true of humans, created in the image of God himself. So Jesus is teaching us to love like God when he tells us we need to love one another and value relationship with one another more than all created things: more than our *possessions* (“give to everyone who begs or wants to borrow from you;” if someone want to steal the shirt off your back, “hand over your coat as well”), more than our *time* (if someone imposes, go the “extra mile”), more than our desire to avoid *hurt* and rejection (“turn the other cheek”). He says “offer no resistance to one who is evil” for the sake of holding on to any created thing. “My command to you is: love your enemies, pray for your persecutors.”

## You Are That Temple

This command is beyond human goodness. But in **1Corinthians 3:16-23** Paul catches us up short in our objections: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?... God’s temple is

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<sup>1</sup> *Deuteronomy* 6:4-5.

<sup>2</sup> *1John* 4:8,16.

holy, and you are that temple.” Because we are holy, we have to act like God. This means loving one another, not just as ourselves, but according to the “new commandment” Jesus gave: “Love one another *as I have loved you*.”<sup>1</sup>

By human cultural standards, the love Jesus orders is crazy. But we are not just human; we are divine. Our whole standard of judgment is different. Paul writes: “The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.” And vice-versa: the “wisdom and love” revealed in the crucified Jesus is foolishness to this world. No one who has the power to kill an enemy will choose to be killed instead. But we call that “perfect love.”

## **Insight**

*Do you trust more in your “gut” cultural instincts or in God’s word?*

## **Initiative:**

*Seek “wisdom and love” through reflection on God’s word. Set a time.*

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<sup>1</sup> *John 13:34; 15:12; Romans 13:8; 1John 4:7-12.*

## Monday, Week Seven, Year 2

February 24, 2014

*The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 19)*

According to a footnote in the *Christian Community Bible*, **James 3:13-18** tells us four things about wisdom.

1. Wisdom is a gift of God:

*In every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind.<sup>1</sup>*

False wisdom:

*does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.... But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.*

2. which is acquired by prayer:

*When I was young and innocent, I sought wisdom. She came to me in her beauty, and until the end I will cultivate her.... I became resolutely devoted to her.... I burned with desire for her, never turning back. I became preoccupied with her, never weary of extolling her.... At first acquaintance with her, I gained understanding such that I will never forsake her.<sup>2</sup>*

3. by perseverance in meditation on the word of God:

*Remain faithful to what you have learned and believed.... From infancy you have known (the) sacred scriptures, which are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work.<sup>3</sup>*

4. and by the purification of the heart through ordinary living. James does not speak of a theoretical wisdom but of practical wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, we grow into wisdom by *committed discipleship*.

**Mark 9:14-29** is one of the few places in the Gospel where Christianity itself seems to fail. Jesus' disciples cannot cast the demon out of a young boy. These are presumably the same disciples to whom Jesus gave the power to heal, and specifically to "cast out demons." Why isn't the power working?<sup>5</sup>

We can't exclude the possibility that Mark is making a subtle association between the disciples' powerlessness over the demon and their refusal to accept the "doctrine of the cross"—Jesus' teaching that he was going to save the world by dying, and that his disciples must accept to lose their lives in order to save them.<sup>6</sup>

As long as the Church continues to think in human priorities, and not as God thinks, we will be powerless to save the human race from its recurring sins of violence and exploitation that repeatedly "cast it into the fire and into the water, to destroy it." Jesus said. "All things can be done for the one who believes." We just can't bring ourselves to believe that being killed is better than killing. That is because so few Christians are *disciples*. We accept what we are taught without trying to learn the mind and heart of Christ. That requires *commitment*.

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<sup>1</sup> *1 Corinthians* 1:4-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Sirach* ch. 51: 13-20.

<sup>3</sup> *2 Timothy* 3: 14-17.

<sup>4</sup> Liguori Publications, 1995, Seventeenth edition.

<sup>5</sup> *Matthew* 10:8; *Mark* 16:17; *Luke* 10:17.

<sup>6</sup> *Mark* 9:32; *Matthew* 16:21-26; 17:22-23; 20:18-19.

**Initiative: Don't duck** the hard questions. Let Jesus' words confront you.

**Tuesday, Week Seven, Year 2**

**February 25, 2014**

*Throw your cares on the Lord, and he will support you.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 55)*

**James 4:1-10** lists some of our problems and gives an answer to all:

*Where do the conflicts and disputes among you originate? Is it not your inner cravings.... What you desire you do not obtain..... You do not obtain because you do not ask. You ask and you do not receive, because you ask wrongly....*

We need to learn what to ask God for. We learn it by reading the word of God, which teaches us to love what God does.

*Do you not know that to be a lover of the world means enmity with God?... Therefore, submit to God.... Draw close to God and he will draw close to you.... Purify your hearts.... Be humbled in the sight of the Lord and he will raise you on high.*

If we have the humility to admit we don't know it all, that we may not be seeing things right, and show that humility by "going back to school" as students of Jesus, he will teach us.

But we need to *register*; that is, *commit* to coming to class on a regular basis.

In **Mark 9:30-37** Jesus, like a good teacher, repeats his "doctrine of the cross." But his students "failed to understand his words." Because they did not want to understand. "They were afraid to question him." Afraid they might hear the answers.

How many Christians today ask about the Church's teaching on war? Or about the united stand the Pope and all the bishops took against the initiation of war in Iraq? Their opposition to the death penalty? How many really want to know the Church's teaching on social justice? Nonviolence? Who reads about it, asks about it? Or about the obligation Vatican II says "every Catholic" has to "aim at Christian perfection"? How many are afraid to ask whether studying Scripture is an obvious duty for all who believe it is the word of God?

Who in the Church is willing to confront Jesus' words here about ambition (for example, desiring to be a bishop or to be "promoted" to archbishop of a more important city); and the duty of those in important positions not only to be the "servants of all," but to *show* that they are by refusing all special titles and protocols of prestige? How many are willing to face the worldwide ruin that the desire for power and prestige has brought down and is still bringing down on the Church? The titles and dress of the hierarchy may seem to be a little thing. But if they are, why did Jesus speak so strongly about them, and why do the hierarchy find it impossible to give them up? Will the 2011 revolts of the young against autocratic rulers in the Middle East inflame a similar revolt in the Church against the top-down, non-consultative rule of the Vatican and bishops? Re-read Edwin Markham's *The Man With The Hoe*:

*O masters, lords and rulers in all lands, How will the future reckon with this man?  
question in that hour*

*How an  
When whirlwinds of rebellion shake all shores*

We fear to read the words of Jesus and take them seriously. To do so would raise questions we may not want to face. But we will face the consequences.

**Initiative: Think out of the box.** See if you find Jesus already there.

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: WEEK SEVEN

**The Seventh Week of Ordinary Time:** Becoming aware of sin in our lives actually is the first step toward receiving wisdom, God's gift. But the gift comes to us as we pray and meditate on the word of God. As we do, Jesus will take us where we haven't even imagined.

**Invitation:** To learn the necessity and the source of wisdom.

**Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion,** for each statement below: "Do you see this in the Scripture reading? What response does it invite?"

**Sunday:** Every sin is a sign of an unsatisfied heart. That is why we cannot sin in heaven, even though we are still free: we have total possession of the All. Nothing can tempt us.

In Scripture, the call to repentance is always a joyful call, because it carries with it the promise of a new heart. If we have enough *faith* to believe Jesus keeps his promises, we will have strength to keep our commitment as his disciples. We will *persevere* in reading and reflecting on his word.

**Monday:** Wisdom is a gift of God which is acquired by prayer, by perseverance in meditation on the word of God and by the purification of the heart through ordinary living. In other words, we grow into wisdom by *committed discipleship*.

We accept what we are taught while trying to learn the mind and heart of Christ. That requires *commitment*.

**Tuesday:** We fear to read the words of Jesus and take them seriously. To do so would raise questions we may not want to face.

### Responses:

**Seek "something new"** through reflection on God's word. Look for promises. **Don't duck** the hard questions. Let Jesus' words confront you.

**Think out of the box.** See if you find Jesus already there.

March 2, 2014

## THE EIGHTH SUNDAY OF YEAR A

### In God Alone

#### Inventory

Are you ever anxious? Stressed out? Who isn't? But how do you deal with it? What is your response? (And how does it work for you?)

#### Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* gives the response God inspires: "*The Lord has been my strength.*" But not just strength to endure: "*He has led me into freedom.*" We can be free of stress and anxiety. The bottom line: "*He saved me because he loves me.*" If he who is Power Itself, the Source and Sustainer of all existence, loves me and chooses to keep willing me into existence, even sharing his own divine life with me and uniting me to Jesus Christ as his continuing body on earth, what do I have to worry about?

The Church believes God wants us free of stress. In the *Opening Prayer(s)* she asks, "*Give your Church the joy and peace of serving you in freedom.*" She focuses us on the mystery of our true identity, which puts everything else into perspective: "*Form in us the likeness of your Son and deepen his life within us.*" That life is "life to the full," and it is eternal life. So what more do we need?

The Church isn't naïve. She knows we are living in "*a world of fragile peace and broken promises.*" But we aren't just "here." We are "sent." "*Send us as witnesses of Gospel joy.*" We have embraced our being-in-the-world voluntarily. For us it is not just a fact, it is a mission. We are here to take the initiative. We know what the answer is to all the world's problems: "*Touch the hearts of all people with your love, that they in turn may love one another.*"

Is it that simple? Yes, it is.

#### Something to Count on

**Isaiah 49:14-15** says it all. When did we feel most secure and at peace? In the womb? In our mother's arms as infants? Why?

First, we had nothing to do but be there. No tasks or goals to accomplish; no bills to pay or obligations to meet. We could just be. Secondly, we knew we were safe and loved.

The *Responsorial (Psalm 62)* encourages us to be this way with God: "*Rest in God alone, my soul.*" Jesus said it too:

*Martha was distracted by her many tasks.... But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing."*<sup>1</sup>

The rest of the *Responsorial Psalm* gives two reasons: "*From him comes my salvation.... From him comes my hope.*" This is the answer both to fears and to desires; to anxieties about losing what we have and to fear of failure in what we want to do. God will save us from what threatens our existence: "he is my salvation." God will empower us to achieve our desires: "he is my hope." *Be at rest, my soul.* But "*only in God.*" If we try to find security, fulfillment or peace in anything else, we will be disappointed. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." *Only in God is my soul at rest.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Luke 10:40-42.*

<sup>2</sup> *Matthew 11:28.*

## “Seek First...” And only

Jesus says this again in **Matthew 6:24-34** and gets explicit about what we are not to worry about: the basics of survival: “your livelihood, what you are to eat or drink or use for clothing.” Or, for that matter, even staying alive: “Which of you by worrying can add a moment to your lifespan?”

This could be just stoic resignation, which is elevated to a higher level in the “Serenity Prayer” that *Wikipedia* attributes to the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. It was adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs, and widely distributed by the U.S. Army to the distressed in Germany after World War II:

*God, grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change;  
The courage to change the things that I can;  
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

Seen in a Christian context, this is more than stoic resignation to things we can do nothing about. And Jesus is far beyond this. He begins and ends with monotheism: that there is one God, and to let anything but God have any influence in our life is idolatry. “No one can serve two masters.” This is the First Commandment: “I the LORD am your God... you shall not have other gods besides me.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Jesus says, “Seek first [and only] his kingship over you, his way of holiness, and all these things will be given to you besides.”

Stress is fragmentation. In single-minded dedication to the service of God we find the freedom and the unity of peace.

Jesus teaches that God is not just our Lord; he is our Father. We can and should count on him to provide for us with a Father’s love. “Your heavenly Father knows all that you need.”

To convince us, he points to two things we know: God provides for the birds that don’t work, and for the flowers that die overnight; and we are more important to God than they are.<sup>2</sup>

Then he “zooms in” on what is more important in our own priorities: “Is not life more than food? Is not the body more valuable than clothes?” Jesus is saying, “If you keep yourself aware of God’s priorities and of your own, you won’t sweat the small stuff.”

Compared to who God is and the work we are invited to do for him, everything else is “small stuff.” It is the “unbelievers” who are “always running after” things like prosperity and success, status and security. We have only one goal to pursue: the holiness to be found in personal surrender to God, and the establishment of his reign over everything else on earth. They are one and the same: “So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul....”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus also teaches us to find the “peace of the present moment.” He introduces the time factor: Why worry about tomorrow? “Let tomorrow take care of itself. Today has trouble enough of its own.”

Again, this is not stoic resignation, even that acknowledged in Scripture as the attitude of those who do not know what God offers after death:

*Let us eat and drink,  
For tomorrow we die.*<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is saying something developed later by the Jesuit Pierre de Caussade in his classic book, *Abandonment to*

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<sup>1</sup> *Deuteronomy* 5:6-9.

<sup>2</sup> Compare this to *Jonah* 4:5-11.

<sup>3</sup> *Deuteronomy* 10:12.

<sup>4</sup> See this presented stoically in *Ecclesiastes* (Quoheleth) 9:5-10 and *I Corinthians* 15:20-34; and with disapproval in *Wisdom* 2:8-9, *Isaiah* 22:12-13,.

*Divine Providence.* The only thing we need be concerned with is doing God's will at the present moment. Period. And accepting whatever God is allowing to happen to us beyond our control at the present moment. We are not responsible today for what God wants us to do tomorrow (unless his will today is that we should prepare for it). If right here and now we are doing what God wants us to do here and now, it is foolish to worry about anything else. This assumes, of course, that we are engaging now in any necessary discernment about decisions we must be prepared to face in the future. Just live in the present moment.

Jesus is situating our life between two poles: its beginning in God and its end in the Kingdom. If we are in union with Jesus as the Alpha and the Omega, we will live in peace.

*Christ yesterday and today,  
The beginning and the end,  
Alpha and Omega:  
All time belongs to him  
And all ages.  
To him be glory and power  
Through every age for ever.<sup>1</sup>*

## **“Your toil is not in vain”**

**1Corinthians 4:1-5** gives the *coup de grace* to stress. We are “stewards of the mysteries of God.” Our first concern is just to be “trustworthy,” faithful to the Lord. Paul says, “The Lord is the one to judge me,” so it “matters little” what anyone else thinks. We work only for God, and for others only in the measure and manner that we believe God desires. We don't have to please any boss but God. People may think what they want of us, but “at the time of his return” Jesus will “bring to light... the intentions of hearts.” The name for this is freedom. “*Rest in God alone, my soul.*”

## **Insight**

*Are you living for one thing or for many? Can the many be found in the one?*

## **Initiative:**

*Keep saying “Lord, do this with me, do this in me, do this through me” and relax.*

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<sup>1</sup> Easter Vigil Mass: Preparation of the candle.

**March 3, 2014**

**Monday, Week Eight, Year 2**

*The Lord will remember his covenant forever.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 111)*

Prophets proclaim hope and live by hope. “*Thy Kingdom come!*” is a prayer of hope. When Jesus sent his disciples on *mission*, it was to announce that what the people had been hoping and praying for was now at hand: “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’”<sup>1</sup>

**1Peter 1:3-9** describes Baptism as “a new birth into a *living hope*... and into an *inheritance* that is imperishable... in heaven.”

And this hope “draws its life from the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” We are so used to believing there is life after death that we take it for granted. And it is true that to deny it is to presume oneself superior to almost every race, tribe, people and culture that has ever existed. Every group of humans whose burial customs we know realized, although they could not explain it, that there is something in humans that is different from animals. Something that does not depend on the body. Only we, who pursue technology without wisdom, are narrow enough to think that knowing how things “work” is the same as knowing what they *are*. And so we ignore both rational metaphysics and the “ordinary mysticism” of the human heart. In this we are uneducated fools.

But the final assurance and visible evidence of what God promises us after death was given when Jesus rose from the dead. This was the event all Christian preaching was based on. This was the key to the “Good News.” And it was the stumbling block for those whose *Sophia* (wisdom) was sophistry.<sup>2</sup>

We may not think of our religion as being the *mission* of proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But it is. We, the Church, are the “sign of Jonah,” the visible evidence that Jesus has risen from the dead. We are this by living lives inexplicable without it. This is the meaning of Christian *witness*.<sup>3</sup>

Peter says we give this witness by the way we endure challenges to our faith:

Rejoice, even if now for a little while you... suffer various trials, so that your faith—more precious than fire-tried gold—may by its genuineness lead to praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

He is revealed, not just when he comes again, but in us. Here and now.

**Mark 10:17-27** reminds us that to bear this witness we have to do more than just keep the commandments. We have to take toward money and everything else in this world a stance so radical that “for humans it is impossible.” This reveals Christ living in us.

**Initiative: Think about the resurrection.** Make Christ’s evident in your life.

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<sup>1</sup> *Matthew* 10:7. This is what John the Baptizer and Jesus proclaimed: *Matthew* 3:2; 4:17; *Acts* 1:3; 8:12.

<sup>2</sup> See *Acts* 1:22; 4:2; 17:18-32; 23:6-8; 15-21.

<sup>3</sup> *Matthew* 12:38-41; *Luke* 11:29-36.

**March 4, 2014**

**Tuesday, Week Eight, Year 2**

*The Lord has made known his salvation.*

*(Responsorial: Psalm 98)*

Yesterday Peter told us Baptism is “a birth unto hope which draws its life from the resurrection... a birth to an imperishable inheritance... a birth to a salvation which stands ready to be revealed in the last days.” Now in

**1Peter 1:10-16** he tells us this is “the salvation,” the “divine favor” which the prophets knew “was destined to be ours.” This is the *mystery* “proclaimed by those who preach the good news to you in the power of the Holy Spirit.” A mystery so deep it is something into which “angels long to search.”

Is this the way your religion came across to you in catechism class? Do you hear this in the homilies at Mass? Are you listening for it? You can now.

What is this mystery? Paul says it is:

the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages... the mystery of the Father’s will that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him... the mystery of Christ and the Church... the mystery, which is *Christ in you, the hope of glory....*”

This was Paul’s message and mission:

It is he whom we proclaim... teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may *present everyone mature in Christ*. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.... I want their hearts to... have the knowledge of *God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself*, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

The mystery is the risen Jesus living and revealing himself in us. But he can’t unless we “gird the loins” of our understanding, embrace the discipline of discipleship, and “set all our hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring when he is revealed.” Revealed now in us, revealed fully when he comes again.

Peter says our task is radical: “Become holy in every aspect of your conduct, after the likeness of the Holy One who called you. Remember, Scripture says, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’”

We are the risen, visible body of him who said that.

The Gospels are consistent. In **Mark 10:28-31** Jesus is just as radical as he was yesterday. His followers are those who have “given up home, brothers or sisters, mother or father, children or property for me and for the Good News.” He doesn’t mean that we literally “leave” these things, but that we relate to them as people who have died and come back to life as the risen Jesus. In all our relationships with people and use of things, we say with Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” And we deal with all in a way that makes that evident.<sup>2</sup>

**Initiative: Have hope, show hope, give hope** through your lifestyle. Be a prophet.

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<sup>1</sup> *Romans 16:25; Ephesians 1:9-10; 5:32; Colossians 1:27 to 2:3.*

<sup>2</sup> *Galatians 2:20.*

**March 5, 2014**

## **ASH WEDNESDAY (Years ABC)**

### **Lent is a time to change together**

#### **Inventory**

Do you think things can be turned around in our society without a massive conversion? Do you believe it will really help the world situation significantly if you yourself begin living more authentically? Is this the point of Lent?

#### **Input**

The readings summon us as individuals to convert as a community.

**Joel 2: 12-18** is addressed to the whole People of Israel as a community; not just to individuals who see themselves acting independently of others. No one corrupted our society independently of others. And no one will reform it independently of others. Lent is a time to hear the word of God together and respond to it as a community.

It is not true to say that if we don't act together, we should not act at all. But when we act as individuals in the Church (or in the human race!) we should do it in a way that will draw others to act with us. In spite of the fiction, the Lone Ranger is not nearly as effective as a posse. The word "posse" (Latin) means "to be able." Anything we accomplish "alone and unaided" we recognize as exceptional.

Lent, then, is a celebrated season that calls for a *communal* response.

When Joel said: "Proclaim a fast, call an assembly; gather the people, notify the congregation." he was talking to the whole People of Israel. To whom should we address this call today? To individuals? Parishes? Dioceses? Just the Catholic Church? All Christians? The whole world?

**Matthew 6: 1-18** sounds like a contradiction of what we have just said about communal response. Jesus is saying the first thing we have to convert *from* is *religion*, and the first thing we have to convert *to* is *spirituality*. "Religion" as used here corresponds to what people mean when they speak disparagingly of "organized religion." It is not really organization they oppose (even the most private, individual life must be organized to be effective), but a system of organized external observances without interior ordination to God. Since what is interior is, by definition, individual, personal and private, Jesus seems to be summoning us to convert to acting as individuals rather than as a community. That is not what he means.

The watchword for Christian authenticity is "both-and" as opposed to "either-or." There are some "either-or's" — the fundamental choice of the "blessing" or the "curse": life or death; to live or not live by the law of God; to remain in the darkness or be led into the light. But the big errors in living out the religion of "God-made-human" come when we think we have to be *either* divine or human; either physical or spiritual; either obedient or free; either surrendered to faith or guided by reason; either reliant on God or responsible for taking initiatives — and, either a Catholic or a Baptist! (Or Presbyterian or Methodist, etc.) But is it possible to be both? The correct answer to all the choices proposed above is "both-and."

The last example was included for shock value. But think about it. The Baptists say they don't know who is a Baptist. They accept anyone who is "saved." They might not have *fellowship* with someone they disagree with, but they claim no authority to declare anyone's interpretation of Scripture wrong. So there is no contradiction in a Baptist who interprets Scripture the way the Catholics do and joins the Church as *both* a "Baptist Catholic" and a "Catholic Baptist," living by the best in both traditions. (For example, participating in Mass on Sunday

but singing the hymns and putting twice as much in the collection!)

Why shouldn't Catholics as well claim "double citizenship" through fellowship with any church that does not ask them to deny anything they believe, affirm anything they don't believe, or stop doing anything the Catholic Church requires? As long as fellowship is "both-and" it does not have to be "either-or."

