

IMMERSED IN CHRIST



Daily Reflections for the Easter Season
FOR ENTERING INTO THE MYSTERY OF
PROPHETIC WITNESS

Year A, 2014

IMMERSED IN CHRIST FAITH FORMATION SERIES

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

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A Preliminary Explanation:

During the Easter Season we will draw from the Mass readings whatever casts light on our baptismal consecration as *prophets*. This is the season to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and the promise of “power from on high” that comes with the “Gift of the Spirit.” We will do this by putting a particular focus on the part of the Mass which corresponds most to this call and commitment to prophetic witness: the *Presentation of Gifts*.¹

The *Presentation of Gifts* is an important, but under-appreciated moment in the Eucharistic Celebration. It should be a moment of intense re-affirmation of our baptismal commitment and of our conscious desire to participate fully and actively in the mission of the Church. In practice, however, it is often treated almost like a “time-out” in the action of the Mass while the ministers do some table-setting.

The instructions for celebrating Eucharist in the Roman rite direct that after the *Liturgy of the Word* an “acolyte [server] or other lay minister arranges the corporal, purificator, the chalice, the pall and the missal upon the altar.”² After this the bread and wine are brought to the altar, and the presiding priest *presents* them to the assembly and to God. The gifts will not be truly *offered* until, during the *Eucharistic Prayer* they, and we with them, are offered as the Body and Blood of Christ. What the *Presentation of Gifts* makes clear is that the bread and wine represent everyone present; that we will be present in the host that is offered at Mass, just as Baptism made us present in the body of Christ offered on the cross.

Before the presider presents the wine, he pours a little water into it from a “cruet.” Afterwards he washes his hands to make them clean before touching the bread and wine he will be giving to people in Communion.

If all this is done by the presiding priest and altar servers alone at the altar, the congregation hardly seems to be involved. All the more so if a hymn is being sung while the presider presents the gifts to God, because in that case the presider says the accompanying prayers “inaudibly.” If it is done right, however, two or more of the faithful will carry the gifts up from the back of the church, passing through the whole congregation, and put them in the hands of the presider, who will place them on the altar. The *Instruction* provides that the hymn can be terminated when the gifts reach the altar, in which case the prayers are said audibly so that the congregation can hear and enter into what they are expressing.

Properly done, the *Presentation of Gifts* is filled with meaning. It is the Catholic equivalent of a Baptist “altar call” when, after the preaching, the minister invites all those who want to “give themselves to Jesus” to come forward. This is a public, adult expression of personal response to the Gospel and of commitment to serve as a follower of Jesus. Catholics are invited to reaffirm their Baptism in every Mass.

The gifts represent us. The *Instruction* says it is “most desirable” that there be the same number of hosts brought up as there are people present at Mass. And they should be brought up through the whole congregation. Thus every person present is able to “go forward” symbolically, represented by a host, to be placed on the altar.

The bread and wine are placed there to be transformed into the body and blood of Christ. We whom they represent have already been transformed into Christ’s body by Baptism. But we put ourselves on the altar again with the bread and wine as a way of saying three things: first that we *want* to be the body of Christ. We reaffirm the Baptism that made us his body and commit to being so. Second, we put ourselves on the altar as a declaration we are putting ourselves personally into the Mass and into all the mystery it expresses. Third, we are putting ourselves on the altar to be *changed* — not into Christ’s body and blood, since we already are that by Baptism — but asking the Father to “bring the image of your Son to perfection within us.” This is a commitment to *continuing conversion*.³

Each one is called to enter personally and intensely into this moment of the Mass, using “affective prayer” —

¹ *Luke 24:48-49; Acts 1:8*. See my book *Experiencing the Mass*, Abbey Press, 2012.

² See the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* propagated by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002. See especially paragraphs 51, 73-76, 85, 139, 141-142.

³ *Romans 6:3*. See Lenten Preface I.

that is, just *desiring*: for example, *offering* oneself, fervently *willing* to be, to become or to do what is consciously in one's heart. And at the end of the *Presentation of Gifts* the presider invites us to put our commitment into words. At the invitation, "Pray, brothers and sisters, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father," we come to our feet and respond.

"*May the Lord accept the sacrifice*" — the sacrifice being offered through "your hands," but that we are all offering. We offer it. We choose to. First, "*for the praise and glory of his name.*" That was our focus during the *Introductory Rites*. Second, "*for our good.*" This is the way we listened during the *Liturgy of the Word* — as *disciples*, determined to "get something out of it." And finally, "*for the good of all his Church.*" We are here, not just to receive, but to give. We dedicate ourselves to "building up the Church" as committed adults. We accept as our own the Church's *mission* to the world, according to our baptismal consecration as *prophets*, *priests* and *stewards of his kinship*.¹

If we enter into the Easter Season with a desire to open ourselves to the Spirit and give ourselves to the mission of Christ we will find help in these *Reflections*. They will show us how to let the Mass remind, teach and encourage us to live lives of *prophetic witness*.

¹ See *1 Corinthians* 13:11, 4:12, 20, 26; *Ephesians* 4:11-16.

April 20, 2014

EASTER SUNDAY Morning Mass (Year A)

To remember is to *re-member* ourselves: to re-commit as members of Christ's risen body on earth.

Inventory

On a day-to-day basis, how conscious are you of your Baptism? If you were asked to name your baptismal commitments right now, could you do it?

What do you think about at Mass during the *Presentation of Gifts*?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* begins with words inspired by *Psalms* 139, verse 18: The psalmist says, "I have risen: I am with you once more...." We need to be constantly "rising" or "waking up" to be with God "once more." Physical life is a process of constant renewal, and so is spiritual life. So on Easter Sunday we have the *Renewal of Baptismal Promises*, "when we rejected Satan and his works and promised to serve God faithfully" as *Christians, Disciples, Prophets, Priests and Stewards of his Kingship*. We renew the promises to remind us of our commitment. This stimulates us to live it out more consciously. The *Instruction* provides that "on Sundays, especially in Easter time, in place of the customary *Penitential Rite*, the blessing and sprinkling with water may occasionally be performed to recall Baptism."

The *Opening Prayer(s)* repeat this theme: we ask God to "raise us up and renew our lives" by the Spirit given to us at Baptism. And remembering that after his resurrection "the Lord appeared to men who had begun to lose hope," we ask him to renew our hope through the Mass: "May the risen Lord breathe on our minds and open our eyes, that we may know him in the breaking of the bread." The goal is a renewal of commitment to "follow him in his risen life."

In the *Prayer over the Gifts* we call Eucharist "the sacrifice by which your Church is reborn and nourished." At every Mass we are invited to stand up, reborn out of Baptism's grave, and say to God: "I have risen: I am with you once more...." It is a time to *remember and re-commit*, as a "new creation," to let the Christ whose body we have become live and act *with us, in us and through us* in everything we do.

The Call to Witness

In his initial explanation of the Good News to the Gentiles, **Acts 10: 34-43**, Peter uses the word "witness" three times: "*We are witnesses* of all that [Jesus of Nazareth] did.... *witnesses* chosen beforehand by God... commissioned to bear *witness* that he is the one...." Obviously, Peter could not think of the Good News or of himself without awareness of his call to bear witness — a call that belongs to all of us through our baptismal anointing as *prophets*.

The liturgy invites us to make Peter's attitude toward this call our own. We embrace it in the *Responsorial (Psalm 118)*: "*This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad.*"

"Gone ahead of you"

Matthew 28:1-10 (alternate Gospel from Vigil Mass) begins: "As the first day of the week was dawning...." This is the dawn of Christianity. A new beginning. In daylight, when people go to work.

Christ is risen. The seekers are told that if they want to see him, they have to get moving! The angel told the women at the tomb, "He is not here. He *goes ahead of you* to Galilee. There you will see him." Jesus repeated the same message: "Go and carry the news to my brothers that *they are to go* to Galilee. There they will see me."

Galilee here is synonymous with mission. "Most of the events of the Synoptic Gospels occurred in Galilee, and

there Jesus spent most of his life and most of his ministry.”¹ If we want to “see” Jesus, we will find him by joining him in his mission.

To commit to the mission of the Messiah is a mystical experience. It is the experience of call, of being personally invited and empowered by God to do the work of Jesus. Until we hear this call, until we feel moved to take on the work of the Church, we are still “infants” in the faith. Children’s only duty is to develop themselves and grow to maturity. But the mark of maturity is to go beyond oneself in dedication to work that contributes to the wellbeing of others. We are adults in the Church when we take on the work of the Church.²

People sometimes say they don’t find Mass “meaningful.” The short answer to this is to paraphrase St. John of the Cross and say, “Where you don’t find meaning, put meaning and you will find it.” But what does “meaning” mean?

A dictionary definition is: “adding significance or purpose to somebody’s life.”³ The Mass explicitly does this.

During the *Presentation of Gifts*, we are called to “present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God” in reaffirmation of our Baptism. We send up, as a symbol of ourselves, a host to be placed on the altar, lose its existence as bread, be transformed and offered as the body of Christ for the life of the world. Since the host represents us, this is without doubt an act that “adds significance, meaning and purpose” to our lives. If we mean it.

But if we don’t pay attention to what is happening or to what we are doing, but just sing the hymn along with the choir or watch the altar servers preparing the altar, we won’t experience anything very meaningful. For that we have to consciously be aware of what the *Presentation of Gifts* is expressing at that moment, make it our own expression, and mean what we express.

What we are expressing is dedication to mission. We are reaffirming our Baptism, declaring our deliberate participation in all that the Mass means and expresses, and presenting ourselves under the form of the bread and wine to be offered with Christ for the life of the world.

May the Lord *accept the sacrifice...* for our good and that of *all his Church*.

“A fresh dough”

1Corinthians 5:6-8 invites us to see the bread being carried up to the altar as us. Paul tells us to be a “fresh dough.” To bring a prophetic freshness to the Church and to the world. To live in a way that makes it obvious Christianity, our religion, is not just the “same old same old.” This is what it means to bear *witness* to the risen, the living Jesus, the Jesus present and acting in us who are his real body on earth. Now.

To do this, Paul says, we have to “get rid of the old yeast.” What is that?

Yeast is the moving factor. It is what makes the dough rise to become bread. In us, and in human society, the “yeast” is what makes us “rise to the bait” when something is held up before us as an object of choice. The yeast is that complex of attitudes, values, desires, compulsions, fears and expectations that are the interior make-up of each one of us. The yeast is everything prior to free choice itself, but which has the greatest influence on what our free choices will be. The yeast determines the “chronic priorities,” recognized or not, that we bring to every encounter with every object of choice. Whether what is offered is good or bad, the yeast is what makes us spontaneously rise to the bait or be unresponsive to it. It takes an act of free will to actually get hooked on what expands or diminishes life, but the yeast determines the attraction.

The “old yeast” is cultural conditioning. It is made up of all the attitudes, values, etc. that have been “programmed” into us since our first contact with the human race in a society corrupted, as all societies are, by many false attitudes, values and patterns of behavior. To “get rid of the old yeast” is to declare oneself free —

¹ McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, under “Galilee.”

² This is the context in which Paul wrote his famous “Hymn to love” in *1Corinthians*, chapters 13-14. He is telling the Corinthians to “grow up” by dedicating themselves to “building up” the Church.

³ Encarta® World English Dictionary © 1999 Microsoft Corporation.

and prove it by living by Christ's standards instead of by those of the culture.

The *Presentation of Gifts* reminds us at every Mass to be "fresh dough." But we need to put ourselves consciously on the paten to be presented, transformed, offered and shared as the "unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

"Of sincerity": not corrupted, not ruled by the shortsighted standards of the "world" or the blind impulses of the "flesh." And "of truth": not the truth of this world's orbit, but the Truth of the Way that is divine and the Life that is proper to God.

Every time we do this, "the first day of the week is dawning." It is a new day, a new beginning, a new hope for humanity. "*This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad.*"

Insight

Do I find new meaning now in the Presentation of Gifts?

Initiative

Make the Presentation of Gifts a moment of intense personal recommitment.

April 21, 2014

Monday of Easter Week:

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 16) begins: “Keep me safe, O God, you are my hope.” The rest of the Psalm shows that the “hope” is really for immortality.

As interpreted by Peter in **Acts 2:14-33**, David “foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah.” Peter says God freed Jesus from the grip of death because “it was impossible that death should keep its hold on him.” The reading ends with Peter declaring: “of this we are all witnesses.”

In the following verses (33-35), he tells why it was “impossible” for Jesus to be held by death. In contrast to David, who “died and was buried, and his grave is with us to this day,” Jesus was not just human; he was divine. Jesus is God the Son, “exalted at the right hand of the Father.” Together with the Father he “poured forth the Holy Spirit” at Pentecost. Christ changed everything for us, because by Baptism we too were made divine. Through incorporation into his body we “became Christ,” true children of the Father, our bodies the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

When Christ died, he not only died for all, but all died in him. Taking us and our sins into his body, Jesus was “made to be sin... so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”¹ As a “new creation,” each of us can say the words of the Psalm with Jesus, “You will not abandon my soul to the nether world, or let your holy one experience corruption,” at least, not a disintegration of the body that endures. Our bodies too will rise again. It is impossible that they should not. We are divine.²

The presider’s prayer over the bread and wine during the *Presentation of Gifts* emphasizes the transformation from human to divine that is at the core of Christianity. “We have this bread to offer, which *earth has given* and *human hands* have made. It will become for us the *bread of life*.” It reminds us that we who “eat this bread,” though formed from the “clay of the ground” and destined to “return to the ground from which we were taken,” have now “put on immortality,” because we have “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven.... Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

We are aware that the bread we see is about to become what we do not see: the “Bread of life.” It reminds us we are called to make his invisible, divine life in us visible in behavior inexplicable without it.” This is *witness*.³

Matthew 28: 8-15 reminds us that we must “not be afraid,” but “go and carry the Good News” as “witnesses to all the world of what we have seen and heard.”⁴ What we see at Mass, what we hear in the *Liturgy of the Word*, is not to lie dormant in us. We need to contradict the “story that circulates” in our culture.

Initiative: At the *Presentation of Gifts* look and listen. See yourself in the bread.

¹ Or “the very holiness” (1970 *New American Bible*).

² *2Corinthians* 5:1-21.

³ *Genesis* 2:7, 3:19; *Romans* 13:14; *1Corinthians* 15:35-57. *John* 6:48-51, 20:26-29. And see *Eucharistic Prayer IV*.

⁴ See *Acts* 22:15.

April 22, 2014

Tuesday of Easter Week:

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 33) proclaims: “*The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord.*” But not completely! In **Acts 2: 36-41** Peter exhorts the people, “Save yourselves from this generation which has gone astray.”

There is a negative as well as a positive meaning in the presider’s words during the *Presentation of Gifts*. Like the bread and wine, the human nature we present to God is something “earth has given.” God created us from the “clay of the ground” and created us good. “God looked at everything he had made and he found it very good.”¹

But not for long. God made humans free. God created our human nature, and it is good. But as *persons* we are something “human hands have made.” Our choices form us and make us what we are as persons. We can choose to be good or bad.

Never totally, of course.

There is so much good in the worst of us
And so much bad in the best of us,
That it ill behooves the rest of us
To criticize what’s left of us.

Still, we do make bad choices. And every choice, good or bad, not only has an effect on us; it also puts something into the environment that never goes away. The attitudes and values we express influence others. Expressed often enough, they tend to become characteristic of a culture. Then everyone born into that culture is influenced by them — even before becoming old enough to make a free choice. Our society can “program” us to think and act spontaneously in ways we have never consciously considered or chosen. We call this “cultural conditioning.” This is what Peter is talking about when he urges, “Save yourselves from this generation which has gone astray.”

The task of the *prophets* is to challenge the culture through a lifestyle so different that they “radiate faith in values that go beyond current values, and hope in something not seen.... Through this wordless witness they stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this?”²

To be consecrated to this, Peter says, “you must reform, and be baptized... then you will receive the *gift of the Holy Spirit*.” The gift of the prophets.

John 20: 11-18 begins with Mary weeping and ends with her proclaiming, “I have seen the Lord.” The core of all witness is personal encounter with the living Jesus. Everything else comes from that. Once we know him, we are driven to know him better through the study of his mind and heart as revealed in the word of God. We become *disciples*. Then, as we take on his mission as *prophets, priests* and *stewards of his Kingship*, we reverse the darkness and death of “this generation that has gone astray” until “*the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord.*” This is a motive to “present our bodies” again at the *Presentation of Gifts*.”

Initiative: Save yourself and others from the infection of the culture. Be a prophet.

¹ *Genesis* 1:24-31, 2:7.

² Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, no. 21.

April 23, 2014

Wednesday of Easter Week:

The *Responsorial* (*Psalms* 105) gives us the key to joy: “*Rejoice, O hearts that seek the Lord.*” It is as simple as that.

The man in **Acts 3: 1-10** had been “crippled from birth.” He wasn’t particularly happy with it, but he was resigned. He wasn’t even seeking a cure: just alms.

If we are honest, we have to admit many Christians are “crippled from birth” in the way they live their religion. It isn’t that they are committing great sins (that they recognize, at least). It is just that they seem to be going nowhere. Or barely limping along. And they don’t enjoy the journey. It’s okay; it’s just not exciting. They do what they “have to do,” and accept with resignation that this is what religion is.

Except for the younger ones. They just stop going to church because they “get nothing out of it.”

Everything changed for the lame man when he met Jesus — not Jesus in his earthly life, but the risen Jesus. Peter said to him, “Look at us.” There was something about Peter and John that was different. He didn’t know what it was, but it was enough that “he paid attention to them, expecting to receive something from them.”

If we are *witnesses* to the risen Christ by a lifestyle so different it cannot be explained except by his life within us, people will begin to “pay attention” to the phenomenon of the community that believes. They will begin to analyze the example of the believers they live and work with. If they come to Mass, it will be with a different attitude, “expecting to receive something.” They will listen to the readings with a questioning mind. Why? Because they will see that those who are “witnesses” have something they want.

The turned-off and tepid can be turned on and fired up. Those who experience “religion” as an unexciting system of doctrines, rules and observances will discover the “spirituality” of the life of grace: dynamic, exciting, personal interaction with God as Father, Son and Spirit. Life “in the grace lane” is living on the level of God. It is an ongoing mystical experience. The key is in what we are looking for: “*Rejoice, O hearts that seek the Lord.*” Do we want to encounter the living Jesus? Do we interact with him in everything we do?

Luke 24: 13-35 parallels the Mass. Jesus’ questions, like the *Introductory Rites*, focus us on what the Good News is supposed to be. Then, as in the *Liturgy of the Word*, he “interpreted the Scriptures” to them. But the real encounter came in the “breaking of the bread,” the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*.

If, during the *Presentation of Gifts* we consciously reaffirm our Baptism, send ourselves up intentionally under the sign of bread to be placed on the altar, and ask intensely for ongoing transformation — “Father, bring the image of your Son to perfection within us” — our “eyes will be opened.” We will realize “our hearts were burning within us” during the Scripture readings and that he “was made known to us in the breaking of the bread.” But only those who look will find: “*Rejoice, O hearts that seek the Lord.*”

Initiative: Where you don’t find meaning, put meaning by interacting with Jesus.

April 24, 2014

Thursday of Easter Week:

The *Responsorial* (*Psalm 8*) is a prayer of praise and thanksgiving for the gift of creation, and especially for the dignity God has given to the human race: *“O Lord, our God, how wonderful your name in all the earth!”*

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are humans that you are mindful of them, or the children of men that you care for them?

The presider echoes this praise of God as Creator when he prays over the bread and wine: “Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation, through your goodness we have this bread to offer.” But then the prayer takes us into a whole new dimension of God’s goodness: “It will become for us the Bread of life.”

God is not just Creator, giving us human life as “children of men.” He is the Redeemer and Sanctifier who shares with us his own divine life, making us children of God. The “bread of the children” he gives us becomes the Bread of Life (*John 6:30-59*).

Matthew uses the word “bread” (*artos*) to tie together the passages he wrote on the multiplication of the loaves (15:26, 32-39), the Pharisees’ insistence on a “sign from heaven” (16:1-4), and Jesus’ reproach to his disciples for not recognizing him as the kind of Messiah he really came to be (16:5-12), which was the secret they were about to reject when he revealed it (16:21-28).

Jesus warned his disciples against the “yeast of the Pharisees” who expected a Messiah who would use divine power to give people human satisfaction on earth. This was Jesus’ first temptation in the desert (4:3): to change stones to bread as a sign that he brought prosperity. But even after the two “bread signs” (16:9-10), the disciples did not understand the difference between a Messiah who gives the bread of human life and one who gives the Bread of divine life.

The *Presentation of Gifts* invites us to reaffirm our faith in the central mystery of our redemption: the linking of human and divine. God “humbled himself to share in our humanity” so that he might die and rise as the Bread of Life, making us “sharers in his divinity.”

Peter is preaching this in **Acts 3: 11-26**: “The God of our fathers has glorified his servant Jesus... the author of life [whom] you put to death.” It is “faith in his name,” the crucified and risen, that gives “fulfillment,” “perfect health,” and the “restoration of all things.”

We place ourselves on the altar with the bread and wine to be offered with Christ and in Christ, reaffirming our Baptism into his death and resurrection. And we echo the presider’s prayer: “Blessed be God forever.” *“O Lord, our God, how wonderful your name in all the earth!”*

Luke 24: 35 to 48 ends with Jesus saying, “You are witnesses of these things.” We are the “prophets of the Prophet,” sent to proclaim the transformation of bread into Bread, of the human into the divine, of life into Life and of death into Life everlasting. We know the Good News. We celebrate it in Eucharist. Our lifestyle should cry out, *“O Lord, our God, how wonderful your name in all the earth!”*

Initiative: **Be a prophet.** Live in a way that proclaims life through death.

April 25, 2014

Friday of Easter Week:

What is the difference between the offering we put in the collection basket and the symbolic gesture of sending up a host that represents us to be placed on the altar?

For one, the money we give is not a symbol of our whole selves, but of our labor: of whatever we did to earn it. And it is not transformed into the body of Christ offered for the salvation of the world, but is simply a contribution to the particular ministries Jesus is doing through a parish: the members of his body on earth today gathered together as a recognized community and acting officially in the name of the Church.

More important: we assign to the collection only part of the money we are managing for God as his *stewards*. But the host stands for our whole selves. In sending it up to be placed on the altar we are giving all that we are.

That is why Peter says in **Acts 4: 1-12**, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” Jesus is not one aid to salvation among others, with devotion to him a contributing factor. Jesus *is* salvation. He and he alone is the “Bread of Life.” We don’t invest part of our resources to buy a part interest in Jesus. For Jesus we give all for All. And we express it by sending up a host that represents us to be placed on the altar and lose its existence. The bread ceases to exist as bread. It becomes the Body of Christ existing as God by God’s own act of existing. In a similar way, by Baptism we give up our human lives in order to rise out of the waters a “new creation,” existing still as human, but totally committed to living by the divine life of God. In Baptism we “lose our life to find it.” We give up our lives as isolated human individuals in order to share communally in the divine life of Jesus as members of his body. We are like grains of wheat that have given up being isolated grains in order to become one bread. Branches on the vine. The vine apart from whom we can “do nothing.”¹

That is why the *Presentation of Gifts* is such an intense moment of the Mass. In one symbolic gesture we are reaffirming and reliving our Baptism, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and our acceptance of communal, relational existence in the Church.

The *Responsorial (Psalm 118)* tells us Jesus was “*the stone rejected by the builders*” because the power structure of Israel — the priests, Sadducees, “rulers, elders, and scribes” — were not willing to die to the sense of control they had over their earthbound existence and “lose themselves” in the mystery of divine life “in Christ.” But for us he “*has become the cornerstone.*” In the *Presentation of Gifts* we are saying this.

John 21: 1-14: Jesus again previews Eucharist. Before feeding his disciples he calls them to “present” the fish they had caught. We present the “work of human hands” at the *Presentation of Gifts* and receive back the Bread of Life. Jesus makes human efforts bear divine fruit. The theme song of redemption!

Initiative: Enter into mystery at the *Presentation of Gifts*. Give all for All.

¹ 2Corinthians 5:14-17; *John* 12:23-25; 15:5.

April 26, 2014

Saturday of Easter Week:

The *Responsorial* (*Psalm* 118) gives credit to God for the prophets' courage in bearing witness and for the faith of those who receive it: "*I will give thanks to you, for you have answered me.*"

Jesus could not have found anything more ordinary to turn into his Body and Blood than what we put on the altar during the *Presentation of Gifts*. Bread and wine were the commonplace food of his time. Not anything precious, rare or exotic to set people up to believe in mystery. In the Eucharist God is made present under appearances that are about as ordinary as you can get. And it is in and through the most ordinary, unimpressive people that he continues to reveal his presence on earth today. In us.

We may be impressive in all sorts of ways according to the standards of our society: rich, successful, recognized, honored and famous. But when we put ourselves on the altar during the *Presentation of Gifts*, it is under the simple appearances of bread and wine. Think about that.

