

Step One of the *Immersed in Christ* series



BE CHRIST

*by letting Christ act
with you, in you, and through you
in everything you do.*

Appreciating and Accepting Jesus as Savior

By David M. Knight

***May the grace and peace of the Christmas season be with you, my friend!
And may Advent be a time of looking and longing that stimulates light and
love!***

This little booklet is meant to foster in a practical way a process of spiritual growth designed to help you — and every person in the world! — to grow to the “perfection of love.”

This booklet has reflections for every day during Advent and the Christmas season. They are based on the readings read at Mass each day. But there is a spin to them!

The reflections focus on whatever I can find in the readings that speaks to the theme of appreciating and using Jesus as the Savior, not just of our “souls,” but of our life on *this earth*: family and social life, school life, work and politics. Their aim is to facilitate the kind of *interaction* with Jesus Christ that will “save” every area and activity of our lives from “veering off” toward *destructiveness, distortion, mediocrity and meaninglessness*. A good theme for Advent and Christmas.

This booklet is also a practical follow-up to help live out Step One in my book *Reaching Jesus — Five Steps to a Fuller Life* — the introductory or “flagship” book for the spiritual growth plan *Immersed in Christ*. I hope you will love it, use it and enjoy it!!

Merry Christmas and a growthful New Year!

In His love,
David

December 1, 2013

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, (YEAR A)

Jesus Gives Fulfillment in Life

Appreciating and Accepting Jesus as:

“Son of David” — the fulfillment of all God’s promises

Inventory

Where do I seek my fulfillment in life? What am I focused on? What do I think about, dream about, most often? What do I think God can or will do for me? Is it what he really promised? (This is not just our question; Jesus asks this of every person on earth. See *John* 1:38).

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* puts words in our mouth that invite us to ask if they are really in our hearts: “*To you, my God, I lift up my soul... No one who waits for you is ever put to shame* (or disappointed).” How often do I really “lift up my soul” to God

In the *Opening Prayer* we ask God to “increase our strength of will” – that is, motivate us — so that “Christ may find an eager welcome” in our hearts. But what do we ask God to motivate us to do? It is to “lift up our hearts” in longing for Christ, in expectation that Jesus will open to us the way to fulfillment in life, the way to happiness on this earth as well as in heaven. (Before the *Preface* we will be invited again: “Lift up your hearts!” and we will answer, “We lift them up to the Lord”).

What does it mean to “lift up our hearts”? The *Alternate Opening Prayer* tells us. It means to tell God consciously that “our hearts desire the warmth of your love.” Telling God this makes us aware of it.

We also need to tell him, “Our minds are searching for the light of your Word.” We have to realize that this is what our minds really are searching for.

Whether we are conscious of it or not, our minds are constantly scanning all of reality, monitoring all our experiences, looking for something to settle on: a truth to rest in, a goal that promises satisfaction, a desire that fills the soul.

St. Augustine said: “Our hearts are restless, O God, and they shall not rest until they rest in Thee!” If we know this consciously, and explicitly affirm it in our minds, it will “increase our longing for Christ our Savior.” We will have a clear picture of fulfillment to focus on. (The answer the human heart spontaneously gives when Jesus asks, “What are you looking for?” is “*Where does God dwell?*” See *John* 1:38).

There is hope:

Isaiah 2:1-5 announces that our desires, our longings to be filled and satisfied by God, are not just hopeless illusions. God promises to come “pitch his tent” among us, to take up residence on earth in a place where we can find him.

The “Lord’s house” shall be established on the mountain top, where everyone can see it. And “all nations shall stream toward it.” Now, to those who ask, “Lord, where do you dwell?” he answers, “Come and see” (see *John* 1:38-39).

Why do we come to church? What are we looking for on Sunday mornings? Isaiah tells us we come because our hearts within us are saying, “Come, let us climb the Lord’s mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob, that *he may instruct us in his ways and we may walk in his paths.*”

If we learn God’s ways and walk in his paths, it is not just interior satisfaction and personal peace that we will experience. We will also find *hope* that there can be peace in the world, “peace on earth.”

We will find reason to hope that the divisions and violence in our world can be replaced by unity and love. In the measure that all nations begin to “walk in the light of the Lord,” people will begin to “beat their swords into

ploughshares.” The senseless outpouring of national resources into the “arms race,” the production of weapons of mass destruction, will stop. Nor will we “train for war again.” Instead of living in fear and preoccupation with “national security,” we will “go rejoicing to the house of the Lord” (*Responsorial Psalm*). There will be “peace within our walls, prosperity in our buildings.” When we have chosen to be “brothers and sisters and friends” to all people, the Lord will say, “Peace be within you.”

Wake-up!