There is a new surge among Christians toward unity. Catholics and Protestants often find themselves participating in each other's services. The question arises about Communion.

In practice we do what the bishop or pastor decides. But we need to ask what options there are in theory. Laws are always to be obeyed, but always according to the intention of the lawgiver. And we have to understand that intention in the light of our faith.

Catholics believe that "grace" is the *favor of sharing in the divine life of God*. The principal acts of grace — divine faith, hope and love — are in reality acts of sharing in God's own activity. By faith, for example, we share in God's own act of knowing.

Because we are both divine and human, our interior, divine act of sharing in God's knowledge might "take flesh" in human concepts and words that do not perfectly agree with the truth we possess in faith. What we possess may differ from what we profess. Examples:

The Magi were "saved" by believing in *whatever* the star God sent was leading them to. "Where is he?" they said to Herod: "We have come," not to "check him out," but "to adore him." They already adored Jesus Christ, and knew him as God, before they ever met him. This is classical "Baptism of desire."

Scripture scholars tell us the disciples believed in Jesus long before, through the Resurrection and Pentecost, they were able to recognize him as God. But if they knew him by faith, then interiorly they already knew him as God, whether or not they could have said this in words.

Did Jesus know he was God? Of course he did. From his birth:

*he has to be the Son of God and he has to know it.... But it is not necessary — and it is hardly probable — that this fundamental experience should from the beginning have taken the form of an intellectual certitude, of a clear concept."*

In other words, as divine made human he always knew he was God. But as a human who was divine he could not always have said that in human words.<sup>1</sup>

Do saved Baptists, who by grace share in God's own knowing act through faith, but who stoutly assert that the bread and wine of Communion are nothing more than a symbol of fellowship, really know and believe, without being conscious of it, that they are in fact the Body and Blood of Christ? If we are consistent with our theology of grace, we have to say they do!

Also, by our theology of "Baptism of desire," if they believe unconditionally in the Bible and everything God intends to reveal through it, then they believe what the Bible really says about Eucharist — whether or not their human understanding, distorted by the controversies of the Reformation, allows them to express it in the right words. For any good Baptist, the actual truth of the Bible takes priority over any intellectual formulation of that truth, including their own. Whatever God means to say in the Bible, they believe it.

So logically, we Catholics, who know the Bible means that the bread and wine become the real Body and Blood of Christ, have to accept that the Baptists believe this too — whether they know it or not!

The Baptists may be Catholic after all! Where does this lead us?

**2Corinthians 5:20 to 6:2:** "We are ambassadors for Christ, God, as it were, appealing through us" — calling the whole world to turn around together. Is it time we broadened our ministry to address everyone who will listen? Time to open our doors to everyone we recognize as having "become Christ" through Baptism? Is it time Catholics and Protestants applied to themselves what Paul applied to Jews and Gentiles:

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Guillet, S.J., *The Consciousness of Jesus*, Newman, 1972, pp. 43-44.

*Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.... In his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, the hostility between us.*

*He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body.... for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.*

*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God....*

Perhaps we could make this our principle focus as we recite the *Responsorial* (Psalm 51): “*Be merciful O Lord, for we have sinned.*”

**Insight:** *Is Lent a “Catholic” season, or one we share with everyone?*

**Initiative:** *Participate in both Catholic and Protestant Lenten observances — preferably with the same people.*

**March 6, 2014**

**Thursday after Ash Wednesday**

*Happy are they who hope in the Lord! (Psalm 1).*

**Deuteronomy 30: 15-20** sets before us the basic “either-or” choice of human existence: life and wellbeing or death and misery. God’s gift; our choice. “Life or death, the blessing or the curse.” All we have to do is accept it.

How do we know we have?. Three times the reading describes acceptance as *listening*. To choose life is to “obey” (from *obaudire*, to “listen to”). It is “heeding God’s voice.” Those who refuse “will not listen.” Obviously, to choose life means we choose to become *disciples*, “learners,” people who *listen* to God’s word in order to *learn*. This is the choice to keep learning from Jesus all our life; to keep reading and reflecting on his words and actions. Either we do or we don’t. Our choice.

In *Acts*, what those who accepted the Good News “*devoted themselves* to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” That is discipleship.<sup>1</sup>

Learning is sometimes described as a “change of behavior.” That is only one aspect of it, of course, but it is true that any learning that does not affect the way we live or help us to live better — for example, by enhancing our appreciation of truth and beauty — is useless. In John’s Gospel Jesus is presented as “Light” and “Life” interchangeably.

*In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

*Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”<sup>2</sup>*

Discipleship is learning for living. In the reading, we “listen” to “obey the commandments of the Lord.” “Heeding God’s voice” entails “holding fast to him.” Not to listen is to “turn away” our hearts and be “led astray.” Discipleship is like eating: intake gives energy for output. We feed our minds to assimilate and put into action.

That means we read and learn with expectations. But they are based, not on our abilities, but on God: *Happy are they who hope in the Lord!*

**Luke 9:22-25** puts that hope to the test.

*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.*

*For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.*

What Jesus gives as the “entrance exam” to discipleship is humanly impossible to accept or do. Peter’s first act after receiving the “keys of the Kingdom” was to reject it. He gave the spontaneous reaction of us all.<sup>3</sup>

But Jesus didn’t come to teach a human way of life. He calls us to live on the level of God and empowers us to do it. That is why, ultimately, his words and no others teach us to be Christian. We listen to the divine words of the divine Word made flesh in order to give flesh to his words in human actions that are divine. That is Christian discipleship.

**Initiative: Make the choice.** Commit during Lent to learning from Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> *Acts* 2:42.

<sup>2</sup> *John* 1:4, 8:12. See also *Psalm* 27:1, 36:9, 56:13; *Proverbs* 6:23.

<sup>3</sup> *Matthew* 16:21-22.

**March 7, 2014**

**Friday after Ash Wednesday**

*A broken, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn (Psalm 51).*

Jesus was a disciple. As a boy, and later as a young man, he learned from Scripture and from the rabbis. When he got separated from his parents in Jerusalem, “they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening... asking them questions.”<sup>1</sup>

How did his heart resonate to these words from **Isaiah 58: 1-9**?

*This the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice...to let the oppressed go free.... to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house....*

Was he thinking of this when he announced his mission to the people he grew up with in Nazareth:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Jesus came with good news. It was light and life.

*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly... the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, “Here I am.”*

Jesus came with good news. He knew it was good news: *the* Good News. And Lent is a time to hear it. What is it, essentially? In a nutshell?

In **Matthew 9: 14-15** Jesus tells us it is *relationship*. The heart and soul of Christianity is relationship — first with Jesus himself, and through him with God as Father and with the Spirit as indwelling Advocate and Guide.

The Pharisees — and those who grew up under their influence — saw religion as *doing*. If you did the right things you were religious. If you didn't, you weren't. And the “right things” were spelled out in the Law. If we look, we may find the same attitude in ourselves.

The disciples of John the Baptizer reflected this assumption when they asked, “Why is it that while we and the Pharisees fast, your disciples do not?” It was taken for granted that if you were “holy,” fasting was what you did.

Jesus said no. Nothing makes us “holy” but relationship with God. And he made that the same as relationship with himself. Fasting, he taught, is not just something you do; fasting is to *express* something. What it expresses is the “mourning” of unsatisfied spiritual hunger, longing for himself: “How can the wedding guests go in mourning so long as the groom is with them?” But “When the day comes that the groom is taken away, then they will fast.”

Lent invites us to ask what all our actions express, beginning with our religious actions. *Why* do we go to Mass? To “be there” or to *interact* with God? (The reality of relationship is interaction). Interact how? In how many ways? How in the *Introductory Rites*? How during the *Liturgy of the Word*? To answer that is a good start on Lent.

**Initiative: Be a thinker.** Ask what you are expressing when you act.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:46.

**March 8, 2014**

**Saturday after Ash Wednesday**

*Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may be faithful in your sight (Psalm 86).*

**Isaiah 58: 9-14** presents two levels of response to God, and two levels of promise.

The first level is to keep the Commandments on the “second tablet” of the “two tablets of the covenant,” that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. Custom assigns to the first tablet the Commandments that call us “to acknowledge God as the one Lord of all and to worship him alone for his infinite holiness.” On the second are the Commandments that rule our interaction with humans, “the summary and foundation of which is “the commandment of love of neighbor.”<sup>1</sup>

The Lord promises: “If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted [the “second tablet], then “the Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs.... The ancient ruins shall be rebuilt... you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” To live by God’s law brings wellbeing on earth, restores and renews human society.

But to those who keep the “first tablet” God promises something higher:

*If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and ... honor it.... then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will nourish you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob....*

Treat those on earth right, and we will have delight on earth. Treat God right, and we will “delight in the Lord” himself. We will know God.

Which shall we choose? To focus on living well (in both senses) on earth, or to focus on relationship with God and enjoying that “life to the full” Jesus came to give, finding our delight in knowing God and spending our lives to make his name “hallowed” by every person in the world? This is not an “either-or” choice; we must make it “both-and.” *Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may be faithful in your sight.*<sup>2</sup>

**Luke 5: 27-32** tells us only the hungry will come to be fed. If we are good enough not to think we are bad, we may settle for ordinary, decent human behavior, with no further hunger or desire, no longing to learn how to live on the level of God. This is the curse of the self-controlled; the fallacy of the Pharisees. Jesus calls it the handicap of the “healthy.” It is the “good” that is the enemy of the “better.”

The paradox is, if we are fully “natural” we will long for the “supernatural.” The built-in desire of our intellect and will is for truth and goodness. If the infinite Truth and Goodness we can never attain by nature is offered, it is a sin against our human nature to refuse it.

**Initiative: To be fully “natural,”** long and live for the “supernatural.”

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<sup>1</sup> See *Exodus* 31:18 and John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth*, nos. 11-13, citing *Exodus* 20:2-11 for the “first tablet” and *Romans* 13:8-10 for the second.

<sup>2</sup> *John* 10:10. See John Paul’s brilliant explanation of how Jesus transformed the practice and promise of both tablets in *The Splendor of Truth*, nos. 11 to end.

# TO WHAT DOES LENT CALL US?

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

for the “half week” between Ash Wednesday and the First Sunday of Lent.

**Lent is a time for “metanoia,” a change of mind. This is *discipleship*:** To read, reflect on the word of God, call into question goals, attitudes, priorities, lifestyle.

### Invitation:

Take time to think. Ask where you are going spiritually. Join a discussion group. Make changes in your priorities, time-schedule, interests. Check your focus..

**Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion**, for each statement below: “Do you see this in the Scripture reading? What response does it invite?”

**Joel 2:12-18:** Lent summons us as individuals to convert as a community. Whom does our “community” include?

**Matthew 6: 1-18:** We have to embrace *both* “religion,” *and* “spirituality.”

The watchword for Christian authenticity is “both-and” as opposed to “either-or.”

One’s interior, divine act of sharing in God’s knowledge might “take flesh” in human concepts and words that do not perfectly agree with the truth we possess in faith. We “possess” more than we “profess.”

**2Corinthians 5:20 to 6:2:** Is it time to open our doors to everyone we recognize as having “become Christ” through Baptism?

**Deuteronomy 30: 15-20:** The basic “either-or” choice of human existence (post revelation) is to listen to God’s words and try to act on them; or to refuse.

We read God’s word with expectations based not on our abilities, but on God.

**Luke 9:22-25:** Jesus did not come to teach a human way of life. He calls us to live on the level of God and empowers us to do it.

**Isaiah 58: 1-9 and Matthew 9: 14-15:** The heart and soul of Christianity is *relationship* with Jesus and through him with the Father and Spirit.

The Pharisees see religious acts as *doing*. Jesus sees them as *expressions* of relationship

**Isaiah 58: 9-14:** Two levels of response to God are: 1. To focus on living well (in both senses) on earth; 2. To focus on relationship with God and “life to the full.”

The first focus brings wellbeing on earth, restores and renews human society. The second brings “delight in the Lord” himself.

**Luke 5: 27-32:** If we are good enough not to feel we are bad, we may settle for decent human behavior. But it is “unnatural” not to long for the “supernatural.”

### Initiatives:

Participate in both Catholic and Protestant Lenten observances.

Make the choice: commit during Lent to learning from Jesus.

Be a thinker. Ask what you are expressing when you act.

March 9, 2014

## THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT (Year A)

### Entering Discipleship: the Recognition of Sin

#### Inventory

To what do I attribute the evils in our society? Do I blame them on bad politics? Bad business practices? Inadequate education? Unenlightened ministry in the Church? Disintegrating family life? What do I think is the *root* cause?

Could the root of it all be *sin*?

The *Entrance Antiphon* quotes God: “When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them” (*Psalms* 91).

Do I believe the answer to society’s problems is to call on God? How often do I do it? And what do I call on him for?

#### Input

In the *Opening Prayer* we ask God to “help us understand the *meaning* of your Son’s death and resurrection.” But we are not looking just for abstract enlightenment. We continue: “Teach us to reflect it in our lives.” We are willing to *respond* to what God shows us, to *act* on what we understand.

The *Prayer over the Gifts* echoes this: “Lord... may this sacrifice help us to *change our lives*.” And so does the *Prayer After Communion*: “Help us to *live by your words* and to *seek Christ*, our bread of life.”

The focus of Lent is on *seeing more clearly* and *acting more consistently*. This is the description of *conversion* — but of conversion based on greater insight, on new discovery, on a clearer understanding of what Jesus really calls us to believe and do. We don’t just turn away from “the same old sins.” We turn away from attitudes, values, priorities and patterns of behavior we never recognized before as “sin.”

This is what “conversion” really means: a “change of mind” made fully human in a change of heart and habits. The New Testament word for sin is *hamartia*, which means “to miss the mark, to fall short.” To “convert” is to correct our *aim*: to rectify coordinates and range.

But to do this we have to recognize it when we “miss the mark.” We do this in a “*confession* of sin” that is a *profession* of more enlightened faith.

#### Sin is the root:

**Genesis 2:7 to 3:7** is a story God told to answer one of the basic questions in life — like the questions little children ask their parents — “Why is there pain and suffering in the world?”

The Genesis story is intended to make it clear that God didn’t will this. God does not want people to suffer. The world God gave the first humans to live in was like a garden, teeming with beautiful trees and luscious fruit. A paradise.

But God made humans free. He knew they might abuse their freedom and mess up the world for themselves and others. So he gave instructions: he told them what they must avoid and what they must do if they wanted to keep their living conditions, their environment — including their interaction with one another — pleasant, beautiful and enjoyable for all. These instructions have come down to us as the “Ten Commandments.”

In the story there is only one command, because the point of the story is that there is only one cause of all the pain and suffering in the world. The cause is *sin* — the choice people make to use freedom, not to obey God, but to disregard God’s instructions and do what they themselves think will make them happy. We might think some particular sin is messing up the world, some particular way of acting. But God says the problem is sin as such. Any time we choose not to do what God says, we “miss the mark” and we mess up the world for ourselves and others.

When we choose to live by our own light, our own guidance system, instead of God’s, the results are disastrous. When we recognize this, our “eyes are opened” and we realize we are blind. Then there is hope.

## “If you are...”

**Matthew 4: 1-11** shows us Jesus confronting his call to be the Messiah, the Savior of the world. He is being tempted to falsify his mission. Not to disobey God overtly and explicitly, but to adopt as the goal of his mission something that looks good to human eyes but “misses the mark” established by God’s wisdom.

The devil urges him to give people what they think they want: prosperity, protection from enemies, a just and peaceful society; in other words, a pleasant, pain-free life on this earth. Basically, the devil is urging Jesus to make the earth a garden without God.

Jesus is not asked to exclude God; just to make God marginal. God can be a player; just don’t let him call all the plays. God will be allowed to speak to those who want to listen, but listening to God is not what will save the world. Society believes salvation consists in what people have, not in what they hear.

Jesus’ first answer is a call to *discipleship* — to listening and learning. The way to live fully is to live “by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Is this an answer I have accepted? Will I accept to be the one who saves society around me by preparing myself through reading and reflecting on the words of God? Is my failure to do this the place where I am “missing the mark”? Can I recognize this as “sin”?

## “Through one man”

The *Responsorial Psalm* is a meditation on the first reading. The response to which it guides us is: “*Be merciful, Lord, for we have sinned.*” When we realize we are blind, we call out to God. And God will always save us. The “definition of God” that God himself gave when he showed his “glory” to Moses is: “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (*Exodus* 34:6). God will never turn away from us when we sin.

But for us to turn to him we have to *recognize* our sin: Jesus said to the Pharisees, who refused to do this, “Because you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains” (read *John*, chapter 9).

**Romans 5:12-19** shows us the form God’s mercy took when he acted to save us from our sins. And it gives the answer we asked for in the *Opening Prayer* “Father, help us understand the *meaning* of your Son’s death and resurrection.”

On the cross Jesus recognized sin as sin in the name of us all. He “became sin” by taking our sins into his own body (*2Corinthians* 5:21) to express and expiate the evil of sin in the name of the whole human race. And just as sin and suffering entered the world through one free choice — the first human choice to sin — so salvation began through the free choice of “one man,” Jesus Christ, to offer himself on the cross. When he died, all who were or ever would be made members of his body by acceptance of him also died “in him,” and their sins were annihilated. This is the mystery of our redemption.

But just as the first human act of disobedience to God began a chain reaction that filled the world with sin, so Jesus’ unique divine-human act of obedience began a chain reaction of graced responses to God that continues to reverse the destructive effects of sin on human society. Through the obedience of “one man” we were saved. But through the obedience of many that salvation takes flesh in society to turn wasteland into gardens, alienation into acceptance, selfishness into service and indifference into love. For this to happen, however, each one of us has to be that “one man” or “one woman” in whom it begins.

This may be the conversion to which God calls us during Lent.

## **Insight**

*Do I really believe that if I want to relieve pain and suffering in the world, the first thing I should do is read and reflect — seriously and consistently — on the words of God? Should this be my first priority?*

## **Initiative**

*What “conversion” will I work toward during Lent? What it would mean for me to convert to being a disciple? How could I begin?*

**March 10, 2014**

**Monday, Lent Week One**

The *Responsorial* (John 6:63 and Psalm 19) could be the motto for the discipleship to which the *Liturgy of the Word* calls us in every Mass: “Your words, Lord, are spirit and life.”

**Leviticus 19: 1-18** puts morality in context: “Be holy, for I, your God, am holy.” Christian morality is not “being good,” it is “being like.” And its goal is *relationship*: with God and others. Once the “grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” was revealed as “the favor of sharing in God’s own life,” the goal of a moral life became mystical *union*: union with God in one shared life; union with others in the “communion of the Holy Spirit.”

“You shall not steal... lie... swear falsely....” We can just accept and obey, or we can *ask*, like *disciples*, “Why? Why are these words ‘spirit and life’?”

The answer is, sins destroy *relationship*. Stealing says property is more important than people. Lying makes words mean nothing and communication impossible. To “profane the name of God” means we don’t care to know or relate to God as he really is. Those who have the slightest real knowledge of him cry out, “Hallowed be your Name!”

Look to the *goal* of every law, even God’s. God doesn’t want us just to obey; he wants us to be one with him in mind and heart. This makes the difference between Phariseism and friendship with God; between mere “followers” and “disciples.” The *Responsorial Psalm* pilots us: “*The law of the Lord is perfect... giving wisdom to the simple.*”

“You shall not defraud, curse, mislead, slander or fail to help your neighbor.” The Commandments of the “second tablet” have as their base and goal, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But the Psalm roots this in “fear of the Lord,” which, divorced from fright, is *perspective*. If there were no God, people might vie for dominance, some claiming to be greater than others and entitled to more. But if our very existence is an ongoing act and gift of God, we are all equally nothing before him. And equally precious. All are “as ourselves.” “*The command of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eye.*” God’s laws give perspective.

“You shall not bear hatred, take revenge or hold a grudge.” Love endures evil in others. Because God does. The Jewish Scriptures repeat forty-three times, “His *steadfast love* endures forever.” And John’s Gospel introduces Jesus as “enduring love.” If we keep God and his love in perspective, our love for others will not be fragmented or fail: “*The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.*”<sup>1</sup>

**Matthew 25:31-46**: Our relationship with God will be judged by our relationship with others: “If you did it for one of mine, you did it for me.” And vice-versa. To love others “as ourselves” is to love them as Christ, because by Baptism we “became Christ.” Now our perspective is mystery.

**Initiative: Be a disciple: ask “Why?”** about every word of God’s law. Study God.

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:17, 1970 *New American Bible*; Luke 6:35-36; 1 *Corinthians* 13:4-8.

**March 11, 2014**

**Tuesday, Lent Week One**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 34)* assures us: “*From all their afflictions, God will deliver the just.*”

**Isaiah 55: 10-11** tells us how he does it: God saves us through his “word”: “It will not return to me void, but shall... achieve the end for which I sent it.”

This is not just God’s creative word. He compares it to the “rain and snow” that “water the earth, making it fertile and fruitful.” That is what God’s word does for us. It makes us fertile in life-giving ideas and fruitful in the lives we lead and help others to lead. We need to take in God’s word the way we take in food and water. If we do, “*From all their afflictions, God will deliver the just.*”

The *Responsorial Psalm* emphasizes two kinds of prayer that “deliver” us. The first is the prayer that the *Liturgy of the Word* encourages: meditation, “faith seeking understanding” through reflection: “I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.” Jesus said, “Seek and you will find. knock, and the door will be opened for you.” He also said, “If you remain in my word, [immersed in it, absorbed in trying to learn and live it] you will truly be my *disciples* and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Free from destructive errors and distortions; free from fears and anxieties. Prayer helps us see God and the world in perspective. In that view, God reigns supreme and there is no room for fear. “*From all their afflictions, God will deliver the just.*”<sup>1</sup>

**Matthew 6: 7-15** teaches us a second way to pray: the way Jesus taught his disciples:<sup>2</sup> The “Our Father” is “petitionary prayer,” but it is also instructive. It makes a list of Jesus’ own priorities and tells us to adopt them as our own. If we pray for these petitions above all others, thinking about what we are saying, we will grow into union with the mind and heart of Christ. This is also a prayer of discipleship.