Acts 4: 13-21 shows us the "leaders, elders and scribes" rejecting the witness of Peter and John because they were "uneducated, ordinary men." The Greek words are *agrammatoi*, "illiterate or uneducated," and *idiotai*, for which the first meaning is "laymen"; that is, not experts of any kind. They "recognized them" only as "companions of Jesus" and were not impressed.¹

But before we get too judgmental, we should note that in **Mark 16: 9-15** those same "companions" — all eleven of what we would call the original "college of bishops" — rejected the eyewitness testimony of Mary Magdalen and of the men who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus. And Jesus "rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had been raised." The Christian "leaders and elders" were no more open to the testimony of the "uneducated ordinary laity" than the Jewish leaders were. Prejudice is prejudice, and common to us all, no matter what our religion is or our position in it.

Knowing the prejudice (and worse) that his followers would meet, Jesus still sent them: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature." And he told them what to expect:

If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because... I have chosen you out of the world —therefore the world hates you.

The prophets will encounter the "world" and its spirit both inside and outside the Church. Vatican II was clear about this:

The Church, embracing sinners in its bosom [among clergy and laity alike], is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, and incessantly pursues the path of penance [*metanoia*, "change of mind and heart"] and renewal.²

Every one of us is called to contribute to that renewal in every age — with trust in God: "*I will give thanks to you, for you have answered me.*" That is why we put ourselves on the altar.

Initiative: Be humbled as bread, but exalted as a witness to the Bread of Life.

¹Bauer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Univ. of Chicago, 1979,

²*John* 15:16-20. See Vatican II, "The Church," nos. 8, 33, 51.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: EASTER WEEK ONE

During the *Presentation of Gifts* we send up, as a symbol of ourselves, a host to be placed on the altar, lose its existence as bread, be transformed and offered as the body of Christ for the life of the world. This is an act that adds significance, meaning and purpose to our lives.

Invitation:

Make the *Presentation of Gifts* a moment of intense personal recommitment.

Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion: How could the statements below make Mass mean more if we stay aware of them during Mass?

Acts 2:14-33: The *Presentation of Gifts* emphasizes the transformation from human to divine that is at the core of Christianity. “We have this bread... which *earth has given* and *human hands* have made. It will become... the *bread of life*.”

We who share his divine life are called to live “no longer for ourselves, but for him”: to live as he did, to give “our flesh for the life of the world.”

Acts 2: 36-41: Like the bread and wine, the human nature we present to God is something “earth has given.” It is good. But as *persons* we are something “human hands have made.” We can choose to be good or bad.

The task of the *prophets* is to challenge the culture through a different lifestyle.

Acts 3: 1-10: If we are *witnesses* to the risen Jesus by a lifestyle so different it cannot be explained except by his life within us, people will begin the “pay attention” to the phenomenon of the community that believes.

The turned-off and tepid can be turned on and fired up. Those who experience “religion” as an unexciting system of doctrines, rules and observances can discover the “spirituality” of dynamic, exciting, personal interaction with God.

Acts 3: 11-26: The *Presentation of Gifts* invites us to reaffirm our faith in the central mystery of our redemption: God “humbled himself to share in our humanity” and died to rise as the Bread of Life, making us “sharers in his divinity.”

Acts 4: 1-12: Jesus alone is the “Bread of Life.” For Jesus we give all for All. And we express it by sending up a host that represents us to be placed on the altar and lose its existence. In Baptism we “die” with Christ to “rise” as his body on earth.

In Baptism and Mass we give up our lives as isolated “grains of wheat” in order to live communally by the divine life of Jesus as “one bread,” members of his body.

Acts 4: 13-21: We put ourselves on the altar during the *Presentation of Gifts* as very ordinary people, under the simple appearances of bread and wine. But we bear witness to the divine life we have “in Christ,” the Bread of Life.

Initiatives:

At the Presentation of Gifts look and listen. See yourself in the bread.

Where you don't find meaning during Mass, put meaning by offering yourself.

Enter into mystery at the *Presentation of Gifts*. Give all for All.

April 27, 2014

**The Second Sunday of Easter (Year A)
and Divine Mercy Sunday
Experiencing and Expressing the Risen Life**

Inventory

When do you experience yourself as most alive by grace? How much of it depends on what you yourself are doing? How much on what other people are doing (or doing together with you)?

Input

The *Opening Prayer* reminds us that we must “no longer look for Jesus among the dead” — including the deadening routine of just “saying prayers” or participating in Mass without attention — for “he has become the Lord of life.” We ask God to “increase in our minds and hearts [our experience of] the *risen life we share with Christ*.” This will “help us to *grow*... toward the *fullness* of eternal life.” We are asking for a religion brought alive by the *experience* of life — of Christ’s life within us.

The *Readings* show us how we become aware of this experience. The *Responsorial (Psalm 118)* puts into words the spontaneous response it evokes: “*Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love is everlasting.*”

An awesome experience:

Acts 2: 42-47 describes the experience of the first people who responded with faith to the Apostles’ proclamation of the Good News: “They *devoted themselves to the teaching* of the Apostles, and to the *communal life*, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. “ The result of this was “*exultation and sincerity of heart*.” And: “Every day the Lord *added to their number* those who were being saved.”

What we have here is a formula for experiencing the risen life. The first two elements are *discipleship* — a real desire and commitment to *learn* everything Jesus taught — and *community* — a commitment to gathering and celebrating the Good News with others.

The next line gives us the third element: “All who believed... would *sell their property* and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need.” This, more than any miracles, was the greatest “wonder and sign” brought about by the Apostles’ preaching. This was the “sign of Jonah,” the visible evidence of the risen Jesus alive and active in the hearts of the community. To reveal (to ourselves as well as others) that we are alive by grace, we don’t have to literally sell our possessions. But we do have to give up selfishness and all selfish attachment to what we own, and respond to the needs of others with the same love Jesus shows to us. When we see others doing this, and experience ourselves doing it also, that is when the life of grace becomes for us an awesome experience. Then we have something deep and personal to celebrate. “*Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love is everlasting*”

When the fruit of grace, the fruit of Christ’s divine life within us, is *visible in our actions*, that is when we are bearing *witness* as *prophets*.

How do we know...?

How do we know we are alive by grace and sharing in Christ’s own divine life? **1Peter 1: 3-9** tells us we know it when we see ourselves living in a way that cannot be explained without it.

This letter was written to Christians facing persecution. It tells them that their fear itself is an experience of their faith, because in spite of it they are remaining faithful. “

You rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith... tested by fire... may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is

revealed.”

To our human way of perceiving things, the visible threat of death is a lot more real than the invisible promise of eternal life. But the point of the letter is that if we choose to remain faithful, *the experience of believing is just as real as the experience of fearing death*. We experience the promise of eternal life, not just as words of Jesus handed down to us, but as words Jesus is speaking now in our own hearts.

How do we know he is speaking? We know it because we have enough certitude in faith to die for the sake of the promise. The deep certitude we experience (without necessarily *feeling* it) cannot be explained except by the divine gift of faith. We know that we know. And we know that nothing human can explain the fact that we know. Our willingness to die requires as the “condition for its possibility” the reality of our faith in Christ’s promise. That is when we know our faith is real. As Karl Rahner has said, “We do not know we believe in the two birds in the bush until we *let go* of the one bird in our hand.”

Peter’s letter makes the point: “Even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice... for you are receiving [and experiencing] the *outcome of your faith*, the salvation of your souls.” By his fruits in our heart we know him.

So we know that we are sharing in Christ’s divine life when we find ourselves *acting* in a way that can only be explained by divine faith, hope and love. We do not have to face death for this. We experience it whenever we let go of any “bird in the hand” for the sake of what is promised by the Voice in the burning bush. This is the role and the experience of the *prophets*, who live in counter-cultural ways inspired by the voice of God in their hearts. When we go beyond “what everybody does,” we know our faith is personal — that we ourselves are listening and responding to the living God. Then we can personally “*give thanks to the Lord*,” for we ourselves know that “*he is good, his love is everlasting*.”

Unless I see and touch...

When the risen Jesus appears to his disciples in **John 20: 19-31** his opening word is always, “Peace....” Where does that peace come from?

Jesus’ first words after the greeting tell us. The first time, “When he had said this, he *showed them his hands and his side*.” He showed them the proof of his passion and death so they would know that the living man in front of them had truly risen from the dead. The first source of our peace is in the fact that Jesus is risen and living still. Still with us.

After his second greeting, Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Then he “breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” The second source of our peace is in the fact that we are *sent and empowered* by the Spirit to continue Christ’s work on earth. We have a meaning and purpose in life. We know what we are here for and what we have to do. And we know that the light and strength to do it are coming, not from us, but from the gift of the Spirit within us. In other words, we know that the risen Jesus is living and acting in us.

Jesus said he would go down into the grave to rise multiplied through resurrection in every living member of his body on earth: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (*John 12:24*). Our peace is in the fact that Jesus is risen and living in us.

But Thomas could not find this peace just from the other disciples’ report that they had seen Jesus. He said, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and touch his wounds myself, ‘I will not believe.’”

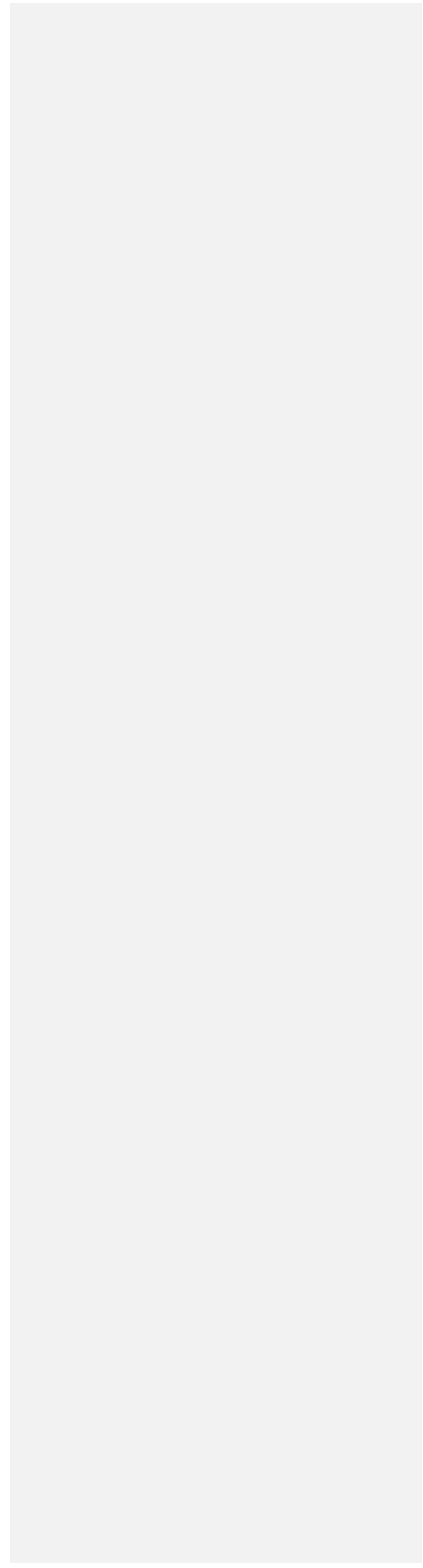
Thank God for hard-headed disciples! Thomas voiced the need we all have to see flesh-and-blood evidence that Jesus is risen and real. And we find it in the flesh-and-blood reality of his body on earth, in the flesh-and-blood experience that we and others are living the divine life of Jesus risen and living in us. Every time we act in a way that nothing but faith can explain, Jesus in us is saying to anyone who doubts, “See my hands. Touch me. And do not be unbelieving but believe — that through this belief you may have *life*.”

Insight

What do I do that cannot be explained except by my faith in Jesus Christ? Are there things I do that I know I would not do unless I were motivated by faith, even though other people might do them for other motives?

Initiative:

Take God's words seriously. Make some choices consciously based on them.



April 28, 2014

Monday, Easter Week Two

The *Responsorial (Psalm 2)* reminds us where power and security lie: “*Happy are all who take refuge in the Lord*”

In **Acts 4: 23-31** Peter and John report to the community that they have been commanded by the priests and elders “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” The response of the community is to quote Psalm 2: “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things... against the Lord and against his Messiah?”

They are grounding their life and action in the most basic truth perceived by human intelligence: that nothing exists except by God’s ongoing will to continue his creative act. We *are* only because God is saying “*Beeeee.....*” And prolonging the creative command. We *can move* and act only because God within us is empowering us to convert our existence into action.

The philosophers call our existence “first act” and our operations “second act” — not because they are two separate acts of God, but because *existence* is God’s actualization of the power he has to make nothingness exist as a being, and *operation* is God’s concurrence in a being’s actualization of the power it has to use existence according to its nature. Paul put this on the table when the “Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him” in Athens: “I proclaim to you the God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth.... since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.... For ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’”¹

This is the recognition every human choice should be based on. We acknowledge it at every Mass in the *Presentation of Gifts*: “Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have....” Forget that, and every choice we make is baseless. Remember that, and we are grounded in truth and security: “*Happy are all who take refuge in the Lord.*”

But God goes beyond giving us existence. In **John 3: 1-8** Jesus tells Nicodemus that we need to receive life on a higher level by being “born from above... of water and Spirit.” We say in the *Presentation of Gifts* that this bread “which earth has given and human hands have made” will become “the bread of life.” Likewise, this human life which God gave when he “formed us from the dust of the ground, and breathed into us the breath of life” is meant to become eternal life, divine life, a sharing in the Life of God himself.²

In every Mass we are reminded of this. In every Mass we need to reaffirm our faith that this mystery is true, our hope that its promise will be fully realized in us, our love for God giving us life that is both human and divine. We do this by “presenting our bodies” under the form of bread to be offered as a “living sacrifice” to God as we did on the day of Baptism: “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands....”³

Initiative: Recognize God as Creator by intelligence and as Father by faith..

¹ *Acts* 17:16-29.

² *Genesis* 2:7.

³ *Romans* 12:1.

April 29, 2014

Tuesday, Easter week two

The *Responsorial (Psalm 93)* — “*The Lord is king; he is robed in majesty*” — means Jesus is as different from earthly kings as God is different from his creatures. The Psalm continues: “He has established the world.... From everlasting you are.... Holiness belongs to your house....” And we are called to be as different from ordinary human beings as God is. How is that for a shocker?

Acts 4: 32-37 shows us what it means to “bear witness to the resurrection of the Lord.” It means to make it evident that Jesus is risen and living in us. We do that by living in a way that is both unintelligible and impossible without grace. And by “grace” we mean “the favor of sharing in the divine life of God.” If we are not obviously divine, we are not the kind of humans God made and called us to be by Baptism.

The early “community of believers” was “of one heart and mind.” That is the first sign of divine life. Jesus prayed at the Last Supper: “that they may all be one.” Not just as a human community. He prayed that we might be one *as the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are one*: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” What does this say about us?¹

On the visible, human level it should be evident that no human concerns have enough importance to divide us. Are we who are united by sharing in the divine life of God going to let ourselves be disunited by something that is of value only on the level of human life?

Jesus already laid down this principle in the “Sermon on the Mount”:

If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

The general principle here is that for those who are the body of Christ on earth and children of God the Father, nothing on this earth should take precedence over good relationship with another human being. Not our wounded pride when we are insulted or feel rejection like a slap in the face. Not attachment to our possessions or the arrogance of someone cheating us out of them. Not the pressure people put on us by imposing on our time or making our work longer or harder. Our response to all that is to risk more rejection by sticking our neck out again; to give others more than they are trying to cheat us out of; to spend more time on people than they are already costing us.²

Is that human? No, that is to be divine. In the “community of believers... no one claimed anything as a personal possession, but they had everything in common.... There was no needy person among them.” That is Christian witness.

In **John 3: 7-15** Jesus asked Nicodemus, “You do not understand this?” Is he asking us that? Three words: “You are divine.” Do you understand them? If not, why not? If you would, decide how you could. “*The Lord is king; he is robed in majesty.*” Jesus will help you.

Initiative: Come to grips with being divine. What does it mean to be it? To live it?

¹ *John 17:16-23.*

² *Matthew 5:38-42.*

April 30, 2014

Wednesday, Easter week two

In **Acts 5: 17-26** God delivered the Apostles from prison the way Jesus was delivered from the tomb. The temple police reported, “We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” When Jesus rose, those who went to the tomb found it likewise empty. And no explanation.

By Baptism we were freed from the prison of this world’s limits and the tomb of its death. We went down into the water of Baptism as into the grave. When we rose out of that water, those who looked for the “old self” we used to be simply did not find us. Our “old self” was “crucified with Jesus so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.” We “were taught to put away our former way of life,” our “old self with its practices,” to be “renewed in the spirit of our minds” and to “clothe ourselves with the new self which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” and “created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

We need to be conscious of this when we present ourselves to be placed on the altar under the symbols of bread and wine. We are accepting to step out of the prison of our culture’s darkness. To be free of its myopic attitudes and intramundane values. To embrace the “new self” that was given to us at Baptism and which is growing — gradually — “until all of us come to... the knowledge of the Son of God...” and the Father brings the “image of his Son to perfection within us.” The *Presentation of Gifts* is a commitment to *ongoing conversion*.¹

John 3: 16-21 warns us that something in us may “prefer darkness to light.” Not just because our “works are evil” and we don’t want that fact exposed, even to ourselves. But also because prison protects us from challenge. To be locked into the laws and practices of “religion” with such a walled-in vision that nothing gets past them is to escape the unknown of conscious interaction and personal relationship with God. We focus so narrowly on *what* we do that no *who* even enters the equation. John says God sent his Son so that “the world might be saved through *him*” and “whoever believes in *him* will not be condemned.” Unless our faith lets us know Jesus as a person, and our hope is to grow in intimacy with him until we love him passionately, we are “condemned” to the half-life of the Pharisees. This is the way, not of life but of the living dead. We may be alive by grace, but barely.

The “way of life” is the way of those hungry to know and do more; to chart their course by the “single star” of Jesus; to sail by the “wild winds” of the Spirit, “withersoever they blow.” It is the freedom of “nothing left to lose,” because all has been given for All. The *Responsorial (Psalm 34)* assures those who leave their measurable prison: “*The Lord hears the cry of the poor.*”

Initiative: Give up security. Trust God calling you into the unknown.

¹ *Romans 6:6; Ephesians 4:13, 22-24; Colossians 3:9-10; Preface I for Lent.*

May 1, 2014

Thursday, Easter week two

Acts 5: 27-33 presents us with a puzzle. The Apostles' strength came from their certitude they were speaking God's truth and doing God's will: "We must obey God rather than any human authority." Where did this certitude come from? Obviously, from the Holy Spirit. But Peter said God gave the Spirit "to those who obey him." So were the Apostles empowered to obey God rather than humans because they had the Holy Spirit, or did God give them the Spirit because they obeyed him?

This isn't just a word game. There is a mutual dependency between faith and action. Faith empowers us to act, but it is action that confirms us in faith. The Apostles knew their certitude was from the Holy Spirit when they took the action of risking prison and death by disobeying the human authorities.

How does this work?

By definition, faith is certitude about something beyond the reach of human reason, something that "transcends" the range of any creature's activity. **John 3: 31-36** insists on the contrast:

The one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard.

So how do we know that "the one who comes from heaven" is speaking to us and through us? That we are in a real, and not just an imagined relationship with the transcendent God?

First we consciously establish ourselves in a relationship with some visible, created person or reality. We can know this relationship is real, because the reality of relationship is *interaction* and we can experience ourselves interacting with visible people and things on this earth. But we make sure that what we are doing is such that there is simply no human reason for doing it, no value on earth that would motivate us to do it. Then we know we must be doing it for some value not of this earth, some "transcendent" value. That can only be God. God alone is "beyond" everything created. "The one who comes from heaven is above all." He alone.

So if we want to know we are in a real relationship with God —acting toward him with real faith, real hope, real love — the way to do it is to take a stance toward some created person or value that requires "as the condition for its possibility" the reality of the stance we want to take toward God. "We don't know we truly believe in the two birds in the bush until we let go of the one bird in the hand."

We experience the reality of our faith in the *act* of making *choices* that we would not (or could not) make without it.

That is why the *Presentation of Gifts* is such an important moment in the Mass. It is the moment that invites us to declare explicitly to God that we *choose* to participate in this celebration and in the mystery it expresses: the mystery of our baptismal incorporation into Christ, into his body, into his Church, into the mission he wants to continue in and through us as members of his risen body, anointed *prophets, priests, and stewards of his kingship*.

Initiative: Empty yourself to know you are filled with the Spirit. The *Responsorial (Psalm 34)* promises, "*The Lord hears the cry of the poor.*"

May 2, 2014

Friday, Easter week two

The *Responsorial* (*Psalm 27*) tells us what each one is expressing during the *Presentation of Gifts*: “*One thing I seek: to dwell in the house of the Lord*”.

Acts 5: 34-42 gives us what is known as “the principle of Gamaliel”:

If this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them — in that case you may even be found fighting against God!”

This says that what God inspires people to do will not fail because of external opposition or lack of human resources. God’s word achieves its end:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth... giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Jesus pointed out in the “Parable of the Sower” that God’s word does not always bear fruit. But it only fails because of an internal failure of faith, hope or love in those who deliver or receive the message.¹

We express our faith in this principle every time we bring up the insignificant elements of bread and wine during the *Presentation of Gifts*, counting on them to become the mystery, the sacrifice that redeems the world. From a human point of view, isn’t it ridiculous to think that a few pieces of bread and a cup of wine can achieve what all the money, talent, weapons and technological wizardry of the world cannot achieve? But we believe it. Because this bread “will become for us the Bread of Life.”

For whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.²

The Apostles, sentenced to be flogged,

left the presence of the Sanhedrin rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer for the sake of the Name. And day after day, both in the temple and at home, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news of Jesus the Messiah.

If faith is alive, we will conquer. If we are conquering, our faith must be alive.

In **John 6: 1-15** the “multiplication of the loaves” depended on Jesus having some loaves to multiply. He didn’t just produce them out of thin air.

He could have. But God has chosen and is still choosing to save the world with the help of the humans being saved. This saves our dignity as free persons and God’s reputation as Creator. No matter how bad we are, our human nature is basically good and capable of cooperating freely with God.

Without the *Presentation of Gifts* there would not be any *Eucharistic Prayer*. If we don’t present the bread — and ourselves as represented by it — the Bread of Life will not become present.

When the people “saw the sign Jesus had done,” they said, “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.” Our task as “prophets in the Prophet” is to live in a way that shows Jesus is still in the world. We are empowered to do this by the “gift of the Spirit.” —

Initiative: Live the impossible dream. Show that with God all things are possible.

¹ *Isaiah 55:9-11; Matthew 13:3-33.*

² *John 5:4.*

May 3, 2014

Feast of Saints Philip and James, Apostles¹

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 19) predicts: “*Their message goes out to all the earth.*” But how do we present it?

We tell children, as Ananias told Paul, that sins are “washed away” in Baptism. Not a threatening image. But is it possible to explain how Baptism takes away sin without speaking of death?

In **1 Corinthians 15:1-8** Paul says “*Christ* died for our sins... was buried, and raised...” Peter also says, Christ “*suffered for*” our sins...” There is nothing threatening about Christ suffering and dying for us. That is extrinsic to us. But when Paul explains the mystery more deeply, he says that in Baptism *we ourselves* have to die.”

All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead... we too might walk in newness of life.

Paul says our “old self *was crucified with him* so that the body of sin might be *destroyed*... For whoever *has died* is freed from sin.”²

We usually don't tell children that in Baptism we ourselves have to die. We take the mystery out of Baptism. This makes “walk in newness of life” just an exhortation to good human behavior. It also leaves us with the impression our sins were only “forgiven,” not “taken away.” Being forgiven does not change us; dying and rising again does.

This “dumbs down” the whole mystery of Christian identity. We miss the reality of Paul's conclusions: “In the one Spirit we were all *baptized into one body*--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free” and “As many of you as were baptized *into Christ* have *clothed yourselves with Christ*.” These are intrinsic changes in us that no extrinsic “payment for sin” can produce. It is only because *we died* in Christ and rose in him that Paul can say, “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view... If anyone is *in Christ*, there is a *new creation*...”³

In **John 14:6-14** when Jesus “knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father,” he spoke about the mystery of believing in him:

If you know me, you will *know my Father* also... I am in the Father and the Father is in me... the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do *greater works than these*... I will ask the Father, and he will *give you another Advocate*, to be with you forever... On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and *you in me, and I in you*.

Peter urged Baptism, not just so that our “sins may be forgiven.” but also so that we may “receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” We die and rise in Christ to live a new life; one *visibly divine*. If the Spirit empowers us to know and act as only God can, this bears witness to the living presence of Jesus in us, who rose out of the waters of Baptism as his body risen from the grave. True *witnesses* live on the level of God.⁴

Initiative: Live a new life by the power of the Spirit. Go beyond being human.

¹ For facts on St. James, see July 25 (next booklet).

² *Acts* 22:16; *1 Peter* 3:18; *Romans* 6:3-7.

³ *2 Corinthians* 5:16-17.

⁴ *Acts* 2:38.

Same Day: May 3, 2014
Saturday, Easter week two

Acts 6: 1-7 shows us that, although all in the Church are equally Christ and equal members of his body, there are many different roles and functions in the Church, some of them incompatible with others. One role was that of the “Twelve,” who were those apostles who had been chosen as special witnesses out of the disciples who had been with Jesus “beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us.” They had the function of “overseers,” but they could not be everywhere and oversee everything¹.