Matthew 24:37-44 is a wake-up call. It may be that, like ordinary people in our culture, we have been caught up in “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage,” earning a living, taking care of our physical fitness, keeping the house clean, getting the car repaired, shopping, paying bills, getting the kids off to school and driving them to doctors’ appointments and sporting events, coping with a boss or with customers, and just trying to find a little relaxation at the end of the day.

But in the Gospel Jesus calls us to lift up our heads as well as our hearts; not to be buried and blinded by details. Jesus calls us to keep our faces above water, to look around, to be aware of the larger picture, to think about where we are going, what we are looking for in life, how it is all going to end.

God is out there also. But God doesn’t just stay “out there.” He comes to us constantly. He comes to us repeatedly, “at an hour you do not expect,” with inspirations and invitations, with enlightenment and encouragement. If we expect to recognize and respond to God when he comes to us at the hour of death, we need to recognize him and respond to him when he comes to us every day. “Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day [or at which moment of every day] your Lord will come.”

This is what Advent is all about. It is a time to shake ourselves free from encumbering preoccupations, to look around and to look up. It is a time to take stock, to look within our hearts and see what we find there: what desires, what longings, what faith and hope in their fulfillment. It is a time to look intently at the promises of God. It is a time to respond to love with love. It is a time to think about time.

If we act:

Romans 13:11-14 summons us to *act* in response to God’s message of hope. “It is the hour now for you to awake from sleep!” With a motivation born of new hope we will find the “strength of will” to “throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

If we have learned to “lift up our hearts to the Lord,” and to seek our true joy in “the warmth of his love” and “the light of his Word,” our driving desire will be to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” This is to seek fulfillment where it can be found.

Our goal will be union with Jesus, identification with him as his own body on earth, as sharers in his divine life. We will hear the goal, the focus, and the promise of our existence in the words of the *Greeting at Mass*: “May the *grace of our Lord Jesus Christ* (the favor of sharing in God’s own life), and the *love of God*, and *fellowship (communion) in the Holy Spirit* be with you all!”

What we will focus on now in our work, our social life, our personal development; what we will think about and dream about most often, will be to grow into a greater *experience of grace*, into a deeper *experience of love*, into an all-embracing *communion* of mind and will and heart with God and with all people in the “fellowship of the Holy Spirit.”

We will be more attuned to the voice of our own hearts crying, “Come, let us climb the Lord’s mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob, that *he may instruct us in his ways and we may walk in his paths.*” This is the path to fulfillment.

Insight: *Do I really believe that by interacting with Jesus, I can find more fulfillment in my home life? Social life? School or professional life? What would this change?*

Initiative: *How can I — no, how will I — use the time of Advent to make all my time on earth more fulfilling?* (This is the time for some concrete choices!)

December 2, 2013

MONDAY, first week in Advent:

The *Responsorial Psalm* is a key to the readings: “Let us go rejoicing to the house of the Lord” (*Psalms* 122).

We rejoice because **Isaiah 4:2-6** tells us that through the gift of Jesus “the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious.... and whoever... remains in Jerusalem will be called holy.” The Church may be going through difficult days. The world may be torn by divisions and conflict. But those who attach themselves to Jesus Christ will find joy in life, even in the midst of suffering, and arrive at the fulfillment Jesus promises: “life to the full” (*John* 10:10). Nothing can prevent this. Nothing can take it away from us so long as we remain “in Christ,” interacting with him in his Church, the New Jerusalem, who is being “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (*Revelation* 21:2). This is a promise: God’s *promise* of fulfillment through Jesus Christ.

But we have to “go... to the house of the Lord.” In **Matthew 8:5-11** the centurion had to *approach* Jesus. Jesus healed his servant only after the centurion *interacted* with him. We need to ask for Jesus’ help and also interact with him in every area of our lives in order to bring that area of our lives to fulfillment.

Isn’t it true that for most of us there are areas of life in which we feel unfulfilled— not because we aren’t doing what we should, and doing it fairly successfully, but because something is lacking; something is leaving us unsatisfied?

It may be that our own faults or the faults of others keep us from being as happy as we want. Perhaps something in us is “lying... paralyzed,” or even “in terrible distress.” Or it may be just that, on a level deeper than ordinary human interaction and higher than normal human expectations, our hearts may be feeling a call, a longing for something more, for evidence of a divine dimension, for assurance that there is eternal value in what we do.

This is where we are asked to *believe* in Jesus as the “Son of David” who brings all of God’s promises to fulfillment. We do not have to live lives of mediocre joy. If we give Jesus an active part in all we do, we can find joy and fulfillment in everything, regardless of what others do. And we may even be able to bring others to a higher level of response if we let Jesus as Savior act with us, act in us, act through us. This is something to *believe in* and to *strive for* during Advent. “Let us go rejoicing to the house of the Lord.”