Every petition in the *Our Father* is asking for Christ’s triumph, which will be complete at the end of the world.<sup>3</sup> What is delaying it? If God’s word “will not return void, but shall achieve the end for which he sent it,” why is the Kingdom not yet established?

The answer is simple: there are not enough disciples on earth who are truly immersed in his word — enough to understand and live it. We tend to settle for keeping the laws, without learning where they come from or where they intend to lead us. Even some teachers in the Church just learn doctrines and laws, without seeking deep understanding of the mind and heart of God from whence they came, and pass shallow understanding on to others. Jesus calls them the blind leading the blind. There is no substitute for deep, personal discipleship.<sup>4</sup>

**Initiative: Be a disciple.** Ask where every law comes from and where it leads.

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<sup>1</sup> *Psalm 34:4; Matthew 7:7; John 8:31-32.*

<sup>2</sup> *Luke 11:1.*

<sup>3</sup> See “The Pater Noster As An Eschatological Prayer” in Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *New Testament Essays*, Bruce, 1965; Doubleday, Image Books, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> See *Matthew 15:12-14.*

**March 12, 2014**

**Wednesday, Lent Week One**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 51)* is an insight into God: “A broken, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn.”

**Jonah 3: 1-10** is a story of conversion. That is what Lent is all about and what the *Liturgy of the Word* calls us to: *metanoia*. We translate the word as “repentance,” but it literally means more: a “change of mind,” a “complete makeover” of all that determines who we are as persons: our life-goal; means chosen to achieve it; priority given to those means over the means to lesser or even contradictory goals. *Metanoia* is direction-finding. And what initiates and sustains it is response to God’s voice, however it is received.

Continued attention to God’s voice, and continued response to it is called *discipleship*. Lent is offered as a short time of intense discipleship to give an extra push to *metanoia*.

The people of Nineveh got the invitation, responded, and were saved. The Scripture says, “God repented of the evil he had threatened to do to them.” What Scripture calls God’s “repentance” is just the mirror-image we see of our own — just as the “evil” God threatens is in reality God’s observation of the evil we are already doing to ourselves.

Is there any difference between Jonah’s voice sounding in the streets of Nineveh — “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed” — and God’s voice sounding in our ears through the readings proclaimed in the *Liturgy of the Word*? The Church says there isn’t. The action we take or don’t take in response reveals what we say.

Forty days? Forty years? The time-frame is not the message. The message is, “Sin is destroying us; conversion will save us.” The carrot and the stick; if we doubt either one we are fools. But the carrot is the one to focus on. “Repentance” is a joyful word in Scripture, because the call to it always includes the promise of the Holy Spirit poured out to “create a clean heart” in us and “renew within us a steadfast spirit.” “Repent” is really a proclamation about God: “A broken, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn.”

In **Luke 11: 29-32** Jesus says, “You have a greater than Jonah here.” Is he still saying that? To us? If so, where is he? Can we hear his voice?

The “sign of Jonah” is the Church. Jesus risen from the dead was a “sign” to those who saw him. But he is only a sign today when he is visible, and visibly risen from the dead in the Church that is his body. In us.

When we “rise” from the death and darkness of whatever pit our culture led us into, we are the “sign of Jonah.” When we live in a way that reveals the divine life of Christ in us, we are the sign of Jonah. To those who “sit in darkness and the shadow of death” Jesus warned, “no other sign will be given.”

That puts a heavy responsibility on us. But if we let Jesus carry it *with, in and through* us, we will find the shared yoke easy and the shared burden light.

**Initiative: Be a sign.** Live a lifestyle inexplicable without the life of God in you.

**March 13, 2014**

**Thursday, Lent Week One**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 138)* is a testimony “*O Lord, on the day I called for help you answered me!*”

**Esther chapter C** (after chapter 4), **verses 12, 14-16, 23-25** shows us what it means to live a lifestyle inexplicable to those who do not recognize the empowering presence of grace — the divine life of God — in us.

Esther laid it out before God: “I am alone and have no help but you.” Do you know people who are alone? Who really have no one to help them but God? Don’t you worry about them?

Sure: logically, saying this is like facing a mugger and saying, “I have no one to help me but a whole division of United State Marines.” If we have God, what else do we need? But that isn’t the way we see it when God is all we have.

It isn’t the way others see it either. To attempt something — anything — with no help available but God’s seems crazy. His help is good in theory, but in practice we don’t like to depend on it. So if we do attempt the impossible when we are “alone and have no help but God,” that bears witness to God’s life in us — even before we succeed.

Let’s don’t think in terms of business ventures and other unimportant projects whose outcome won’t make any difference to you a hundred years from now. Let’s talk about essentials. A temptation you are fighting that all your friends keep convoying you into. Ideals you hold that no one understands or agrees with; that you are not even sure you believe in. Values Jesus taught that just don’t seem to make sense to you. Times when neither your feelings nor your mind are much help to you in doing what nevertheless you know God wants you to do. Then can you join Esther in telling God, “I am alone and have no help but you”?

What if you are blocked from Confession because of something you “know you can’t stop?” What if the last priest you talked to was harsh and discouraging? What does it reveal about your faith if you keep trying? You may find yourself saying, “*O Lord, on the day I called for help you answered me!*”

As long as we have God’s promises we are not alone; they are comforting company. So are the stories of the way God “fulfilled his promises” to others. They are there in the Bible. Read them. The *Liturgy of the Word* invites us to do a little discipleship. Read how Esther’s story turned out.

In **Matthew 7: 7-12** Jesus makes some promises. “Ask... Seek... Knock.... The one who asks receives, who seeks finds, who knocks enters.” Ask when you don’t know how it can be given to you. Seek when you don’t know how you can possibly find it. Keep knocking on a stone wall. The divine life of God in you reveals itself through faith in the midst of doubt, “hope that contradicts hope,” and “love that surpasses knowledge.” That makes you the “sign of Jonah.”<sup>1</sup>

**Initiative: Read Scripture.** Learn how God helps those who trust him.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Romans 4:18; Ephesians 3:19*.

**March 14, 2014**

**Friday, Lent Week One**

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 130) is both truth and trust: “If you, O Lord, laid bare our guilt, who could endure it?”

**Ezekiel 18: 21-28** basically tells us that God doesn't keep books.

Many of us grew up thinking God keeps all our sins recorded in a big ledger, along with all the good things we do to make up for them. At the “judgment,” when we die, God subtracts one from the other and we have to make up the difference in “Purgatory.” We took for granted the good list would be shorter.

But Ezekiel talks as if the only thing that counts is what side you are on at the end: “If the wicked turns away from all the sins he has committed... he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of the crimes he has committed shall be remembered against him.” And vice-versa: “If the virtuous man turns from the path of virtue to do evil... none of his good deeds shall be remembered.” So how do you run up a score?

God doesn't keep score. What matters to him is not what we have done but what we are. It is true, we “create ourselves” by what we do. Every act, good or bad, changes us, for better or worse. But the change isn't quantitative; it is cumulative. What counts is the part all of our actions play in making it easier or harder for us to surrender ourselves totally to God in death. In pure faith, hope and love. The last judgment we make about God is our personal Last Judgment. Either we want him enough to say “Yes” to death — and to leaving all we have and love on earth, including life itself, to possess him — or we don't. Our answer at that moment is all that counts.

**Matthew 5: 20-26** seems both to support this and contradict it. Jesus bases God's judgment on the kind of person we are: loving or unloving. All the examples speak of this: embraced anger, abusive language, silent contempt, alienation; they say we are or are not living in love. It's a pass-fail exam. No one adds or subtracts points.

But if we haven't completely reconciled our differences with others, Jesus uses the image of a prison from which we “will not be released until you have paid the last penny.” This seems quantitative.

Does Jesus speak of “punishment”? No. “Paid the last penny” can as easily mean “made a complete turnaround,” or “grown to the fullness of love.” The image speaks of completeness, not of payment as such.

But if we think of “penalty” instead of “punishment,” that works. God doesn't “punish” us for sins; what would be the point of it? But he warns us that if we do not try to grow into “the perfection of love,” there will be distance to make up before we enter heaven. To say “Yes” to death, choosing God as our All with love undivided between God and any creature, is not something that comes easily. If we don't work at growing into this (which means surrendering to it) during life, then the natural consequence or “penalty” is that we might have a struggle at the end. Another reason to embrace discipleship.

**Initiative: Seek the “perfection of love.”** Use the *Liturgy of the Word*.

**March 15, 2014**

**Saturday, Lent Week One**

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 119 ) asserts the blessing of discipleship: “*Happy are they who follow the law of the Lord.*”

**Deuteronomy 26: 16-19:** A principle of American jurisprudence is: “Ignorance of the law is no excuse.” For Christians, to seek knowledge of God’s law is a commitment.

Moses told the People, “Today you are making this agreement with the Lord: he is to be your God and you are to walk in his ways,” observing all of God’s “statutes, commandments and decrees.”

Obviously, we can’t live by all of God’s principles and ideals if we don’t know what they are. And there is too much to learn overnight. Or over a lifetime. If it were just a matter of “statutes, commandments and decrees,” we could learn them in one catechism course! But the point of the Covenant is to absorb God’s mind and heart so completely through reflection on his words and wonders that we will “love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind.” For this the *Liturgy of the Word* invites us to become *disciples*.

There is more. The People are agreeing to live in a way that shows them to be “a people peculiarly his own.” “Peculiarly” just means “especially,” but the word makes a point: Any group of people who live by the ideals and principles God teaches will, in fact, seem “peculiar” to the unenlightened. Jesus calls his disciples to a radical peculiarity.

In **Matthew 5: 43-48** Jesus zooms in on the “scandalous commandment,” the one that drew instant protest out of Peter.<sup>1</sup> “Love your enemies, pray for your persecutors.” This just isn’t human. Every soldier we put in the field and every bomb we drop declares we would all as a nation rather kill our enemies than be killed loving them.

There is no escaping Jesus’ meaning. He declares categorically, “If any want to become my followers, let them... take up their cross and follow me. Those who want to save their life will lose it. Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” But we prefer to save our lives by killing our enemies (perhaps sending them to Hell, since they are presumably the “bad guys”) rather than let them send us to heaven by giving up our lives in love as Jesus did on the cross. According to Jesus, this is what God finds “peculiar.”

This is exactly what makes Jesus’ point when he says, “This will prove you are children of your heavenly Father...” Anybody who loves, not as humans do, but as God alone does, must be doing so by sharing in God’s divine life. It is above all by observing this commandment, treating every man and woman on earth as our brother or sister, that we reveal ourselves as the mystery of Christ’s risen body on earth, children of God the Father,.

Obviously, it takes a lot of discipleship to grow into this one.

**Initiative: Don’t give up.** To love like God is a graduate course. Keep at it.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Matthew* 16:21-28. The basic principle here is that we love others, even enemies, enough to let them kill us rather than do them harm. This is just as shocking to us as it was to the first disciples.

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: LENT WEEK ONE

**The answer to sin is to see** — and act. *Discipleship* is the alternative to darkness. If we are committed *students* of the mind and heart of God, his truth will free us.

### Invitation:

Get something really great out of Lent this year. If you decide to go for it, these daily reflections will “call the plays” for you. All you have to do is run them.

**Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion**, for each statement below: “Do you see this in the Scripture reading? What response does it invite?”

**Sunday:** There is only one cause of all the pain and suffering in the world. The cause is *sin*.

Society believes happiness comes from what people have, not from what they hear. Jesus’ first “saving act” is a call to *discipleship* — to listening and learning.

**Monday:** Christian morality is not “being good,” it is “being like.” Its goal is *relationship*: with God and others.

Look to the *goal* of every law, even God’s. God doesn’t want us just to obey; he wants us to be one with him in mind and heart.

To love others “as ourselves” is to love them as Christ does, because by Baptism we “became Christ.” This makes our perspective mystery.

**Tuesday:** God saves us initially through his “word.” It makes us fertile in life-giving ideas and fruitful in the lives we lead.

**Wednesday:** “Repentance” is a joyful word in Scripture, because the call to it always includes the promise of the Holy Spirit

The “sign of Jonah” is the Church living in a way that reveals the divine life of Christ in us.

**Thursday:** The divine life of God in us reveals itself through faith in the midst of doubt, “hope that contradicts hope,” and “love that surpasses knowledge.” Explain.

**Friday:** What matters to God is not what we have done but what we are.

**Saturday:** We are committed by the Covenant to work at absorbing God’s mind and heart so completely through reflection on his words and wonders that we will “love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind.” For this the *Liturgy of the Word* invites us to become *disciples*.

### Decisions:

Be a disciple. Ask where every law comes from and where it leads.

Be a sign. Learn from Scripture how to live a lifestyle inexplicable without the life of God in you.

March 16, 2014

## THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT (Year A)

### The Event and the Glory that Motivate Discipleship

#### Inventory

How much do I think about the *event* of Christ's death and resurrection? Do I consciously base my whole life on the difference that event has made?

The *Entrance Antiphon* asks: "Remember your mercies, Lord, your tenderness from ages past." Do I use my *memory* of God's deeds in a way that gives me confidence God "will not let our enemies triumph over us"? Do I let the *Liturgy of the Word* remind me of what God has done in the past?

#### Input

In the *Opening Prayer* we are looking for understanding, and for the *vision of a goal* that will encourage us: "Enlighten us with your word, that we may find the way to your glory."

Jesus is the Word made flesh. His words are "spirit and life." In the *Liturgy of the Word* we hear his voice, as we hear that of the Father. The Church teaches: "In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven *meets his children* with great love and *speaks with them*. And the force and power in the word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church." But to receive that power and support we have to *listen* to God's words. And so we ask God, "Help us to hear your Son."<sup>1</sup>

God's answer will be to *show us Jesus*, to let us see his glory so that when we lose sight of it we will *remember*, continue to listen to his words and follow his way.

#### God's intervention:

The *Responsorial (Psalm 33)* asks, "Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you." To "have mercy" is to come to the aid of another out of a sense of *relationship*. And relationship is the result of *interaction*. It is on the basis of God's interaction with us that we say "We place our trust in you."

**Genesis 12: 1-4** tells us that it all began with the *event* of God's intervening in history to form a special relationship with one man — Abraham — and his descendants. This relationship was a covenant that committed God to take an active, guiding role in human history.<sup>2</sup> "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great."

This is the act of *mercy* — of God's entering into a special relationship with Abraham's race — that is the first

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<sup>1</sup> *John* 6:63; *Vatican II*, "Liturgy," no. 33.

<sup>2</sup> God's covenant with Noah (*Genesis* 9:9) was only a pledge not to destroy the human race. All who survived the flood are Noah's descendants. But Abram and his family were a particular clan, the descendants of Noah's son Shem (*Genesis* 10:1; 11: 10, 26).

foundation of our trust. God's promise to Abraham was realized in Jesus, in whom all those who become members of his body, the Church, are "sons and daughters in the Son," children of God and children of Abraham. In Christ the promise is fulfilled: "All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you."

## Revealed in Jesus:

**2Timothy 1: 8-10** tells us that the full favor (grace) of the plan God began to implement through Abraham was "made manifest through the appearance of our Savior," Jesus Christ. Through the Good News of his life, death and resurrection Jesus "has brought life and immortality into clear light." And he "has called us to a holy life."

We know through the Gospel that this "holy life" is actually divine life. Through Baptism we were incorporated into the body of Jesus on the cross, into the *event* of his dying and rising. We died to our merely natural, human lives and rose to live as sharers in the divine life of Jesus. Our glory is to "be Christ." And his glory is to be visibly, manifestly alive and risen in us. St. Irenaeus wrote: "Life in humans is the glory of God." The proof of Christ's resurrection and triumph is his divine life present and shining out unmistakably in those he has redeemed.

To live authentically as Christians we need to have some idea of the glory Jesus has in himself, and of how that glory should appear in us who are his body on earth. To understand what that glory is and should be, the *Liturgy of the Word* invites to reflect deeply on the Scriptures. That is why we prayed in the *Opening Prayer*, "Enlighten us with your *word*, that we may find the *way* to your glory."

## A vision of his glory:

In **Matthew 17: 1-9** Jesus took three of his disciples — the same three he would take with him later in his agony in the garden — and led them up to the top of a mountain, where he was "transfigured before their eyes." Something of the glory he had as God appeared visibly in his body — but only a very little bit, because they were still able to speak.

When Peter suggested, however, that they should put Jesus on a par with Moses and Elijah, who embodied the Law and the Prophets, by building shrines to the three of them, the Father made it clear that Jesus was not on a par with anyone: he was infinitely superior to every human prophet or saint, no matter how great. "*This*," the Father declared, "is *my beloved Son*." And he spoke from within the *shekinah*, a cloud both opaque and luminous, which in Scripture is a sign of God's presence.

The Father added: "*Listen* to him!"

We keep getting the same message. If we really want confidence that God "will not let our enemies triumph over us" we need to *listen* to his Son. If we want a motivating goal for our life, we need to take seriously Christ's glory and ours, and keep striving to enter into it through deeper understanding and love.

We do this by reflecting on the words of God that show us his glory revealed in the Word made flesh. Jesus is not just an exemplary human being: he is God himself showing us how God would and did live in human flesh.

*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets. But in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son... through whom he also created the worlds.*

*He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being....*

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

The glory revealed in Jesus is the glory God wants to reveal in us as his divine-human body on earth.

In the Transfiguration God gave us a glimpse of Jesus in his divine glory so that we would be encouraged to

interact with him in his humanity: learning from his words and example how to live as humans who are divine; how to live on the level of God.

We learn this by *interacting* with Jesus as *disciples*: reading his words, asking questions, talking to him. But it has to be “hands on” learning. We don’t know what Jesus is talking about until we try to actually do what he says. We don’t know we are hearing his voice until we respond to his inspirations. We don’t experience ourselves as his body until we begin working with him for the establishment of God’s reign on earth, asking him to act with us, in us and through us in everything we do.

The starting point, however, and key to doing this well, is *listening to him*. We first have to become *disciples*, students dedicated to learning from him. For this we pray: “Lord, help us to *hear* your Son.”

## **Insight**

*By what standard do I measure my behavior? By human standards or God’s? By “right or wrong” (i.e. “reasonable”) or by “faith-inspired”? By what I see others around me doing, or by what I hear Jesus saying we should do?*

## **Initiative:**

*Spend some time thinking about Jesus’ glory. How do you, will you share in it?*

**March 17, 2014**

**Monday, Lent Week Two**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 79)* gives a key to the readings: “*Lord, do not deal with us as our sins deserve.*”

In the Gospel Jesus is going to tell us, “Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate.” The reading from **Daniel 9: 4-10**: reminds us how much we ourselves need the compassion Jesus instructs us to give to others.

The Book of Daniel is an example of “apocalyptic” writing, which looks ahead to the “day of the Lord” and to the consummation of history when God, the Lord of history, will ultimately vindicate his people. It was written during a bitter persecution, and its purpose was to strengthen and comfort the Jewish people in their ordeal.<sup>1</sup>

Daniel recognizes that troubles always have causes. Frequently they are brought on by our failures to live by the principles God teaches. Historians say the seeds of World War II were planted in the harsh terms of the peace treaty that ended World War I. The scourge of Islamic terrorism today would not be possible if Moslems had no grounds for perceiving America as the society of the Great Satan because of the values we project. These are not our deepest and truest values, but to the superficial scanner, our media present us as a country of materialism, militarism, violence and sexual license. Our reaction is defensive: we pour billions into national security. Daniel’s reaction was to confess his People’s sins to God:

*Ah, Lord... we have sinned and done wrong... acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments.... We have not listened to your servants, who spoke in your name.*

His real message, however, is not about us. It is about God: “Yours, O Lord, are compassion and forgiveness.” Every “confession” of sin is a “profession” of faith in God’s values and love.

In **Luke 6: 36-38** Jesus tells us to set all our standards by the standards God follows. “Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate.” Then he seems to reverse himself and say that God will match his standards to ours: “for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

The truth is, God never limits his goodness to correspond to ours. When we pray, “Forgive us... as we forgive...” “as” does not mean “in the measure that,” but closer to “while.” We are anticipating the “wedding banquet of the Lamb,” when total reconciliation will reign between all people and with God.

What limits God is our refusal to open ourselves to his generosity. If we close our minds, he cannot enlighten us as he wants. If we close our hearts, he cannot love through us as he will. If we refuse to forgive, he cannot give us his peace. But never, *never* does he refuse to forgive when we repent, to give when we ask, or to fill us when we admit our emptiness. We already know God’s answer when we pray, “*Lord, do not deal with us as our sins deserve.*”

**Initiative: Listen to the readings.** Measure yourself by what you hear.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the introduction to the Book of Daniel in the *Catholic Study Bible*, Oxford University, 1990, using the *New American Bible* texts.

**March 18, 2014**

**Tuesday, Lent Week Two**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 50)* promises: “*To the upright I will show the saving power of God.*” Isaiah encourages us to add: “And also to those not upright.”

**Isaiah 1: 10-20** offers forgiveness and purification to the “princes of Sodom.” When we read in *Genesis* 19 the sin that brought destruction on Sodom, we wonder that Isaiah can promise what he does. In the eyes of Lot, in whose culture protecting guests was sacrosanct, to have allowed the rape that the men of Sodom intended would have been worse than turning his own daughters over to them for child abuse! (19:8). But even to these rapists God says, “Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow.... If you are willing and obey, you shall eat the good things of the land.” Let’s be honest. Would we say that to a child abuser?

To priests guilty of that sin, the Church offers forgiveness; but with no possibility of ever being admitted to full priestly ministry again. That is because we learned — late, after 1980 — that no matter how much therapy is given, recidivism can never be discounted. This alerted us to another aspect of sin: one obvious but overlooked.