So when argument broke out over the distribution of food they “called together the whole community of the disciples” and asked them to “select from among yourselves seven men... whom we may appoint to this task [of serving at tables], while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” Both functions are “service,” *diakonia*. One is food service, the other “word service,” but both services are equal, as are the persons chosen for each. They are like the hosts brought up in the *Presentation of Gifts*: are all distinct, but they are all one bread. All look alike, are treated alike, and all become equally the “Bread of life.” St. Paul is clear about that:

I say to *everyone* among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.... For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

We respect each one’s role — in the Church and in civil society — without seeing anyone as “higher” or “lower” than anyone else: “Pay to all what is due them—taxes... revenue... respect... honor....” But what should dominate and characterize every relationship is love.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.²

When persecution in Jerusalem caused the Greek-speaking Christians to flee to Samaria while the Twelve remained behind, those chosen for ministry at table took on the ministry of the word. Philip, especially, the first named, is described as preaching, baptizing and “proclaiming the good news to all the towns.”³ As we saw in yesterday’s Gospel (*John 6:9*), when there is need, the gifts are present in the community; we just have to use them.

In **John 6: 16-21**, as soon as the disciples “wanted to take Jesus into the boat” they found they had already arrived where they wanted to go. We may wonder sometimes if we really are the kind of Christians we need to be — or if the Mass has any “meaning” for us. We need to be clear about the significance of *desire*. If we *want* to take Jesus into our hearts, *want* to “get something” out of the Mass, *want* it to have meaning for us, we are already “there.” This is the value of “affective prayer” in the *Presentation of Gifts*: just *willing* and *offering* to be what Baptism made us, the body of Christ.

Initiative: Be what you are and desire to become all God wants you to be.

¹ *Acts* 1:20-22.

² *Romans* 12:1-10, 13: 7-8. This is also the clear message of *ICorinthians*, chapters 12-13

³ *Acts* 8:4-40.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: EASTER WEEK TWO

Experiencing and Expressing the Risen Life: We must “no longer look for Jesus among the dead” — including the deadening routine of just “saying prayers” or participating in Mass without attention — for “he has become the Lord of *life*.”

Invitation:

Experience Christ’s life within you by living as you couldn’t without it.

Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion: How could the statements below make Mass mean more if we stay aware of them during Mass?

Acts 4: 23-31 We acknowledge in the *Presentation of Gift* the most basic truth perceived by human intelligence: that nothing exists except by God’s ongoing creative will: “Lord, God of all creation, through your goodness we have....”

John 3: 1-8: By “presenting our bodies” under the form of bread to be offered as at Baptism, we reaffirm our faith that human life is meant to become divine life.

Acts 4: 32-37 We “bear witness to the resurrection of the Lord” by living in a way that is both unintelligible and impossible unless Jesus is risen and living in us.

If we are not obviously divine, we are not the kind of humans Baptism made us.

The first sign of divine life is for the “community of believers” to be “of one heart and mind,” showing that no human concerns have enough importance to divide us.

Acts 5: 17-26: To *present* ourselves with the gifts is to pledge *ongoing conversion*—until the Father brings the “image of his Son to perfection within us.”

Acts 5: 27-33: Faith empowers us to act, but we experience faith as real in the *act* of making *choices* we would not (or could not) make without it

The *Presentation of Gifts* is an important moment in the Mass because it invites us to declare explicitly to God, ourselves and others that we *choose* to participate.

Acts 5: 34-42: What God inspires will not fail because of external opposition or lack of human resources; only because of an internal failure of faith, hope or love.

John 6: 1-15: If we don’t present the bread, Christ will not become present on the altar. If we don’t present ourselves Christ will not be present in the world,

Acts 6: 1-7: We respect each one’s role in the Church and in society without seeing anyone as “higher” than anyone else. All were just bread. Now all are Christ.

John 6: 16-21: The value of “affective prayer” in the *Presentation of Gifts* is in the significance of *desire*. If we *want* the Mass to have meaning for us, then it does.

Initiatives:

Take God’s words seriously. Make some choices consciously based on them.

Recognize God as Creator by intelligence and as Father by faith.

Come to grips with being divine. What does it mean to be it? To live it?

Live the impossible dream. Show that with God all things are possible.

Be what you are and desire to become all God wants you to be.

May 4, 2014

The Third Sunday of Easter (Year A) Finding Joy in Christ

Inventory

What gives me the most joy in life? What do I do now to find joy? Have I ever decided on a formula for living a joyful life? Do I think religion is one?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* assumes the whole world should find joy in God: “*Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.... Proclaim his glorious praise.*” And in the *Opening Prayer* we ask God to give us the kind of live, conscious hope in our own resurrection from the dead that, whether we are young or old, gives us the joy of eternal youth: “*May we look forward with hope to our resurrection, for you have made us your sons and daughters, and restored the joy of our youth.*” We have everlasting life because we have “become Christ” (St. Augustine). We are children of God: because “in Christ,” we are the “only-begotten Son of the Father.” Because we are members of his risen body, we share in his own divine life, life eternal.

The *Responsorial (Psalm 16)* gives the theme of the readings: If we live as Christ now, we will have now the joy of his life: “*Lord, you will show us the path of life.*”

Jesus Gives Life:

Acts 2: 14-33 tells us that Jesus has “made known to us the path of life.” He did this, not only by his teachings, but above all by rising from the dead to show that he can give what he promises. Jesus is the Life: he “fills us with joy in his presence.” And because he is the Life, we can be sure that his *Truth* is the *Way* that leads to *Life* (see *John 14:6; Psalm 86:11; Matthew 22:16*).

It is not only the testimony of Christ’s resurrection that convinces us he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. It is also, and most immediately, the testimony of the Holy Spirit poured out in our hearts. The evidence to which Peter appeals in his first public proclamation of the Good News is the double sign of Christ’s *resurrection* and the *manifestation of the Spirit* in those who witnessed to him: “*God raised this Jesus; of this we are all witnesses. Exalted at God’s right hand, he received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father and poured him forth, as you see and hear.*”

For us to bear witness to Christ as *prophets*, our lives have to be visible proof of the presence of Christ’s Holy Spirit in us. To do this we must show in our body language, words and actions the “fruit of the Spirit”: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (*Galatians 5:22*). For now let us focus on *joy*.

Realizing...

1Peter 1: 17-21 tells us how to do this. It is not by “projecting an image” of joy; it is by *realizing*, remaining *conscious* that we have been “ransomed from the futile ways inherited from our ancestors, not with... silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ.”

We read last Sunday, “In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that *the genuineness of your faith... tested by fire, may... result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*”

What makes our witness credible makes our joy a reality: “Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are *receiving the outcome of your faith*, the salvation of your souls” (1Peter 1: 6-9). We have joy, even when things are very difficult or painful for us, because we “believe in God who raised Jesus from the dead and gave him glory, so that our faith and hope are in God” — not in anything this world gives or promises.

They recognized him:

Luke 24: 13-35 shows us how we come to this faith and hope. It is first through *encounter with Jesus*: “Jesus drew near and walked with them.”

Secondly, it is through *intellectual understanding*: “He interpreted to them what referred to him in all the Scriptures.” But intellectual knowledge is not enough; we have to experience God himself speaking to us through the Scriptures. It is a mystery and mystical experience of *encounter*: “Were not our hearts burning within us *while he spoke to us* on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?”

Finally, we have to *celebrate* what we have experienced. We have to re-express it in our own words, and in more than words. Celebration involves the whole person: body, emotions, mind and will and action. The deepest (and most available!) celebration is *Eucharist*. The disciples did not really recognize Jesus until he “*took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them*” — the Gospel formula for Eucharist. “With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him.”

We too know Jesus “in the breaking of the bread.” It is in the Mass that we express and experience the mystery of our faith most clearly, most deeply, in its fullness. For this, however, we have to give “full, conscious, active” *participation*. We have to listen to the words, be aware of what they mean, try to mean them more every time we say them, make the Mass an authentic expression of our own faith, hope and love. Then in the Mass the “*Lord will show us the path of life.*”

Insight

What in my religion gives me joy? What else would if I focused on it with faith?

Initiative:

Decide to identify and absorb everything in my religion that is a source of joy.

May 5, 2014

Monday, Easter week three

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 119) confronts us with an either-or choice: “*Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord.*” Either we have decided to do that or we haven’t. If we have, we need to begin with what God says we should live for.

In **John 6: 22-29** Jesus is blunt about what should be the goal of our life: “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.” He is equally blunt about where we find that food. It is “...what the Son of Man will give you.”

There it is: an either-or choice. Take it or leave it.

It is quite possible many of us have never confronted that choice. Not seriously. Not explicitly, as a crucial decision we have to make. (“Crucial” comes from *crux*, meaning “cross.” A “crucial” decision is one we face at the crossroads of life. A direction-setter).

Why are so few teenagers interested in reflections like these? It is because many are not conscious of setting a direction for life. They have short-term goals: text a friend, pass a test, take a trip, work on their appearance, make a team, win a game. At most they may be thinking of getting into a particular college or preparing for some career. Some may identify fulfillment in life with a career or a happy marriage. Pitiful, but true. Few even suspect there is a larger picture. They are not looking for anything except what “perishes.”

And let’s be honest: the last place they think they will find real joy and fulfillment in life is through relationship with Jesus Christ.

Let’s be even more honest. In this, aren’t most adults little better than teenagers?

Acts 6: 8-15 invites us to look at self-identity. People are willing to murder Stephen just because he is calling into question their national and religious identity as Jews. They see him changing who they are. He is threatening their religion, nationality and culture all combined. They will kill him for it.

Most of us grew up with three identities we took for granted: *family, nationality and religion*. Would you kill to keep living as an American? As a Christian? As a (insert your family name)? Would you die rather than give up any one of them? Have you ever really thought about what each one means in your life? You received all three without choosing. Have you ever personally, consciously, deeply chosen one or all of them?

In every Mass the *Presentation of Gifts* invites you to choose your religion. Deeply and personally. Do you do it? Do you place yourself on the altar each time, with the host that represents you, to offer yourself to God as you did at Baptism? Do you focus all your life’s hopes on what “the Son of Man will give you?” Does desire for this rule every choice of your life?

Or would you have to say, to be truly honest, that in what is most important in life you are not really looking further ahead than a teenager?

If you participate in Mass “fully, actively and consciously,” the *Presentation of Gifts* will give and sustain focus in your life.

Initiative: Don’t fly blind. Focus on the goal and keep your eyes on it..

May 6, 2014

Tuesday, Easter week three

The *Responsorial (Psalm 31)* is the profession of faith and trust Jesus made before he died; except he called God “Father” instead of “Lord”: “*Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.*” The meaning of the whole psalm is summed up in the next-to-last verse: “Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord.”

In **Acts 7:51 to 8:1** Stephen died with the same words on his lips except he addressed them to Jesus: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” These are the words of ultimate faith, hope and love. To say them with our last breath is to die a Christian death. To say them with every breath we take is to live a Christian life. This is the meaning of the traditional greeting and prayer at Mass: “The Lord be with you,” with its echo: “And with your spirit.” What it says is, “Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord. He is here.”

The “people, elders and scribes”¹ killed Stephen because he said, “you always oppose the Holy Spirit.” Their whole religion focused on keeping the law, but Stephen said “you did not observe it” because they did not let the Holy Spirit show them what it meant. Law observance without intimate knowledge of the mind and heart of God is deadly. These are the ones who persecute the prophets in every age.

This is a reason why at Mass, after hearing God’s words in the readings, we symbolically place ourselves on the altar in the *Presentation of Gifts* to be *transformed*. As the bread that represents us is changed into the Bread of life, God promises we will be changed:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you.... I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.. Then [you] shall be my people, and I will be [your] God.²

The words the presider speaks in the name of all during the *Presentation of Gifts* echo the words of Jesus in **John 6: 31-36**: “I am the Bread of Life.”

Blessed are you, Lord... through your goodness we have this bread to offer... It will become for us the Bread of Life.

We don’t just present ourselves in commitment to give human obedience to the words of Jesus as understood by our human minds. St. Paul tells us, “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice” to be

transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.

We are committing ourselves to live out our baptismal consecration as *prophets*. We seek *enlightenment* through God’s word as *disciples*, but we know we will not truly understand how to live as *witnesses* to Jesus Christ until we have been “clothed with power from on high” by the “gift of the Spirit.” We receive it through *surrender*: “*Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.*”³

Initiative: Obey laws, not according to their letter but by the Spirit.

¹ Modern equivalents are “laity, clergy and Canon Lawyers.” The correct word for ordained priests is “presbyters” or “elders.” The scribes were the teachers or “doctors” of the law. The Gospels link the “scribes and Pharisees” together as allies twenty times.

² *Ezekiel* 11:19, 36:26.

³ *Romans* 12:1-2; *Luke* 24:48-49; *Acts* 1:8, 2:38, 10:45; *1 Corinthians* 2:6-16.

May 7, 2014

Wednesday, Easter week three

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 66) extends Easter joy to every creature: “*Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.*” The key to this joy is *seeing* and *believing*. The Psalm continues: “Come and *see* the works of God Therefore let us *rejoice* in him.”

Acts 8: 1-8 shows us Philip, who was chosen for the administrative task of distributing food, “proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” and baptizing. “Philip went down to . . . Samaria and proclaimed the Christ to them.”¹

Philip and the others with him were doing all of this as what we call “laypersons.”² Church rules and customs change with the times, but it is important to remember that according to our *theology* all of the baptized are consecrated and empowered as *prophets* to bear witness to Jesus Christ in word and action. Anyone can validly baptize, although the Church has prudently ruled that for Catholics this should normally take place and be registered only in a parish and under the jurisdiction of a pastor. Likewise, during Mass the specific preaching of “homilies” is restricted by current rules to the clergy. We should not let this make us forget, however, that by Baptism we are *all* charged to preach the Gospel and teach each other the word of God in every possible way. We are *prophets*:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.³

It would be a natural mistake to see in the *Presentation of Gifts* only the “administrative” action of preparing the altar and bringing up the gifts. All present need to remind themselves to enter into this moment with minds and hearts alert to the spiritual meaning embodied in the actions. We present *ourselves* under the symbols of bread and wine to be offered with Christ and in Christ during the *Eucharistic Prayer*. This is a peak moment of Mass: “*Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.*”

In **John 6: 35-40** Jesus promises: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.” This obviously invites us to deep, personal, direct interaction with Jesus in everything we do. But it also makes us conscious that many people will “come to Jesus,” especially in the beginning of their faith journey, only by seeing him in others who are his body and real presence on earth. To “see” him they must have faith. But they will find faith by seeing faith *embodied* in the lifestyle of those who already have it. This defines our role as *prophets*: to live in such a way that our life can only be explained by Christ living within us. It is to this that we pledge ourselves at the *Presentation of Gifts*.

Initiative: Let people see Jesus as the only explanation of what they see in you.

¹ Verse 12. See *Acts* 6:1-6, 8:26-40, 21:8.

² The identification of “deacons” with the “seven” chosen in *Acts* 6:1-6 is not Scriptural.

³ *Colossians* 3:16. See also *2Timothy* 2:2, *1John* 2:27; *Hebrews* 8:10-11. See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 436, 1241, 1268.

May 8, 2014

Thursday, Easter week three

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 66) repeats yesterday's theme: — "*Let all the earth cry out to God with joy*"

Acts 8: 26-40 shows one of the shortest versions of the RCIA on record. Philip explained the Scriptures to the court official. He believed, asked for baptism, received it and "continued on his way rejoicing" — back to Ethiopia. There wasn't even any follow-up. "The Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away and the eunuch saw him no more."

Today we require a lot more instruction before Baptism. For adults, at least. For infants the rule is that we only baptize children when there is reasonable certitude they will be instructed and formed in the faith by their parents.

But what follow-up is there for adults once they are baptized and confirmed? Is Sunday Mass enough? Let's not discount the continuing formation we receive through the practices of the liturgical seasons: Advent, Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, "Ordinary Time," and the various feast days that emphasize some major event or doctrine. Still, is it enough?

It may not be. Some kind of more personal community interaction in the family or in small groups may be necessary. But if we learn to participate fully in the Mass, understanding what is really going on and consciously involving ourselves in the action, we will experience the Eucharist more and more as what it is: the "source and summit of the Christian life."

In these *Reflections* we focus during Advent-Christmas on the *Introductory Rites* and *evangelization*: on the *new identity* we have in Christ. During Lent, on the *Liturgy of the Word* and *discipleship*: the experience of *enlightenment*. During Easter on the *Presentation of Gifts* and *prophetic witness*: the call to lead a *lifestyle* empowered by the Gift of the Spirit. During Ordinary Time (Weeks 14-21), on the *Eucharistic Prayer* and the call to *minister as priests* by Baptism. During Weeks 22-34, on the *Rite of Communion* and on *leadership* in establishing the reign of God as *stewards* of Christ's kingship. Over the course of a year these reflections will imbue us with the spirit of the Mass.

In **John 6: 44-51** Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father." At Mass be conscious that the Father himself has drawn you there. Praise and thank him for this during the *Introductory Rites*.

"They shall all be taught by God." God is fulfilling this promise during the *Liturgy of the Word*. Listen to learn.

"Not that anyone has seen the Father..." During the *Presentation of Gifts* present yourself for progressive conversion to a lifestyle that makes God more and more visible in you as *prophet*.

"I am the bread of life." During the *Eucharistic Prayer* offer your "flesh for the life of the world" as *priest*.

"Whoever eats this bread will live forever." Receive *Communion* as a foretaste of the Kingdom. Pledge yourself as a *steward of Christ's kingship* to keep working for his reign.

Initiative: Make the Mass the "source and summit" of your life. Learn how.

May 9, 2014

Friday, Easter week three

The *Response* (Mark 16:15, used with *Psalms* 117) is our life: “Go out to all the world and tell the Good News.”

Acts 9: 1-20 is the source of everything Paul preached: “I am *Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*” From the first, Paul knew Jesus as identified with us.

Paul could have answered, “I am not persecuting you. I am persecuting your followers.” But he didn’t, because he understood immediately, and more deeply than he had ever understood anything in his life, what Jesus was saying. Those who receive the life of God in Baptism “become *Christ.*” This is the “mystery hidden throughout the ages and generations but now revealed.” The mystery Paul was sent to preach is simply *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*” That is how Paul identified himself: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” We must see and identify ourselves in the same way: as people who have “become *Christ.*”¹

When Ananias laid hands on Paul, “something like scales fell from his eyes.” This is what happens to us when we finally recognize the true mystery of Baptism and realize that we have “become *Christ.*” We recognize what Paul meant when he said “You have *come to fullness* in him.” And “God has *made you alive* together with him.” “Continue to *live your lives in him*” as his living, risen body on earth.²

Then we understand our life as mission: “Go out to all the world and tell the Good News.” The Church “exists to evangelize.” The Church is us.³

What does it take to make the scales fall from our eyes? The truth is, most of us do not think of ourselves as “being *Christ.*” As Christians, yes. Or “Catholics” (or Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, etc.). And if asked what that meant, we would probably list the doctrines, rules and practices that belong to our “religion.” How many would say, “It means I try to be conscious of Christ acting *with me, in me and through me* all day long?” How many could honestly say, “It means that in everything I do I try consciously to act “through him, with him and in him” as his risen body on earth?” There are scales on our eyes. Scales of superficial religious instruction. Scales of cultural conditioning. Scales of shortsighted preoccupation with “the cares of the world, the lure of wealth, and desire for other things” that blind us to mystery. Do we even know we are blind?⁴

The blind in **John 6: 52-59** ask: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” The *Presentation of Gifts* should open our eyes to ask: “If the bread we present becomes the Body of Christ, can’t *we* in a real way ‘become *Christ*’ by Baptism?” We grow to appreciate *how* we who “eat his flesh ‘abide in him and he in us’” by staying *conscious* of Jesus acting *with us, in us and through us* in everything we do. We grow into it.

Initiative: Identify yourself. Be comfortable saying, “I have become *Christ.*”

¹ See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 795, 460; *Colossians* 1:25-28; *Galatians* 2:19-20.

² See *Colossians* 2:6-13.

³ Paul VI, *Evangelization in Modern World*, no. 14.

⁴ *Mark* 4:19. Read the whole parable.

May 10, 2014

Saturday, Easter week three

The *Responsorial* (*Psalm* 116), asks: “How shall I make a return to the Lord for all the good he has done for me?” The answer is “Get up!”

Acts 9: 31-42 shows us Peter healing a bedridden man and raising a woman who had died. His command to both was the same: *anastathi*, “Rise!” “Get up!”¹ The point is, they didn’t know they were healed until they did. And if we want to experience Christ giving us new life, the way to do it is to “get up” and go: *do* something, live the life of grace, spread the Good News, *act*. No one ever rose from the dead by staying inert in a coffin. “How shall I make a return to the Lord for all the good he has done for me?” Yesterday’s *Responsorial* gave the answer: “Go out to all the world and tell the Good News.” Commit yourself to *mission*.

John 6: 60-69 parallels the “confession of faith” that in *Matthew* 16:16 got Peter named pope. In *Matthew* Peter’s reply of faith in Jesus precedes the announcement that Jesus is going to be a savior who wins by losing, triumphing through crucifixion. Peter finds this too shocking to accept, just as Christians today find the similar concept of nonviolence — accepting to be killed rather than to kill — too shocking to accept. Peter’s confession of faith in Jesus as Messiah turns immediately into rejection of the kind of Messiah Jesus is going to be. “No! God forbid!”

In John what shocks people is Eucharist: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Even “many of his disciples said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’” And “many turned back and no longer went about with him.” But this time Peter came through. When Jesus “asked the Twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.’”

In *John* it is in the context of Eucharist that Jesus describes Peter’s special role in the Church. After the Resurrection Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. This was probably to give him a chance, without making a point of it, to make up for his three denials. And each time, when Peter says he does, Jesus answers: “Feed my sheep.”

He also predicts that Peter will embrace the fate he objected so much to Jesus embracing. The Bread of life is the fruit of death. Like Jesus, to “feed the flock” Peter will pay with his blood.

For those charged with pastoral ministry, this is the “first and greatest commandment.” In order to “love the Lord your God with all your heart... and your neighbor as yourself,” Jesus tells them, “Feed my sheep.” Woe to those who deny the Eucharist to anyone without certain and serious cause.²

When Peter objected to the sacrificial core of the *Eucharistic Prayer*: “Lord! This must never happen to you!” Jesus flayed him: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me!” What will he say to those who in the *Rite of Communion* refuse to “feed his sheep”?

Initiative: Get up and give whatever it takes to “feed the sheep.”

¹ Several saints were named Anastasius or Anastasia, for “Risen” with Christ.

² *Matthew*:24:40; *John* 21: 1-19

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: EASTER WEEK THREE

The Third Week of Easter: the whole world should find joy in God. We have everlasting life and are children of God because we are “in Christ,” the “only-begotten Son of the Father.” We have “become Christ” (St. Augustine). The Spirit in our hearts bears witness to Christ’s divine life in us, revealed in words and *ff* actions that show the “fruit of the Spirit,” one of which is *joy*.

Invitation: By full, active, conscious participation, make the Mass a true *celebration*: using *memory* for *encounter* with Christ (*Introductory Rites*); *intellect* for deeper *understanding* (*Liturgy of the Word*); and *will* for joyful *recommitment* (*Presentation of Gifts*).

Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion: How could the statements below make Mass mean more if we stay aware of them during Mass?

Acts 6: 8-15: In every Mass the *Presentation of Gifts* invites us to choose our religious identity. **John 6: 22-29:** The key is in what we decide to live for.

Acts 7:51 to 8:1: A religion of law observance alone is deadly. We must be “transformed by the renewing of our minds.” We ask this in the *Presentation of Gifts* by uniting ourselves to the bread that will become the Bread of Life.

Acts 8: 1-8: All Christians, even those in administrative functions, see themselves as evangelizers; just as in the “administrative” action of preparing the altar during the *Presentation of Gifts* we see the spiritual meaning embodied in the actions.

Acts 8: 26-40 The Mass, as the “source and summit of the Christian life,” is the best follow-up to Baptism if we pay attention to all it expresses: *New identity* as Christ (*Introductory Rites*); *Discipleship* (*Liturgy of the Word*); *Continual conversion* as *prophets* (*Presentation of Gifts*); *surrender to Ministry* as *priests* (*Eucharistic Prayer*); *Leadership* as *stewards* of the reign of God (*Rite of Communion*).

Acts 9: 1-20 The core of everything St. Paul preached was our identification with Christ. The *Presentation of Gifts* should open our eyes to the mystery that we ‘become Christ’ by Baptism as truly as the bread becomes his Body.

Acts 9: 31-42 The way to experience Christ giving us new life is to get up and go: *do* something, live the life of grace, spread the Good News, *act*.

Initiatives:

Decide to identify and absorb everything in your religion that is a source of joy.

Don't fly blind. Focus on the goal and keep your eyes on it.

Obey laws, not according to their letter but by the Spirit.

Let people see Jesus as the only explanation of what they see in you.

Make the Mass the “source and summit” of your life. Learn how.

Identify yourself. Be comfortable saying, “I have become Christ.”