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, after nine years on the Australian child-abuse commission, gives this overlooked aspect of sin as a possible reason why so many bishops re-assigned offenders after they repented. We were so focused on seeing sin, including child abuse, as a “direct offense against God,” that the bishops treated it as any other sexual sin: Confession and absolution marked “end of story.” But sin always also does *damage to people*. If we forget this, we might act as if forgiveness precludes forestalling. With our eyes only on repentance we can be blind to risk. The truth is, to forgive fully does not entail the folly of gambling on reform. If we do, it is the psychological and spiritual wellbeing of children that we wager. No matter what the odds, that is too much to gamble.<sup>1</sup>

In **Matthew 23: 1-12** Jesus tells us why we include the *Liturgy of the Word* in every Mass. It is to make sure we have direct exposure to the word of God.

We can never rely entirely on second-hand exposure through teachers, priests and bishops. In his time Jesus said, “The scribes and Pharisees have succeeded Moses as teachers.” That is a possibility in every time. We need to obey every legitimate authority, but as disciples, not dumbbells. We should view all opinions and optional customs in the light of the word of God, expecting some errors.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus mentions some: blind applications of the law that lay “heavy burdens” on people; ways of dressing that suggest some are “higher” than others; preferential treatment and signs of special respect in gatherings; honorific titles. He alone is the teacher; the rest of us, clergy and laity alike, are all fellow-students. We verify by his words what other pupils say they have heard. No one is “higher” than another. Those who want status should seek it through serving others. That is the word of God.

**Initiative: Assume some errors** in ordinary teaching and practice. Try to fix them.

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<sup>1</sup> *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church*, Liturgical Press, 2008, p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> See Vatican II: *Church*, nos. 48,51; *Church in Modern World*, no. 19; *Revelation*, no. 8.

**March 19, 2014**

## **St. Joseph, Husband of Mary, Foster Father of Jesus**

The readings for the feast of St. Joseph are all about faith, hope and promise.

In **Matthew 1:16-24** the angel tells Joseph “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” What was he afraid of?

We usually assume that Joseph thought Mary, to whom he was engaged, was pregnant by another man, and for that reason was going to break off the engagement and “dismiss her quietly.”

Another interpretation is that Mary told Joseph exactly what had happened, and he believed her. He was intending to take Mary as the wife who would be the mother of his children. But when Yahweh, the LORD, made it known that he had chosen his fiancée to be the mother of his own Son, Joseph’s reaction, as a devout Jew, was to back off in reverent “fear of the Lord.”

The angel affirmed that Joseph was to be Mary’s husband anyway — and fulfill the role of earthly father to Jesus. “You are to name him,” the angel said, which was the father’s prerogative. But the real Father, Yahweh, chose the name: “You are to name him Jesus....”

Thus Joseph had a double role: as the one everybody assumed to be Jesus’ real father,<sup>1</sup> he was to be for Jesus everything a father should be on earth. But he was to exercise his role as “steward” of God the Father, whose place he held. And see his son Jesus always through eyes of faith that told him whose Son Jesus really was.

Every Christian mother and father must see their children as more God’s than theirs. At Baptism parents deliver their children over to death. Yes. Shocking, but true. We are incorporated into the body of Jesus on the cross to die in him and rise with him to live for nothing except to let Jesus continue his divine mission in our body, through our human words and actions. Christian parents are charged to raise their children as divine, to live on the level of God. Could that cause doubt and fear?

We need *faith* to see our own children as divine: bodies in whom Jesus Christ is living and acting. **2Samuel 7:4-16** calls us to add *hope* to that. Nathan tells David God “will raise up your offspring after you... and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”

In spite of David’s sins, God kept his promise to him — and will keep the promise he made implicitly to us when he called us to be parents: that if we remain conscious in faith and steadfast in hope, “blessed is the fruit of your womb.... “I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”<sup>2</sup>

We don’t always see God’s grace reigning in our children. **Romans 4:13-22** shows us Abraham “hoping against hope” when it seemed his son, Isaac, was lost to him forever. Hope is based, not on what we see, but on what we hear. We find it in God’s word. Whose child have we? “*The Son of David will live forever*” (*Responsorial, Psalm 89*).

**Initiative: Believe in what is.** Hope in what can be. Work for it with love..

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<sup>1</sup> *Matthew 13:33; Luke 3:23, 4:22.*

<sup>2</sup> *Luke 1:42; John 15:16.*

## March 19, 2014 (EXTRA)

### Wednesday, Lent Week Two

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 31) prays with confidence: “*Save me, O Lord, in your steadfast love!*”

**Jeremiah 18: 18-20** affirms a truth of human life as shocking as it is sad. Truth arouses criticism. Good incites to evil. “Must good be repaid with evil, that they would dig a pit for my life?” You can’t love people enough to stop them from hating you. Jeremiah couldn’t. “Remember that I stood before you to speak in their behalf.” Jesus couldn’t. And no one who works for renewal in the Church can. Accept it.

But we can count on God: “*Save me, O Lord, in your steadfast love!*”

In **Matthew 20: 17-28** Jesus leads us onto dangerous ground. We are Catholics. We have great respect for official religion teachers and for priests. We do, we should and we must. But Jesus pointed out that his greatest enemies were the “chief priests and scribes.” Add the strictest observers of the Law, the Pharisees. These are the three groups we would most expect to welcome him. Instead, they sought to “condemn him to death.”

Not once do the Gospels mention the “chief priests” as being in favor of Jesus. They are named as the enemy 54 times. The “elders,” which is the correct word for those we call “priests” (from “presbyter”) today, are mentioned 24 times as enemies and once as envoys of a rich benefactor. An individual scribe or Pharisee might be good, like Nicodemus, but as a group, out of 54 reports of interaction with Jesus, they are the enemy all but once, when Luke reports that “some of the scribes answered, ‘Teacher, you have spoken well.’” Should this make us anticlerical?

No. It should make us shun *power* for ourselves and mistrust it in others. We should be on guard against all those in positions of authority who, like “those in authority among the Gentiles,” want to “lord it” over people and “make their importance felt.” They exist. Given human nature and the pretentious protocols we impose on those with power, now taken for granted in the Church, it is a wonder there aren’t more.

Jesus was radical about shunning prestige and power. And insistent. “Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest. Whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all.”

To help them remember this, the popes have taken the title *servus servorum Dei*: “servant of the servants of God.” But we made it hard for them to remember it by insisting on crowning them with a triple crown (which Paul VI stopped wearing and sold) and carrying them through the streets in a sedan chair (which John Paul II discontinued). People still call the pope “Your holiness” and bow or kneel before him. But change is in the air. And the air is the Spirit of God. Every identified abuse is the first blossom of reform. Whatever we see wrong, our response, enlightened by the word of God, will always be, “*Save me, O Lord, in your steadfast love!*”

**Initiative: Never read** the Scriptures without active faith, hope and love.

**March 20, 2014**

**Thursday, Lent Week Two**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 1)* takes note: “*Happy are they who hope in the Lord.*”

If we keep assembling with the community for Mass, the *Liturgy of the Word* assures us that the truth will catch up with us, whether or not we want to hear it. All truth is lifegiving, but sometimes it takes faith to accept that. And all truth offers hope, even if at first it discourages us. Yesterday’s reading could have been hard for some priests to hear, especially if they are infected with “clericalism” or “triumphalism.” Today’s reading might make some of the affluent uncomfortable. But truth is truth, and all truth is lifegiving. And all truth holds out hope. (If it doesn’t it is not from God and therefore not truth). If we want to grow through love to the fullness of life, truth is our ally.

**Jeremiah 17: 5-10** is litmus paper for true and false trust. “Cursed is the one who trusts in human beings,” he says. Or in anything created. “Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord.” Everybody trusts in something. Jeremiah tells us to be sure we know what we trust in.

That may not be easy. Jeremiah continues, “More tortuous than all else is the human heart... who can understand it?” The answer is: “God can.” “I, the Lord, alone probe the mind and test the heart.” And he helps us to know who we are. He does it, first of all, through his word.

It isn’t that we can understand everything God has written; much less know how it applies to ourselves. But God helps us. “In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven *meets his children* with great love and *speaks with them.*” We aren’t just dealing with written words; God is a living teacher. Jesus promised that “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” Discipleship owes more to prayer than to pondering. But they go together.

**Luke 16: 19-31** shows us a man who truly did “trust in human beings” — and in all that humans can have and do. He was rich. He thought it was a blessing. And took it for granted — so much so he wasn’t bothered at all by the poor man lying at his gate. He hardly noticed him. The beggar belonged to a different world; not on the same level as his own. This gives us the definition of “rich.”

The “rich” are not those who have money, but those who think money entitles them. To more respect. To more voice in affairs. To easier access. To better treatment, even when it has no price tag. (The price tag is on *them*; that is what draws the favors). These are dangerously rich. They are “cursed.”

Plenty of rich don’t see themselves this way at all. They are not rich; not in the Scriptural sense. The sign of it is their concern for others.

To “love your neighbor as yourself” means to value all people as much as yourself — and those in your social class. It means to feel their needs as your own. To want to help. To live in gratitude, not complacency. Truth helps.

**Initiative: Trust truth.** Don’t run from it. Seek it. In God’s word.

**March 21 2014**

**Friday, Lent Week Two**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 105)* gives a simple remedy to many troubles: “*Remember the marvels the Lord has done.*” If we pay attention to the *Liturgy of the Word*” we will hear enough of those marvels to be able to remember some when we need to.

**Genesis 37: 3-28** shows us what envy can do. And what God can do in spite of it. Envy is more than jealousy. Jealousy is to want something another has. Envy is to hate so much the fact the other has something I don’t that I don’t want the other to have it either.

Joseph’s brothers were envious. They hated the fact he enjoyed more love from their father than they did. Enough to stop it by killing him. But they weren’t completely evil. Reuben delayed the killing, hoping to rescue Joseph. Judah suggested slavery rather than slaughter. And God worked through the good in both of them.

He worked so well, and things turned out so well for Joseph and his whole family, that it comes to mind when we “*Remember the marvels the Lord has done.*” It gives hope time of in trouble.

Envy often makes us lose, or keeps us from getting, the very thing we want. In **Matthew 21:33-46** the point of Jesus’ story is that by being envious of his power and popularity with the people, who “regarded him as a prophet,” the “chief priests and Pharisees” were going to lose whatever power and prestige they had. In the story, the tenant farmers had a pretty good life and could have kept it if envy and greed had not moved them to kill the owner’s son. By killing him they lost everything.

Envy and jealousy have no place in the Church. Among those doing the work of the Kingdom, there are no competitors; just allies. This includes other Catholics and also Protestants whose gifts, projects and approaches are different from ours. Jesus said, “whoever is not against you is for you.”<sup>1</sup>

Here again we find the *Liturgy of the Word* recalling us to truth — or to the truth of the whole picture. We get so caught up in things we are passionate about, that we need the Mass readings — readings chosen for us, not by us — to break us out of our tunnel vision and broaden our perspective. It is a wise thing to do, whenever we have difficulty with another’s zeal, to ask (with interest, not challenge) what words of Jesus fire that zeal. If we can agree on their meaning, we have a common basis of understanding, even if disagree about some details. All religious dialogue should start with what we agree on.

A further step is to ask how the other felt moved by grace, by the Spirit, to live out God’s word in this particular way. We may find we have both had similar experiences of receiving and discerning inspirations of the Spirit. Then we are united in the “communion of the Holy Spirit.” And together we can “*Remember the marvels the Lord has done.*”

**Initiative: Notice envy.** Turn it to good by reaching a level of shared blessing.

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<sup>1</sup> *Luke 9:50.*

**March 22, 2014**

**Saturday, Lent Week Two**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 103)* gives a hope in God's love that encourages conversion "*The Lord is kind and merciful.*"

**Micah 7: 14-20** tells us that if we feel blocked from Mass or from participation in the sacraments, the block is not because of God's attitude.

We may think it is. We may think that God — or the Church — does not accept us. That God's acceptance is conditional on our "living up" to some law or ideal we are not able — or, to be honest, perhaps just not willing — to live up to. We feel blocked from Confession (Reconciliation) because we don't have the "firm purpose of amendment" we may have learned in religion class was necessary to receive absolution.

If we think this, what we didn't learn in religion class was what God is really like. We get that best directly from the word of God. Micah says, for starters, that God is different from anyone we have ever known or heard of: "Who is there like you?" And what does Micah focus on that is different? "The God who removes guilt and pardons sin..."

Who are we to say God cannot remove our guilt and pardon our sins? Who are we to say what his conditions are? Why do we think God's power to forgive is limited by our power to repent?

Well, it is, isn't it? Confession without sorrow for sin or the intention to do better is hypocrisy. It takes two to tango: God's good will and ours, right?

Right. And wrong. It depends on how you understand it.

In **Luke 15: 1-32**, was the "prodigal son" sorry for his sins? All Jesus says is that he was sorry he was hungry! And ready to make a deal. If his father would take him back as a hired hand, he would settle for that.

He admitted that what he did was wrong. "I have sinned against God and against you." Yes, we do have to "come to our senses" enough to call a sin a sin. Rationalization is deadly. But even some sins have a lot of good in them. We can be sorry for the bad without regretting what was good. Or being strong enough to stop.

The son decided to "break away and return." A clean conversion. But what if it is not so simple? What if we can't "break away" entirely? Can we still return? Or do we have to keep starving — and specifically, for Eucharist?

Notice that the father didn't ask any questions. It was enough for him that his son was back. If we return to our Father's house and Mass, do we think he will keep us from the table? If we have enough faith, hope and love to desire to participate in Eucharist, we can't be completely dead. How will we regain health and strength without being nourished by the "bread of life" that the Church tells us we receive "from the table of *both the word of God and of the body of Christ*?" If we are drawn to our Father's house, we are family. If we are family, we eat. God will bring us to healing. "*The Lord is kind and merciful.*" Let him be God.

**Initiative: Don't set limits** on your desire or God's. Do what you can and let him.

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: LENT WEEK TWO

**We get so caught up** in things in our culture that are important to others — and ourselves — that we need the Mass readings — readings chosen for us, not by us — to break us out of our tunnel vision and broaden our perspective.

### **Invitation:**

To keep assembling with the community for Mass and *listening* during the *Liturgy of the Word* so that truth will catch up with us, whether or not we want to hear it.

**Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion**, for each statement below: “Do you see this in the Scripture reading? What response does it invite?”

**Sunday:** If we want a motivating goal for our life, we need to keep striving to make the *event* of Christ’s death and resurrection the explanation for everything we do.

Our glory is to “be Christ.” And his glory is to be manifestly alive and risen in us.

**Monday:** What limits God is our refusal to open ourselves. If we close our minds, he cannot enlighten us as he wants. If we close our hearts, he cannot love through us as he will. If we refuse to forgive, he cannot give us his peace.

**Tuesday:** The *Liturgy of the Word* is part of every Mass to ensure we have direct exposure to God’s words. Secondhand discipleship is deficient and dangerous

We need to obey every legitimate authority, but as disciples, not dumbbells. We should view all opinions and optional customs in the light of the word of God.

**Wednesday:** We should shun *power* for ourselves and mistrust it in others.

Change is in the air. And the air is the Spirit of God. Every identified abuse is the first blossom of reform.

**Thursday:** The “rich” are not those who have money, but those who think their money, position or power entitles them.

**Friday:** Jealousy is to want something another has. Envy is to hate so much the fact the other has something I don’t that I don’t want the other to have it either.

Among those doing the work of the Kingdom, there are no competitors; just allies.

All religious dialogue should start with what we agree on. We should root every discussion in shared and recognized, mutual experience of God.

**Saturday:** We need to call a sin a sin, because rationalization is deadly. But some sins also have good in them. We can be sorry for the bad without denying the good.

### **Decisions:**

Listen to the readings. Measure yourself by what you hear.

Expect some errors in “ordinary” teaching and practice. Try to fix them.

Trust truth. Don’t run from it. Seek it with an open mind in God’s word.

Never read the Scriptures without active faith, hope and love.

March 23, 2014

## THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT (Year A)

### The Pace of Conversion

#### Inventory

Do I ever get discouraged about growing into intimate friendship with God? Am I tempted, because of my sins or shortcomings, to stop reading Scripture and praying? When I feel like this, how does God feel?

#### Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* encourages us to believe God is *always* working to set us free from whatever holds us back from him: “*My eyes are ever fixed on the Lord, for he releases my feet from the snare.*” God says, “*I will prove my holiness through you*” — his love, his mercy and power — by “*gathering you from the ends of the earth. I will pour clean water on you and wash away all your sins. I will give you a new spirit within you.*”

Is this a good reason to persevere? God accepts gradual conversion. So should we. All he asks is “forward motion.” And so in the *Opening Prayer* we pray, “When we are discouraged by *our weakness*, give us confidence in *your love.*”

#### The voices we hear

The *Responsorial (Psalm 95)* alerts us to the different “voices that cry in the desert.” *If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.* There is God’s voice and there are other voices that come from our own predispositions, from the influence of the culture, or even from the devil. How do we know which is which?

**Exodus 17: 3-7** warns us to be suspicious of any voice that leads toward discouragement or suggests doubt about God’s love, God’s reliability, God’s readiness to help us. The going was getting tough in the desert. The people were beginning to doubt they would ever reach the Promised Land. They were tempted to go back to the life they had left: security at the price of slavery. They complained to Moses: “Why did you ever make us leave Egypt?” What voice were they listening to?

It is characteristic of God to encourage, not discourage; to build up, not tear down. So the minute we notice that a train of thought is blocking our forward motion, leading us toward discouragement or less confidence in God’s love for us, we need to reject it. When a voice says, “You are just proud and delusional. What makes you think God would ask anything great of you? Be realistic. Be humble and settle for an ordinary, mediocre life. You are no *disciple!*” — that is the time to “sing joyfully to the Lord,” to “acclaim the Rock of our salvation” and dream great dreams, trusting not in what we are, but in what God is.

#### The basis of hope

**Romans 5: 1-8** roots our reason for hope in the fact that God took flesh in Jesus and chose to die for us “while we were still weak.” Paul’s argument is, “Perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

If the worst sins we ever committed did not stop Jesus from dying for us, do we think the sins we are committing now will make him stop pouring out his grace on us? Having died to win us to himself, will he give up when it looks like he is losing us?

The problem is, when we feel discouraged, we look at ourselves and our failings instead of looking at Jesus and his love.

What characterizes God's love is *fidelity* or steadfastness. The words Moses heard when God "showed him his glory" were: "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in *steadfast love and faithfulness*" (*Exodus* 33:12 to 34:6). If we think more about what God *is* and less about what we are *not*, we will find the way out of discouragement.

## Jesus the fisherman

**John 4: 5-42** shows us how Jesus interacts with sinners. He initiates a conversation with a Samaritan woman he meets at the village well. (For the Jews the Samaritans were like heretics). He begins by asking her for a drink of water. Then, little by little he gets deeper and more personal with her. When she tells him she has no husband. Jesus answers, "You are right, for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband." But he gives her credit: "What you have said is true!"

Was Jesus judging her? The only obvious judgment he made was that she was worth talking to, and that she was able to respond to him with faith. And before the day was over, "many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony."

Conversion to Jesus — or deeper conversion to Jesus — can begin at any point in our lives, and it does not have to be immediately whole and entire. There is no record that Jesus even asked the woman he met to stop living with the man to whom she was not married. Maybe she wasn't ready for that. Nor did he ask the Samaritans to give up their false beliefs. He accepted them as they were and was willing to work with them. The point he made to his disciples was, "Look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting!" They should focus, not on people's sins, but on their potential. The role of his disciples is not to drive people away but to draw them in. This means accepting them as they are.

To accept others as they are, we have to believe that Jesus accepts *us* as *we* are.

## Direct discipleship

The *Liturgy of the Word* puts us into direct, immediate contact with the inspired word of God. We don't claim that everything in the Gospels is a direct quote from Jesus: each evangelist wrote from a particular point of view, intent on leading us to particular insights, using various sources. As one teacher put it, "See each Gospel as a *meditation* on the event of Jesus."

The difference between the Gospels and anyone else's meditation is that God says about the Gospels, "This is *my* meditation." God's point of view is always the right one, if we can discern what it is. And in the different Gospels he presents the Good News from various points of view, all of them reliable.<sup>1</sup>

Other people's meditations on the Good News — or their interpretations of the inspired meditations in the Gospels — are only more or less reliable. This includes — are you ready for a shock? — some viewpoints that have been passed down to us through the ages as "the teaching of the Church."

The authentic teaching of the Church is always true, always reliable (if we understand and interpret it right). But not all the teachings *in* the Church are teachings *of* the Church. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council warned us that "believers can have more than a little to do with the rise of atheism" — and even more so with the widespread defection from the Church we see today:

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<sup>1</sup> See the explanation of myths as "God's stories" in the reflection above on *Genesis* 1:1-19 for Monday of the Fifth Week of the Year.

*To the extent that they are careless about their instruction in the faith, or present its teaching falsely, or even fail in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than to reveal the true nature of God and of religion.*

This is true of both official and non-official teachers. Even the “ordinary *magisterium*” of the Church is by definition not “infallible.” Recognizing this,

*this Council urges all concerned to remove or correct any abuses, excesses or defects which may have crept in here or there, and so restore all things that Christ and God be more fully praised.*<sup>1</sup>

“All concerned” means every Christian. That is why it is essential that we all keep drinking from the pure spring of God’s own words — if for no other reason than to raise fruitful questions in our minds to which we can seek more careful answers. The *Liturgy of the Word* encourages us to do this.

## **Insight**

*Do I focus more on what blocks me — or others — from full relationship with Jesus, or on what there is in me — and in them — to work with?*

## **Initiative:**

*Decide never to let any sin or failing block you from interacting with Jesus in every way that is possible for you here and now.*

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<sup>1</sup> Austin Flannery, *Vatican II*, “The Church in the Modern World,” no. 19, and “The Church,” no. 51.

**March 24, 2014**

**Monday, Lent Week Three**

The *Responsorial* (Psalms 42 and 43) is: “*My soul is thirsting for the living God. When shall I see him face to face?*”

In **Kings 5:1-15** the mistake Naaman made was that he had some prior expectations about how a “prophet” would act. When Elisha did not “come out, invoke the Lord and move his hand over the spot” where his leprosy was, he lost whatever faith he had in his ability to help him. He wouldn’t even follow the simple direction, “Go and wash seven times in the Jordan.”

Fortunately, he let his servants talk sense to him. “If the prophet had told you to do something extraordinary, would you not have done it? So what do you lose?” Naaman did what he was told, and was cured. But we don’t and aren’t.

On the Ninth Sunday of the Year (March 6 above) you read:

*Being a disciple means doing something; down-to-earth and daily, like putting a Bible on the pillow where we will have to pick it up at least once a day, and beginning to actually read it.*

Did you do that? The same suggestion was made last year, for this same day: To be a disciple, begin small:

*Get a copy of the Bible, a cheap one you are not afraid to write in and underline. Don’t put it on a table. Put it on your pillow.... And tell God you will read one line every night before you go to bed.*

If you didn’t do that (and assuming you are not reading the Bible every day already), was your reason the same as Naaman’s? No “signs and wonders” accompanied the suggestion? It didn’t sound exotic or “mystical” enough to promise any significant effect on your life? So you treated it as unimportant?

What might you have gained if you had done it? So why not do it now?

People make this same mistake all the time. They even made it with Jesus! In **Luke 4: 24-30** the people he grew up with wouldn’t believe this “hometown boy” could be the Messiah. He wasn’t “different” enough — at least, not in the way they expected him to be.

Have we made our churches places people are too much “at home” in? Should we make them less “user friendly”? More intimidating? Forbid laity to enter the sanctuary? Require fasting, even from water, for several hours before Communion? Insist people dress up for Mass? Put everything into a special language nobody understands? Make children afraid to open their mouths in church?

It might “work.” But would it be Christian? Jesus could have acted so divine no one would believe he was human. Instead, he acted so human they found it hard to believe he was divine.

Maybe the answer is to stop depending on appearances and learn to see with the eyes of faith. Let faith tell us what we see instead of letting what we see determine what we believe. Isn’t that the core experience of Eucharist?

“*My soul is thirsting for the living God. When shall I see him face to face?*” The answer is, “Whenever you accept to find him where he is.”

**Initiative: Do something unimpressive.** For starters, put the Bible on your pillow!

**March 25 2014**

## **Feast of the Annunciation**

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 40) is: “*Here am I, Lord, I come to do your will.*”

The Church applies to Mary the promise made to Ahaz in **Isaiah 7:10-14**: “The Lord himself will give you this sign: the young woman [literally “virgin”] shall be with child and bear a son...”?

*The basic meaning of the sign in biblical thought is the symbol which indicates the existence or the presence of that which it signifies; it directs the attention to the reality signified.*<sup>1</sup>

The Church is the “symbol” the “sacrament,” which indicates the existence and presence of Jesus on earth. And calls attention to him.<sup>2</sup>

Whenever he is asked for a sign, Jesus says emphatically that “no sign” will be given but the “sign of Jonah.” Except once. When asked to send “manna from heaven,” he promised the Eucharist.<sup>3</sup>

The risen body of Jesus was a sign to those who saw him, and is still a sign to those who see him present in Eucharist. Since Jesus’ ascension into heaven the “sign of Jonah” is the Church, the visible body of Jesus risen and active in his members.

The Church, Eucharist and Mary are the kind of sign that “indicates the presence of that which it signifies.” Mary was this to Elizabeth:

*Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.*<sup>4</sup>

And this is the sign we should be.

Jesus is present in us. “The virgin shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel” —which means, “God with us.” As long as Jesus lives in his body on earth, he is “with us.” We are his embodied presence.

His presence is visible through our lifestyle. However we live, Jesus wants to reveal himself living with us, in us and through us. Our way of living, acting and speaking should be the sign that reveals the presence of Jesus in us.

Whatever we do, Jesus wants to do it with us, in us and through us. Wherever we go he wants to go with us, be in us and act through us. Everyone who encounters us should encounter Jesus along with us, present in us, speaking through us. As “soon as they hear the sound of our voice” they should feel, whether conscious of its source or not, something within them “leap for joy.” Does this sound crazy?

In **Hebrews 10:4-10** Jesus says, “a body you have prepared for me.” We are that body. At every moment the passionate thrust of our heart should be, “*Here am I, Lord, I come to do your will.*”

Whatever God asks or allows to happen to us, we answer with Mary in **Luke 1:26-38**, “Let it be with me according to your word.” Then we are the sign of Jonah.” We are “Emmanuel.”<sup>5</sup>

**Initiative: Imagine the Hail Mary** addressed to you. What adaptations are needed?

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<sup>1</sup>John McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, “Sign.”

<sup>2</sup>See *Vatican II*, “The Church,” no. 1; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 770-776, 1108.

<sup>3</sup>*Matthew* 12:39, 16:4; *Mark* 8:12; *Luke* 11:29; *John* 2:18-22, 6:22-59.

<sup>4</sup>*Luke* 1:39-45.

<sup>5</sup>The classic book by Pierre De Caussade, S.J., *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, makes this the sum and substance of the whole spiritual life.

**March 25, 2014 (Extra)**

**Tuesday, Lent Week Three**

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 25) is: “Remember your mercies, O Lord.”

During Lent the first reading and the Gospel are chosen to match. The *Responsorial* gives us the theme of both.

The Gospel is going to talk about a man in an impossible situation. To match it, **Daniel 3: 25-43** describes a situation the whole People are in that doesn't offer any ray of hope — except God:

*For we are reduced, O Lord, beyond any other nation, brought low in the world this day because of our sins. We have in our day no prince, prophet, or leader.*

What hope is there for a nation — or a church — that seems to be losing on every level? No competent authorities or government (“no prince”); no one inspired by God to lift up a voice in prophetic witness about the situation (“no prophet”); and no private individuals willing and able to take the initiative for reform (“no leader”).

Were things as bad as Daniel said? God certainly inspired him to describe the situation as he saw it. But that was just the setting for the real message:

*We follow you unreservedly; for those who trust in you cannot be put to shame.... Deal with us in your kindness and great mercy.... And bring glory to your name, O Lord!*

Do we sometimes feel that Daniel's description fits the Church? If so, we have a very small field of vision. Even with all the defects and defections we can identify, there are throughout the Church dynamic communities and parishes, initiatives and movements inspired and empowered by the Spirit. One only has to look to see.

This, however, only leads to optimism. And optimism, even well-founded, is not hope. Optimism is a human judgment based on our perception of human abilities and activity. Hope is divine assurance based on the nature of God. Optimists expect something to happen, usually within a time-frame. They can be disappointed. Those who hope in God know something is already happening, but not when it will become evident. They are never disappointed.

God is not an optimist. But **Matthew 18: 21-35** teaches us he never fails to hope in our ability to convert to him and “pay back in full” the gift of existence through eternal praise and thanksgiving. We may not actually do it, but he knows we can. He keeps loving us and giving us the grace to do it until our choice is sealed in death.

Jesus teaches that we must love one another as he does, with God's own “steadfast love,” because we share in God's divine life. We can never give up on anyone on earth whom God is still choosing to will into existence, because that is to give up on God.

The same holds true for us. When we are “brought low in the world... because of our sins,” we tend to think that what has happened to us through our own choices can only be reversed through our own efforts. We feel like the debtor in Jesus' story whose resources were hopelessly insufficient to save him. But God has unlimited resources. We just have to ask him to use them. “Remember your mercies, O Lord.”

**Initiative: Measure everything by God** — whose borders are out of sight.

**March 26, 2014**

**Wednesday, Lent Week Three**

Why does the *Responsorial* (*Psalm 147*) invite us: “*Praise the Lord, Jerusalem*”?

**Deuteronomy 4: 1-9** says God’s laws are so good and just that if we live by them people will say, “This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.”

We would be, if we had written them. But since they were given to us by God, we can only claim credit for being smart enough to recognize how good they are. And the jury is still out on whether we are that smart or not.

Have you ever given thought to how wise God’s laws are? How much sense it makes to live by them? How they enhance our life on earth?

Most of us weren’t taught to do this. Our teachers may have thought it would be motivation enough just to know these are God’s commands. But it isn’t.

When you confess a sin in Confession, does the priest ever ask you, “Why does God command (or forbid) that?” Do you ever ask the question yourself?

Some unenlightened teachers discourage questioning, especially about religion. But God is disappointed if we do not question everything he tells us. Christianity, the religion of “God-made-human,” calls us to be always, as much as possible, “fully human and fully divine.” We know by divine faith that God is always right. But he wants us to know it with our human intelligence as well. Theology (study of the “logos” or intelligibility of God) is defined as “faith seeking understanding.” That is a good definition of *discipleship*.

*Deuteronomy* urges us emphatically to life-long discipleship: “Take care, be earnestly on your guard not to forget.” We should not allow to “slip from memory” the things we have learned from teachers, from reflection on God’s word, from experience, as “long as we live.” The Scripture says, “Teach them to your children and to your children’s children.” We ourselves should teach them. This is the word of God.

In **Matthew 5: 17-19** Jesus gives the key to the New Law he teaches in the “Sermon on the Mount” (*Matthew*, chapters 5-7): “I have come, not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them.” The Law enhances life. Jesus came that we might ‘have life, and have it to the full.’ So his New Law fulfills or “fills full” the old. How?

In a word, by changing their goal. The Commandments are the “manufacturer’s instructions” for getting the most here on earth out of the human nature God designed for us. If we live by them, even the “nations” will see us as a “wise and intelligent people.” People who know how to live on this earth.

But the New Law gives guidelines for living on the level of God. “Those who fulfill and teach these commands” will not just earn respect as good human beings. They “shall be great in the kingdom of God.” That is, in the milieu of those who live by the divine life of God, directed from within by the mind and heart of God, which has become their own. “*Praise the Lord!*”

**Initiative: Challenge everything** — not to doubt, but to understand.

**March 27, 2014**

**Thursday, Lent Week Three**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 95)* is a survival principle: *“If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.”*

God tells **Jeremiah (7: 23-28)** that from the day the people left Egypt until now he has “sent untiringly” prophets to guide them. But they won’t listen. And, “when you speak... they will not listen to you either!” Do we?

Isn’t God’s word constantly available to us? Can’t we pick up the Bible any time we want? Aren’t the “prophets” preaching every Sunday? Every day, even, for those at daily Mass? Don’t children have parents and teachers, and all of us friends God uses to help us? Do we listen?

God’s conclusion is sobering: “Faithfulness has disappeared. The word itself is banished from their speech.” The word is “commitment.” How often is it used? Does it stop divorces? Does the commitment of Baptism (the most radical in human life) stop people from giving up Mass, leaving the Church? Are we conscious of breaking our commitment, our covenant with God, when we sin? God’s self-description is “steadfast love.” Is “steadfast” the word that characterizes our pledged love?

It could be. Would be, God suggests, if we would just “*Listen* to my voice.” If we would just read his word with open minds and hearts, everything could be different for us. Discipleship “works.”

In **Luke 11: 14-23** Jesus identifies another problem; the root problem, really. The Scriptural word for it is “idolatry,” which we no longer understand.

“Idolatry” means dividedness. It is the contrary of the First Commandment:

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

“All” means all. One hundred percent. Nothing left over. If we are committed to God as God — to the One God as “Lord alone” — we have made an all-inclusive choice. No other choices can call it into question. Anything that does is an “idol.” A false god. A created value we have made comparable, even if not equal, to God. Comparable enough for us to compare them and choose between them. If “Thy will be done” is not absolute for us; if it does not pre-determine every choice, we are idolaters. To some degree, we all are.

God’s answer was to send his Son. The practical answer to idolatry is to make an idol of Jesus: but a true one. Christianity “works” if we make the person of Jesus our abiding focus. Religion itself can offer idols. We can divide our devotion between various doctrines, laws and practices. We can lose Jesus by focusing on prayers to say, devotions to follow, practices to observe. We can be loyal or disloyal to popes, priests and bishops without connecting to Jesus. They can command and preach without referring to him. This gives “aid and comfort” to idolatry. Jesus says, “whoever does not gather with me scatters.” *“If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.”*

**Initiative: Narrow your focus** to Jesus. Then broaden it to include everything else.

**March 28, 2014**

**Friday, Lent Week Three**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 81)* is incomprehensible: “*I am the Lord your God: hear my voice.*”

It is impossible to summarize these readings — just as it is impossible to begin to grasp what “*I am the Lord your God*” means. We could sit silent in front of that mystery for the rest of our lives.

So read **Hosea 14: 2-10**. Then re-read it. Then read the *Responsorial Psalm* — all of it. Then start over.

Read **Mark 12: 28-34**. It is saying the same thing. Keep reading until you realize you don’t understand any of it and yet have grasped the meaning of all of it.

Then sit in silent wonder before your God.

“*Return....*” What does it mean that God says this? Not just a human; God himself. What depth and breadth and length and height does it contain?

“*Say to him, ‘Forgive all iniquity.’*” Who is saying this to whom? Who is he, that we dare, are encouraged, to say it? Who is this God we are dealing with?

“*We shall say no more, ‘Our god,’ to the work of our hands.*” With “steadfast love” we will work against the idolatry of our hearts embodied in the “work of our hands.” In what we do. But if we say it, we need to mean it. At least mean that we will sincerely and perseveringly try. We don’t bandy words with God.

How long do we have to think about that before it gets real? Our culture has removed the labels from our idols. They go by legitimate names. What reveals them as idols? As idols for me?

“*I will heal their defection. I will love them freely.*” What does this mean — when it is God who says it? God doesn’t act, heal or love on our limited level. What does this mean on his level? What does it encourage me to feel? To do?

“*I will be like the dew for Israel... he shall strike root and put forth shoots.*” We have to read *Psalm 1*. God is talking about *disciples*: those who “*meditate day and night.*”

*They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.*

Do these words mean anything to you? What have they inspired you to do? Have you grasped their meaning, under the imagery? Have you really? Do you really believe what they say?

You don’t unless you are doing it. Or unless you haven’t really understood what you believe. “*Let those who are wise understand these things. Let those who are prudent know them.*”

Look up what “know” means in Scripture. It means to get in bed with. To touch every part of. To lose yourself in. To possess totally in total surrender.

Do you “know these things”? Then become a *disciple*.

*This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful (Joshua 1:8).*

“*I am the Lord your God: hear my voice.*”

**Initiative: Be awed.** Stand before the mystery of God. Let it fill you.

**March 29, 2014**

**Saturday, Lent Week Three**

The *Responsorial* (*Hosea 6:6* and *Psalms 51*) says God wants us to *know* him: “*It is steadfast love, not sacrifice, that God desires.*” The verse continues: “...*the knowledge of God* rather than burnt offerings.” God wants *disciples*.

**Hosea 6: 1-6** shows us the predictable path of discipleship.

The starting point, as often as not, is seeking an escape from pain. “*In their affliction they shall look for me.*”

When we are “in the pits,” all we want is a return to ground level: a basically human, reasonable way of life. We want God to “heal” our human natures and “revive” us, as in “re-vivify,” make us alive again. We have hope that he will.

But our hope is focused on healing: restoring the level of life we received at creation, from which we “fall short” by following appetites, emotions and the culture instead of reason. (The common Scriptural word for sin is *hamartia*: to “miss the mark”). We want God to “raise us up, to live in his presence,” because sin is separation from the Good, the True and the Beautiful that are found in God as Creator, the truth that clarifies our own being; the goodness that puts order into everything we do. Whose rejection is disorder. As long as we are “in the pits” we cannot focus on God in himself; we go to God to escape pain. That is why most people went to Jesus.

But once out of the pits and restored to ground level we begin to “lift up our eyes to the mountain.” Now, feeling the intrinsic longing of our human nature for the “more,” we say, “*Let us know, let us strive to know the Lord.*”

This is a distinct and very important phase of discipleship. Now we are able to look at God just in order to know him. We can hear his words without immediately focusing them on our human needs. Now we can be students of God’s mind and heart.

This activates another level of hope: hope in *enlightenment* for its own sake; that is, for the sake of knowing Truth and Goodness as such; for the sake of knowing God. We may struggle with the discipline of discipleship, and feel discouraged when prayer and reflection seem fruitless. But our new hope tells us, “*Certain as the dawn is his coming.*” We await him like “the light of day,” with hope that he will “*come to us like... spring rain that waters the earth.*” We hope for *union* with him whose Light is Life: life on the level of God.

Now the focus turns to *perseverance*. God speaks out of his experience of humans: “*Your piety is like a morning cloud, like the dew that passes away.*” Discipleship requires commitment. As Woody Allen said about success, “Eighty percent of it is just showing up.”

But we need to show up with the right attitude, and the attitude, even to get beyond our needs, is *need*. In

**Luke 18: 9-14** Jesus tells us “those who humble themselves shall be exalted.” Discipleship is not accomplishment. It is begging. With “a heart contrite and humbled.”

**Initiative: Seek to know God.** Seek it with efforts, but receive it as gift.

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: LENT WEEK THREE

**All God asks is “forward motion,”** God is always working to set us free from whatever holds us back from him. But he accepts gradual conversion. So should we.

### Invitation:

Keep drinking from the pure spring of God’s own words. They raise fruitful questions in our minds to which we can seek more careful answers.

**Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion,** for each statement below: “Do you see this in the Scripture reading? What response does it invite?”

**Sunday:** Be suspicious of any voice that leads toward discouragement or suggests doubt about God’s love or readiness to help us.

When we feel discouraged, we are looking at ourselves instead of at Jesus. We should think more about what God *is* and less about what we are *not*,

The role of Christ’s disciples is not to drive people away but to draw them in. We accept people as they are, and focus, not on their sins, but on their potential.

**Monday:** Optimism is a human judgment based on our perception of human abilities and activity. Hope is divine assurance based on the nature of God.

We can never give up on anyone on earth whom God is still choosing to will into existence, because that is to give up on God.

**Tuesday:** Some unenlightened teachers discourage questioning, especially about religion. But God is disappointed if we do not question everything he tells us.

**Wednesday:** The Commandments are the “manufacturer’s instructions” for getting the most out of the human nature God designed for us. But the New Law gives guidelines for living on the level of God.

**Thursday:** If we are committed to the One God as “Lord alone,” we have made an all-inclusive choice. Anything that calls it into question is an “idol.”

**Friday:** If we really believe in God’s promises we will do what they call for. If we don’t, perhaps we haven’t really understood what we believe.

**Saturday:** As long as we are “in the pits” we cannot focus on God in himself; we go to God to escape pain. That is why most people went to Jesus.

When we can hear God’s words without immediately focusing them on our human needs, we can be students of God’s mind and heart.

### Decisions:

Never let any sin or failing block you from interacting with Jesus in every way that is possible for you here and now.

Challenge everything — not to doubt, but to understand.

Do something unimpressive. For starters, put the Bible on your pillow!



March 30, 2014

## THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT (Year A)

### Conversion to a New Guidance System

#### Inventory

How do I make most of my decisions? Is it by common sense? By applying rules and doctrines to situations? By reflecting on things in the light of Scripture? By trying to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit in my heart?

#### Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* calls us to rejoice in the Church (the new Jerusalem): “Be glad for her, you who love her; rejoice with her, you who mourned for her, and you will find contentment at her consoling breasts.” We may see many faults in the Church to mourn over. But if we love her, we will seek nourishment from her and we will find it. We just have to know where to look. And we have to look with the eyes of faith. This is to use God’s guidance system.

In the *Opening Prayer* we declare to the “Father of peace” that we are indeed joyful in our relationship with “your Son Jesus Christ.” We follow the Church through the season of Lent and into Easter “with the eagerness of faith and love,” knowing that we are being led into the fullness of life.

#### Through God’s eyes:

The *Responsorial (Psalm 23)* calls us to believe and affirm with faith that, in spite of all appearances, “*the Lord is our shepherd; there is nothing we shall want.*”

**1Samuel 16: 1-13** teaches us not to judge by appearances: “for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” If we want to be disciples of Jesus, it is not enough to accept what he sees and tells us; we have to learn how to look at things as he does.

There is a learning process here — we have to form the human habit of looking at things as God does — but first and foremost this is a gift of God. It is only by the divine gift of faith that we can share in God’s act of knowing. And this is what Christian insight is: seeing by sharing in what Christ within us sees. To be authentic disciples of Jesus, we have to convert to following a new guidance system: the divine light of God within us instead of the natural light of human reason alone. *The Lord is our shepherd.* If we let him show us truth and guide us, *there is nothing we shall want.*

#### The Light of Life:

**Ephesians 5: 8-14** insists that we must recognize the difference between the guidance of Jesus and the light of this world, which shines through our cultural conditioning and the current trends and values in society. This includes the brilliance of shortsighted intellectuals who, in spite of their impressive knowledge are blind to what even the natural light of reason could tell them about God. In contrast to them St. Paul tells believers, “Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light.”

This is not a rejection of human reason. As disciples of God-made-human in Jesus we accept everything human as good. But it is a *transcendence* of the human, a “going beyond” what is merely human to live and see and act

on the level of God. To be disciples of the divine-human Jesus we have to convert to living lives that are not just human but divine. The Lord is our shepherd; he leads us, not only along “right paths,” but to pastures our earthly minds cannot even dream of. He came that we might “have life and have it to the full” (*John* 10:10). But our life, our joy, can only be filled by what addresses our capacity for total truth, total goodness, total love. It is only through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that our “cup overflows.”

## Light in the world

An underlying theme of **John 9: 1-41** is that the light of God is available *on earth*, and we come into it through down-to-earth human actions. When Jesus opened the eyes of the man born blind he “spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes.” This is so earthy it shocks us; we would expect something more hygienic from God! Then he told the man, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.” There wasn't going to be any miracle until the man took a bath.

All this was to emphasize that we open ourselves to the divine by doing human things. We interact with a very human Church. We listen with our ears, read with our eyes, think with our brains, make decisions with our wills, carry them out into action with our hands and feet. God doesn't just turn us on like light bulbs. To come into the light we have to be *disciples*, which means *active learners*.

John said, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the *world*” (*John* 1:9). Jesus comes from above, but we meet him on ground level. We find him in “word and sacrament,” by gathering with other physical bodies for worship, through serious engagement with Jesus enlightening us through preachers, teachers and discussion groups.