Get up and give whatever it takes to “feed the sheep.”

May 11, 2014

The Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year A) Jesus Is The Shepherd Who Leads Us To Life

Inventory

Where is my religion taking me? Do I experience it as leading me somewhere besides heaven? Where am I this year as compared to last year? Did I get there by consciously, explicitly following Christ? In what ways?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* speaks of an active, dynamic God: “The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord” because “by the word of the Lord the heavens *were made*” — and are still being made, being sustained in existence by the presence and action of God in the universe.

In the *Opening Prayer*, when we ask God through “Christ our shepherd” to “*lead us to join the saints in heaven,*” we are asking him to lead us in the way we live our lives *on earth*. All who are alive are *in statu viae*: “in the condition of being on the road.” Both *Vatican II*, (*The Church*, chapter VII) and the *liturgy (Eucharistic Prayer III)* call us a “pilgrim Church.” We believe Jesus is leading us somewhere. To be a Christian is to follow, to *move*. Jesus is shepherd who leads us.

Saving Shepherd:

The *Responsorial (Psalm 23)* focuses on a God who doesn’t just dish up the same old feedlot fare every day, but who constantly *leads* us into richer religious experiences, into a more fulfilling spirituality — the way a shepherd leads sheep to higher, more nourishing pastures. “*The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.*”

Acts 2:14, 36-41 identifies Jesus as the shepherd who leads us out of enslavement to a corrupt and corrupting society. He died and rose from the dead so that we might “*Repent [accept a complete change of goal and focus in life]..., be baptized..., receive the gift of the Holy Spirit...,*” and “*save ourselves from this corrupt generation.*”

Healing Shepherd:

1Peter 2: 20-25 tells us that because of his sufferings, Jesus is able to *heal* us: “By his wounds you have been healed” (and see *Matthew 8:16-17*). But to be healed we have to *follow* him as sheep follow a shepherd. If we stay close to him he can keep us safe: “For you had gone astray like sheep, but you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.” We are healed, not by a one-time jolt from on high, but by a continuous process of *following* Jesus. This involves: 1. *interacting* with him, giving him an active part as *Savior* in everything we do; 2. *learning* from him as *disciples*; 3. accepting *empowerment* from the Holy Spirit to give flesh to his words in action as *prophets*; 4, loving and *ministering* to each other as *priests in the Priest*; and 5. *working* with him as *stewards of his kingship* to establish the reign of God on earth. If this puts us on a collision course with society, so be it: “For to this you have been called.”

“Life to the Full”

It is all a matter of what voice or voices we choose to listen to. **John 10: 1-10** alerts us that there are all sorts of people offering us role-models and remedies to boost us toward fulfillment; all sorts of guides and gurus proposing themselves as shepherds. How can we know which ads, which programs, which guidelines to believe in; which voices to trust, which crowd to follow? (Or, if we think we are not “followers,” which crowd to run with? It usually means the same thing in practice).

The Gospel directs us to look at what *gate* the would-be shepherds are coming through. Are they using our desire for *money* as an approach? Our fear of *failure*? Our ambition to *succeed*? Our need to *belong*? To what in us are they appealing when they hold out their promises? What door, what gate are they holding open for us and inviting us to walk through?

Jesus says, “*I am the gate* for the sheep. Whoever enters through me will be saved... and find pasture.” Whatever is proposed to us as an object of choice or a course to follow, we should ask whether the basic motivation for it is grounded in values taught by Jesus. We should not expect that commercials and advertisements should explicitly base themselves on religious values. That could turn into distasteful fundamentalism or a sacrilegious prostitution of religion. But *we ourselves* should *question and look* to see what underlying assumptions support the motivation presented to us. What do the advertisers — and what do our family, friends and business associates — assume we want out of life? What do they think will give us happiness? What do they think will lead us to it? What carrot are the would-be shepherds dangling before us? What stick are they using to compel us?

The bottom line is: “Where are they leading us? What, ultimately, is being promised?” Jesus makes his promise explicit and clear: “*I came that they might have life* and have it more abundantly” — or in the 1980 edition of the *New American Bible*, “*have it to the full*.”

Anyone who looks for the fullness of life through association and interaction with Jesus Christ will inevitably be a *prophet* — and probably pay the prophet’s price. But the price buys “life to the full,” both here and hereafter. If “*the Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want*.”

Insight

What is “wanting” to those who follow Jesus? What to those who do not?

Initiative:

Be conscious you are moving. Keep looking ahead to see where you are going, and back to see where you have been.

May 12, 2014

Monday, Easter week Four

The *Responsorial (Psalm 42)* specifies the effect the *Liturgy of the Word* should have on us: “*Athirst is my soul for the living God.*” Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, as God speaks to us through the readings, we should find ourselves saying, “Were not our hearts burning within us... while he was opening the scriptures to us?”¹

In **Acts 11: 1-18** the same thing happened to the Gentiles to whom Peter was sent to explain the Good News of Jesus. “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word,” and they began “speaking in tongues and extolling God.” Faced with this, Peter set aside all the rules and policies: ““Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.”²

This was a major conversion on Peter’s part, and it led to a community decision that defined the Church as “catholic.”³ Peter — and after him the Church — realized that Christianity was not identified with keeping the Jewish rules and customs all the first Christians had grown up with, such as circumcision, dietary laws, prescribed sacrifices and devotional practices. It started when God told Peter in a vision to eat food the Jews were forbidden to eat. “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Obedience to the Spirit takes precedence over obedience to the Law, even though both are from God.

When did we learn this? When did our obedience to the word of God become personal response to God’s living voice? When did we, as *disciples*, develop into *prophets*? When did we learn, in keeping laws, to look first to their goal, and to respond, not to their letter, but to the mind and heart of God behind them? This was our passage into maturity.

We express this liturgically in the *Presentation of Gifts*, which follows the *Liturgy of the Word*. Having heard God’s living voice in the readings, we present ourselves to be transformed — not just the way human choices based on human understanding can change us, but as the bread which represents us will be transformed from bread “earth has given” into the “Bread of life.” We who have already “become Christ” by Baptism recommit to living by the Spirit as *prophets*, living on the level of God.

In **John 10: 1-10** Jesus tells us, “Whoever does not enter the sheepfold by the gate... is a thief and a bandit.” Later he clarifies, “I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be safe.” Safe from what?

From everything, really. But in the context, what keeps us safe from the deadly virus of *legalism* in the Church — the temptation to focus our religion on observing rules — is personal relationship with Christ. Only through direct, constant, personal interaction with the person of Jesus as *prophets* can we “recognize his voice.”

Initiative: Focus on Jesus. Let everything follow from this. Use the “WIT” prayer all day long: “Lord, do this *with* me, do this *in* me, do this *through* me.

¹ *Luke 24:32.*

² Read *Acts*, chapter 10.

³ See *Acts 15:1-33.*

May 13, 2014
Tuesday, Easter week four

The *Responsorial verse* is from *Psalms* 117:1 and *Romans* 15:11: “*All you nations, praise the Lord.*” The rest of the *Responsorial* is from *Psalms* 87, which in the present context proclaims the *Church* the true home of all believers. A motive to “Go out to all the world and tell the Good News.”

The three steps of evangelization are (1) *pre-evangelization* through an event (or lifestyle) that raises questions.¹ In **Acts 11: 19-26** the Christians who were “scattered” by persecution to “Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch” were the event. When people asked them why they were running, their answer was (2) *evangelization*: to explain about Jesus. Result: “a great number believed and were converted.” Then they could (3) celebrate together in *eucharist*.

The witness that won people to join the Christians was not just the event that raised questions. It was the evident faith the Christians had and the joy they took in it. Plus the joy the “Church in Jerusalem” showed by welcoming them into unity and sending Barnabas as an official representative to confirm their acceptance by the whole Church.

This acceptance is a pattern:

When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.²

The Sacrament of “Confirmation” is not primarily the act of those who receive it “confirming” their acceptance of the Church; it is the act of someone who can speak for the whole Church as bishops do, confirming the membership in the Church that anyone can give to another through Baptism. It is the whole Church approving and, like Barnabas in Antioch, “encouraging all to remain firm in their commitment to the Lord.”

Confirmation should give us a sense of being accepted as authentic Christians by someone with authority to judge and accept us in the name of the Church. At the same time, it encourages us to take our place in the ranks of those who carry on the Church’s *mission*. It approves us as working members of the Church and confirms our anointing to take part in the triple task of Jesus as *Prophet, Priest* and *King*.

John 10: 22-30: Jesus is asked, “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

At every Mass the *Presentation of Gifts* invites us to “tell plainly” that we accept Jesus as Messiah. This involves embracing his *mission* as defined in the “messianic anointing” of Baptism: “As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet and King, so live always as members of his body.”³ We “go up” symbolically with the bread and wine to commit ourselves to prophetic *witness, ministry, and leadership* in establishing his Kingdom.

Initiative: Ask if you have reason to be glad you are Christian. If so, express it..

¹ See *Acts* 2:4-8, 3:1-12; Pope Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, no. 21.

² *Acts* 8:14-17.

³ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 695, 1241.

May 14, 2014

Feast of Saint Matthias, Apostle

The *Responsorial* (*Psalms* 113) applies to Matthias: “*The Lord will give him a seat with the leaders of his people.*”

The selection of Matthias to replace Judas in **Acts 1:15-26** shows that bishops are not “successors” to the Twelve Apostles. Although “the phrase is too well attested to be rejected now,” if it is “used without care for the finer distinctions it may distort the truth.”

The apostles could never have a successor in that function of witness which was at the heart of their calling (*Acts* 2:32; 3:15; 4:20-33; 8:25; 10:39-42; 13:31). They are those who bear witness to the fact that the risen Lord is the Jesus in whose company they had lived (*Acts* 1:21-22). That is why to have been with Jesus during his life and after his death [as Matthias was] remained a qualification essential in anyone who was to be included in the group of the [twelve] apostles and to take part in the first mission, that of bearing witness (*Acts* 1:1-3; 10:41).... This is why the twelve are forever, once and for all... the Church’s foundation. No one could follow them in this function of witness.

The bishops are not “successors” but “*vicars*” of the Twelve; that is, someone who “acts in place of” another. As vicars, what the bishops “succeed” to is “the “*function* of shepherding and teaching in order to guard the churches founded on the power of [the apostles’] witness.” And this function is a daunting one! Bishops need all the help and encouragement we can give them.¹

Over the centuries the popes have appropriated to themselves some of the powers that properly belong to the heads of the local churches; for example, the right to decide whom to ordain as priests and how to train them. The bishops must provide “enough priests capable of properly caring for the people of God,” but from a pool severely restricted by papal preferences. Other Vatican preferences limit the bishops’ authority as “the governors... and guardians of the entire liturgical life in the church committed to them.” More radically, the popes have made all bishops papal appointees, having taken away the local churches’ power to select their own bishops that “for the first thousand years of Church history” was “clearly recognized.... It was only in 1884 that the papacy claimed the right to name bishops throughout the world.”²

For perspective, we read **John 15:9-17**: Jesus says the Church should “keep his commandments” as he kept his Father’s: not as “slaves” but as “friends” who “know what their master is about” and “live in his love.” His commandment is, “Love one another as I have loved you.” Bishops and pastors should govern as “friends,” sharing their intentions, motives and decisions transparently with the flock in “mutual trust.”³ Christ wants us to live in such a way that our “joy may be complete” and we will “bear fruit.” These are the signs of a healthy Church. They are goals that as *prophets* we must work for.

Initiative: Be faithful to the word and Spirit of God. Judge everything by them.

¹ J.M.R. Tillard, O.P., *The Bishop of Rome*, pp. 93-96. For the impossible load placed on bishops, see *Vatican II*. “Decree on Bishops in the Church,” ch. 2, nos. 12-18.

² *Loc. cit.* nos. 15, 22. T. Rausch, *Catholicism in the Third Millennium*, Liturgical Press, 2003, pp. 218-19.

³ *Vatican II*, Bishops,” no. 16.

Same Day May 14, 2014
Wednesday, Easter week four

The *Responsorial (Psalm 67)* is still celebrating the Good News and its extension to the whole world: “*O God, let all the nations praise you.*”

The Psalm specifies, “May your *way be known* upon earth, among all nations your *salvation.*” This inspires evangelization: we want every nation to “be glad and exult,” accepting Christ who “rules with justice” and “guides” to salvation. We dedicate our lives to this!

Acts 12:24 to 13:5 shows the Spirit telling the Church in Antioch to dedicate Barnabas and Saul (Paul):

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Notice that it was the *Church* that “sent them off.” The community. Not God or the Spirit acting directly on Paul and Barnabas as individuals. Not just an authority or bishop. The Spirit spoke to and through the community.

This may not be so visible today. When do we find the community, or a parish council, or the presbyterate and lay leaders assembled with the bishop “worshiping the Lord and fasting” to seek God’s guidance in pastoral ministry? (Think about that. It may be happening in your parish and diocese without being recognized as such).

There is, however, a visible sign of it at every Mass. When the bread and wine are brought forward in the *Presentation of Gifts*, they are brought up from the back of the church, passing through the whole congregation. This says two things: first, that the whole congregation is “coming forward” symbolically to place themselves on the altar under the signs of the bread and wine. But it also says that each individual, represented by each individual host, is being presented by the whole community. We don’t go forward only on our own initiative. It is an individual, personal expression of commitment, yes. But it is commitment within a community, invited by a community, approved and supported by a community. This is expressed ritually in both Baptism and Confirmation.

And it is, if we are mature enough to accept it as that, the community “sending us off” in mission. The community is recognizing that God has “set apart” each one of us “for the work to which” he has called each one. We are consecrated by Baptism to do the work of Jesus *Prophet, Priest and King*. At home. At work. In family and social life. In business and politics. Each one of us is “set apart” for the work to which God has called us. The *Presentation of Gifts* invites us to *remember* and *reaffirm* that as there are many hosts but one bread, we are many members but one body, with many gifts but one goal. We live to make God known and loved: “*O God, let all the nations praise you.*”

In **John 12:44-50** Jesus said, “who sees me sees him who sent me.” We need to be conscious that who sees us sees the Church. And Jesus. People will judge both by what they see in us, for better or worse. Let it be *prophetic witness*.

Initiative: Know you are “set apart” as one of many, to be a witness.

May 15, 2014

Thursday, Easter week four

The *Responsorial* (*Psalm* 89) affirms God's faithfulness and "steadfast love," even when we are unfaithful and he appears to have forgotten us: "*Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.*"

In **Acts 13: 13-25** Paul reminds his hearers they are a chosen people, and that God has "made this people great" by guiding their history through chosen individuals, some of whom sinned and betrayed him: "The God of this people chose our ancestors...." He mentions the judges, the prophet Samuel, and the kings Saul and David, about whom "God testified, 'I have found David... to be a man after my own heart, who will fulfill my every wish.'"

We need to remember that David was a rapist who betrayed and murdered a loyal officer to cover up his crime. God punished him for that, but did not withdraw his love or the promises he made to David. Does that say something about his fidelity to us?¹

When Paul reminds us of the great things God has done and is doing through his people, do we choose to be part of it? At every Mass the *Presentation of Gifts* invites us to make or reaffirm that choice. We hear the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send?" And we are called to respond: "Here am I; send me!" Under the symbols of bread and wine we place our own bodies and blood on the altar as a "living sacrifice to God." We present our bodies, as Mary did, to be the Body of Christ: "Here am I... let it be with me according to your word.... This is my body, given for you."²

In **John 13: 16-20**. Jesus makes clear that betrayal by his chosen ones does not mean he was deceived: "I know the kind of men I chose." He told them ahead of time about Judas "so that when it takes place you may believe that I AM" (that is, God: *Exodus* 3:13-15). Judas was a good choice. But he had free will and sinned. If he had repented like Peter he could have been as great as any of the Twelve. Jesus would have stood by the call he gave him.

He extended this: "I tell you, whoever accepts one whom I send accepts me; and... accepts him who sent me." Unfaithful ministers, whether laity or clergy, bishops or popes, are not a reason to reject Jesus or the Church — or even the ministers themselves, if they repent. The danger they are to others may exclude some from ministry, as all child abusers must be excluded absolutely. But we do not exclude them from the Church or from our love. Once they have "turned back" like David and Peter, their sin is "taken away."³

At Baptism all of us "presented our bodies as a living sacrifice," and promised not to be "conformed to this world." But we all fail. So at every Mass, in the *Presentation of Gifts* we present ourselves again. And are accepted.⁴

Initiative: See God's fidelity also, whenever you see your own or others' sins.

¹ *2Samuel* 11:1 to 12:27. In *1Samuel* 13:14 God calls David "a man after his own heart." Read *Psalm* 89.

² *Isaiah* 6:8. See *Luke* 1:38, 22:19; *Romans* 12:1-2; *Hebrews* 2:13, 10:5-7.

³ *Luke* 22:31-34.

⁴ *Romans* 12:1-2.

May 16, 2014

Friday, Easter week Four

The *Responsorial (Psalm 2)* recalls what God said of Jesus at his baptism and Transfiguration: “*You are my Son; this day I have begotten you.*” Jesus is not just a prophet; he is the divine Son of God. This gives special meaning to the Father’s words, “*Listen to him.*”¹

Peter announces in **Acts 13: 26-33**: “We bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us... by raising Jesus.” But his point follows in verses 40-41:

Beware, that what the prophets said does not happen to you: “Look, you scoffers! Be amazed and perish, for in your days I am doing a work, a work that you will never believe, even if someone tells you.”

If God said of Jesus. “*You are my Son...*,” the news about him is not something to take lightly.

It is arguable whether the worst response to the Good News is to deny it by refusing to believe, or just to ignore it by refusing to take a stand. Only once do the Gospels say Jesus was “angry.” He had asked the Pharisees a question and they were “silent.” Just refused to answer. Jesus “looked around at them with anger... grieved at their hardness of heart.” If they had answered, even with the wrong answer, he could have argued with them and perhaps convinced them. But there is no way to communicate with stone silence.²

This may not be as rare as we think. How many people, even among those in church, have never taken a deep, conscious, personal stand toward the Good News of Jesus Christ? We think first of the youth, of course: those who are present at Mass but obviously not participating in any personal way. They aren’t denying anything they have been taught or anything their parents believe — not yet — but they are just not getting involved in it. They are inside of the church but outside of the action. They have not really taken a stand yet toward the Good News. Or toward Jesus. Or toward what is going on in the Mass. (It is all the same thing). They may not even be aware of it. Dangerous.

How many adults are almost as uninvolved? Many may have made the decision to keep “going to Mass,” and “obeying the rules” in the Church, but without giving to Jesus Christ the kind of total, personal, all-embracing response God called for when he said, “This is my *Son... listen to him!*”

That is why every Mass, during the *Presentation of Gifts*, invites us to recommit, to declare ourselves personally and publicly by sending up a host that represents us to be placed on the altar as a sign of our response to the Good News. It is an important moment; not one to take lightly.

In **John 14: 1-6** Jesus says, “Believe in God, believe also in me.” Or “Trust in God; trust in me.” In practice, we reveal (and experience) our real faith by where we place our trust. If we really believe Jesus is “the Way, and the Truth, and the Life” we will be serious about learning his truth and following his way. If not, we don’t really want his Life.

Initiative: Declare yourself. Come alive during the *Presentation of Gifts*.

¹ *Matthew* 3:13-17, 17:1-5.

² *Mark* 3:1-5.

May 17, 2014

Saturday, Easter week Four

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 98) declares: “*All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.*” Have you?

The *Presentation of Gifts* is a turning-point in the Mass. It marks the transition, not only from the *Liturgy of the Word* to the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*, but also from what could be an understanding of the Mass that is merely human to a realization of the divine mystery that is taking place.

A flight attendant said to a priest on a plane, “I have been to the Catholic Mass. I’m with you through the Scripture readings and preaching; but after that you go into all that mumbo-jumbo and you lose me.” Good insight.

Nothing from the *Presentation of Gifts* on makes any sense unless we understand the mystery that Jesus is being made present on the altar in flesh and blood. And that we are present in him. That when Jesus died we died in him and rose in him as his body endowed with the divine life of God. That in him we are a “new creation.” Made divine. Having “become Christ.”

That is the mystery we begin to express when we put ourselves on the altar with the bread and wine to be offered: our flesh in Christ for the life of the world.¹

The strange statement Paul makes in **Acts 13: 44-52** applies to many believers: “...since you do not think yourselves worthy of eternal life...” We can believe in *everlasting* life, because that could be just human life extended. But only God has *eternal* life: life without beginning or end. And we balk at admitting we actually share in the divine life of God. We “do not think ourselves worthy” to say we have “become Christ.” To say we are “divine” is too much to accept.

If we do not accept it, we are failing in faith. And from the *Presentation of Gifts* on, much of the Mass will be just “mumbo-jumbo” to us.

But if we can put ordinary bread on the altar and believe God transforms that bread into Christ’s real Body and Blood, why do we balk at saying he can take humans, made in his image and likeness, and make us his true body by sharing his divine life with us? True, we remain our human selves (while the bread ceases to be bread), but we acquire the added identity of Christ himself through union with him. Christ lives and acts, not only *with* us but *in* us and *through* us.²

In **John 14: 7-14** Jesus says, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” When you act by grace, would you say, “Who sees me sees Jesus?” Hears his voice? Experiences his love? Do you believe Jesus can do in and through your body things as great as he did in the body he had on earth? Was Jesus exaggerating when he said, “Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, *and will do greater ones than these*”? Believe — so that “*All the ends of the earth may see the saving power of God.*”

Initiative: Take Christ at his word. Believe he acts *with* you, *in* you, *through* you.

¹ John 6:51; 1Corinthians 1:24; 2Corinthians 4:8-11.

² See Galatians 2:20; Colossians 2:6; Romans 12:1-5; 1Corinthians 12:1-27; Ephesians 3:1 to 4:24.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: EASTER WEEK FOUR

The Fourth Week of Easter: Jesus is leading us somewhere. To be a Christian is to *move*, to follow the shepherd who died and rose to lead us out of enslavement to a corrupt and corrupting society into divine life.

Invitation: Follow the “beaten path” only when the Spirit shows it is on course. Whatever is proposed to us, we should ask whether the basic motivation for it is grounded in values taught by Jesus.

Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion: How could the statements below make Mass mean more if we stay aware of them during Mass?

Acts 11: 1-18: We develop into *prophets* when we learn to look to laws’ goal, and respond to the mind of God behind them. This is our passage into maturity.

We express this in the *Presentation of Gifts* when we present ourselves to be transformed as the bread we present will be transformed” into the “Bread of life.

Acts 11: 19-26: The *Presentation of Gifts* invites us to embrace *our messianic anointing*. We “go up” symbolically with the bread and wine to re-commit to *witness* as prophets, *ministry* as priests, and *leadership* as stewards of his kingship.

Acts 12:24 to 13:5: In the *Presentation of Gifts* we express our individual, personal commitment, but as invited, approved and supported *by* and *within a community*.

The *Presentation of Gifts* invites us to *remember* that as there are many hosts but one bread, we are many members but all one body; with many gifts but one goal.

Acts 13: 13-25: The *Presentation of Gifts* invites us to respond to Christ’s call in spite of our sins, saying: “Here am I; send me!” We all fail, so we keep presenting ourselves again at every Mass. And are always accepted.

Acts 13: 26-33: Is it worse to deny the Good News by refusing to believe, or to accept it without taking a conscious, personal stand? Every *Presentation of Gifts* invites us to declare ourselves personally and publicly. It is an important moment.

Acts 13: 44-52: The *Presentation of Gifts* is a turning-point in the Mass, marking a transition from the *Liturgy of the Word* to the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*, and from an understanding of the Mass that could be merely human to a realization of the divine mystery that is taking place: Jesus being made present on the altar and we in him.

Initiatives:

Be conscious you are moving. Keep looking ahead to see where you are going, and back to see where you have been.

Focus on Jesus. Use the “WIT” prayer all day long.

Ask if you have reason to be glad you are Christian. If so, express it.

Know you are “set apart” from this world, as one of many, to be a witness.

See God’s fidelity also, whenever you see your own or others’ sins.

Declare yourself. Come alive during the Presentation of Gifts

Take Christ at his word. Believe he acts *with* you, *in* you, *through* you.

May 18, 2014

The Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year A) Light and Life Through Conscious Union with Jesus

Inventory

The *Entrance Antiphon* invites us: “Sing to the Lord” because he has “done marvelous deeds” and “revealed his saving power” (*Psalm 97*). What “marvelous deeds” of God have I experienced? How do I see his “saving power” revealed in the Church and in the world today?

Input

In the *Opening Prayer* we profess our belief that the Father is “looking upon us with love” and giving us “true freedom.” This is not just *freedom from* enslaving attitudes and values, but *freedom to* make *personal choices* that “bring us to the inheritance” God has promised. Our free, personal, creative, innovative choices in response to God’s word can be lifegiving and reveal God’s “saving power” because the Spirit is given to us to inspire them. The *readings* show this happening.

Hear the Spirit:

The *Responsorial (Psalm 33)* teaches us that the choice to *trust* in God, expecting to experience his guidance within us, opens the way to his saving graces: “Lord, let your mercy be upon us, as we place our trust in you.”