The once-blind man asked the Pharisees, “Do you also want to become his disciples?” That is the question this Gospel asks us. How will I answer?

## Insight

*What human things do I need to do in order to open myself more to the divine light of Christ? How can I use my eyes, ears, mouth, hands and feet?*

## Initiative:

*Get specific about how you will seek encounter with Christ through “word and sacrament.” How will you use Scripture, Eucharist, Confession? How will you look for Christ in the Christian community? Through what kind of interaction?*

**March 31, 2014**

**MONDAY, Lent Week Four**

The *Responsorial* (*Psalm 30*) is an acknowledgement each one of us needs to make. Frequently. “*I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me.*”

What kind of God comes through in **Isaiah 65: 17-21**?

*Lo, I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth... There shall always be rejoicing and happiness in what I create. For I create Jerusalem [read “the Church”] to be a joy, and its people to be a delight.*

Larry, a Baptist minister, told at a dinner party how his loving wife was the one who kept order in the family. She got their daughter Jane off to school, regulated the TV, and kept the candy down. But Larry didn’t conform: “I just gave Jane everything she wanted.”

One morning, when his wife left for a trip, Jane said, “I don’t want to go to school today.” “Great,” Larry laughed, “Let’s take a holiday!” The other mothers at table all looked horrified as he told how they just stayed home for the rest of the week. Watched television. Ate junk food. Had a ball.

Before his wife’s return Larry suggested to Jane, “You know, there are some things mommy doesn’t need to hear.”

Isn’t the Church like a mother to us? Loving, but conscientious. Mothers set the rules. They keep family life ordered. That is their job. It is necessary. But it isn’t the whole picture.

Can you see God the Father acting like this Baptist minister? One Sunday you wake up, see glorious weather outside, and say to the Father, “I don’t want to go to Mass today.” Can you imagine God the Father laughing and saying, “Fine! Let’s take a holiday!” And making sure you have one of the most enjoyable days of your life?

Do you see disapproving glances among those who read this? But wouldn’t you guess Jane did not follow the rebellious “minister’s daughter syndrome” when she became adult? Wouldn’t you bet she is still going to church?

Please don’t tell anybody what you read here. There are some things everybody doesn’t need to hear!

How does Jesus come through in **John 4:43-54**? According to the “rules” the official didn’t qualify for a miracle. Jesus’ standard remark to those he cured was: “Your faith has made you well... According to your faith let it be done to you.” Jesus reproached the official for lacking it: “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you do not believe.”

But the official saw in Jesus more than someone who lived by rules, even his own! He appealed directly to Christ’s heart, the law of all laws, to the love that gives life: “Sir, come down before my child dies.” Jesus said, “Return home. Your son will live.” Then he believed. In Christ’s love.

*The man believes “the word spoken to him.” ...He had [not] acquired perfect faith, but it was a beginning.... The cure appears to be not so much the cause of the man’s faith [as] its consequence; signs and faith in the word go together.<sup>1</sup>*

Love won his faith. Hearing God’s word with faith in his love is *discipleship*.

**Initiative: Obey the rules, but...** interpret them according to the Father’s heart.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Matthew* 9:22,29; 17:20; 21:21-22; *John* 10:10; 21:15-18; *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1968.

**April 1, 2014**

**Tuesday, Lent Week Four**

The *Responsorial* (*Psalm 46*) tells us to trust: “*The mighty Lord is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.*”

**Ezekiel 47: 1-12** is about water, a symbol of the life God gives in Baptism. All who have this life within them should be sources of life for others: “Wherever the river flows, every living creature that can multiply shall live.”

Picture it: a clean, flowing river. On both banks, green plants, flowers, crops and trees. This is the way the world should look, wherever Christians are. At least to those who have eyes to see the Life he gives. “I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”

Jesus used this same image with the woman of Samaria: “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” Later he said: “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.” Those who receive life are to give life.

John continues: “Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive.” Jesus had said, “It is the spirit that gives life... The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”<sup>1</sup>

The “daily way” to receive and increase God’s life within us — and transmit it to others — is to read God’s *words*, praying for enlightenment by his Holy Spirit. To do this regularly is to be a *disciple*. In every Mass the *Liturgy of the Word* reminds and calls us to this. What this reading does is give us motivation: by opening ourselves to the “water of life” by reflecting on God’s words, we will become fountains of life for others. Is that worth investing time in?

**John 5: 1-16** ends with the sobering statement: “It was because Jesus did things such things on the Sabbath that they began to persecute him.” We want to scream: “What things? Healing a sick man? Anyone who would persecute a person for that is the one who is sick!”

But it happens every day. Who within the Church gets persecuted the most by others in the Church, laity as well as officials? Isn’t it the “prophets” — those who upset complacency by acting or speaking in a way that calls our assumptions into question?

What did you think of yesterday’s reflection? “It was bad, dangerous! It said it’s okay to miss Mass on Sunday!”

Is that all you saw? Or did you see God as a wise, loving Father who will dispense with a rule at times to help someone love the Mass and him more? Any priest can dispense from Mass for a good reason. Do we need an authority to make that judgment for us? Or can we look at God’s heart and make it for ourselves? The answer to that question is the “litmus test” of Phariseism.

If the comfortable are afflicted by what comforts the afflicted, they have a problem. It is probably fear of human freedom exercised in decisions.

**Initiative: Remember:** “*The mighty Lord is with us.*” Trust him to lead.

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<sup>1</sup> *John* 4:10, 6:63, 7:37-39; 15:16.

**April 2, 2014**

**WEDNESDAY, Lent Week Four**

The *Responsorial* (*Psalms* 145) reminds us “*The Lord is kind and merciful.*”

Phariseeism feeds on fear. And a sense of rejection. And unacknowledged anger at not feeling loved. We don’t say, but we feel, “The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.” Without the intimacy of personal interaction with God, we fall back on the impersonal relationship of rules. We will “save ourselves” without his help. We will keep the rules so strictly that our “righteousness” will be our revenge.

“Phariseeism” is legalism: a focus on rules with desire to enforce them for others. It is never joyful, never nurturing, never loving. There is always underlying anger in it. And unconscious resentment, which surfaces in anger against those who are not rule-bound. Paul fought the “false believers” who “slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us.”<sup>1</sup>

**Isaiah 49: 8-15** counters this by describing God’s closeness and saving love. “In a time of favor I answer you... I help you.” God addresses those whose sense of isolation from him has locked them into the defensive posture of legalism: “Saying to the prisoners: ‘Come out!’... For he who pities them leads them and guides them beside springs of water.” Stop focusing on rules. Drink from the spring of God’s own heart, revealed in his words. Read. Meditate. Pray. Don’t be so afraid. Your fear of sin, in the absence of reliance on God, drives you into the fortress-prison of rigid self-discipline. God will “cut a road” through all that blocks you from him. He has not abandoned you.

*Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb?  
Even should she forget, I will never forget you.*

In **John 5: 17-30** Jesus defends his own freedom against those who persecuted him for healing on the Sabbath. He claims to be acting by a higher law: the law of *union*, of shared life with the Father who acts with him, in him and through him: “The Son cannot do anything by himself... only what he sees the Father doing”—and doing in him.

More: “Just as the Father possesses life in himself, so has he granted it to the Son to have life in himself.” And Jesus can share this life with humans: “The Son grants life to whom he wishes.... The one who hears my word... possesses eternal life.”

The *prophets* claim to act by the Light and Life of God within them. They can be deceived. But the worst deception is to deny the prophetic gift entirely and trust in nothing but slavish obedience to laws. This is to deny the faith. By Baptism we share in the life of God. We are anointed, consecrated by God as “priests, prophets and kings” (responsible stewards of his kingship). The fear that denies freedom to let Christ act *with us, in us and through us* is darkness overshadowing faith.

**Initiative: Be what you are:** alive with the life of God. Act in union with God.

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<sup>1</sup> *Galatians* 2:4.

**April 3, 2014**

**THURSDAY, Lent Week Four**

The *Responsorial* (*Psalm 106*) presumes the value of prayer: “*Lord, remember us, for the love you bear your people.*”

In **Exodus 32: 7-14** Moses gives God good advice, reminds him of what God seems to have forgotten, and gets God to change his mind about what he had planned to do. Yeah, right.

This is a good example of the way God inspires the Scripture writers. He inspires them with truth, but truth expressed in the kind of words and images the writers understood, and that the people for whom they were writing would understand. Sometimes a story incorporates assumptions everyone had that were false, but which it was not yet time to challenge.

From our way of seeing things, our prayer does affect what God does. God already knows from all eternity what he is going to do, but he has made some of it conditional on our asking for it. Why?

God does not want to save the world unilaterally. He wants humans to have a part, a real part, in it. One way in our power is to pray for each other. Then God can say, truly, that what he does is our gift as well as his. We ask, God answers, and we are joined in love.

Also, if we “argue” with God, as Moses did, it lets God inspire us with questions and answers that lead us to clearer understanding of ourselves and him. God is a teacher; we are disciples. Disciples learn through dialogue.

In **John 5: 31-47** Jesus is trying to dialogue, except that it takes two to tango, and Pharisees never answer.

Jesus gives four reasons for believing in him and seven why people don't.

Bearing witness to Jesus are: 1. *John* the Baptizer, whose life made people trust him; 2. the *works* (good deeds and miracles) Jesus performs; 3. the *Father* himself; 4. the *Scriptures*, and specifically Moses.

People refuse to believe because 1. God's *word* is not abiding in their hearts; 2. and this is because of their free *choice* not to accept Jesus, the “one God has sent”; 3. they don't *desire* eternal life enough to come to Jesus for it; 4. they *accept others* who do not come in the name of God; 5. they *accept praise* from one another; 6. they *do not seek* the glory that comes from God; 7. they *don't believe Moses* or the Scriptures.

Later, Jesus will specify that all the reasons for believing in him are secondary to the testimony the Father and Spirit give within the hearts of those who are open. “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, *then believe* me because of the works themselves.” Those whose hearts are good will just *know*.<sup>1</sup>

The readings in the *Liturgy of the Word* are intended to encourage *reflection*. So take time to go through the “four and seven” above. See which apply to you.<sup>2</sup>

**Initiative: Believe Scripture** as divine revelation. Read it as human dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> *John* 3:20-21, 6:44-45, 8:42, 10:38, 14:11.

<sup>2</sup> *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, no. 56.

**April 4, 2014**

**FRIDAY, Lent Week Four**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 34)* tells us that, contrary to appearances, “*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted.*”

**Wisdom 2: 1-22** lists four reasons— as common today as then — why some nonbelievers find those who are authentically religious “obnoxious.”

1. Believers “reproach” others for going against God’s law. We do. We can’t judge others’ consciences, but when something is wrong we should say so.
2. Believers “profess to have knowledge of God.” Of course. Religion is empty without it. But this is not pride; the knowledge is a gift, not an accomplishment.
3. Believers are “different.” The attack here is not consistent with logic. In a religious culture the nonbelievers would be different — and fight for the right to be.
4. Believers “hold aloof from [cultural] paths as from things impure.” The question is, “Are they?” Unbelievers “hold aloof” from religious services. So?
5. Believers “call blest the destiny of the just.” Yes. And since they aren’t always “blest” by this world’s standards, this calls into question the core values that unbelievers live for. Someone is a fool.
6. Believers “boast that God is their Father.” Yes, but it is a gift offered to everyone, not a boast. And its first effect is humility: “O Lord, I am not worthy.”

The unbelievers’ biggest mistake is to assume God will protect the just from being delivered over to their enemies. Jesus’ crucifixion settled that question. But this only makes sense if there is “a recompense of holiness” after death. The bottom line (omitted in the reading) is: “For God created human beings to be immortal; he made them as an image of his own nature.” Our stand on that rules our answer to everything else. “*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted.*”

An advantage to reading Scripture is that it raises all sorts of questions that are tossed about but not really confronted elsewhere. It helps to confront them, getting help from the word of God.

**John 7: 1-30:** When Jesus calls people to confront the question of his origins — “So you know me...?” — all he explains is, “I was sent.” We can like or dislike, understand or misunderstand all sorts of things Jesus teaches. But the only important question is whether God speaks in him. If he does, belief is settled. All that remains is to try to understand, and ask how to put it into practice. That is the work of disciples.

In a theology exam, the first question asked about every Church doctrine and practice is, “Where does it come from?” Scripture? A Church council? The personal viewpoint of a pope, bishop or scholar? The common consensus of the faithful? Or just unexamined conventional hearsay? To give a doctrine more authority than it has is just as bad as giving it less.

In today’s educated Church, every believer is challenged to ask those questions. If we don’t, we will become a community of blind led by the blind.

**Initiative: Be a responsible believer.** Know the origin of what you believe and do.

**April 5, 2014**

**SATURDAY, Lent Week Four**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 7)* gives us the ruling principle of discipleship: “*O Lord, my God, in you I take refuge.*”

The starting point of discipleship is an act of trust in God. Our security is rooted, not in acceptance by others, not in conformity to whatever group in the Church seems most solid and reliable, not even in the approval of popes and bishops, who frequently in history have turned a blind eye to abuses and “stoned the prophets” God sent to them. Our ultimate confidence is in the word of God and carefully discerned enlightenment by the Holy Spirit. To give unqualified trust to anything else, besides the reliable but rare “defined” dogmas of the Church, is idolatry. “*O Lord, my God, in you I take refuge.*”<sup>1</sup>

**Jeremiah 11: 18-20** tells us we don’t always know who is speaking or acting against us. “I, like a trusting lamb led to the slaughter, had not realized they were hatching plots against me.” It is not paranoia to think that it happens today. A priest “on loan” to an American diocese was denounced in a letter from the bishop’s office in his home diocese for sexual misconduct with a consenting adult. The American bishop told his Chancellor to put him on the next plane home. The Chancellor asked if he could check the story first and found proof the letter was a forgery.

Priests and others are frequently denounced to bishops for statements some hearer judged “heretical” (which today almost always means “liberal”). Most bishops simply send the letter to the accused for a response. But some prominent authors and theologians have complained that they were never allowed to confront their accusers or see the actual text of accusations made against them. This is unjust. The right to confront one’s accusers is a basic human right.<sup>2</sup>

So what? We live with the truth that we are a sinful, saintly Church. Not to worry. Eventually, God wins. “*O Lord, my God, in you I take refuge.*”

In **John 7: 40-53** everybody is arguing about the wrong questions — except the temple guards, who when asked why they didn’t carry out orders and arrest Jesus, just said, “No man ever spoke like that before.” But others argued that he wasn’t born in the right place, or accepted by the Sanhedrin (the religious authorities) or by the Pharisees (considered the educated and “fervent”), but only by “this lot, that knows nothing about the law — and they are lost anyway.” Nicodemus pointed out it was all irrelevant. “Since when does our law condemn anyone without first knowing both the person and the facts?”

All the false arguments above are still used against controversial figures today. Authentic “disciples” seek to *know Jesus* (and any accused) and *the facts*.

**Initiative: Be a disciple of Jesus.** Neither accept nor reject without involving him.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Mathew* 5:12; 23:29-39. The worst opponents of Jesus were the established teachers of religion (the “scribes”), the approved “law and order” party (the Pharisees), and the “chief priests.” What they all had in common was power and prestige.

<sup>2</sup> Archbishop D’Souza of India accused the Roman Curia of this in *Council Speeches of Vatican II*, edited by Hans Kung, Yves Congar, O.P. and Daniel O’Hanlon, S.J., Deus Books, Paulist Press, 1964, p. 129. Cf. Jefferson: “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.”

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: LENT WEEK FOUR

**To be authentic disciples** of Jesus, we have to convert to following a new guidance system: the divine light of God within us instead of the natural light of human reason alone. This means living lives that are not just human but divine.

### **Invitation:**

Jesus offers to “speak peace to a sinful world,” and to “teach us,” so that “our faith, hope and love may turn hatred into love, conflict into peace, death into eternal life” and “bring to the human race the gift of reconciliation.” If we love what Jesus offers us in the Church and believe in it, we will seek it as *disciples*, as *students* eager to learn and be nourished by God’s words.

**Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion**, for each statement below: “Do you see this in the Scripture reading? What response does it invite?”

**Sunday:** If we love the Church, we will seek nourishment from her and we will find it. We just have to know where to look.

To be disciples of Jesus, it is not enough to accept and do what he tells us. We have to learn how to look at things as he does.

**Monday:** The Church is like a mother to us: loving, but conscientious. Mothers set the rules, keep family life ordered. It is necessary. But it isn’t the whole picture.

**Tuesday:** Those most persecuted by others in the Church are the “prophets” — those who upset complacency by acting or speaking in a way that calls long-standing assumptions into question

**Wednesday:** Without the intimacy of personal interaction with God, we fall back on the impersonal relationship of rules, trying to “save ourselves” without his help.

The worst deception is to deny the prophetic gift out of fear of mistakes and trust in nothing but slavish obedience to laws. This is to deny the faith.

**Thursday:** God does not want to save the world unilaterally. He wants humans to pray for each other. Then what God does is our gift as well as his.

**Friday:** In today’s educated Church, every believer is challenged to ask about every Church doctrine and practice, “Where does it come from?” If we don’t, we will become a community of blind led by the blind.

**Saturday:** Our ultimate confidence is in the word of God and carefully discerned enlightenment by the Holy Spirit. Unqualified trust in anything else, besides the reliable but rare “defined’ dogmas of the Church, is idolatry.

### **Decisions:**

Obey the rules, but interpret them according to the Father’s heart.

Believe Scripture as divine revelation. Read it as human dialogue.

Be a responsible believer. Know the origin of what you believe and do.

April 6, 2014

## THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT (Year A)

### Conversion to Being Divine

#### Inventory

The *Entrance Antiphon* is a prayer of trust: “*Give me justice, O God... Rescue me from the deceitful and the unjust*” (*Psalms* 43). Do I see this happening?

Judging by what I see going on in the world, does it seem that Jesus is winning or losing? Christians believe Jesus triumphed over those who crucified him by rising from the dead. Do I see any visible evidence of his resurrection around me today that encourages me to believe in his victory? Am I looking the right way?

#### Input

In the *Opening Prayer* we ask to be like God: “Father, help us to be like Christ your Son.” We are the risen body of Jesus on earth. It is in and through us that he is winning the battle against evil today. What do I need to do in order to let him act and win through me?

#### Resurrection is us:

**Ezekiel 37: 12-14** does not mention what God will do to his enemies or ours. Ezekiel only speaks of what God will do *for* us: “I will open your graves and have you rise from them.... I will put my spirit in you that you may live.” This was the way Jesus triumphed after his crucifixion: he did not obliterate his enemies; he just rose from the dead.

We know Jesus is triumphing in us, not from what we see happening in the world around us, but from what we see happening within ourselves. “I will put my spirit in *you* that *you* may live.... *Thus you shall know* that I am the Lord.” We know Jesus is Lord when we experience the “fruit of the Spirit” in our lives. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy and peace (see *Galatians* 5:22).

The *Responsorial* (*Psalms* 130) puts our focus on God as giving life, not taking revenge: “*For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem*” (or “fullness of redemption”). God shows his power in saving, in converting, in redeeming, not in condemning and destroying.

This is a lesson the first disciples of Jesus found hard to learn, and we do too. When a Samaritan town would not give Jesus lodging for the night, “his disciples James and John said, ‘Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?’” Jesus told them they were wrong and just “went on to another village” (*Luke* 9: 52-57). Jesus came, not to destroy but to save. If we want to reveal ourselves as his risen body on earth, we need to cultivate within ourselves, as his disciples, the same attitude Jesus had. Faced with injustice or hostility, our immediate response should not be, “How can I fight back?” It should be life-giving: “How can I help, how can I heal this person?”

#### Life “in the Spirit”

**Romans 8: 8-11** makes clear that there is a radical difference between thinking and living in the way that seems most natural to us — the way people in our society seem to think, the way we grew up thinking, the way

our culture conditions us to think and react — and the way Jesus thinks and acts. St. Paul calls the first way “living in the flesh,” following what our physical contact with others in human society has programmed us to think and do. He calls the second way “living in the Spirit,” following what our experience of the Spirit in our hearts impels us to do. Paul says, “those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” They might do a lot of good things, but they can’t integrally live and impact the world in the way Jesus needs them to do if they are going to be most effective in helping him establish the reign of God on earth. “But you are not in the flesh,” Paul says to those who are living the life of grace and listening to Jesus as disciples. “You are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.”

This is the way we experience Jesus’ triumph and Jesus’ life in us: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.” This is not just physical life: we will find that we “come alive” in faith, hope and love and can do Christ’s work in the world as his living body, enlightened and strengthened by his Spirit. Then we ourselves will be the visible proof of Jesus resurrection, because we will be living manifestly by his Spirit as his risen body on earth.

## “Lazarus, come out!”

But we have to hear his voice. And we can. **John 11: 1-45** tells us that Lazarus was four days in the tomb; nevertheless, in response to the voice of Jesus he “came out,” though his hands and feet were “bound with strips of cloth.” If we let the words of Jesus call us forth, we too will “come out” of whatever binds us and keeps us in darkness or in the death of inertia. We will experience Christ’s triumph and his “great power to redeem” through the divine life he shares with us and the action of his Spirit within us.

But for this to happen we have to *hear his words*. We need to become *disciples*, learners, and *listen* to Jesus. We need to reflect on his words and let them call us to life. His words open us to the Spirit, and the Spirit gives us life. “For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is *great power to redeem*.” We have to believe this enough to dedicate ourselves to learning from him as committed students of his mind and heart.

## Insight

*Do I live more by the “Spirit” or by the “flesh”? When have I experienced the light and power of the Spirit in me?*

## Initiative

*Read Scripture every day — even if only for five minutes — and let it challenge the attitudes and assumptions you grew up with.*

**April 7, 2014**

**MONDAY, Lent Week Five**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 23)* declares all fears false except separation from God: “*Though I walk in the valley of darkness, I fear no evil; for you are at my side.*”

**Daniel 13: 1-62** is a painful story to read today, and it raises painful issues. The villains are “elders,” which in Greek is *presbyteros*, the word which became “priest” in English. In the context of our world, the men who tried to rape Susanna were priests. Worse than that, they were “judges,” which makes them closer to bishops. Although Susanna was a married woman, we cannot read this without feeling the shadow of the disgrace that Catholic priests and bishops brought upon the Church through commission, collusion or cover-up in the recently unveiled horror of child-abuse.