Acts 6: 1-7 shows the Holy Spirit guiding the community in response to unforeseen challenges that arise in their life as Church. Cultural differences threatened to cause division between the Greek-speaking “Hellenist” Christians and those of Hebrew origin. The Twelve met with all the disciples and made a proposal “acceptable to the whole community.” It was to select seven men “filled with the Spirit and wisdom” (the names show they were all Greek) to deal with the Hellenists’ needs. These men they “presented to the apostles, who prayed and laid hands on them.” The report ends, “The word of God continued to spread, and the number of disciples increased greatly.” By praying and discerning together as a community, the Church had courage to take decisive action, and experienced that God’s “mercy” was indeed “upon them,” since they “placed their trust in him.”

A Living Structure

1Peter 2: 4-9 invites the disciples to let themselves be formed into a structured community — “be built into a spiritual house” — but one made of “living stones,” with Jesus, also “a living stone,” as its cornerstone. People sometimes speak disparagingly of “organized religion.” But an “unorganized religion” cannot really be a church (an “assembly” with identity). The Church does not exist apart from the “organizational Church,” any more than a body can exist apart from its skeleton. But we don’t *reduce* the Church to its organizational structure, any more than we reduce the body to its bones. For the Church to be authentic, the stones of its structure must be *alive*.

Jesus, the “living stone” must be the “cornerstone.” The Church is alive through her connection to the living person of Jesus. The Church is alive because her members have “become Christ” by Baptism, dying to their isolated, individual human lives and rising “in Christ” to live as parts in a whole, members of the body of Christ, and to “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*” (*Ephesians 4: 15-16*). The “organizational Church” is, in reality, a living, growing, mutually supportive, organized community continuing to carry out the mission of Jesus Prophet, Priest and King. We are consecrated to “proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.” For this we need to

keep ourselves always aware of Christ, refer every experience to him, and base all our decisions solidly on him, the cornerstone

Way, Truth and Life

John 14: 1-12 gives us a basis for praying, *“Lord, let your mercy be upon us, as we place our trust in you.”* Jesus himself said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God, have faith also in me.” Jesus is not just a teacher from the past, to use like a reference book and imitate as best we can. He did not just teach us some truths and point out some directions. Jesus *is* “the way and the truth and the life.” He is Truth enlightening our minds now from within. He himself *is* the Way. To follow his way is to live in him. The way is not something he points out; it is something we find through deep, conscious, personal union with him as his body on earth. We know the way only by knowing Jesus. We follow the way only by *being* Jesus.

The fact is, Jesus is the Way and the Truth for us by being our Life. Because he lives in us and shares his life with us, we see truth by his light and walk by his strength. This explains his shocking statement: “Whoever believes in me will do the works I do and *greater ones* than these.” He said, “the Father who dwells in me is doing his works.” And it is Jesus dwelling in us who, in each one of us, can do things he could not do in or through any other human body, including the one he received from Mary. He is our Life; we are his body. In combination, we are the mystery of the risen Jesus living and acting on earth.

Insight

When have I seen Christ’s “saving power” revealed in my actions? In the life of the Church? What can I do that is “greater than” what Jesus did?

Initiative

Put your trust in Jesus dwelling and working within you, and have the courage to make decisions based on his truth that depend on his strength.

May 19, 2014

Monday, Easter week Five

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 115) teaches us to look for the real cause of the wonders we experience: “*Not to us, O LORD, but to your name give glory.*”

In **Acts 14: 5-18** Paul and Barnabas restore a man to the level of health and being that most humans are born with. Healing the cripple was a miracle, but the same thing could have been accomplished, conceivably, at least, by sufficiently advanced medical technology when he was born. When the crowd proclaimed them gods for it, Paul and Barnabas tried to focus them on the miracle right before their eyes that they were ignoring: on what no god, but only God as Source of being itself can do:

You should turn from these empty idols to the living God, who made heaven and earth and the sea and all these hold.... giving you rain from heaven... filling you with food and your hearts with joy.”

There is something Paul did not point out, though: if the crowd thought Paul and Barnabas were gods because they restored the cripple to ordinary human health, what should they have taken them for if they had realized that these men, through their ministry, had the power to give them divine life, life on the level of God? To make them sharers in the life of God himself?

A good doctor can bring our human health up to par. A good teacher can enable us to understand any truth available to human reason. With sufficient good will we can reach the level of heroic human love. And we can legitimately hope and strive for any good and happiness available on earth. But only Jesus Christ, and those in and through whom he acts as his body on earth, can give divine life. The power to understand Truth accessible only to God. The “perfection of Love” proper to God alone. A happiness no one but God can dream of. This is what Paul offered:

I pray that... you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations.¹

This is the glorious ministry for which we offer ourselves at Baptism. It is to this that we recommit ourselves at the *Presentation of Gifts* when we put our human selves on the altar as bread — “fruit of the earth and work of human hands” — to be offered and given in Christ for the life of the world.

John 14:21-26 responds to our fear to believe this is possible. The same John who wrote: “No one has ever seen God,” reports Jesus as saying, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father... Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and *reveal myself to them.*” More than that, “We will come to them and *make our home* with them.” John repeats it: “If we love one another, God *lives in us*, and his love is perfected in us.” Ponder that. Then say, “*Not to us, O LORD, but to your name give glory.*”²

Initiative: Accept the miracle of your being, both human and divine. Use it.

¹ *Ephesians* 3:16-21.

² *John* 14:9; *1John* 4:12-16.

May 20, 2014

Tuesday, Easter week Five

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 145) reminds us what we are by Baptism and what we are called and consecrated to do: “*Your friends make known, O Lord, the glorious splendor of your kingdom.*”

Acts 14: 19-28 shows us the pattern of early evangelization: 1. Inspired by the Holy Spirit “while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting,” the whole Christian community “laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas and sent them off.” 2. Those sent preached and made converts. 3. In each of the churches before they left they “appointed *presbyters* (elders)” for them, and, with prayer and fasting, entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had put their faith.” This was to assure the continuance of the new communities. 4. On their return, those sent “called the church together and gave an account of what God had done with them.”

The word “elders” is the correct word for those we call priests. Grammatically, the word “priest” comes from *presbyteros* (elder) in Greek, which became *prêtre* in French and *Priester* in German. But through mistaken usage, the meaning actually changed to what the Latin *sacerdos* designates: a “sacred” person (*sacer*) ordained to perform sacred acts. Compare this to the Greek *hieros*, meaning “priest” or “keeper of the sacred,” from which “hierarchy” comes.

The bishops at the second Vatican Council (1962-1965) attempted to restore the authentic terminology. They tried to reserve the word “priest” (in Latin *sacerdos*) for *Jesus alone* and for all who became “priests in the Priest” by “becoming Christ” at Baptism. For ordained clergy they used the word *presbyter*. But the translators defeated their purpose by carelessly translating both words as “priest” in English,¹

As a result, most Catholics have no understanding of their baptismal anointing as “priests.” When we say during the *Presentation of Gifts*, to the “elder” presiding at Mass, “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands...” we are not thinking of ourselves as priests offering the sacrifice equally with the presider. We think of him as the priest, of him as offering the sacrifice, and of ourselves as the community he is doing it *for* more than *with*. Progress has been made in correcting this error, but not yet enough.

In **John 14: 27-31**, Jesus showed us the way to peace is *surrender*: “My peace I give to you.... Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid... I love the Father... and I am doing exactly what the Father told me,” We send ourselves up under the form of bread to be placed on the altar in an act of surrendering our bodies, minds, hearts and lives to be joined to Christ and offered with him. We abandon ourselves to the Father’s will, both in life and in death. There is no greater security, no greater peace. “*Your friends make known, O Lord, the glorious splendor of your kingdom.*”

Initiative: Find yourself by losing yourself in the *Presentation of Gifts*.

¹ See *Hebrews*, chapters 7-10, and Patrick Dunne, now Bishop of Auckland, New Zealand: *Priesthood: A Re-examination of the Roman Catholic Theology of the Presbyterate*, Alba House, 1990, p. 110.

May 21, 2014

Wednesday, Easter week Five

The *Responsorial* (*Psalm 122*) identifies authentic religion with joy: “*Let us go rejoicing to the house of the Lord.*” But some people try to make happiness consist in something that cannot give happiness — *law observance* — and call it salvation. This is Phariseeism.

In **Acts 15: 1-6**, when Paul and Barnabas “reported the conversion of the Gentiles, [they] brought great joy to all the believers.” Well, not to all. “Some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘It is necessary for them to be ordered to keep the law of Moses... Unless you are circumcised you cannot be saved.’”

Faith was not enough. Loving God was not enough. Keeping the Ten Commandments was not enough. Even keeping the New Law of Jesus in the “Sermon on the Mount” was not enough. Evidence of having received the divine life of God and the “gift of the Spirit” was not enough. To be saved you had to keep all the rules and observances that made up Jewish religious culture: circumcision, eating kosher food, observing the minute rules of Sabbath observance, etc., etc.

The Catholic equivalent is, or at one time was, abstaining from meat on Fridays, fasting during Lent and for a set time before Communion, never touching the host or even the chalice with your fingers if you were a lay person, going to Mass every Sunday, having your marriage witnessed by a priest or deacon, accepting celibacy as a condition for ordination as a presbyter, wearing a Roman collar if you were a presbyter and, if you were a woman, a hat in church (and *never* entering the sanctuary during Mass!), making your “Easter duty” by annual Confession and Communion — all Church rules and none of them, in themselves, necessary for salvation. None of these rules was obligatory from the beginning. Others were, such as the rule that women should not come to church “with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes... not teach or speak in church,” and that bishops should be “married only once” and “keep their children submissive and respectful in every way.” Such rules can, do and should change with the times. We do not (repeat: do *not*) say we should not keep them; just that keeping them must never be identified with “salvation.”¹

John 15: 1-8 tells us what salvation is: being one with Jesus as branches are one with the vine, sharing in his life. That is why we do not stop after hearing the words — and the laws — of God in the *Liturgy of the Word* but go on to “present our bodies” in the *Presentation of Gifts* as a “living sacrifice” to be offered with and in Christ during the *Eucharistic Prayer*.² We give our lives to live his life, knowing that “apart from him” we can do nothing. For this we “*go rejoicing to the house of the Lord.*”

Initiative: Be a prophet. Hear God’s words as words of life, not just law.

¹ *1Timothy* 2:9 to 3:4; *1Corinthians* 11:4-15, 14:34-35; *1Peter* 3:3.

² *Romans* 12:1-2.

May 22, 2014

Thursday, Easter week Five

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 96) says, “Proclaim God’s marvelous deeds to all the nations.”

What do we proclaim? In the Mass, during the *Introductory Rites* we proclaim the Good News in a brief résumé of the early “kerygmatic” or “heralding” preaching. This is *evangelization*. Then in the *Liturgy of the Word* we proclaim the “word of God” more extensively, to nurture and encourage *discipleship*. But a temptation enters here: the natural human tendency to reduce God’s word to moral teachings, to instructions on how to live. Even though based on the teachings and example of Jesus, this can degenerate into a religion of law-observance, in which, for practical purposes, what we do and don’t do is really all that counts.

Before we go beyond this, however, as we must, we should read *Psalm 119*:

Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD... who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.

Does this Psalm contradict yesterday’s reflection by saying happiness is found in keeping God’s law? No. Not if we notice phrases like “With my *whole heart I seek you*,” “I will *praise you*... when I learn,” “*Make me understand*...” “Let your *steadfast love come to me*...” “The *LORD is my portion*...” “*You are good and do good; teach me*...” “*I am yours; save me*,” “*preserve my life according to your steadfast love*.” In this psalm law-observance is a means to *know God*, to understand his heart and ways, to enter into the life he alone can give. Likewise, in the Mass, God’s *words* prepare us to enter into *life* — not through good behavior, but through *union* with God in grace.

In **Acts 15: 7-21**, the Church decided not to impose Jewish law on the Gentile converts. James said, “For generations past, Moses has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues.” He agreed with Peter that we need more. We are saved, not just by hearing God’s word, or even by basing our human conduct on it, but “through the grace of the Lord Jesus.” All the hymns, prayers, reading, and preaching of the *Liturgy of the Word* are to prepare us for the *mystery* to which we surrender ourselves in the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*, beginning with the *Presentation of Gifts*.

In **John 15: 9-11** Jesus says the reason to keep his law is to abide in his love: “*If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love*.” This means to live in him as branches in the vine, sharing his divine life. To share in his own act of knowing by the gift of faith. To share in his own act of loving by the gift of divine love. To share in his own intentions, dreams, goals and desires by the gift of divine hope. It means to “*become Christ*” by Baptism and the “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,” which is the “favor of sharing in God’s divine life.”

“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” The joy of religion is not in the sense of security law-observance gives, but in the *life* of union with others and with God “in Christ.”

Initiative: Go beyond God’s words to God’s Word. Present yourself to *be Christ*.

May 23, 2014

Friday, Easter week Five

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 57) reminds us we pray as a community: “*I will give you thanks among the peoples, O Lord.*”

Acts 15: 22-31 shows us the Church’s response to the division caused by those who “without any mandate from us have upset you with their teachings and disturbed your peace of mind.” See the beginning of this chapter: “Certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’”

This raises the question of good and bad prophets. Everyone has the right — and the obligation — to speak up within the community (parish, diocese, family and friends) and to say whatever God inspires for the good of the Church:

This Synod [the Second Vatican Council] 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.¹

How do we know what is inspired by God? The ultimate answer is “by discernment of spirits”: an art, not a science, and a gift of God rather than a human talent. There are guidelines, but we can begin by distinguishing “prophets” from “Pharisees.”²

Prophets can summon to law-observance, but typically do it with insight into the deeper, spiritual purpose of the law and into the real damage non-observance causes. Pharisees just call for literal conformity, and recognize no damage but the fact alone that the law is not being kept. Those arguing for circumcision were not seeing the deep meaning this symbol had (surpassed by Baptism). The only evil they weighed against the good of so many conversions was just the fact of non-conformity. The same spirit moves those in the Church today (jokingly referred to as the “liturgical police”) who scrutinize their pastors and report to the bishop any departure from the letter of liturgical instructions. They don’t understand that their pastors are obeying Vatican II:

Pastors of souls must realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, *more is required* than the mere observance of the laws governing valid and licit celebration. It is *their duty also to ensure* that the faithful take part *knowingly*, actively and fruitfully.³

The pastor who “knows his sheep” has the right and obligation to make the adjustments required to do this. Pharisees criticize, not damage; only supposed disobedience.

John 15: 12-17 Jesus said, “I no longer call you *servants*... but *friends*, because *I have made known to you* everything that I have heard from my Father.” Those who know the Lord interpret rules according to his mind and heart as expressed to Peter: “If you love me, *feed my sheep*.” Pastors sometime suffer from those who “do not care for the sheep,” but only for laws. The “good shepherd” risks this, and Jesus says there is “no greater love.”⁴

Initiative: Interpret all laws according to the mind and heart of Christ.

¹ Vatican II: *The Church*, no. 51.

² See *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, nos. 313-336.

³ “Sacred Liturgy,” no. 11.

⁴ See *John* 10:11-15; 21:15-17.

May 24, 2014

Saturday, Easter week Five

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 100) is: “*Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.*”

Yesterday Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” In today’s reading from **Acts 16: 1-10** we see Timothy, not laying down his life, but literally shedding his blood in circumcision for no other reason than to keep local prejudice from being an obstacle to the gift of life he and Paul were offering. Paul, who insisted that the law of circumcision was abolished, nevertheless “had him circumcised because of the Jews of that region.” Love is the most demanding law.¹

The Scripture readings and homily in the *Liturgy of the Word* at Mass can cause division. People have different opinions, influenced by personal leaning toward the left or the right. So what keeps the *Liturgy of the Word* from splitting us into separate camps of “conservatives” and “liberals” who show more partisan allegiance than “communion in the Holy Spirit”?

First, as soon as the readings and homily are over, we express our unified agreement on the “rock bottom” doctrines of the *Profession of Faith*. Then we pray together, united in love, for the needs enumerated in the *General Intercessions* (*Prayer of the Faithful*). These have a definite unifying effect. As we hear what the community prays for, it makes us proud to be part of it.

But we go beyond this in the *Presentation of Gifts*. Now everyone in the church passes from words to action, from partisan consciousness to deep awareness of mystical union with each other in the “one bread” which the bread we place on the altar is about to become as the one Body of Christ.

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.²

Everyone is sending up a host on the same plate, brought up from the back of church, through the whole congregation, to show that the whole community is offering itself together, not just as isolated individuals. And all are being placed on the altar in re-affirmation of the Baptism in which all “presented their bodies as a living sacrifice to God.” All differences and personal preferences are swallowed up in one communal surrender of ourselves, body, mind, heart and will, to *be Christ* and live as Christ for the life of the world. In the *Presentation of Gifts* we are all committing to this together.

The *Presentation of Gifts* reminds us of **John 15: 18-21**: “You do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world...” Through our human natures we are bread of this earth; people whom “earth has given and human hands have made” — products of our parents’ flesh, formed by our human choices. But “in Christ” we are one with the Bread of Life that transcends this world. Our call as *prophets* is to be the “leaven” that lifts up the world through a lifestyle inexplicable without grace.”³

Initiative: Lose all and find all by offering yourself as one with all.

¹ *Romans 2:25-29; Galatians 5:6, 6:15.*

² *1Corinthians 10:17.*

³ *Matthew 13:33.*

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: EASTER WEEK FIVE

The Fifth Week of Easter: By discerning together, the Church shows trust and receives courage to take decisive action. The Church is a *community*: organized and kept alive through awareness of the “cornerstone,” the living person of Jesus.

Invitation: Choose to *trust* in God, expecting to experience his guidance.

Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion: How could the statements below make Mass mean more if we stay aware of them during Mass?

Acts 14: 5-18: In the *Presentation of Gifts* we don’t ask God to make the gifts better bread and wine, but to change them into the “Bread of life” and “spiritual drink.” This reminds us that to bear witness to the “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” it is not enough to live a better human life. We must live clearly by the life of God.

Acts 14: 19-28: When we say, “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands...” we affirm we are priests offering the sacrifice equally with the presider.

John 14: 27-31: At the *Presentation of Gifts* we surrender our bodies to be joined to Christ and offered with him— to death and life— during the *Eucharistic Prayer*.

Acts 15: 1-6: What “brought great joy to all the believers” was the *conversion* of the Gentiles, not their conformity to Jewish rules. Keeping the Catholic equivalent of such rules is good, but is not “salvation.” We “present our bodies as a living sacrifice” to live by a new life, which must not be identified with old laws.

Acts 15: 7-21: All the hymns, prayers, readings, and preaching of the *Liturgy of the Word* should prepare us for the *mystery* to which we surrender ourselves in the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*, beginning with the *Presentation of Gifts*.

Acts 15: 22-31: Prophets summon to law-observance with insight into the deeper, spiritual purpose of the law, pointing out the real damage non-observance causes. Pharisees ignore both, calling for literal conformity for conformity’s sake.

Acts 16: 1-10: The Scripture readings and homily in the *Liturgy of the Word* at Mass might cause division. But we go beyond this in the *Presentation of Gifts*, when all differences are swallowed up in a communal surrender to be one “in Christ” as the one “Bread of Life” that transcends this world.

Initiatives:

Put your trust in Jesus dwelling and working within you. Have courage.

Depend on the Spirit. Base decisions on his truth. Rely on his strength.

Accept the miracle of your being, both human and divine. Use it.

Find yourself by losing yourself in the *Presentation of Gifts*.

Be a prophet. Seek guidance through God’s words, not just laws.

Go beyond God’s words to God’s Word. Present yourself to *be Christ*.

Interpret all laws according to the mind and heart of Christ.

Offer yourself to lose all in order to find all, be one with all.

May 25, 2014

The Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year A) Spirit of Christ, Spirit of Joy and Peace

Inventory

What gives me my greatest joy in life right now? What liberation, healing or empowerment in my life can I attribute to the fact that Jesus is risen from the dead?

Input

Everything in the liturgy is speaking to us of joy. The *Entrance Antiphon*: “Speak out with a voice of joy....” The *Opening Prayer*: “God, help us to celebrate our joy....” The *Responsorial (Psalm 66)*: “*Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.*” Why? Because of the awesome power God has used for us; because by “the resurrection... the Lord has set his people free”; because at the preaching of the Good News “many possessed, paralyzed or lame were cured.”

The Gift of the Spirit

In **Acts 8: 5-17** the crown of conversion is the *gift of the Holy Spirit*. In Luke’s Gospel the Holy Spirit brings about the conception of Jesus in Mary’s womb, and this gift distinguishes the baptism of John the Baptizer from the Baptism Jesus gives. In John’s Gospel Jesus declares that no one enters into the kingdom of heaven without it, the Spirit is the Father’s great gift to those who believe, and the gift of the Spirit is the fruit of Jesus’ resurrection. It empowers the Church to continue his mission and to forgive sins. In *Acts* the Spirit gives power to proclaim the Good News to the whole world and to bear witness to Jesus as prophets.

In Paul’s letters receiving the Spirit was proof of faith and was revealed in joy; a joy “in the Holy Spirit” that, together with hope, love and peace is a characteristic of the kingdom, even in time of persecution. To make his case against the legalists, Paul appeals to the Galatians’ experience of receiving the Holy Spirit. Clearly, a conscious, experienced *joy in the Spirit* is a constitutive element of true Christian life. It should lead us to sing, “*Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.*”¹

Pledge of Life:

1Peter 3:15-18 tells us, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” If we live as *prophets* — that is, in a way that does not make sense without the Gospel — then obviously we have set our hearts on something beyond what this world promises. When our lifestyle or behavior raises the question of what that is, we should be ready to answer. Not just with abstract truths or doctrines of faith, but in some way out of our *experience*. The joy of experiencing the Holy Spirit empowering us from within is such an experience.

Remember, St. Paul based his argument against legalism on the Galatians’ experience of the Holy Spirit. He didn’t argue *to* that experience; he argued *from* it (*Galatians* 3: 2-5). In the same way, we should be able to base our hope of resurrection on our *experience* of living here and now by the Spirit of God.

We are not speaking about strange and “mystical” experiences: overwhelming feelings and inexplicable sensations. No, we are talking about *choices* that we experience ourselves making, and making with confidence and courage, when no merely human knowledge or experience would justify them — choices based on faith;

¹ *Luke* 1:35; 3:16; *John* 3:5; 14:16; 20:19-23; *Acts* 1:8; 2:17-18; 10:47; 13:52; *Romans* 14:17; 15:13; *Galatians* 3:2-5; 5:22; *1Thessalonians* 1:6.

choices based on trust in God's promises; choices that are clearly options to love God more than anything on this earth. These choices don't necessarily give us *feelings* of absolute certitude, or of fearless confidence, or even of passionate devotion. It is just that the choices cannot be explained unless their foundation is a graced (divine) *certitude, confidence* and *devotion* — whether these are felt or present to us mostly by an aching awareness of their absence! We *know* we believe, trust and love because we find ourselves *acting* out of faith, hope and love. We experience the Holy Spirit as the “condition for the possibility” of the way we are choosing to live. And deep down, deeper than both feelings and conscious, rational thought, we *know* we are living in truth and love. We experience even more certitude when persecution, dryness and doubts take away all human motivation for living the Christian life. In the absence of the human we are confirmed in our experience of the divine.

“You know him...”

In **John 14: 15-21** Jesus not only promises to send the Spirit into our hearts; he also tells us what the fruit of his presence is: “You *know* him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.... You will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will *know* that I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you.” This is the source of our joy.

He promises we will experience in some way all Three Persons: Father, Son and Spirit. How? By *loving*: “Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” In the act of loving God we experience being loved. Those who choose to live in love will experience God loving in them. And they will join their voices to those who sing: “*Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.*”

Insight

Is it not true that I experience my faith, not just as an opinion, and not just as something I was taught, but as something I know— even when I feel doubts?

Initiative:

Let the Spirit move you to find your joy in loving. Consciously do everything you do out of love for God and people.

May 26, 2014

Monday, Easter week Six

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 149) tells us, “*The Lord takes delight in his people.*” Surprised? Many of us may be inclined to think he just puts up with us!

We could wonder what to meditate on in **Acts 16: 11-15**. All it seems to say is that Paul and his companions went to Philippi in Macedonia, part of modern Greece, to evangelize. They went down to the river to pray (and probably have a picnic), struck up a conversation with some women gathered there, and made an impression on Lydia, who said “If you are convinced that I believe in the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And they did. This was the first time Paul preached in Europe.

What this passage does is show the apostles (and God?) in what we might call a relaxed moment. Lydia liked the apostles; they liked her; they went to her house. What attracted them? The fact she believed. What makes God “take delight” in us? Many things. But a major one is just the fact we believe. Jesus told his disciples, “the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and *have believed* that I came from God.” And before that: “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and *we will come to them and make our home with them.*”¹

A good reason to *express* our faith and love is so we ourselves will be “convinced that we believe in the Lord.” Believe personally. Consciously. Deliberately. Firmly. And love him.

It really helps if we do this consciously at Mass, meaning all the words we say. In the *Presentation of Gifts* we should see a connection between our giving a host to Christ as an expression of our love and him giving a host to us in Communion as an expression of his.

In **John 15:26 to 16:4** Jesus says the way we know we believe, ultimately, is because “the Spirit of truth... whom I myself will send from the Father, will *bear witness* on my behalf.” We know the Father because the Spirit is crying, “Abba! Father!” in our hearts. And it is only by the same Spirit that we can say and know that “Jesus is Lord.”²

The Spirit bears witness to us that we know the Father and the Son by moving us to *act* on what we believe. Jesus said, “You must bear witness as well.” We can’t be sure our faith is real until we see its effects. Faith is like pregnancy: no one knows it is there until it shows.

Sometimes we recognize the Spirit in us by contrast. When others make fun of our ideals or think we are crazy because of what we give priority to, we need to ask, “Why do I see this if they don’t?” Are we any smarter? Do we even necessarily feel we are better persons than they are? But we know we know. And if we know, how do we explain that, if not by the Spirit given to us?

When we realize that what we know and desire is God’s free gift to us, then not only does “*the Lord takes delight in his people;*” we take delight in him.

Initiative: Acknowledge the Spirit. Tell God you believe, you hope, you love.

¹ John 16:27

² Romans 8:15-16; Galatians 4:6; 1 Corinthians 12:3.

May 27, 2014

Tuesday, Easter week Six

The *Responsorial* (*Psalms* 138) capsulizes the Good News: “*Your right hand has saved me, O Lord.*”

Acts 16: 22-34 reveals again the pattern of evangelization. First there is *pre-evangelization*: an event that shocks, that raises a question. Here it is not so much the earthquake itself as the fact that the prisoners did not leave. The jailer, impressed by all this, asks the question: “What must I do to be saved?” That opens the door for the second step: *evangelization*, or announcing the Good News in response to a desire to hear it. Paul and Silas said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and all your household.” The guard brought them to his family and the disciples “proceeded to announce the word of God to him and to everyone in his house.” In response “he and his whole family were baptized.” Then, in a preview of *eucharist*, step three, the guard “spread a table before them and joyfully celebrated with his whole family his newfound faith in God.”

In the Mass, the *Introductory Rites* are evangelization, but also pre-evangelization. The joy the community expresses in the entrance hymn; the *Greeting* that presents the shocking concepts: “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, love of God, communion in the Holy Spirit...”; the total acceptance of all by all taken for granted in the *Penitential Rite* with the “*Lord, have mercy*”; the phrases of the *Gloria* — all these should raise questions in believers and visitors alike. The *Liturgy of the Word* begins to answer them. Then all are invited to *respond* by “coming forward,” represented by the bread and wine in the *Presentation of Gifts*, to express their belief and their continuing but renewed acceptance of Baptism: placing themselves on the altar to be offered with and in Jesus during the *Eucharistic Prayer*. The *Rite of Communion* follows in anticipation of the “wedding banquet of the Lamb.” It is all the Good News celebrated: “*Your right hand has saved me, O Lord.*”

In **John 16: 5-11** Jesus says it is better he should leave this earth and return to live in and through us than to stay here in the body he got from Mary. He gives three reasons:

1. The lives of prophetic witness that the Spirit empowers us to live, plus the manifest “fruit of the Spirit” in us (see *Galatians* 5:22), give proof worldwide that Jesus gives what he promised. It shows that refusal to believe in him is “*sin*,” a rejection of obvious good.
2. Jesus was unjustly condemned: we “see him no more.” But when we act in ways inexplicable without his Spirit, it proves God’s *justice* triumphed. Jesus visibly alive and acting everywhere in us reveals that death simply returned him to the Father. He is in glory. The “gift of the Spirit” in us is proof of it.
3. The Spirit empowering us to live by Christ’s values over those of the culture is proof of *judgment* against “the prince of this world.” God doesn’t sit back and let evil triumph. Jesus has “overcome the world” (*John* 16:33; *1John* 4:4). We proclaim it: “*Your right hand has saved me, O Lord.*”

Initiative: Be Christ: Live by the Spirit to reveal him in the flesh.

May 28, 2014

Wednesday, Easter week Six

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 148) declares God is evident everywhere: “*Heaven and earth are filled with your glory.*”

When we first gave ourselves to God in Baptism, we either knew nothing about God (if we were baptized as infants), or we knew less than we know now. Every day we learn a little more, both by discipleship and by experience, about who God is, what the mystery of Christian life is, and what it means to live it out in practice. That is why, each time at Mass when we re-present our “bodies to God as a living sacrifice” in the *Presentation of Gifts* by sending up a host that represents us to be placed on the altar and offered as Christ, we do it with more understanding of the commitment we are making. And more understanding of the God to whom we are making it, And more appreciation of the mystery involved in receiving and living the grace of Baptism.

In **Acts 17:15 to 18:1** Paul is urging this kind of growth to the people of Athens who, though sophisticated and intellectual, still had no clear concept of an infinite God. They worshipped many gods, symbolic personifications of many human truths and values. And there was value in their worship, insofar as it made them focus on certain real values of human life and dedicate themselves to realizing them. Vulcan, for example, was the personification of technology; Mercury of speed; Aphrodite of fertility; Venus of sexual love; Bacchus of celebration. Their devotion to these and many other “gods” revealed and fostered their appreciation for these values, all good, and all very respected elements in modern life and culture — as they should be. But for many of us, some of these values are just as much “idols” as they were for the Athenians. We just don’t name them as our “gods.”

Paul is not arguing against dedication to human values. He simply takes our thinking a step further by pointing out that recognition of these values, whether individually or collectively, falls far short of acknowledging “the God who made the world and everything in it, the Lord of heaven and earth,” the infinite Creator and Giver of being. The mystery of this God, Paul says, is that “in him we live and move and have our being.” This God embraces all created reality, including ourselves.

Have we grown into an understanding of the God Paul proclaims? God who is All Good, All we can desire on earth or in heaven? All we live for? For us, are “*heaven and earth filled with his glory*”?

In **John 16: 12-15** Jesus says to his disciples, “I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. When the Spirit of truth comes, however, he will guide you to all truth.”

Christianity is life, and life is progressive. We gradually grow into greater understanding of our faith, greater intentionality in our hope, greater absorption in our love for God and others. This again is a reason to recommit ourselves repeatedly in the *Presentation of Gifts*: it takes more than one lick to drive a nail home.

Initiative: Keep recommitting as experience opens you to receive and give more.

May 29, 2014

Thursday, Easter week Six

These are today's readings where the feast of the Ascension has been transferred to the Seventh Sunday of Easter. Where not, see June 5 for the feast of the Ascension.

The *Responsorial (Psalm 98)* proclaims God's irrepressible "steadfast love": "*The Lord has revealed to the nations his saving power.*"

In **Acts 18: 1-8** Paul is not having much success in Corinth converting his fellow Jews, whether of Jewish or Greek origin. When they "turned against him and started to insult him," he finally said, "Your blood be on your own heads!... From now on I will go to the Gentiles." Nevertheless, "Crispus, president of the synagogue, and his whole household, all became believers... and a great many Corinthians who heard Paul... were baptized." God doesn't give up. Someone has called him "the God of second chances." And third, and fourth, until we have entered fully into death. This is really just another way of recognizing him as the God of "steadfast love," which is Scripture's most characteristic description of him.

In **John 16: 16-20** Jesus says something to his apostles that has application to our daily experience: "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me."

All of us have the experience of being "turned on" by God, or by some religious activity, such as private prayer or the Mass, and later being "turned off" by exactly the same thing. What we call "devotion" and the spiritual writers call "consolation," just doesn't last. It comes and goes. Saint Ignatius gives reasons for this in his *Spiritual Exercises*,¹ but the essential is to know it is normal and expect it. And above all, to know that the "desolation," or lack of all feelings of devotion — sometimes extending to the absence of all feeling of conviction about the faith, of love, or even of any felt interest in God — will not last. "You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy." You will be "turned on" again, and when you are, you will know that it is by God, and not just because the liturgy is more exciting for a change, or you have begun to do something different in prayer. This is when we experience grace most purely as grace and Jesus most clearly as God.

A clarification, however: When we don't find devotion we should first examine what we ourselves are doing at Mass, in prayer or in action. We may need to make some changes. The first one at Mass is just to *pay attention to the words*. The words are exciting. But only if we think about what they mean.

The essential response, however, is just to reaffirm our faith, hope and love: not "even when," but "especially when" we don't feel it. Faith, hope and love are gifts from God, but each is also a free choice. The grace of each is the grace to *choose to act* by faith, in hope, with love. That is why the *Presentation of Gifts* is such a crucial moment in Mass: it is the explicit invitation to reaffirm our Baptism and all it expresses. If we persevere, we will say, "*the Lord has revealed... his saving power.*"

Initiative: Go up in spirit with the bread and wine at Mass. Be placed on the altar.

¹ See no. 322

May 30, 2014

Friday, Easter week Six

What the *Responsorial (Psalm 47)* says is not always obvious: “*God is king of all the earth.*” But it is still true. The truth is, we see God’s will flaunted constantly — even by ourselves. The good he desires is not done. The evil he hates is inflicted on countless victims. We are tempted to ask, “Who is in charge?” It does not appear to be God.

In **Acts 18: 9-18** the Lord tells Paul not to worry: “There are many of my people in this city.” God supports free will, which by definition means he allows evil to happen. But he is still in charge, and there are people who listen to him.

In the Catholic Church there is a way we are failing to listen to God that we may not notice. It is the failure to call Church authorities to accountability. The laity are as guilty of this as anyone.

We are shocked to read that when the proconsul Gallio dismissed the Jews’ case against Paul, “they all turned on Sosthenes, the synagogue president, and beat him in front of the court house.” This was clearly bad. But whenever something goes wrong, we do tend to blame whoever is in charge. And with some justification. Authorities admit, “The buck stops here.” They *are* responsible for the good of the community. If there are abuses, they should correct them. If they do not, they should be confronted as Paul confronted Peter for his cowardice as Pope!¹ But Catholics, out of a false sense of reverence for priests and bishops, allow them repeatedly to deaden the Church by refusing to correct abuses and failing to lead the Church forward.

An underlying negligence surfaced in the child abuse scandal, which erupted in the United States, flowed out to Ireland and Germany, and is probably going to inundate the rest of the world before the lava cools. The abuse itself is not a specifically Catholic issue: most abusers are family members, and there are as many or more in state institutions as in the priesthood. But the bishops’ complicity is a specifically Catholic sin, made possible in part by the laity’s assumption that priests should not be turned over immediately to the police, or that their bishops were so holy they would make the proper moral response. No one would say that as soon as a bishop was known to have reassigned a child-abuser priest, the laity should have “all turned on him, and beat him in front of the [chancery office].” That would have been a sin. But surely a lesser sin than allowing the abuse to continue.

God draws good out of evil. In **John 16: 20-23** Jesus could be saying to the Church today: “You will weep and mourn [and you should, for what you have failed to do] but the world will rejoice.” Only a sin of the Catholic Church could draw such widespread, worldwide attention. If that attention serves to deter future child abusers and to encourage victims to report them to the police immediately, “the world will rejoice.” Even more so if it wakes up Catholics to their duty to challenge all church officials about everything they are doing to, or not doing for, the flock.

Initiative: Accept responsibility. Do your part to keep the Church on course.

¹ *Galatians* 2:11-14.

May 31, 2014

Feast of The Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The *Responsorial* (Isaiah 12:2-6) tells us the response that should be evoked from everyone who sees how Christians live: “Among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.”

Romans 12:9-16 (alternate: *Zephaniah* 3:14-18) is like a description of *prophetic witness*. It lists ways of acting — and, more deeply, of *being* — that should be visible in every Christian’s life. They are so different from the standards of any human culture, that only the presence of the risen Jesus, acting through his Spirit in those who believe, can explain them.

- To love everyone “with the affection of brothers and sisters.” No strangers.
- To be proactive in showing respect for everyone. Repeat: everyone.
- To perform every task enthusiastically, as a way of “serving the Lord.”
- When things are tough, to “rejoice” in a hope sustained by persevering prayer.
- To (choose to) feel about others’ needs the same way you feel about your own.
- To be generous in opening your home to others, your country to immigrants.
- To pray for the good of those who make your life hell instead of cussing.
- To gravitate toward those who are unhappy as well as those fun to be with.
- To forget about social status and mix with those who can’t help you.

St. Paul continues the list. Translate it into modern forms as food for thought.

In **Luke 1:39-56** we see the effect that the presence of God in us should have on others. All Mary did was show up on Elizabeth’s doorstep. The effect on Elizabeth was not all miracle. True, “the baby stirred in her womb for joy.” But something also stirred in Elizabeth’s heart just from what she saw in Mary’s face, or knew of her already, that her appearance recalled. What was that?

It was what Mary believed. What she knew from the word of God, and by the Holy Spirit: the truth, the values, the convictions she embraced and lived by. What she *was*. And what was that?

Her *Canticle* gives the core of it:

- She lived and breathed to “proclaim the goodness of the Lord.” This was her “soul,” her very being.
- She sought and found her *joy* in God. God was her “savior”: the source, sustainer and summit of all that could make her happy.
- She knew God *accepted* her, and intended to *use* her for “great things,” although in herself she was nothing.
- She knew she was not the exception: “his mercy is from age to age” on *all* those who respect him for what he is.
- She recognized that God’s values are not those of this world. The “proud” are “confused”; the “mighty” are insecure in their lofty positions; the “rich” who think they have “every good thing” are in fact “empty.” The truly blessed are the humble, the lowly, and the poor. Her Son will proclaim this later in his “Beatitudes.”¹

When Christians live by these truths, all sincere people will cry out, “Among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.”

Initiative: Sing Mary’s *Canticle* — not in words, but in lifestyle.

¹ See *Matthew* 5:1-12 and the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola, nos. 136-147. Christ counters the strategy of the devil — desire for *riches* which bring *prestige* and lead to *pride* — by urging preference for a *poverty* that identifies one with the humiliated “*lowly*” and fosters *humility*.

Same Day: May 31, 2014
Saturday, Easter Week Six

In **Acts 18: 23-28** we meet Apollos, a Jew who “knew only the baptism of John,” but was “well-versed in the scriptures, instructed in the Way of the Lord, spoke with burning enthusiasm, and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus.” When the Christian community heard him speak, they “took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately,” and encouraged him in his ministry.

Apollos reminds us of what Baptism commits us to do. We are not all eloquent speakers, but there is no excuse for any of us not to be “well-versed in the scriptures, instructed in the Way of the Lord,” and filled with “burning enthusiasm” to spread the Good News. Whether or not it was ever impressed on us, we are all called to be evangelizers, because “the Church exists to evangelize,” and we are the Church.¹

To evangelize, we don’t have to stand up and preach, or go door-to-door explaining our religion to strangers. But we do have to *desire* to spread the Good News. This does not mean telling people about Church doctrines — although, when asked, we should be able, like Apollos, to explain “accurately the things concerning Jesus.” The most important thing is to share our *experience* of Jesus Christ, because that is our true experience of the Good News, and without that no discussions about doctrine are going to get anywhere. It is not what we know that reaches hearts, but what we are. If what we are has been transformed by our personal interaction with Jesus Christ, we have good news to share. And will want to.

In **John 16: 23-28** Jesus emphasizes the difference between religion that informs and religion that transforms. He tells his apostles, who had heard him preach for three years, “Until now you have not asked for anything in my name.” They have prayed as “followers” of Jesus or as “disciples” (“students”). But they did not know the transformation of “becoming Christ” by dying and rising with him in Baptism to live henceforth as his risen body on earth. This is a mystery; the mystery of our lives that transforms everything we do.

Before receiving the divine life of God and the “gift of the Spirit” through Baptism and Confirmation, we only knew *about* the Father. But now, with the Spirit of Jesus the Son crying out “Abba! Father!” in our hearts, Christ “tells us plainly of the Father.” His Father and ours.²

At every Mass, during the *Presentation of Gifts*, the liturgy invites us to re-commit consciously to Christ and to the life of grace. This makes us more aware of the difference between just being baptized and accepting Baptism with increasing understanding as we mature in both human and divine life. Experience teaches us what it means to “be Christ.” As we enter more deeply and consciously into that experience, we become able to share the Good News.

Initiative: Identify your experience of Christ. As you see it, share it.

¹ Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, 14.

² *Romans* 8:16; *Galatians* 4:6.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: EASTER WEEK SIX

The Sixth Week of Easter: The crown of conversion is the *gift of the Holy Spirit*. When our lifestyle raises questions, we should be able to answer out of our *experience* of the Spirit giving inner joy and power. Especially in *choices* we make that no merely human knowledge or experience would justify. Especially love

Invitation: Seek conscious, experienced *joy in the Spirit* as a constitutive element of true Christian life. Joy is found in loving.

Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion: How could the statements below make Mass mean more if we stay aware of them during Mass?

Acts 16: 11-15: We express our faith and love in the *Presentation of Gifts* so we ourselves will be convinced that we believe — personally, consciously, freely.

John 15:26 to 16:4: the way we know we believe, ultimately, is because the Spirit bears witness within us by moving us to *act* on what we believe.

Acts 16: 22-34: The Mass follows the pattern of evangelization: the *Introductory Rites* raise a *question* that the *Liturgy of the Word* begins to *answer*. Then in the *Presentation of Gifts*, all *respond* by symbolically “coming forward.”

Acts 17:15 to 18:1: For many, some human values are just as much “idols” as they were for the Athenians. We just don’t name them as our “gods.”

Christianity is life, and life is progressive. We grow gradually. This is a reason to recommit ourselves repeatedly in the *Presentation of Gift*.

Acts 18: 1-8: God is “the God of second chances” and “steadfast love.” We express this in the *Presentation of Gifts* by repeated recommitment.

John 16: 16-20: It is normal that “consolation” and “desolation” do not last. The essential response to this is just to reaffirm our faith, hope and love, especially when we don’t feel anything. That is why the *Presentation of Gifts* is such a crucial moment in Mass: it is an explicit invitation to reaffirm our Baptismal commitment.

Acts 18: 9-18: Catholics, out of a false sense of reverence for priests and bishops, allow them repeatedly to deaden the Church by refusing to correct abuses and failing to lead the Church forward. We have a duty to challenge church officials.

Acts 18: 23-28: There is no excuse for any of us not to be “well-versed in the Scriptures,” instructed, and burning with enthusiasm to spread the Good News.

John 16: 23-28: The *Presentation of Gifts* emphasizes the difference between religion that informs and religion that transforms. We re-commit to *mystery*.

Initiatives:

Let the Spirit move you to find your joy in loving consciously in everything you do.

Be Christ: Live by the Spirit to reveal him in the flesh.

Keep recommitting as experience opens you to receive and give more.

Go up in spirit with the bread and wine at Mass. Be placed on the altar.

Accept responsibility. Do your part to keep the Church on course.

Sunday, June 1 2014

The Feast of the Ascension (Year A)

Except in the provinces of Boston, Hartford, New York, Newark, Philadelphia, and Omaha the feast of the Ascension is transferred from the sixth Thursday of Easter to the seventh Sunday of Easter. Where it is not transferred, see the next reflection.

Inventory

What does it mean to me that Jesus ascended into heaven? Does it have any influence on my life? On the decisions I make today?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* tells us to stop “looking up at the skies” because, just as Jesus left, in the same way he is going to return. The *Opening Prayer* has us ask that we might “follow him into the new creation,” and calls his ascension our joy, “our glory and our hope.” The *Responsorial (Psalm 47)* just calls for celebration: “*God mounts his throne to shouts of joy; a blare of trumpets for the Lord*”.

This is a lot to deal with! Taken together, these texts call us to “await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ” (from the *Communion Rite* of the Mass). But this is an *active* waiting: we don’t just stand around waiting for it to happen; we are *sent to make* it happen.

The Reign of God

Acts 1: 1-11 tells us that after his resurrection, Jesus spent forty days appearing to his apostles and “speaking about the reign of God.” We don’t know what he said, but the apostles must not have understood, because just before Jesus ascended they still thought he was going to set up a government in Israel supported by divine power! “Lord is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Jesus didn’t answer; he just kept telling them to “wait” — wait for the “fulfillment of my Father’s promise,” wait to be “baptized with the Holy Spirit,” wait to “receive power when the Holy Spirit comes down on you.” Then “*You will be my witnesses* in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The kingdom is going to be established by divine power, but working through human weakness. It will be the power of the Holy Spirit enlightening and motivating them; a Spirit not of coercion and force, but of conversion through truth and love.

This should have told them already that the establishment of God’s reign over every human heart was going to take a long time! When we pray, “Thy kingdom come!” we are praying “*Thy will be done* on earth as in heaven.” God’s reign will not be complete until everyone really wants this.

At God’s Right Hand

Ephesians 1: 17-23 tells us that in God’s time-frame Jesus is already reigning. God has “seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion... not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” This is what the Ascension says: in Jesus “*God mounts his throne to shouts of joy*.” The man the apostles ate and drank and walked the dusty roads with, the man they saw crucified in weakness, is now seated at God’s right hand in glory, and all power is his *now* — and forever. St. Paul writes this so that the “eyes of your heart may be enlightened,” and “you may know what is the hope to which he has called you... and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.” “*God mounts his throne to shouts of joy*.” Our joy is the joy of our *hope*.

“Go therefore...”

We need hope, unshakeable hope, because in **Matthew 28: 16-20** Jesus tells the apostles and us: “Go *make disciples of all nations*, baptizing them... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

That is hardly a modest undertaking! But Jesus empowers us with the words, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.... And remember, I am *with you always*, to the end of the world.” Jesus ascended, not to leave us, but to remain with us, in every member of his body on earth who is animated by his Spirit. With us, in us and through us, Jesus continues to “go about all the cities and villages, *teaching ... and proclaiming* the good news of the kingdom, and *curing* every disease and every sickness” (*Matthew 4:23; 9:35*). This is his ministry. He will continue it in his body, the Church, until the reign of God is established in every heart that accepts him. Then he will “come again,” his triumph revealed in the emergent glory of his body, his glory shining in diversified beauty through each and every member of the human race who has become a transparent vessel of God’s own life and love.

Jesus ascends to make this happen. He ascends to send down the Holy Spirit. The Church professes her faith and hope in prayer: “Send forth your Spirit, and our *hearts will be regenerated*.” The Church believes this can happen. And then, “*You will renew the face of the earth!*” That is what we celebrate: “*God mounts his throne to shouts of joy; a blare of trumpets for the Lord.*”

Insight

Does the Ascension of Jesus inspire you now to let him live and continue his work in you? Does his promise of the Holy Spirit encourage you? Does it motivate you to any decisions?

Initiative

Resolve to let Christ grow “to full stature” in you (Ephesians 4:13), and dedicate yourself to a lifestyle that bears witness, so that you can help bring Christ to “full stature” throughout the human race.

Same Sunday, June 1, 2014

(For the provinces of Boston, Hartford, New York, Newark, Philadelphia, and Omaha).

The Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year A)

Spirit and Flesh

Inventory

In the *Entrance Antiphon*, not only do we say that our heart prompts us to “seek your face,” but we declare positively to God: “I seek it. Lord, do not hide from me.” Am I making both of these statements personally or just repeating them because they are “in the book”? How do I “seek God’s face?” Where? How?

Input

In the *Opening Prayer* we affirm both that Christ “lives with God in glory,” and “promised to remain with us until the end of time.” Both statements are verified when we see Christ “glorified” visibly on earth. Then the words of the *Gloria* at Mass: “We praise you for your glory,” take on the ring of personal experience.

When we sing in the *Responsorial (Psalm 27)*: “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living,” we mean we will see God’s glory here on earth — in the “community of the living” — as well as in heaven.

History and Spirit

Acts 1: 12-14 makes a point of listing again the names of the original Twelve Jesus chose to be the foundation of his Church (minus Judas). This is because they were unique witnesses to Jesus.

There had to be twelve of them to show that the Church was the continuation of the twelve tribes of Israel. John reports:

And in the spirit [the angel]... showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God... It has a great, high wall with twelve gates... and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites.... And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (*Revelation 21:9-12*).

The Twelve also had to be historical witnesses. The replacement had to be “one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us” (*Acts 1:21-22*). Still today, to be a fully authentic witness to Jesus, one has to be in historical continuity with the community of those who knew him during his earthly life.

Saint Paul would not have qualified as one of the Twelve, because he did not know Jesus before his resurrection. That is why Paul, although he had already been baptized and had been preaching for three years, went up to Jerusalem to “visit Cephas [Peter] and stayed with him fifteen days.” Then after fourteen years, “in response to a revelation” he went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus, his co-workers, for “a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders.” There, he says, “I laid before them the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain.” And he was approved. “When James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised” (*Galatians 1:18, 2:1-9*).

The Church Paul helped to establish is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” (*Ephesians 2:20*). The apostles are the link with the historical Jesus, but the prophets are proof that the risen Jesus is alive and speaking in the Church today through his Spirit. Both are essential. Jesus told the disciples before his Ascension, “not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father.... *You will receive power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (*Acts 1:4-8*). And that is why today's reading, after listing the apostles' names, shows them gathered in an upstairs room, “constantly devoting themselves to prayer.”

Christ in you, the hope of glory

John 17: 1-11 says Jesus is “glorified” in us. This means that his “glory,” his greatness and his triumph as Messiah and Savior of the world is made evident in us. We are the visible proof that he is what he claimed to be.