The relevance and practical value of the story for us lies in the reason why Susanna was found guilty. With her unblemished reputation, the people might not have accepted the testimony of two ordinary men. But her accusers had the credibility that two bishops or cardinals would have in a Church hearing today. Any lawyer will tell you that, although justice is supposed to be blind, justice through a jury can be swayed by the prestige of the witnesses.

The child-abuse horror is a story of *clericalism*, defined as the unmerited assumption that priests and bishops are somehow more sacred and more holy than ordinary people. Priests could prey on children because the children were in awe of them as representatives of God. Parents reported abusers to the bishop because they thought priests too sacred to be handed over to the police. And they trusted — mistakenly — that the bishop would handle the matter on a higher, holier level than the government. No one knows what the bishops thought, because none has ever been made publicly accountable. Like the judges who accused Susanna, they were initially assumed to be beyond reproach. Hopefully, we will never make that mistake again.

We have learned a bitter lesson. In God’s human-divine Church, no rank, position, function, even sacramentally bestowed, makes anyone holier or more to be trusted *a-priori* than anyone else. Our theology tells us the sacraments produce their result independently of the holiness of the minister. That also should tell us the holiness of the minister is not to be presumed without some corroborating evidence. What Jesus said of true and false prophets is also true of good and bad clerics: “You will know them by their fruits.”<sup>1</sup>

In **John 8: 1-11** Jesus shows us that it is also wrong to presume anyone is “bad,” even a sinner “caught in the act” of adultery. Jesus said to the woman, “I do not condemn you.” But he did condemn the action: “From now on, avoid this sin.” No matter what we do, Jesus will not forsake us: “*Though I walk in the valley of darkness... you are at my side.*”

**Initiative: Put aside prejudice**, whether for or against any person. Speak truth.

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<sup>1</sup> *Matthew 7:15-20.*

**April 8, 2014**

**TUESDAY, Lent Week Five**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 102)* tells us what to say when we are just tired of following Christ: “*O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you.*”

In **Numbers 21: 4-9** the people were tired of following Moses through the desert. They “complained against God” because food and drink were scarce in the desert, and what they got didn’t satisfy them: “We are disgusted with this wretched food.”

We may not have traveled in the desert. But if we have been disciples for very long in the true sense — “students” of God’s mind and heart through reading and meditation — we know what it is to be “dry.” There are times when reading God’s word is like eating sawdust without salt. And times when any religious act, from devotions to Eucharist, just makes us “disgusted.”

Sometimes it is not that bad. But we are just bored and tired of “putting in the time” on whatever our spiritual “fitness program” is. That is when we pass or fail to pass the test. (Actually, most of us fail it many times, but God keeps giving us retakes).

God doesn’t send serpents to afflict us. He doesn’t have to. Once we have begun to “seek the face of God,” if we stop seeking it we feel the difference. We may not fall back into previous sins (or we may), but we will live with the sense that something is lacking in our lives. We will keep getting little bites until we either “die” by giving up entirely, or learn to turn to God: “*O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you.*”

When we know we can’t persevere just by will power (although sometimes it will feel like that’s all we’ve got), God will give us help that lets us appreciate everything we do as a gift of God.

**John 8: 21-30** explains that the “bronze serpent” is the symbol of Jesus on the cross. It teaches us discipleship is not just a human exercise. The *Liturgy of the Word* leads us to what we celebrate in the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*: the mystery of dying and rising in Christ.

Jesus said the problem with being Christian is: “You belong to what is below — this world. I belong to what is above.” Jesus is divine; he is God. But it took his dying and rising to reveal it: “When you *lift up* the Son of Man you will come to realize that I AM.”

*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up (John 3:14).*

To be Christian is to “become Christ.” We can only do this by looking to Jesus “lifted up” on the cross and letting ourselves be lifted up with him by incorporation into his body at Baptism. By this we die in him and rise to live as his own human-divine body on earth. We are *disciples* to learn how to do this.

But living as Christ can only be learned by *surrender* to letting Jesus act *with* us, in us and *through* us. When we can do no more, we look to him in whom we are and pray, “*O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you. Do what I am doing with me, in me and through me.*”

**Initiative: Say the WIT prayer.** Persevere in human efforts to be divine.

**April 9, 2014**

**WEDNESDAY, Lent Week Five**

The *Responsorial* (*Daniel 3: 52-56*) affirms: “*Glory and praise forever!*”

St. Ignatius of Loyola defines “three degrees of humility” — three levels of understanding about ourselves in relationship to God. The first is:

*I so subject and humble myself as to obey the law of God in all things, so that not even were I made lord of all creation, or to save my life here on earth, would I consent to violate a commandment... that binds me under pain of mortal sin.*<sup>1</sup>

**Daniel 3: 14-95** gives an example of three young men who fit that description perfectly. They were young Jews

*of the nobility, young men without any defect, handsome, intelligent and wise, quick to learn.... who were to be taught the language and literature of the Chaldeans. After three years’ training they were to enter the king’s service (ch.1:3-5).*

Smart politics: integrating the conquered into the culture. They were made administrators of the province of Babylon. But when the king wanted to impose religious uniformity on his kingdom, the three refused to worship his false god. When threatened with death by fire, they replied: “If our God, whom we serve, can save us from the white-hot furnace... may he save us! But know, O King, that even if he will not, we will not serve your god.”

God did save them, but the point is, being unfaithful to God was for them simply a non-negotiable. Not even to think about. That is the first level of authentic relationship to God.

The three young men learned Chaldean culture but did not abandon their own. They remained uncompromising Jews, faithful to the Covenant. In **John 8: 31-42** Jesus argues with others who claim the same thing. He had said, “If you live according to my teaching, you will truly be my disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They answer, “We are descendants of Abraham. Never have we been slaves to anyone.” But Jesus tells them they are: “Everyone who lives in sin is the slave of sin.” Might that include us?

Many young Catholics, “intelligent and wise, quick to learn....” are selected by our system for four years of higher education, “after which they are to enter the service” of the American dream. With great rewards. They are not asked to kneel before a golden statue. But they may be required to subordinate their values to the god of gold. Or of success. Or corporate power. Or of relativistic philosophy. Or the god of No-god-at-all. In the name of an unavowed religious uniformity, “fitting in” may mean rejecting all religions as divisive. If they refuse, they will be “burned.” If they accept, they may not even know they have.

Jesus gives four “if’s” to help us know if we are free: “If you live according to my teaching...” “If the Son frees you” (through personal interaction with him). “If you are Abraham’s children”: faithful to your heritage, e.g. still going to Mass... “If God is your Father,” not just your Creator and Judge. Four benchmarks.

**Initiative: Make fidelity** non-negotiable. Refuse slavery. Identify false gods.

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<sup>1</sup> *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 165.

**April 10, 2014**

**THURSDAY, Lent Week Five**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 105)* gives one side of the picture: “*The Lord remembers his covenant forever.*”

**Genesis 17: 3-9** is a weak promise compared to what Jesus promised those who accept his “New Covenant.” To Abraham God promised human benefits: “I will render you fertile, make nations of you... give to you the land where you are now as a permanent possession.” But Jesus promises us a “posterity” alive with the life of God; and the Kingdom of God as our “permanent possession” for all eternity. Beginning with Mary, who gave flesh to God himself, we will bear spiritual fruit:

*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*

Blessed are we all. Blessed is the fruit of our lives. Like Paul, we are “in the pain of childbirth” until Christ is alive and fully formed in every person. All we help to grow in grace are our “children.”

This is the fruit of *discipleship*: those who hear the word and accept it” will “bear fruit, 30, 60, 100 times over”:

*I chose you... to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last....*

*My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples....*

In Baptism we “died to the law” and to every human rule of life, so that “through the body of Christ” we might “belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.” This comes through absorption in:

*the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.<sup>1</sup>*

That is just one side of the picture: “On your part,” God asks, “you must keep my covenant throughout the ages.” Christian life is a commitment.

In **John 8: 51-59** Jesus claims to be divine: “I solemnly declare it: before Abraham came to be, I AM.” This is the translation of YAHWEH, the self-description God gave when Moses asked him to reveal his “name.”<sup>2</sup>

As Christ’s disciples, we study, not just words, but the words of the Word. This makes a difference in our commitment.

We made a covenant at Baptism with the Word of God. It was at the same time a covenant with the words of God: we are committed to seek understanding of the Word through his words. This is a “constitutive element” of being a Christian. To “love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind,” we have to use our minds to know him. St. Augustine said, “We cannot love what we do not know.” The conclusion is obvious. We are committed by our baptismal covenant to be “students of the word,” disciples of the Word expressing himself in words. “*The Lord remembers his covenant forever.*” The question is, “Do we?”

**Initiative: Face the Word.** Commit to discovering him in his words.

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<sup>1</sup> *Luke 1:42; Galatians 4:19; Mark 4:20; John 15:8, 16; Romans 7:4; Colossians 1:5-6.*

<sup>2</sup> *Exodus 3:14; see Isaiah 41:4-14 and 43:1-13; John 4:26, 6:20, 8:24-28, 13:19, 18:5-8.* “I am he” can also be translated, “I am.”

**April 11, 2014**

**FRIDAY, Lent Week Five**

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 18) is a reminder we never stop feeling the need for: “*In my distress I called upon the Lord and he heard my voice.*”

**Jeremiah 20: 10-13** shows us what Jesus predicted for his disciples:

*“Terror on every side! Denounce! Let us denounce him.” Those who were my friends are on the watch for any misstep of mine.*

Jesus said, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”

*See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves... Beware of them.... Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child.... You will be hated by all because of my name.*

It takes courage to study God’s word. We may get insights we don’t want — about ourselves, others, friends and family, the Church, the world we live in. (That first came out as a typo: “the world we lie in.” Also true). Once we see the truth, what do we do with it? Put it under a bushel basket? Speak it? Live it out? The last two can get us in trouble. But Jesus calls this peace!

*I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!*<sup>1</sup>

The assurance of victory gives peace even in the midst of conflict. “*In my distress I called upon the Lord and he heard my voice*” — and answered, “Peace!”

**John 10: 31-42** is all about Jesus’ identity. His enemies were stoning him because “you who are only a man are making yourself God.”

If we are honest in professing our faith, the same can be said of us. We say we are the actual, physical body of Christ, not just God’s creatures but his true children. His own divine life is in us, because we are *fili in Filio*, “sons and daughters *in the Son*.” Each of us says with St. Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” By Baptism we have “*become Christ*.”

And we claim that this groping, sinful “pilgrim Church” we are is uniquely the “one true Church” of Jesus Christ! While all Christian assemblies have something of his Church in them, we alone have all that is required to be the full Church Jesus founded. Does that make us popular?<sup>2</sup>

Jesus said, “If I do not perform my Father’s works, put no faith in me.” We as a Church may hesitate to suggest that, but people will do it anyway. If the “fruit of the Spirit” is not visible in us; if we don’t obviously love God and all our neighbors; read and reflect on God’s word as *disciples*; live a lifestyle different from our culture as *prophets*; celebrate liturgy with enthusiasm and nurture one another as *priests*; care for the poor and work to establish the reign of God’s justice and peace on earth as *stewards* of his kingship, no proofs from Scripture or theology will convince anyone that we actually are the living body of Jesus Christ on earth.

**Initiative: Have the courage** to read, reflect, speak and do. *Be Christ* visibly.

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<sup>1</sup> *Luke 12:51; Matthew 10:16-22; John 16:33. See John 7:40-43, 15:18-20.*

<sup>2</sup> *See Romans 12:1-5; Galatians 2:20; Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 795, 460.*

**April 12, 2014**

**SATURDAY, Lent Week Five**

The *Responsorial* (from *Jeremiah* 31:10-13) is a promise for all time: “*The Lord will guard us as a shepherd guards his flock*”.

In **Ezekiel 37:21-28** God is promising to restore unity to his People by uniting the tribes again as they were under King David.<sup>1</sup> But it was under the kingship of the promised “Son of David” that true unity would be restored; not just to Israel, but to the human race. The “miracle of tongues” at Pentecost was a sign and preview of this, when God reversed the Tower of Babel by letting people present “from every nation under heaven” understand the apostles speaking the “language of the Spirit.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul announced God’s “plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.” Paul was sent to the Gentiles so that through him Christ “might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace”:

*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and members of the household of God... with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone... in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*<sup>3</sup>

This unity was broken by the schism between Catholics of East and West, and by the Protestant Reformation. We can never rest until unity is restored. What is holding it back?

It is an axiom in most organizations that “the buck stops” at the top. John Paul II may have been thinking this when he said that if his way of “exercising the primacy” was keeping the Eastern Rites separated, he would change it. “This is an immense task, which we cannot refuse and which I cannot carry out by myself.” He asked for “a patient and fraternal dialogue... in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his Church and allowing ourselves to be deeply moved by his plea ‘that they may all be one...’”<sup>4</sup>

This sets a principle for all renewal in the Church. The authorities — bishops, pastors and lay professionals in charge of various ministries — have more power than anyone to bring about reforms, but without the committed participation of everyone else, lay and cleric, it will be “too little, too late.”

**John 11:45-57** tells us that when the high priest said, “It is better to have one man die than the whole nation destroyed,” he unknowingly “prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation... and to gather into one all the dispersed children of God.”

So what are you willing to do to bring about unity? In your home? Parish? School? Workplace? With other Christians? With Muslims? Other non-Christians? The non-churched? What would you have to “die” to? If we are as willing as Jesus was, then “*the Lord will guard us as a shepherd guards his flock*.”

**Initiative: Strive for unity.** Believe in each one’s grace. Hope for change. Love.

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<sup>1</sup> *2Samuel* 5:1-3.

<sup>2</sup> *Acts* 2:12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ephesians* 1:9-10, 2:13-22.

<sup>4</sup> See the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, nos. 95-96.

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: LENT WEEK FIVE

**We are the risen body of Jesus.** In and through us he is winning the battle today.

### Invitation:

Live by the Spirit. Dedicate yourself to *listen* to Jesus as a *disciple* of his mind and heart. Let his words open you to the Spirit, and let the Spirit give you life.

**Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion**, for each statement below: “Do you see this in the Scripture reading? What response does it invite?”

**Sunday:** We know Jesus is triumphing, not from what we see happening in the world around us, but from what we see happening within ourselves.

Faced with injustice or hostility, our immediate response should not be, “How can I fight back?” It should be life-giving: “How can I help, how can I heal this person?”

**Monday:** The child-abuse horror is a story of *clericalism*, defined as the unmerited assumption that priests and bishops are more sacred than laypersons.

In God’s human-divine Church, no rank, position, function, even sacramentally bestowed, makes anyone holier or more to be trusted *a-priori* than anyone else.

**Tuesday:** “Dryness” teaches us that discipleship is not just human discipline and will-power but a gift of God.

Living as Christ can only be learned by *surrender* to letting Jesus act *with* us, in us and *through* us.

**Wednesday:** When being unfaithful to God is for us simply a non-negotiable, we have reached the first level of proper relationship to God.

Jesus gives four benchmarks of spiritual freedom: • living by Christ’s teaching; • being free through personal interaction with Christ; • being faithful to our heritage (e.g. still going to Mass); • knowing God as Father, not just Creator and Judge.

**Thursday:** Jesus promises us more than God promised Abraham: 1. a “posterity” of people to whom we have communicated the divine life of God; and 2. the Kingdom of God as our “permanent possession” for all eternity.

**Friday:** It takes courage to study God’s word. But the assurance of victory gives peace even in the midst of conflict.

**Saturday:** Each of us must be willing to “die” to whatever in us is an obstacle to unity— in our home, parish, workplace, with other Christians and non-Christians.

### Decisions:

Say the WIT prayer. Persevere in human efforts to stay conscious of being divine.

Have the courage to read, reflect, speak and do. *Be Christ* visibly.

Promote unity. Believe in each one’s grace. Hope for change. Live in love.

April 13 2014

**THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF LENT (Year A)**  
**PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION**  
**Conversion to Unconditional Discipleship**

**Inventory**

Do I ever grow weary of praying? Of reading Scripture or reflecting on the word of God? Do I sometimes feel it is useless, that nothing ever comes of it? Do I ever feel that God just doesn't care about me? Did Jesus feel this?

**Input**

The *Responsorial Psalm* is the first verse of *Psalm 22*, the verse Jesus quoted on the cross: “*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*” Jesus may have recited the whole Psalm, but if not, the first verse was enough to bring the whole Psalm to mind in his Jewish listeners. And it is a song of trust and triumph: “In you our ancestors trusted... and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were not put to shame... All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD... For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.” Jesus was calling up this Psalm to counter the abandonment he felt in his heart. This pinpoints the theme of all the readings.

In the *Opening Prayer* we focus on Jesus as a “model of humility” because he subjected himself to human weakness like ours. We ask God to “help us bear witness to you” by trusting in God’s power when our weakness crushes us.

**Morning after morning:**

**Isaiah 50: 4-7** is a declaration of perseverance based on trust. Isaiah recognizes that he is called to discipleship because he is sent to teach: “The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.”

We are all called to teach. Jesus said to his disciples, “You are the light of the world... No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ...Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (*Matthew 5: 14-16*).

To do this we must be committed to persevering discipleship, to constant preoccupation with the message of Jesus; to persistent reading and reflection on the Scriptures, and to open-minded expansion of our understanding of Christ’s teaching. Isaiah testifies to his own faithfulness to discipleship: “*Morning after morning* he wakens my ear to *listen*” as a student.

**What Jesus felt:**

**Philippians 2: 6-11** tells us that Jesus experienced the same human difficulties we do. We may think that because Jesus was God prayer always came easy to him; that he never experienced temptations to doubt and despair; that nothing in him ever resisted the Father’s will.

But this isn't true. In his agony in the garden (*Matthew* 26: 37-46) Jesus felt "deeply grieved, even to death" — so much so that on the emotional level he was ready to call off his whole passion: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me!" His feelings were intensely opposed to what God wanted him to do. But feelings are not the measure of anyone's faith, hope, or love — neither in Jesus nor in us. In the garden Jesus did not *feel* any desire to die for us. But on the level that really counts, the level of *will and free choice*, he was firm: "Yet not what I want but what you want."

When Jesus became human he became really human, with no privileges. "Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself," being born just as human as we are, with all the weaknesses that belong to being human, sin excepted. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (*Hebrews* 4:15).

This same Jesus, by taking our bodies to be his own, has also taken on our weakness — and given us his strength. That is the rock-bottom source of our confidence.

## **Triumph by defeat:**

Today's Mass is called both "Passion Sunday" and "Palm Sunday," because it begins with a procession in which we carry palms. We read two Gospels: the *Passion* (**Matthew 26:4 to 27:66**) and one for the procession (**Matthew 21: 1-11**), when we reenact Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem as the crowd that accompanied him spread their cloaks on the road, cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road, shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

This scene gives a key to understanding Christ's passion and all of his work in the Church since then: *the strategy of God is that Jesus wins by losing*. He enters Jerusalem in triumph to die. His defeat and death on the cross were his victory over sin and death. And in the world today, when the Church seems most weak and defeated, that is when God is able to do his best work in us. A poor and humiliated Church is a healthy Church.

In our personal lives, when we feel the least faith, hope and love, that is precisely when we may be acting most purely out of nothing but faith, hope and love. When our feelings give us no support, but we are still trying to do what we committed ourselves to do, we know we are persevering by the pure grace of God. That is the most unambiguous experience of grace. It is the ultimate verification of conversion. And it is the touchstone of dedicated discipleship. When our feelings are crying out, "My God, why have you abandoned me?" but we have not abandoned him, that is when we know most surely he is near.

Jesus said, "The disciple is not greater than the teacher" (*Matthew* 10:24). If we are showing up as disciples, Jesus is showing up as Teacher, whether we feel him there or not.

## **Insight**

*In my ordinary life, when have I gone against my feelings to persevere in something I decided to do? Were the results good? Can I do the same with prayer?*

## **Initiative:**

*Decide what you will do to be a disciple— how much time you will commit to reading, reflecting and other learning experiences —and determine to persevere.*

**April 14, 2014**

**MONDAY of Holy Week:**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 27)* invites us to find life through light: “*The Lord is my light and my salvation.*”

**Isaiah 42: 1-7** is the first “*Song of the Servant of Yahweh*, whom God calls “my chosen one with whom I am well pleased.” But the description is valid for anyone who would do the work of God. As *disciples* we ponder the characteristics of the person God chooses for his work, to whom he says, “On you I have put my spirit.”

- *One who will “bring forth justice;”*
- *“not shouting out... in the streets;”<sup>1</sup>*
- *who “will not break the crushed reed;”*
- *who “will not grow faint” before “establishing fair judgment on earth;”*
- *for whose teaching the ends of the earth are “waiting.”*

The God who chooses this kind of person is the exultant Creator who “spreads out the heavens,” and “gives breath and spirit to people.”

His desire is clear: “I called you for the victory of justice, as a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, and bring out prisoners who live in darkness.” He wants life, light, freedom.

God “grasped by the hand” and “formed” his servant. Intimacy. Guidance. Do these points give something to think about?

**John 12: 1-11** shows us a contrast. First there is Mary, who like the exultant, profligate Creator in Isaiah, pours out on Jesus’ feet a pound of perfume so expensive it would take a laborer’s whole yearly wage to buy it. Crazy! Extravagant. Passionate. Like God!

Judas makes the called-for objection: “We could have sold it! And given the money to the poor!” If he himself were giving extravagantly to the poor, we could accept that. But what he really shows is a mind that can’t see beyond dollars-and-cents to passionate love. Even if he hadn’t been stealing he would have been horrified. He had a small heart. Passion doesn’t count pennies. Or stop to count anything!

St. Ignatius says we make more spiritual progress through one really generous act than ten run-of-the-mill sacrifices. Why? Because we get a taste of what God is like. We get it by treating God like God, which, paradoxically, is the way to experience how he treats us — with boundless love and generosity.

It figures: God is “in-finite” (without *finis*, the Latin for boundaries). If we try to respond to him without boundaries, we get a hint of what it is like not to have any. St. Ignatius’ prayer was:

*Dearest Lord, teach me to be generous.  
To serve you as you deserve.  
To give and not to count the cost.  
To fight and not to heed the wounds.  
To toil and not to seek for rest.  
To labor and not ask for reward —  
Save that of knowing I am doing your will.*

We could do worse. The core of both these readings is the picture of a God who exults in giving life and being, and invites us to be the same. “*The Lord is my light and my salvation.*”

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<sup>1</sup> He “accomplishes his mission modestly and quietly, not whipping people into conformity but transforming them interiorly.” *Jerome Biblical Quarterly*.

**Initiative: Do something extravagant:** for someone else or for yourself. Feel God.

**April 15, 2014**

**Tuesday of Holy Week:**

The *Responsorial* (*Psalm 71*) is a reflex response: “*I will sing of your salvation.*”

**Isaiah 49: 1-6** is the beginning of the second *Song of the Servant*. These songs

*portray the ideal Servant of God, the perfect Israelite, whose consecration to the divine will, even in the midst of overwhelming suffering, ‘takes away the sins of many.’*

The Servant’s identity is complex:

*The Servant is “Israel, alive in all of her great leaders and intercessors.... But the collective interpretation leads to an individual Servant of supreme holiness, greater than any single Israelite of the past.... It was Jesus who clearly identified himself as the Servant.... The Servant is both a collective personality and an individual messiah.”<sup>1</sup>*

For practical purposes we can apply what is said about the Servant to Jesus, to Israel, to the Church, and to ourselves. Individually and collectively, we are all engaged in his mission, and we experience what he experiences in fulfilling it. Four points to keep in mind:

- The Servant knows he was chosen “from my mother’s womb.” So do we — at least from the womb of Baptism. So did Jesus. But he was tempted to doubt it, as we are.<sup>2</sup>
- He feels he has “toiled in vain and for nothing.” So did Jesus, who on the cross felt failure and abandonment. So do we.
- He knows his “reward is with the Lord.” So did Jesus. In his human consciousness he did not know on the cross that he would rise from the dead. But like Abraham sacrificing Isaac, he believed, “hoping against hope,” that he was inexplicably saving the world and entering into his glory. We sometimes need to do the same.<sup>3</sup>
- In response to his discouragement, God extends his mission beyond Israel to include the whole earth: “I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” When the pot is empty, throw a party! After Good Friday comes Pentecost. “*I will sing of your salvation.*”

**John 13: 21-38** shows us Jesus aware of betrayal and denial by two of his closest followers, and his response is to say, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him!” He knew things were out of his hands. He was to be delivered up. He had no human support. But he knew the Scriptural principle: In the absence of the human the divine is revealed, The Virgin Birth: the absence of a human father revealed the fatherhood of God. Sending his disciples without resources to show they relied on God.<sup>4</sup> His present situation: the absence of all human support meant he was in the hands of God. If God was allowing his total abasement, God must be glorifying him. There was nothing more to do but surrender in joy: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” “*I will sing of your salvation.*”

**Initiative: Find life** in death, hope in despair, light in darkness, love in abandonment, power in weakness. In the absence of the human, rejoice in God.

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<sup>1</sup> *Jerome Biblical Commentary, 1968.*

<sup>2</sup> See his temptations, beginning with “If...” *Matthew* 4:1-11; 27:39-46.

<sup>3</sup> *Romans* 4:18; *John* 12:23-28.

<sup>4</sup> *Matthew* 10:9-10.

**April 16, 2014**

## **Wednesday of Holy Week:**

**Note:** *Holy Thursday, Good Friday, the Holy Saturday Vigil and Easter Sunday are all one extended celebration called the “Easter Triduum” (three days). So the Easter season actually begins on Holy Thursday.*

The *Responsorial* (read all of *Psalm 69*) is the constant prayer of the servants of God: “*Lord, in your great love, answer me.*”

**Isaiah 50: 4-9** is the third *Song of the Servant*. The Servant neither depends on human support nor fears human opposition. His confidence is in God.

- God has equipped him: “The Lord God has given me a well-trained tongue.” Think of how God has equipped us in the Church. But for our “tongue” to serve, it must be “trained” through *use* of “word and sacrament.”
- Training is ongoing: “Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear.” The Servant is a continuing *disciple*. He listens. Daily. “The Servant must first be a disciple, prayerfully receiving God’s word, before he can presume to teach others.”<sup>1</sup>
- He accepts persecution and suffering without resentment: “I have not rebelled, have not turned back. I gave my back to those who beat me....” The “way of the cross” is to endure evil and *love back*.
- He relies on God for strength and victory: “The Lord God is my help, therefore I am not disgraced.”
- This is the source of his courage and perseverance. Nothing is going to turn him aside from his mission: “I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame.” “See, the Lord God is my help.”

**Mathew 26: 14-25** shows us another contrast. Judas looks ahead and sees that Jesus is going to go down. So he takes care of himself. He takes his stakes out of the pot and invests in the future. He goes over to the enemy, the “chief priests,” and asks, “What will you give me if I hand him over to you?”

By contrast, when the other disciples look ahead, they go to Jesus: “Where do you wish us to prepare the Passover supper for you?” They are with him and have cast in their lot with him. They trust in whatever he says. Jesus answers as he did when they asked him how to feed the crowd following him in the wilderness. Then he told them to call on the community, ask them to share. “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” They found a boy with “five barley loaves and two fish.”

Now he says, “Go to this man in the city...” — obviously a believer — “...and tell him, ‘the Teacher says my appointed time draws near. I am to celebrate the Passover with my disciples in your house.’” Jesus knows he will share.

“When it grew dark, he reclined at table with the Twelve” — soon to be eleven. As night approached, all they had was themselves and God. It was enough.

Except for Judas. After receiving the “bread” from Jesus’ hand, he “immediately went out.” Then, John wrote, “It was night.”<sup>2</sup>

**Initiative: In any need,** pray “*Lord, in your great love, answer me.*”

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<sup>1</sup> *Jerome Biblical Commentary, 1968.*

<sup>2</sup> *Mark 6:38; John 6:9; 13:26-30.*

**April 17, 2014**

**Holy Thursday** (Thursday, Friday and Saturday really should be together with Easter Sunday, but we put them here because many people still think of them as being part of Lent).

## **Mass of the Lord's Supper**

The *Responsorial* is: “*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?*” (1Corinthians 10:16). *Psalm 116* elaborates on it.

The “Easter triduum” are three days that constitute one single celebration. Any one of them without the others is incomplete.

The *Easter Vigil* celebrates the resurrection of Jesus as the mystery that gives meaning to all human life and history. But without the celebration of Christ's sacrificial death on *Good Friday*, Easter would be unintelligible. And without the institution of the Eucharist, celebrated on *Holy Thursday*, Christ's death and resurrection would be a thing of the past — reported, remembered and relied-upon – but present only to God in the transcendent “Now” of eternity; not present to us in the time and place of the world we live in. Taken together, the three days reveal Christian life as an individual and communal presence to and participation in the ongoing act of love by which the Father, Son and Spirit redeemed the world. The *Liturgy of the Word* is to help us understand this mystery. We listen to the readings as *disciples* eager to learn.

**Exodus 12: 1-14:** “This month shall stand at the head of your calendar.” Time counts, and we should count time, not just numerically by adding hours and days, but historically, seeing it as a series of events. The events are what give time meaning. By celebrating events we absorb their meaning into our lives and pass that meaning on to others.

The readings that are part of the celebration do three things: they *tell the story* of the events, *remind* us to keep them in memory, and *explain* to us their meaning. Where the meaning is expressed in symbols, the readings tell us what those symbols say.

Reading God's word is always part of our celebration. It lets us understand what we celebrate. Celebration makes what is proclaimed or taught in the word real and active in our lives — especially our communal lives. Liturgy unites light to life and us to one another in the “communion of the Holy Spirit.”

**1Corinthians 11:23-26** is an example: the words present the mystery “handed on” to us. But we *proclaim* it as a community every time we “eat this bread and drink this cup.”

In **John 13: 1-15** Jesus teaches us how to participate in Mass. “*Do you realize what I have done?*” It is not enough to see and hear; we have to *think*, meditate, absorb the meaning of the words, gestures and symbols. And keep doing it: “You may not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” Hearing should prompt personal reflection and communal discussion.

And we have to *act* on what we hear: “As I have done, so you must do.” Hearing should lead to *decisions*. Jesus is both “Teacher” and “Lord.” His words are not just data; they are *directions* — to be acted on.

**Initiative: Don't leave Mass** without making a *decision* based on what you heard.

**April 18, 2014**

## **Good Friday**

The *Responsorial (Psalm 31)* expresses the choice our whole lives should lead to: “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*” The readings show us the faith, hope and love we need to do it.

Both **Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12** and **Hebrews 4:14 to 5:9** are reflections on the **Passion Narrative, John 18:1 to 19:42**. *Isaiah* looks ahead to it; *Hebrews* looks back on it. Both are meditations.

Isaiah tells us Jesus’ life had value “because he surrendered himself to death.” The same is true of ours. By “dying” in Baptism to everything life on this earth offers and promises, we entered into Life. But we have to *live out* that death.

In this fourth and last “Song of the Servant,” Isaiah says the life of Jesus and his followers is shocking. He says, “Who would believe...?” People will be “amazed,” “startled,” turned off. “There was in him no... appearance that would attract us to him. He was spurned and avoided... We held him in no esteem.” But read Isaiah’s text and then *Psalm 31*. The way God used and rewarded Christ’s life leads us to say, “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*”

*Hebrews* tells us why we no longer hold Jesus “in no esteem.” He is our lifeline to God and beatitude, “Jacob’s ladder,” connecting heaven to earth.<sup>1</sup>

*Hebrews* invites us to reflect on what Jesus is as “priest.” Jesus is the “connector.” The bridge. He is not just a third-party mediator or intercessor, standing between us and the Father. Through Jesus we are connected to the Father. He mediates God’s life to us by bringing us into God and God into us. He intercedes for us from within our hearts. He doesn’t just pray for us, he prays *as* us, and we pray as him. Through our identification with him by Baptism we are “priests in the Priest.”<sup>2</sup>

Even psychologically, we can “connect” with Jesus because he is not “unable to sympathize with our weakness.” He was “tempted in every way that we are.” The bottom of the ladder is stuck in our earth. We can get our feet on it.

On earth, when Jesus was “in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears” — just like us. And he “learned obedience from what he suffered.” But now that he is “made perfect,” he has become “the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

The top of the ladder is in heaven. Jesus is “a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God.” Jesus connects us to God.

Obedience is the key. Jesus was “made perfect” in obedience to the Father. We are made perfect by obeying the Father “through him, with him and in him” in obedience to Jesus as members of his body subject to our Head. In life and in death we say in union with him: “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*”<sup>3</sup>

Now read the **Passion Narrative**.

**Initiative: Spend your life** saying, “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*”

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<sup>1</sup> See *Genesis 28:10-22* and *John 1:45-51*.

<sup>2</sup> See *John 14:9-20, 16:23-28*.

<sup>3</sup> See *Ephesians 5:21-30; Philippians 3:7-21; Colossians 1:11-24; 2:6 to 3:4*.

**April 19, 2014**

## **Holy Saturday**

The liturgy teaches us to meditate on the word of God by giving us examples of meditation. One of the most all-inclusive meditations on the mystery and gift of the death and resurrection of Jesus is the *Exsultet* or “Easter Proclamation.”

First the presiding priest lights the Easter candle from the new fire that was kindled in darkness at the doors of the church as a symbol of the new light Jesus brought into the world. He prays in the name of all: “May the light of Christ, rising in glory, dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds.” The victory of Christ is a victory of Truth over error. His light is the “light of life.”

God’s word is a light to “walk in.” We reflect on God’s word as *disciples* to find in it a “way of life.” This Light is indistinguishable from the Life of Christ, and it is only “in Christ” as sharers in his divine life by grace, that we can see and understand: “For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.”<sup>1</sup>

The priest or deacon processes through the church, carrying the Easter candle. Three times he stops, lifts the candle high, and sings, “Christ our Light!” The people respond, “Thanks be to God!” This is a proclamation of faith and commitment that affirms our *identity* as Christians. We are the people who have chosen the light of Christ to be our light rather than the darkness of human culture. We recognize his teaching as a gift. We are grateful for it.

The “gift of the Holy Spirit” we associate with Baptism is *Understanding*. The “fruit of the Spirit” is *Joy*. This is the Light that is Life.<sup>2</sup>

## **Easter Joy**

The first theme of the *Exsultet* is “Rejoice!”

*Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels! Exult, all creation around God’s throne. Jesus Christ, our King, is risen.*

*Rejoice O earth... glory fills you...*

Because Christ “has risen... has conquered... darkness vanishes forever.”

*Rejoice O Mother Church! Exult in glory.... Let this place resound with joy.*

If we cannot resonate with that, we have not heard the Good News. We need to immerse ourselves in discipleship, absorbing the message of the Gospel.

The *Exsultet* now summarizes what the Good News is. It concentrates our attention on the five basic mysteries, promises and commitments of Baptism.

## **A New Identity**

*Christians everywhere, washed clean of sin and freed from all defilement, are restored to grace....*

This is the mystery that includes all others: our *transformation* from slaves of sin into free children of the Father through the *new identity* that is ours. By incorporation into his body on the cross, dying and rising in him, we have “become Christ.”

*Christ has ransomed us with his blood and paid the price of Adam’s sin...*

A price, not of punishment due, but of ransom from servitude to “the world, the flesh and the devil.” Because

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:4, 8:11; *Psalms* 36:9, 56:13; *Proverbs* 6:23; *Matthew* 11-25-30.

<sup>2</sup> See *Isaiah* 11:2-3; *Galatians* 5:22-23.

“Christ, the true Lamb is slain,” we died in him, our sins were annihilated, and we rose as his body, a “new creation,” blessed with the very “holiness of God.”<sup>1</sup>

## Enlightenment

*This is the night when the pillar of fire destroyed the darkness of sin.*

The mystery of this transformation is that we are now the “light of the world.” We enjoy the *enlightenment* promised to those who commit themselves as *disciples*, students of the word of God.

*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”<sup>2</sup>*

## Power in the Spirit

Freedom has a purpose. The delivered have a destiny.

*You freed the people of Israel from their slavery and led them dry-shod through the sea.*

The Red Sea was a symbol and preview Baptism. By passing through its waters the Chosen People were freed from subjection to the laws and culture of Egypt in order to reveal to the world the radical freedom of those who know the One Commandment:

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

Him only shall you fear; him only shall you serve. “Do not follow any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you.”<sup>3</sup>

We who passed through the water of Baptism were freed from slavery to any authority but God’s. We obey human laws with the “freedom of the children of God, in “singleness of heart,” with undivided loyalty to God, obeying humans, not “in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.”<sup>4</sup>

To accept this freedom is to renounce slavery to our culture. We don’t conform to what is expected in our society. We don’t “follow any of the gods of the peoples who are all around us.” We don’t assume their attitudes. We don’t embrace their values. We are different. In Baptism we were consecrated as *prophets*, “anointed” with the “power of the Spirit.”

*This is the night when Jesus Christ broke the chains of death and rose triumphant from the grave.*

To be a “prophet” is to profess the faith through a lifestyle that doesn’t make sense without it: one that cannot be explained except through the Light and Life of the risen Jesus present and active within us, sweeping aside darkness and fear of death. This is the core of Christian witness.

## Posterity

*This is our Passover feast, when Christ, the true Lamb is slain whose blood consecrates the homes of all believers....*

We are sanctified as a community. It is not just our hearts, but our homes that are consecrated.

*Christians everywhere... are restored to grace and grow together in holiness.*

Acts 2:42-46 tells us Christianity is a communal experience:

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<sup>1</sup> 2Corinthians 5:21.

<sup>2</sup> John 8:31-32.

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4-14.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 8:15-27; Ephesians 6:5-6.

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.... Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God....*

The mystery of our baptismal anointing as *priests in the Priest* consecrates and commits us to be *priests* to one another, to minister to each other at home and in church as family. And promises us a *posterity*. Our lives will be fruitful in divine life for others.

As children of the Father, “from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name,” we are fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters to one another in the “family of believers.” We help all to grow in love for the Father, in union with the Son, through the gifts of the Spirit given to all for the good of all:

*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

*...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,*

*We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together... as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.<sup>1</sup>*

## Victory

We are sent, not just to one another, but to extend the family of God until it embraces the whole human race. Jesus came to establish the “reign of God” on earth; to draw all of humanity into the “peace and unity of his kingdom.” And he has entrusted this task to us. This is the “mystery of meaningfulness” that transforms, redirects, and enhances the value of all our human labor in the world. By our baptismal consecration as “kings” we were appointed and empowered by God to establish the reign of his love over every area and activity of human life on earth. And we were promised *victory*.

*The power of this holy night dispels all evil... brings mourners joy. It casts out hatred, brings us peace and humbles earthly pride.*

*Night truly blessed, when heaven is wedded to earth and humans are reconciled with God.*

This is the image of the “wedding banquet of the Lamb,” where all will be celebrating together, in perfect union with each other and with God. All offenses forgotten in unrestricted forgiveness; all differences and divisions overcome in total reconciliation. This is the “Kingdom of God.” In God’s time it is already established. In our time we are committed and empowered to persevere in faith and fidelity until Christ comes again in triumph.

## We have “become Christ”

All is included in the central mystery of “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,” the favor of sharing in the divine life of God. We have “*become Christ*,” committed to let him live and act with us, in us and through us to “save” everything we are involved in. This commits us to seek ongoing enlightenment through *discipleship*, and to embrace his mission as *prophets, priests* and *stewards* of his kingship.

That is the mystery and promise of Easter, the call and commitment we exult in.

**Initiative: Renew your Baptismal promises** during the Easter Vigil as a *conscious commitment* to live out in joy the five mysteries and commitments of your Baptism.

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<sup>1</sup> *John 15:16; 1Corinthians 4:14-15, 12:1-27; Ephesians 3:14-15, 4:11-16; 1Peter 2:17; Galatians 4:19;*

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: HOLY WEEK

**Note:** *Holy Thursday, Good Friday, the Holy Saturday Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday are all one extended celebration of Easter called the “Easter Triduum” (three days from Thursday evening to Sunday evening). So the Lenten season actually ends with Wednesday and we the Easter season begins on Holy Thursday.*

**Reading God’s word** lets us understand what we celebrate. Celebration makes what is in the word real and active in our lives. Liturgy unites light to life and us to one another in the “communion of the Holy Spirit.”

### Invitation:

When feelings give no support, persevere. When we feel the least faith, hope and love, we may be acting most purely out of nothing but faith, hope and love.

**Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion**, for each statement below: “Do you see this in the Scripture reading? What response does it invite?”

**Sunday:** Jesus wins by losing. He enters Jerusalem in triumph to die. His defeat and death were his victory. When the Church seems most weak and defeated, God is able to do his best work in us. A poor and humiliated Church is a healthy Church.

In his agony in the garden Jesus did not *feel* any desire to die for us. But on the level of *will and free choice*, he was firm. Feelings are not the measure of anything.

**Monday:** God is “in-finite.” If we try to respond to him without boundaries, we get a hint of what it is like not to have any.

**Tuesday: We are like Jesus because** • We know we were chosen, though we are tempted to doubt it; • we sometimes feel we have “toiled in vain and for nothing”; • we know our “reward is with the Lord;” • In response to our discouragement, God tells us to extend our mission.

A Scriptural principle is: In the absence of the human the divine is revealed. The absence of all human support tells us we are in the hands of God.

**Wednesday:** Like the “Servant of Yahweh”: • We neither depend on human support nor fear human opposition. • We are “equipped” but must be “trained” through *use* of “word and sacrament.” • We are continuing *disciples*; our training is ongoing. • We endure evil and *love back*; • We rely on God for strength and victory.

**Thursday:** Events give time meaning. By celebrating events we absorb their meaning into our lives and pass that meaning on to others.

**Friday:** Our whole lives should lead to the choice: “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*”

**Saturday:** The *Exsultet* recalls the five basic mysteries of Baptism.

### Initiatives:

Decide what you will do to be a disciple. How much time you will commit to reading, reflecting and other learning experiences — determined to persevere?

Find life in death, hope in despair, light in darkness, love in abandonment, power in weakness. In the absence of the human, rejoice in God.

Spent your life saying, “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*”

## What has this booklet done for you?

These reflections were designed to help you deepen your appreciation of the *Liturgy of the Word* as encouraging and enabling *discipleship*. It is above all through reflection on the word of God that we grow into and experience the gift of *enlightenment* that Jesus promised as an effect of Baptism.

It will help to look back and review what you have seen, asking what your response has been so far. Remember, the effectiveness of input is measured by the authenticity of output.

- How much time did you give to reading and praying over these reflections? Did you find yourself looking forward to doing this?
- What do you know about *the word of God* now that you didn't know before?
- Did these reflections motivate you to listen more attentively during the *Liturgy of the Word*?
- Have they inspired you to give more time to *meditating* on God's words?
- Did these reflections lead you to *commit yourself* to regular reading of the word of God? Did you follow the suggestion (made twice) to put your Bible on your pillow?

### • More specifically...

- Do you have a clearer and deeper appreciation of the connection between the *Liturgy of the Word* and *meditation* (reading and reflecting on God's word) as means to experience the gift of *enlightenment*?
- Do you see Scripture reading as a constitutive element of your baptismal commitment? Would you agree that it is just as much an obligation as participating in Mass on Sunday?
- Do you accept the mystery of Jesus' description of *you* as the "*light of the world*"?
- Do you understand more clearly that for Christians called to live on the level of God, reading the words of God is necessary? That being reborn as the body of Christ and children of the Father requires us to live by a different *guidance system*? One that is beyond human wisdom?

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