Jesus said to the Father, “I glorified you on earth by finishing *the work that you gave me to do.*” We glorify Jesus by doing the work he gave us to do. And that work is made specific for us in our baptismal consecration: we were anointed at Baptism to fulfill the triple mission of Jesus as *Prophet, Priest and King*. We glorify him because when we do his work, it becomes evident that Jesus is risen, alive, and doing the work himself — *with us, in us and through us.*

Jesus was specific about the work the Father gave him. It was “to give eternal life” to all whom the Father gave him. Our work on earth is to be the instruments through which Jesus continues to “give eternal life” — that is, to communicate to others “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,” which is the gift of sharing in the divine life of God.

“This is eternal life,” Jesus said: “that they may *know you*, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” This was his work: “I have *made your name known* to those whom you gave me.” Jesus lived and breathed to bring about the first thing he taught us to pray for: “*Father, hallowed be thy name!*” This was the first priority of his life, the greatest desire of his heart

Jesus made the Father known by *embodying* in himself the truth and goodness of the Father. “Whoever sees me sees him who sent me” (*John 12:45*). When Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied,” he answered, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (*John 14:8-9*). For us to glorify Jesus, people have to see him in us, alive and revealing himself in “works” — the choices that characterize our lifestyle — that are manifestly impossible by human motivation alone, but only by the power of his Spirit acting in us. This is to be *prophets*.

Jesus glorified the Father by being the visible “image of the invisible God” (*Colossians 1:15*) and “reflection of God's glory” (*Hebrews 1:3*). He continues to glorify the Father in his body, the Church. The life, the truth, the goodness and glory of God are made visible now in those in whom the risen Jesus continues to *express himself* visibly on earth. Jesus said of his disciples, “I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world.” He is “glorified in them” when we *communicate* his truth through the expression of our faith, his intentions through the expression of our hope, his love through the attitude we express toward all whom we deal with.

Of himself Jesus said, “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.” “The Father who *dwells in me* does his works.” Of his disciples Jesus said, “The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.” Jesus will work in and through them. We glorify the Son by making his life visible in us by *expressing* our faith, hope and love.

St. Irenaeus said, “Life in humans is the glory of God; the life of humans is the vision of God”—provided what is seen cannot be explained except by the “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” risen and living his divine life *in us*.

Jesus said, “In a little while the world will no longer see me, but... because I live, you also will live.... On that day you will know that I am *in my Father*, and *you in me*, and *I in you*” (see *John 14:10-20*). Paul preached “the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is *Christ in you*, the hope of glory” (*Colossians 1:26-27*). To let Jesus in us *express himself* in and through our human expressions of faith, hope and love is our ministry as *priests*.

The glory of “enduring love”

1Peter 4: 13-16 encourages us to “rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his *glory* is revealed.” The fact is, his glory is already revealed — here and now — in those who “are reviled for the name of Christ,” because “the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God” is made visible in our “enduring love” — provided, of course, it is our hope in that “glory” which strengthens our love to endure. Then we suffer, not as “criminals or mischief makers,” but as “*stewards of the kingship of Christ*,” striving and suffering for the establishment of his Kingdom.

“If any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name” and are letting him reveal his empowering Spirit in you.

Insight

Can I draw courage from knowing Jesus is “seated at the right hand of God”?

Initiative *When you take a prophetic stance, imagine Jesus in power and glory.*

June 2, 2014

Monday, Easter Week Seven

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 68) invites us to celebrate what we know of God: “*Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth.*”

Acts 19: 1-8 makes clear that God does not just want to give us divine life. He wants us to know we have received it. And he wants others to see it in us. This is the reason for the “gift of the Spirit.”

We would say today that those baptized by John the Baptizer received “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,” even though the true nature of this gift was not yet revealed and they had no idea what they had received. Paul asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” If he had asked instead, “Did you receive divine life when you were baptized?” their answer would have been the same: “We never even heard of it.” Unfortunately, many of the baptized today would say the same thing. How many are deeply, consciously aware of sharing in the divine life of God himself? It should make us want to genuflect to ourselves!

We may have learned this during our religious instruction — but as an abstract truth that didn’t sink in and didn’t really mystify or astound us. We probably didn’t connect it to our life or experience. The “gift of the Spirit” does.

We are aware of having received the “gift of the Spirit” when we experience things in ourselves — feelings, perhaps, but more reliably *convictions, attitudes, values, and actions* empowered by these — that have no human explanation; that can only be the fruit of God’s divine life within us. We may not “begin to speak with tongues and to prophesy” as Paul’s Christians did. But we will feel impelled to cry out in some way: “*Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth.*” We know that we have *become divine*. And we rejoice.

In **John 16: 29-33** Christ’s own disciples did not fully understand who he was. But when he answered a question they hadn’t asked, they said, “Now we see that you know everything, and do not have to wait for questions to be put into words. Because of this we believe that you came from God.” They still did not understand he was God, but at least they knew that nothing human could explain him. To speak and act in ways that let people see the same truth in us is the essence of Christian *witness*. We are consecrated to this by our baptismal anointing as *prophets*. When we do bear witness in this way, the “gift of the Spirit” becomes visible in us.

Our sharing in divine life is the key to Baptism. This is made explicit in the *Presentation of Gifts*. The presider prays as he pours a little water into the wine before presenting it to God:

By the mystery of [the mingling of] this water and wine, *may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.*”

The wine represents divinity, the water humanity. We mingle them to remind us of the “mystery” of the human and divine united in Jesus by his Incarnation, and in us by our Baptism.

This reminder of what we are reminds us of what we should do. We need to let our divine life appear in actions that reveal the “gift of the Spirit” who empowers us to live on the level of God.

Initiative: Pay attention during the *Presentation of Gifts*. Absorb the meaning.

June 3, 2014

Tuesday, Easter Week Seven

Today's verses of the *Responsorial (Psalm 68)* invite us to "*Sing to God*" for his *generosity* in pouring out divine life like rain.

In **Acts 20: 17-27** Paul describes how God's divine life was made visible in him. Not through miracles, visions or ecstasies (although all these are found in his life). He just says, "I carried out the *mission* the Lord Jesus gave me." It was "to bear *witness* to the Good News of God's grace." How did he do this?

I lived among you... serving the Lord with all humility... enduring the trials that came to me... I have not hesitated to do anything that would be helpful to you. I have preached to you, and instructed you both in public and in your homes, urging both Jews and Greeks to turn to God and to believe in our Lord Jesus.

None of this strikes us as being so explicitly "divine" — until we ask ourselves how many people we see doing the same, and for what motives.

Plenty of non-Christians and even atheists are dedicated to serving people, and are willing to "do anything helpful" for others if they can, "enduring the trials" that come to them as a result. Do their lives reveal God's life in them?

Let's not rule it out. They may well be what we call "anonymous Christians," people who have surrendered to the grace of God, but under some other name because for them "the true nature of God and of religion" was "concealed rather than revealed" by the Church they experienced. Vatican II lays blame on Catholics, lay and clergy alike, who "are careless about their instruction in the faith, or present its teaching falsely, or even fail in their religious, moral or social life." We have taught errors.¹

The key question, though, is motive. Some people "do good" (and it is good), just because it is humanly rewarding. Also, their social milieu may support feeling disturbed by the disorder and irrationality of injustice, ecological devastation, sickness and suffering. They feel better trying to set things right. Add human compassion and we have love. Some have argued that all love reveals divine grace, but this leads to the conclusion that humans cannot love without grace, which makes human nature radically corrupt. So we must say it is possible to be loving and altruistic without grace. But we never can or should judge this is actually so in a particular case.

For Christian witness, however, it needs to be obvious that human motives cannot explain what one does. And this can appear in very ordinary ministries such as Paul details, especially if they are constant and enduring enough to reveal persevering commitment

In **John 17: 1-11** Jesus saw his crucifixion as the supreme and unambiguous revelation of his divine love, both for God and humans. "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you." He in turn is glorified in those disciples whose lives make it clear they "know the Father and Jesus whom he sent." This, Jesus says, "is eternal life." What shows we know God is persevering love.

Initiative: Recommit to revealing the light in you that is proof of eternal life.

¹See *Vatican II*, "The Church in the Modern World," no. 19, and "The Church," no. 51.

June 4, 2014

Wednesday, Easter Week Seven

Both readings express the concern Jesus and Paul have for the protection of the flock after they are gone. So today's invitation to "*Sing to God*" (*Responsorial, Psalm 68*) focuses on God's power to "strengthen his people."

In **Acts 20: 28-38** Paul warns the "elders" (priests) and "overseers" (bishops): "Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth." The Vatican Council accepts this as the normal condition of the "pilgrim Church" and so "urges all concerned to remove or correct any abuses, excesses or defects which may have crept in here or there," even in the official teaching of the "ordinary *magisterium*" of bishops, preachers and teachers. The Church does not claim to be perfect in any age.¹

That is why we always have need of the "prophets;" those who, like Paul, "bear witness... to the primacy of an inward communion of faith and love, the perpetually new work of the Spirit." This, of course, must be in union with the "primacy of Peter," which it complements: the primacy of juridical authority in the Church, given to Peter with the "keys of the kingdom."²

And "therein hangs the tale" of ever-recurring conflict in the Church: true prophets against false prophets, the *magisterium* squelching truth, teachers of error ignoring the *magisterium*. Jesus and Paul both predicted it would happen. How do we survive?

We survive, first of all, by absolute, unconditional, *commitment* to remain united to the Church that celebrates *Eucharist* in union with all the bishops throughout the world who trace their commission back to the Twelve. This is a non-negotiable. We may argue about all sorts of things, but we must never actually break with the bishops.

We express this in every Mass. The *Liturgy of the Word* may invite different interpretations, and we may disagree strongly with the homilist, but our next move is to join ourselves to the bread and wine being placed on the altar and present ourselves unconditionally to be offered with Christ in the Church. Doing this consciously and intensely in every Mass will keep us from losing the faith.

In **John 17: 11-19** Jesus asks the Father, "Keep those you have given me true to your name, so they may be one like us." He bases his prayer on the statement: "They do not belong to the world, any more than I belong to the world." Those who have given up attachment to all the world offers — especially to riches, power and prestige — will have the least to divide them from one another. Regardless of differences of opinion on current questions of doctrine and pastoral practice, if they share with each other their prayer, their devotion and their experience of God, the "grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" will fill them with "the love of God" and each other, and they will find "communion in the Holy Spirit." They will be able to lead us in proclaiming: "*Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth.*"

Initiative: In commitment to truth, unity; in pursuit of truth, liberty; in all, charity.

¹ Vatican II: *The Church*, no. 51.

² See J. M. R. Tillard, O.P., *The Bishop of Rome*, Glazier, Inc., 1986, pages 74-117.

June 5, 2014

Thursday, Easter Week Seven

The *Responsorial* (*Psalm 16*) provides deep support for loyalty: “*Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope.*”

In **Acts 22:30 to 23:11** we see Paul uniting in himself fidelity to the charismatic and to the juridical. He follows the voice of the Spirit, but insists on his obedience to the Law.

We may be shocked to hear Paul claiming, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee.” We need to remember that the Pharisees began as an authentically Jewish reform movement based on fidelity to the Law. This was what God called for constantly through the prophets. It became corrupted only gradually, as it degenerated into narrow legalism. A focus on law observance that does not pass through contemplation of the mind and heart of God is deadly. But law observance as such is good. It is fidelity to God, and Paul claimed it for himself. He also claimed fidelity to the Spirit who can never be restricted to laws. In this he embodied Christianity.

Christianity is essentially the union of the human and the divine. Laws belong to the human side. Laws are the infinite, indivisible, and ultimately undifferentiated Wisdom and Love of God translated into finite human concepts; broken down into particular directions to guide concrete human actions. Laws are by nature “defined” by *finis*, limits, specifications. We must keep in mind that they are always imperfect translations of the Infinite, and we must observe them in conscious submission to the Infinite Truth and Goodness they can never completely express. We *ob-serve* laws, but we only *serve* the Spirit.

The prayer that accompanies the mingling of water (for humanity) and wine (for divinity) during the *Presentation of Gifts* captures this:

By the mystery of [the mingling of] this water and wine, *may we come to share in the divinity of Christ*, who humbled himself to *share in our humanity.*”

Jesus, who was above the Law, subjected himself to the Law, but without contradiction, because he was the Law made flesh. When we who have “become Christ” by Baptism follow the Spirit, it is the spirit of the law we follow. This is not to “abolish the law but to fulfill it. This is our mission as *prophets*. Only God can keep us authentic. “*Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope.*”¹

Once mixed, the water and wine are indistinguishable, as were humanity and divinity in the actions of Jesus. In **John 17: 20-26** Jesus prays that, in spite of the incompleteness of every human insight, opinion or perception of value; in spite of the incompleteness of all human expressions of doctrine and the unintentional exclusivity of all human laws — that cannot explicitly adapt themselves to every exception or particular application — his Church will be one: “Father, may they be one *in us*, as you are in me and I am in you.” The human inevitably tends to divide us. The divine unites us. *In Christ* both are one.

Initiative: Follow the Spirit in a spiritual observance of all laws..

¹ *John 14:6; Matthew 5:17.*

June 6, 2014

Friday, Easter Week Seven

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 103) calls us to look to God alone in our decisions: “*The Lord has set his throne in heaven.*”

Acts 25: 13-21 brings to a head a whole series of people refusing to accept the responsibility of decision. The tribune, although he found Paul “was charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment,” passed him on to the governor Felix to be judged. Felix put off making a decision for two years, until he was succeeded in office by Festus. Festus heard the charges, knew they were groundless, but “wishing to do a favor for the Jews,” did not make a decision either. Instead he asked Paul, “Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem,” as his enemies had requested, “and be tried there before me on these charges?” Paul, who saw which way the wind was blowing with Festus, said, “If there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can turn me over to them. I appeal to the emperor.” Now Festus got to pass the buck, and he sent Paul to Rome.

Actually, God wanted this so that Paul and Peter would die in the same place, giving united witness to the faith. But in itself, the whole story is a travesty of justice, brought about by people who, one after another, refused to take responsibility for making a decision.¹

This is a refusal the *Presentation of Gifts* meets head on in the Mass. When the bread and wine are sent forward to be placed on the altar, every Christian present is confronted with a decision to make. It is the radical, adult, all-embracing decision to take one’s life, one’s existence, into one’s own hands and decide what to do with it. What we want to make of it. On whom we wish to bestow it. The invitation is to give ourselves, body and soul, to God, as we did on the day of our Baptism. But to give more consciously, with more understanding of what the gift of self entails — and gives us in return. The *Presentation of Gifts* is a crucial and a precious moment that urges us to break the inertia of indecision and indifference and embrace radical self-determination in a deep choice of “life to the full.”

The peak of self-determination is self-surrender. Jesus said, “Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” That is what Baptism is: giving up life in this world in order to live divinely as the body of Christ. There is no greater love; there is no greater life.²

In **John 21: 15-19** Jesus tells Peter, as he told Paul, about the surrender which will bring him into total life. And death:

When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.)

Then he gave Peter the “Great Commandment” that rules all pastoral ministry: “If you love me, *feed my sheep.*” Those who don’t “pass the buck” will have the courage to make whatever decisions this calls for.

Initiative: Embrace life: Use your freedom to give it away.

¹ *Acts* 23:11. See again J. M. R. Tillard, O.P., *The Bishop of Rome*, Glazier, Inc., 1986, pages 74-117.

² *Matthew* 16:25.

June 7, 2014

Saturday, Easter week Seven

Today's liturgy gives the end of both the *Acts of the Apostles* and John's Gospel. *Acts* ends focused on the coming death of Paul; *John* ends focused on the future death of Peter. The *Responsorial (Psalm 11)* says of both: "*The just will gaze on your face, O Lord.*"

In **Acts 28: 16-31** Paul, who has been sent as a prisoner to Rome, is portrayed as being pretty much in charge of the situation. First (chapter 26) he convinces King Agrippa of his innocence and tries to convert him! Then he predicts the loss of the ship they put him on for Rome. When they don't take his advice and the ship is about to be lost, he assures them there will be no loss of life. And there isn't. They run aground, as Paul said they would. Paul is bitten by a poisonous snake and is taken for a god because he remains unharmed. He heals the father of their host and many others, who load their ship with provisions when they sail. When they reach Rome, *Acts* says, "Paul spent the whole of the two years in his own rented lodging, welcoming all who came to visit him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ with complete freedom and without hindrance from anyone." Thus ends Paul's story in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

We know that eventually he was martyred in Rome. The same prophecy was made of both Peter and Paul. To Peter Jesus said, "You will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."

For Paul, the prophet Agabus "took Paul's belt, bound his own feet and hands with it, and said... 'This is the way the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" And so it was. But even bound, both were in control. They were supremely free to dispose of their lives as they chose.

Karl Rahner wrote, "The greatest free moment of life is death." By freely, willingly saying "Yes" to death we can take control of our whole existence and bestow it on God. Without reserves. Nothing left out. Irrevocably. Forever. There is no greater freedom, no greater control than this. Jesus, at the most exalted moment of his humiliation modeled it: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!" He had said:

I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and... take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.¹

In the *Presentation of Gifts*, we say this with Christ. We reaffirm the death we accepted by anticipation in Baptism and the risen life it gave, No one can "take our life" from us if we have already chosen to bestow it on God.

John 21: 20-25 ends: "There are many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down... the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." Our lives are writing them now.

Initiative: Put yourself on the altar at every Mass. Own your life by offering it.

¹ *John* 10:17-18.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: EASTER WEEK SEVEN

The Seventh Week of Easter: The Twelve were witnesses to the historical Jesus. To be fully authentic witnesses to Jesus today, we must be in historical continuity with them through the bishops. But we need to be “prophets” as proof that Jesus is risen and speaking in the Church today. Both are essential.

Invitation: To glorify Jesus by continuing his triple mission as *Prophet, Priest* and *King* according to our “messianic anointing” at Baptism. People see Jesus alive in us when we do what can only be done by the power of his Spirit acting in us. When “reviled for the name of Christ” we make the Spirit visible by our “enduring love.”

Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion: How could the statements below make Mass mean more if we stay aware of them during Mass?

Acts 19: 1-8: We experience the “gift of the Spirit” in choices that can only be the fruit of God’s divine life within us. God wants us to *know* and others to see this gift in us. In the *Presentation of Gifts* the Church wants us to present ourselves with the bread and wine so we will know and others see that we accept our Baptism.

John 16: 29-33: In the *Presentation of Gifts* the wine represents divinity, the water humanity. We mingle them to remind us of the “mystery” of the human and divine united in Jesus by his Incarnation, and in us by our Baptism.

Acts 20: 17-27: When human motives cannot explain what one does, this is Christian witness. This can appear in very ordinary actions if they are constant and enduring. **John 17: 1-11** says that persevering love is what shows we know God.

Acts 20: 28-38: Conflict between *prophets* (true and false) and the *magisterium* is normal in the “pilgrim Church” that does not claim to be perfect in any age. We survive by unconditional commitment to the Church. We express this by presenting ourselves without reserves to be placed on the altar with the bread and wine.

Acts 22:30 to 23:11: Christianity is essentially the union of the human and the divine. The prayer that accompanies the *Presentation of Gifts* affirms this: “By the mystery [of this mingling]... may we come to share....”

Laws are always imperfect human translations of the divine Truth and Goodness they can never completely express. We *ob-serve* laws, but we only *serve* the Spirit,

Acts 25: 13-21: Paul’s trial is a travesty of justice, brought about by people who refused to take the responsibility of decision. The *Presentation of Gifts* meets this problem by inviting everyone present to make the all-embracing decision to take their life into their hands and place it on the altar to be offered with and in Christ.

Acts 28: 16-31: “The greatest free moment of life is death.” In the *Presentation of Gifts* we reaffirm the death we freely accepted by anticipation in Baptism.

Initiatives:

When you take a prophetic stance, imagine Jesus in power and glory.

Put yourself on the altar at every Mass. Own your life by offering it.

Pay attention during the Presentation of Gifts. Absorb the meaning.

Recommit to revealing the light in you that is proof of eternal life.

Affirm: In commitment to truth, unity; in pursuit of truth, liberty; in all, charity.

Follow the Spirit in a spiritual observance of all laws

Embrace life: Use your freedom to give it away.

June 8 2014

PENTECOST SUNDAY (Year A)

“By the mystery of this water and wine...”

Inventory

The (alternate) *Entrance Antiphon* proclaims: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts by his Spirit living in us. Alleluia!”¹ What does pouring suggest to you? Water poured at Baptism? Wine and water poured together at Mass during the *Presentation of Gifts*? The Holy Spirit poured forth at Pentecost?²

Input

In the *Opening Prayer* we pray that the Spirit “sent on the Church” will “continue to work in the world through the hearts of all who believe.” The *Responsorial (Psalm 104)* asks, “Lord, send out your Spirit and renew the face of the earth.” God does this, first of all, through the *witness* we bear to the Good News by the power of our baptismal consecration as “prophets.”

In the *Prayer over the Gifts* we ask as *disciples* that “the Spirit you promised” will “lead us into all truth.” And more: “Reveal to us the full meaning of this sacrifice.” The Mass is a mystery. We understand it only by the light of the Holy Spirit. The Church calls Eucharist “the source and summit of the Christian life.” So in the measure we understand it, we understand the full mystery of the Good News.

We begin to express this mystery explicitly in the *Presentation of Gifts*, when we bring up bread and wine to be transformed into the body and blood of Christ. The presider lifts up the bread, then pours water and wine together into the chalice. This is a symbol of Christ’s divinity (the wine) joined to his humanity (the water) at the Incarnation, and of our humanity joined to his divinity by Baptism. As he does he prays: “By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”

We already “share in the divinity of Christ” by Baptism. So the intent of the prayer is that we should share *more*, or “more completely” in Christ’s divinity. But is “divinity” something quantitative, that we can have more or less of?

We become divine by the “grace” (favor) of sharing in God’s divine life. God’s life as such cannot be increased or diminished. We can share in it “more” only by *surrendering* ourselves more completely — surrendering our humanity, our human lives, our bodies, minds and wills, our physical activity — to be guided, directed, enlightened and empowered by God’s divine life within us. Thinking more and more as God does by surrender to the gift of faith. Desiring more and more what God does by abandonment to the gift of hope. Loving more and more as God does by losing ourselves in union with him through the gift of his divine love. What we are really asking in the prayer is that we might be “poured out,” like the water and wine, to be “lost and found” in sharing Christ’s divinity, as he was “poured out” to be “lost and found” in sharing our humanity. As Jesus said, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”³

In practical terms, the formula for this surrender — for “growing in grace” — is to *let grace express itself in and through our physical words and actions*. We “share more” in the divine life of Christ by letting his life become more *visible* in our actions. This is the definition of Christian *witness*, to which we are committed by our baptismal consecration as *prophets*. And so, when we pray, “By the mystery of [the mingling of] this water

¹ See *Romans* 5:5, 8:11.

² Poured out as a seal of covenant: *Exodus* 24:6-8; *Leviticus* 4:30; *Matthew* 26:7, 28; *Luke* 22:20. Poured out as self-emptying or offering: *Isaiah* 53:12; *Philippians* 2:7, 17. Poured forth or in as gift: *Isaiah* 44:3; *Ezekiel* 39:29; *Zechariah* 12:10; *Joel* 2:28; *Acts* 2:17, 33; 10:45; *Romans* 5:5; *Titus* 3:6.

³ See *Philippians* 2:5-11; *Matthew* 10:39; 16:35.

and wine, may we come to share [more completely] in the divinity of Christ,” we are really praying for continual *conversion*, for the grace to embody more and more visibly in our lifestyle the divine truth and values preached by Jesus and implanted in our hearts by Baptism. In this act we re-affirm our Baptism, and in particular our baptismal consecration as *prophets*.

The *Presentation of Gifts* is a symbolic “re-view” of our Baptism and “pre-view” of the *Eucharistic Prayer*. Baptism made *real* for us the mystery of our dying and rising in Christ. We went down into the water as into the grave, giving up our human lives in order to rise up out of the water a “new creation,” the risen body of Christ, living by his divine life. The *Eucharistic Prayer* makes *present* for us the same mystery. The bread and wine become the *real presence* of Christ *offering* himself on the cross, *rising* from the dead and *returning* in triumph and glory: three moments condensed into one in the timeless, eternal “now” of God’s experience and made present to us in the mystery of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is also the mystery of our presence “in him.” We were *in* the body that hung on the cross, because “for our sake God made Jesus *to be sin*” by incorporating us, with all of our sins, into his body on the cross, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” In Baptism we “died in him,” were “buried with him,” “raised with him,” and “seated with him in the heavenly places.” And when Christ comes in glory at the end of time, he will appear in us, who together will “form that perfect man who is Christ come to full stature.” When the host is lifted up at Mass, we are in that host, in the Body that is made present.¹

In the *Presentation of Gifts*, we “present ourselves” for this, represented by the bread and wine, to be placed on the altar and offered with Christ. Although we sometimes call the *Presentation of Gifts* the “Offertory,” it is only a preliminary: the real offering is made during the *Eucharistic Prayer*.

Baptism itself is a preliminary gift of self, one completed by the sacrament of Confirmation. In Baptism we are entirely given. We “die” in Christ and “rise” in him as a “new creation,” sharing in the life of God. We “become Christ” as full members of the Church, his body on earth. Still, it is clear in the *Acts of the Apostles* that the Church considers Baptism incomplete without the “Gift of the Spirit,” just as the Church was “incomplete” until Pentecost. Jesus “gave birth” to the Church on the cross. In his dying and rising redemption was accomplished. But the Church was not formed or mature enough to be “sent” until the Spirit came.

In this Gift the divine life of Baptism becomes *visible* in our actions. And it is associated with being “sent” as *witnesses* of the Good News. That is what a “witness” is: someone whose visible behavior or style of life raises “irresistible questions” that cannot be answered without the proclamation of the Gospel. That is what it means to be a *prophet*.²

In *Acts*, if the Gift of the Spirit was not made manifest at Baptism, it was given later through the “laying on of hands” by an Apostle. We associate this today with the sacrament of Confirmation, in which a bishop, as head of the local church and inheritor of the mission of the Twelve, “confirms” or certifies, that the Church recognizes one’s Baptism as “complete,” and makes it complete by the “laying on of hands.” We were already “saved” as graded members of Christ and of the Church, but now we are officially accepted. And urged to be *mature*.

Grace is life. It *grows* gradually, and reaches maturity in *mission*, just as human life reaches maturity when society judges that one is sufficiently developed to take on adult responsibilities and go to work! This was Paul’s point when he urged the Corinthians to “grow up” by making it their focus to “build up the Church.”³

The first act of “building up the Church” is to bear *witness* to the Good News by letting grace, the life of the risen Jesus within us, become *visible* in our actions. That is witness. For that the Spirit is given. That is what it means to be a “prophet.” And to this is we commit ourselves anew in the *Presentation of Gifts*.

¹ *1Corinthians* 15:18; *2Corinthians* 5:21; *Romans* 6:8; *Ephesians* 1:10, 2:6, 4:7-16; *Colossians* 2:12, 3:1.

² *Luke* 24:48-49; *Acts* 1:8; 2:8; 8:14-17; 10:44-47; 19:2-6; Pope Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, nos. 21, 42; *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, “Confirmation Within Mass.” Homily, no. 22; The Laying on of Hands, nos. 24-25.

³ *1Corinthians*, chapters 12-14.

E pluribus unum

Acts 2: 1-11 tells us that for the Jewish feast of Pentecost—one of the three major festivals: Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, that called for a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem:¹ —“they were all in one place together.” Presumably, this means all the “believers” who *Acts* 1:15 says “numbered about one hundred twenty persons.” When the Spirit came, “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.”

At the Tower of Babel pride led to conflicts, violence and eventual dispersion—which in time led to different languages and inability to communicate. In our day every peer group speaks the special “language of its culture,” which both teaches and distorts truth, restricting our ability to understand other people and God himself. God’s answer to all this is to pour out his Spirit on the “prophets.” These are all the believers who accept their baptismal consecration as prophets and stand up in the power of the “Gift of the Spirit” to challenge the assumptions of their culture, including unexamined teachings and practices of “cultural Catholicism” that the Second Vatican Council “urges all concerned to remove or correct” in the measure that they are abusive, excessive or defective.²

The *Presentation of Gifts* encourages us to trust that, as the bread and wine we bring forward will be transformed into the divine Body and Blood of Christ, we who, like bread, are “fruit of the earth and the work of human hands” can also be transformed and empowered to speak the “language of the Spirit” that reunites the dispersed and divided members of the human race. This is the promise of Eucharist: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”³

Losing ourselves to be found as one

1Corinthians 12: 3-13 reminds us that the Spirit unifies:

There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, varieties of services, but the same Lord, varieties of activities, but the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

The Spirit is given to individuals for the good of the whole community: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” And so in the *Presentation of Gifts* we are brought forward as separate hosts, but pledged to be one bread, one Body in Christ.

Through locked doors

Prophets can polarize. Those who march by a different drummer can throw those in line out of step. So it is significant that **John 20:19-23** tells us Jesus came through “locked doors.” Those who fear the challenge of truth and freedom will divide into clinging groups of partisans — hiding behind locked doors, employing both offensive and defensive tactics for the preservation of their inertia. Jesus sent his Spirit into the Church for deliverance from sin and fear: “Peace.... As the Father has sent me, so I send you.... Whose sins you forgive are forgiven.” The prophets say, as Jesus did, “Peace be with you.” But there is no true peace, or unity, except in truth and freedom. If the prophets break through locked doors, it is to deliver. “*Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.*”

¹ See *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1968, on *Exodus* 23:14-17 and J. McKenzie, S.J., *Dictionary of the Bible*: Pentecost was the “day of first fruits” of the grain harvest and became “the anniversary of the giving of the law to Moses”; hence a “renewal of the covenant.” For us it is the day of first fruits of the New Covenant, the “birthday of the universal Church.”

² See Vatican II: *The Church*, nos. 48, 51.

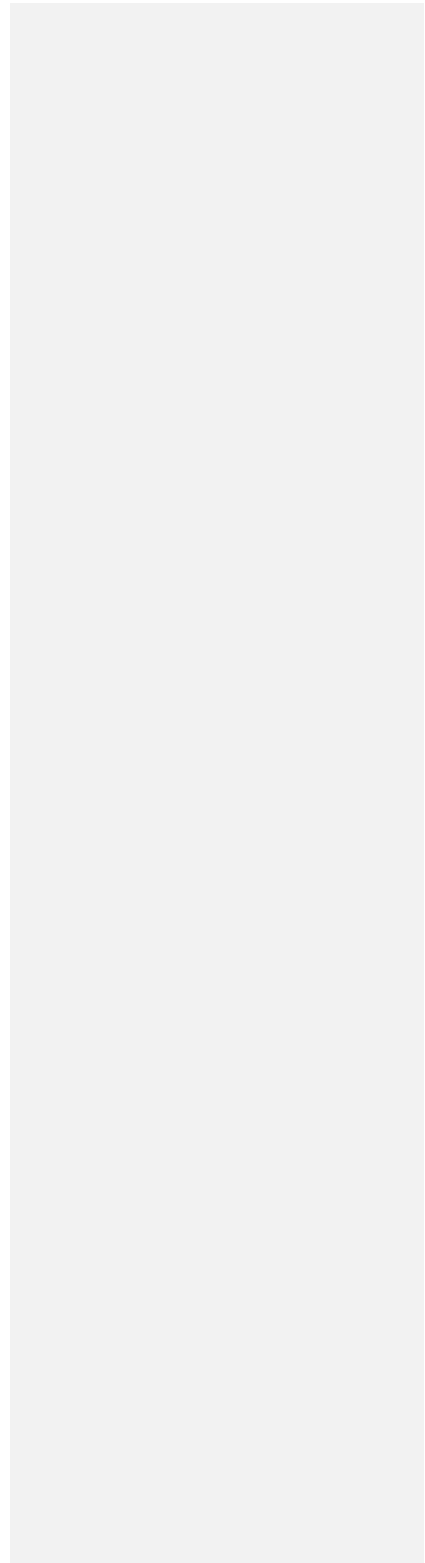
³ *1Corinthians* 10:17.

Insight

What does the Presentation of Gifts express for you now?

Initiative

During the *Presentation of Gifts* recommit to your Baptism and specifically to your baptismal consecration as *prophet*.



June 9, 2014

Monday, Week Ten

(Daily Gospels are from Matthew through week 21).

1Kings 17: 1-6 begins two weeks of readings about Elijah, the prophet whose image John the Baptizer modified (*Luke 1:17; Matthew 17:12*) and who some people assumed Jesus to be (*Matthew 16:14*). In this reading he is in hiding for prophesying drought to Ahab, but the Lord provides for his needs. The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us what to focus on: “*Our help is from the Lord, who made heaven and earth*” (*Psalm 121*). Both readings teach us to look to God for security and wellbeing, not to anything on this earth.

Matthew 5: 1-12: The first teaching of Jesus that Matthew reports was not for the “crowds.” When Jesus “saw the crowds, he went up the mountain” with a smaller group, his “disciples,” and “sat down” with them to teach them his “New Law.” The “crowd” was not yet ready to hear it. So we should read the “Sermon on the Mount” expecting to be shocked!

Jesus begins with a series of statements that contradict basic assumptions everyone takes for granted. He says that the “poor in spirit,” the “lowly classes, whose spirit is crushed by their need and by oppression” (John McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*) are “blessed.”

Let’s be real! Who believes that?

The “poor in spirit,” in every age and social condition, are those who are powerless. Or, by extension, who, because of some recognized inadequacy, deeply realize they haven’t “got it made.” Is that what we want? Jesus says it opens us to accept the “kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus goes further. He says those who “mourn” are blessed. Do we believe that? Do we believe that if we open our eyes and let ourselves be afflicted by what is wrong with the world, and frankly face our own sins and sorrows, fears and anxieties, we will be “comforted” by deeper truth, by promises we can rely on?

Do we really think that the “blessed” on this earth are those who are avid in the pursuit of holiness? Is this the ruling priority in most Christians’ lives? In yours? More than getting educated for affluence? Achieving social acceptance? Earning promotion? Financial security?

Would Jesus have invited you and me into the circle of his special “disciples” to tell us the whole truth about his teaching? Or do we fit in better with the “crowd”?

The question has been answered. By Jesus. He told his apostles, “Go make disciples of *all* nations... teaching them to obey *everything* that I have commanded you.” No secrets. We are all called to be his disciples. Everyone is invited to the banquet table, to the whole meal. The truth is given, available to us in the Gospel. All we have to do is sit down and eat. And assimilate. Read, think, discuss and pray.

Then live it out in prophetic witness to the world.

Initiative: Be a prophet-in-training: Read the “Sermon on the Mount” with an open mind and heart.

David Knight 5/5/09 6:49 AM

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June 10, 2014
Tuesday, Week Ten

The *Responsorial Psalm* asks: “*Lord, let your face shine on us*” (*Psalm 4*). If we truly know God — if we “see his face” — we will both receive light and reflect light. Everybody wins.

In **1Kings 17: 7-16** God sends Elijah to a poor widow so that she can take care of him. But it works both ways. Because she had enough trust and love to provide for him out of her inadequate resources — she and her child were facing starvation! — God made sure she and her son were provided for also.

With God, “what goes around comes around.” Jesus says in *Luke 6:38*: “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

That is easy to believe when we give from our abundance. But what about giving when we ourselves do not have enough to live on? Or enough energy to get through the day? Or enough faith ourselves to build up others? Hardly enough feeling for the Church ourselves to stay in it, much less invite others?

Jesus says, “Give, and it will be given to you.” The “jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.” Your faith and love will last until he renews your devotion.

In **Matthew 5: 13-16** Jesus shocks us. He says, “You are the light of the world!” Is that how you think of yourself? Of the rest of the Church? When we pray, “*Lord, let your face shine on us*,” Jesus answers: “I will do it through your face. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see goodness in your acts and give praise to your Father in heaven.”

For this it is not enough to keep the rules. Pope Paul VI pinpointed the principle of Christian witness: “The first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life” by people who “radiate faith in values that go *beyond current values*.... [who] stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them?” (*Evangelization in the Modern World*, nos. 14, 41). This is what it means to be the “light of the world.”

What about all the people — including Christians disenfranchised by choice — who have lost their taste for “religion”? Or who never did “taste and see that the LORD is good” (*Psalm 34:8*) — at least not in church? If for them the “salt has lost its taste, how can its flavor be restored?”

Jesus is counting on us to do that. By living the Gospel radically — that is, authentically. By becoming so filled with the light of his truth ourselves that it will shine out in our actions and “give light to all in the house.” And to all outside as well! For this we need to be *disciples* and *prophets*.

Initiative: Be the light of the world. Look on the face of God in the Gospels until his face shines in you.

June 11, 2014
Wednesday, Week Ten

1Kings 18: 20-39 shows us the prophet Elijah at his best — and the next verse, expurgated from the Mass readings, shows him at his worst.

Elijah, simply by calling on the Lord, won a great victory over the prophets of Baal. After they spent all morning dancing around and gashing themselves to get their god to set fire to an offering on the altar, Elijah with a simple prayer brought down fire from heaven to consume it. Good. This confirms the *Responsorial Psalm*: “*Keep me safe, O God, you are my hope*” (*Psalm 16*). But then, in the verse the Church chooses not to read at Mass, Elijah said to the people, “Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.” And “Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.”

This was the “old Elijah.” whose image God profoundly modified in John the Baptizer (see Monday, above, and *Luke 1:17; Matthew 17:12*). The “new Elijah” did not kill. Rather, he was killed as the precursor, not only of Jesus’ coming but also of his death. When the Father delivered his only Son to death for us, and Jesus went without resistance to the cross, a new meaning was added to the words, “*Keep me safe, O God, you are my hope.*” God does keep us safe, but not necessarily in a way we can immediately identify. And he is our “hope,” not just for our earthly existence, but for a fulfillment beyond our wildest dreams. One that lasts forever, in comparison with which our time on this earth is less than an eyeblink. The Resurrection of Jesus changed the meaning of “life,” “death,” and “safety” at their roots.

In **Matthew 5: 17-19** Jesus tells us, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.” Jesus didn’t “abolish” the significance of Elijah’s victory. He didn’t subtract anything from what God did, or from what God expressed through it.

The Scripture does not say God inspired Elijah to execute the prophets of Baal. That was something inspired by his culture. Like the Christians, Catholic and Protestant, who in misguided zeal for their religion put each other to death during the Protestant Reformation, Elijah was acting on his own.

Jesus came, “not to abolish but to fulfill.” In John the Baptizer and in himself, prophetic courage was purified of violence. In Christianity, the highest example of “witnesses” to the faith are not those who stamp out error in others by force or power, but those who suffer and even die in testimony to their belief. The word “martyr” — a Christian translation of the Greek word for “witness” — now refers only to those who bear witness at cost to themselves.

Jesus is talking about his New Law when he continues: “Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” From now on, Christians must “break” with their culture. And teach others to do so. That is prophetic witness.

Initiative: Be a prophet: Renounce and denounce violence in every form.

June 12, 2014
Thursday, Week Ten

In **1Kings 18: 41-46** Elijah trusted that it was going to rain before he ever saw it. Although his servant climbed the mountain seven times to look, he saw nothing more forming over the sea than “a little cloud no bigger than a person’s hand.” But Elijah knew. He sent word to Ahab, “Harness your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.” When The *Responsorial Psalm* declares: “*It is right to praise you in Zion, O God*” (*Psalm 65*), it doesn’t mean we should wait for “signs and wonders,” or even a visible answer to our prayers before we praise and thank God. God doesn’t have to prove himself; he simply is all Good, caring and providing for us with infinite love. Always. It is what he is. And now, because we share in his divine life by grace, we are called to be like him — in thought, word and deed. And to believe we can.

This is the key to the “New Law” Jesus teaches in **Matthew 5: 20-25**. He rewrites all the commandments, beginning with “You shall not murder.” The “righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees” was simply to live as good human beings. The New Law calls us to live on the level of God. So we are breaking his law if we are even (willfully) “angry” or insulting to others, even in the privacy of our own minds. Jesus refers to others as our “brothers and sisters” to remind us that we need to see others as our Father in heaven sees them – and us. We break his commandment whenever we choose not to look at others with the same respect and love God has for them. If we won’t do this, then no matter how “religious” we appear to be, we simply do not know God: “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (*1John 4:8*).

John goes further. He says that by the very fact that we “hate a brother or sister” we are “murderers” (*1John 3:15*). Strong words. He says haters do not have “eternal life abiding in them” — that is, the “grace,” of sharing in God’s divine life. And they do not recognize God’s life in others. In their minds they have taken that life away from them, “killed” them in their perception.

In his New Law Jesus reaffirms what God emphatically taught his People from the beginning: that, our prayers and devotions do not please God if our hearts are not conformed to his. “When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister.” What God wants most of all, after our undivided love for him, is that we should love one another. If we keep all the rest of his commandments, but don’t try above all to love others and express our love to them, none of the rest counts for very much (*Amos 5:11-22; Matthew 22:37-39; 1Corinthians 13:1-3*).

Jesus summarized his New Law in one sentence: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another... just as I have loved you” (*John 13:34*). This is a law for living on the level of God. Without faith in grace the New Law is impossible.

Initiative: Make God’s life visible in you by thinking and loving like God.

June 13, 2014
Friday, Week Ten

In **Matthew 5: 27-32** Jesus rewrites the commandment, “You shall not commit adultery,” which proclaims a value even non-religious people recognize. But Jesus takes sexual morality up to the level of God. He says that if we even look at anyone with lust we have already committed adultery on the level of the heart. Why? Because by his New Law those who are divine by grace must not look at anybody except as God does. We must live, think, speak and act always on the level of God.

And the stakes are higher. In Judaism sins were seen as crimes against the community and punished on this earth. But the Old Testament was vague about the after life. Some Jews did not even believe in it (*Luke 20:27*). So when Jesus speaks of sins being punished after death — “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out... it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” — the corollary of this is that a good life is rewarded forever in heaven. That is good news! The New Law is a law for people who share the divine life of God now and are called to share it forever. That gives a new perspective to everything.

In applying this perspective to marriage, Jesus takes up a problem much on our minds today: “I say to you that anyone who divorces... causes... adultery. And whoever marries a divorced [person] commits adultery.” We tend to interpret and argue about this on the practical level of legal precisions: just what, exactly, is allowed and forbidden, and with what consequences. Necessary as this might be as a practical response to questions that arise within the Christian community, it distracts us from what Jesus is doing in the “Sermon on the Mount.” Its tone, language and intent are not those of a legal document. In his New Law Jesus is raising our sights to the level of God’s ideals, God’s values, God’s desires for those whom he exhorts to “Be perfect... as your heavenly Father is perfect.” We need to look, admire, absorb and be inspired. The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us the attitude we should bring to reading the Sermon on the Mount: “*I long to see your face, O Lord*” (*Psalm 27*).

In **1Kings 19: 9-16** Elijah feels that. He is scared, discouraged, and depressed. He tells God, “The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets... I alone am left, and they are seeking my life....” So God told him, “Go out and stand on the mountain... for the LORD is about to pass by.”

Then there was a “great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains... and after the wind an earthquake...and after the earthquake a fire.” But the LORD was not in any of them. Finally there was “a sound of sheer silence.” When Elijah heard it, he “wrapped his face in his mantle.” He knew it was the LORD.

God is mystery, above and beyond any created knowledge, manifestations or power. The full answer to our human problems is ultimately inexpressible. We just need to live with that.

Initiative: Face your problems. But seek their answer in the face of God.

June 14, 2014
Saturday, Week Ten

In **Matthew 5: 33-37** Jesus rewrites the commandment “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (*Exodus* 20:16), expanded in *Leviticus* (19:11-12) to “You shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another [or] swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God.” Jesus adds: “but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.”

Jesus takes us far beyond this. First he says not to swear by any creature in heaven or on earth, because that is indirectly to swear by God the Creator and Ruler of all things. Nor should we swear by anything in ourselves — not by our “head, for you cannot make one hair white or black” — or logically, by our “honor” or anything else presumed to have importance for us (such as, “I swear on my mother’s grave”), because nothing in us or dear to us has any ultimate importance except from its relationship to God. In fact, he says, “Do not swear at all... Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

Is Jesus making a “rule” here? No. He is simply teaching us to be and to live on the level of God. That is his New Law. His commandment is not just to avoid the “sin” of speaking falsely or irreverently. He wants us to realize that every word we speak carries the sacredness of the words of God, not only because we are made in God’s image, being able to utter rational words, but because we are divine, endowed with God’s life and Spirit. Our words should be as true and reliable as the words of God himself (see *Isaiah* 55:10-11).

The author of *Hebrews* (6:13-16) acknowledges the cultural practice: “Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute.” Jesus is saying that if we assume our words should need more validation than God’s do, we are implicitly denying we are divine!

1Kings 19:19-21 shows us the importance of words as commitment. Elisha, when called, must respond. And Elijah will accept only immediate, unconditional and undivided response to his call. Jesus is the same. He will not accept anyone as a disciple whose commitment is divided between him and possessions, family ties, social customs, or the preservation of life itself (see *Matthew* 8:19-22; 19:21; *Luke* 14:33).

Our “words” of response and commitment create us. Like the words of God who said at creation, “Let there be... And it was so” (*Genesis* 1:1-30), when we speak words of free choice we become what we choose to be: honest or dishonest, loving or hateful, liars or reliable. The choice Jesus calls us to make at Baptism is radical and all-inclusive. The *Responsorial Psalm* declares it: “*You are my inheritance, O Lord*” (*Psalms* 16). We live for nothing else but him. That is our final word.

Initiative: Be a prophet: Let every “word” you speak — verbally or in action — bear witness to the values of Jesus Christ.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: PENTECOST (Year A)

The Church calls Eucharist “the source and summit of the Christian life.” So in the measure we understand it, we understand the full mystery of the Good News.

We begin to express this mystery explicitly in the *Presentation of Gifts*, when we bring up bread and wine to be transformed into the body and blood of Christ.

Invitation:

During the *Presentation of Gifts* recommit to your Baptism and specifically to your baptismal consecration as *prophet*.

Ask yourself in prayer and others in discussion: How could the statements below make Mass mean more if we stay aware of them during Mass?

In the *Presentation of Gifts* we are asking that we might be “poured out,” like the water and wine, to be “lost and found” in sharing Christ’s divinity, as he was “poured out” in his Incarnation to be “lost and found” in our humanity.

We can share “more” in God’s life only by *surrendering* ourselves more completely to his divine life within us.

The formula for this surrender is to *let grace express itself in and through our physical words and actions*. This lets his life become more *visible* in our actions, which is the definition of Christian *witness*, to which we are committed as *prophets*.

The Eucharist is also the mystery of our presence “in Christ.” We were *in* the body that hung on the cross. We are in the Body made present and lifted up at Mass.

In the “Gift of the Spirit” the divine life of Baptism becomes *visible* in our actions. It is associated with the sacrament of Confirmation and with being “sent” as *witnesses* of the Good News.

The life of grace reaches maturity in *mission*, just as human life reaches maturity when one is sufficiently developed to able to generate life and to go to work.

The first act of “building up the Church” is to bear *witness* to the Good News by letting grace, the life of the risen Jesus within us, become *visible* in our actions. We commit ourselves to this anew in Confirmation and in the *Presentation of Gifts*.

The *Presentation of Gifts* encourages us to trust that, as the bread and wine will be transformed into the divine Body and Blood of Christ, we can also be transformed and empowered to speak the divine “language of the Spirit” that reunites the dispersed and divided members of the human race.

The Spirit is given to individuals for the good of the whole community. And so in the *Presentation of Gifts* we are brought forward as separate hosts, but pledged to be one bread, one Body in Christ.

Jesus sent his Spirit into the Church for deliverance from sin and fear: “Peace.... As the Father has sent me, so I send you.... Whose sins you forgive are forgiven.”

Initiatives:

Let the *Presentation of Gifts* remind you of Easter, Baptism, Pentecost, Confirmation.

Next: Trinity Sunday, June 15: the PRIEST booklet, followed by Monday of Week 11

What has this booklet done for you?

These reflections were designed to help you deepen your appreciation of the Mass, focusing on the *Presentation of Gifts*, which is the transition from the *Liturgy of the Word* to the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*. This is a moment of *recommitment* to Baptism and Confirmation, and to our sacramental anointing as *prophets*.

By this anointing, we were committed to bear *witness* to Christ as his risen body on earth, and we received the promise of “power from on high” — the Gift of the Holy Spirit. Through significant, conscious, personal recommitment during the *Presentation of Gifts* we enter into the experience of this Gift.

Look back and review what you have seen, asking in particular how you have responded in *choices*. Remember, the effectiveness of input is measured by the authenticity of output.

- How much time did you spend reading and praying over these reflections? Did you come to enjoy this moment in your day?
- Did they motivate you to pay special *attention* to the words and gestures of the *Presentation of Gifts* at Mass?
- What do you know now about sharing in the *mission* of the Church as *prophet* that you didn't know before?
- **More specifically...**
 - When the bread and wine are brought forward to be placed on the altar, do you affirm them as representing yourself and symbolically place yourself on the altar with them?
 - Do you recognize the words, “which earth has given and human hands have made” as describing yourself, created by God and formed by your choices?
 - Do the words, “It will become for us the Bread of life” remind you that Baptism made you divine, a sharer in the divine life of God?
 - Does the mingling of the water and wine express to you the mystery of the mingling of the divine and the human in Christ by his Incarnation and in yourself by Baptism?
 - Does the pouring of the water and wine increase your desire to be “poured out” to be “lost and found” in Christ's divinity as he was poured out to be lost and found in our humanity?
 - When you stand for the prayer, “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands...” are you consciously affirming your participation in this Eucharistic celebration and in the life and mission of the Church?

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for your Year-Long
(and Life-Long)
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• **A Theme Booklet** (ideal for six or more weeks of **group discussion**). This booklet explains simply but in depth how the *five mysteries and promises of Baptism* are celebrated in each of five parts of the Mass. It provides practical steps to make the Eucharist the “source and summit” of your Christian life and will enhance your experience of Mass throughout the entire Church year.

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