Initiative: If you seek fulfillment, seek it where it can be found. *Interact* with Jesus. Before every action say, “Lord, do this with me, do this in me, do this through me” (memory aid: WIT).

December 3, 2013

TUESDAY, first week in Advent:

The *Responsorial* gives us the assurance and source of fulfillment: “Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace forever” (*Psalms* 72).

Isaiah 11:1-10 tells us justice shall flourish because “A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse [Jesus’ ancestor]... The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him. He shall judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the land’s afflicted. There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord as water covers the sea.”

The root and beginning of all justice and peace, all renewal of Church, government and society, is the *knowledge of Jesus*: his knowledge shared with us, our intimate knowledge of him as a person, our knowledge and acceptance of his knowledge as Light of the world. If we want our lives to have meaning and value on earth, we have to begin with this: getting to know Jesus, understanding his mind and heart.

Jesus said all fulfillment consists in this: “This is eternal life, that they may *know you*, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (*John* 17:3).

Luke 10: 21-24 tells us that only through Jesus can we know the Father as he is, and only through the Holy Spirit can we truly know Jesus: “No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son — and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.” But because we have become “sons and daughters in the Son” by Baptism, true children of God, we can know the Father as the Son does: “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (*Galatians* 4:6). Through the actions of the Word of God made flesh, through the words of God recorded in Scripture, and through the Spirit poured out in our hearts, we can know God. In this knowledge is our fulfillment and the renewal of the world.

We don’t have to be super-smart or super-educated to know God. What is “hidden from the wise and the intelligent” God reveals even to little children — and to all who come to him with the openness of children. We just have to come to him.

Advent is an invitation to do this so that “Justice shall flourish in our time, and fullness of peace forever.”

Initiative: If you seek fulfillment, seek it where it can be found. *Know Jesus.* Set aside some time to commune with Jesus. Choose a time of day and a place where you can be quiet and peaceful. Read his words; ask yourself what they tell you about the mind and heart of God, what meaning they have for your life, how you can live them out in practice. Let yourself be “filled with knowledge of the Lord as water covers the sea.” This is the path to fulfillment.

December 4, 2013

WEDNESDAY, first week in Advent:

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us where to look for fulfillment: “*I shall live in the house of the Lord all my life*” (*Psalm 23*).

We grow to fulfillment by being *with Jesus*. And this is only possible because he *came* to be with us: “The Word became flesh and lived among us [literally, “pitched his tent among us”], and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth” (*John 1:14*).

Isaiah 25: 6-10 tells us: “*On this mountain* the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food.... This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.”

In **Matthew 15: 29-37** Jesus does what was promised: He “*went up the mountain....* Great crowds came to him... the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others.... and he cured them... Then Jesus said, ‘I have compassion for the crowd.... I do not want to send them away hungry....’ ”

So the disciples canvassed the crowd and came up with seven loaves of bread “and a few small fish,” which Jesus “*took... and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.*” And all were filled.”

Any Christian would recognize this formula as the words of consecration repeated in every Mass: Jesus “*took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples, saying....*” The bread Jesus gives is his own flesh and blood, the living bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

Jesus’ promise is: “Whoever eats of this bread will live forever. Whoever *comes* to me will never be hungry, and whoever *believes* in me will never be thirsty. The bread that I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world” (see *John 6:33-51*).

Where Jesus is, the table is set. If we eat the Bread of life we will be filled. The Church is the “mountain on which the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food.” Jesus is the feast. He is our fulfillment and our joy. With him “we shall live in the house of the Lord all our life” both now and forever.

Initiative: If you seek fulfillment, seek it where it can be found. *Receive* Jesus. Every time you receive Communion (try for daily!), be aware of the mystery of the “Word made flesh” extended and given to us in the mystery of the “flesh under the appearances of bread.” Be conscious that in Communion your body is the “house of the Lord,” holding all you need for total fulfillment, eternal joy. With Jesus you “shall live in the house of the Lord all your life.” This is total fulfillment.

December 5, 2013

THURSDAY, first week in Advent:

The *Responsorial Psalm* points to our fulfillment: “*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*” (*Psalm 118*).

He who comes in the name of the Lord is Jesus. **Isaiah 26: 1-6** tells us that if the Lord is in our midst we have “a strong city.” We can “trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord God we have an everlasting rock.” But we have to open our hearts to him, If we do, then the gates to peace will be open to us: “Open up the gates to let in a nation that is just, one that keeps faith. A nation of firm purpose you keep in peace; in peace for its trust is in you.”

Jesus came as the promised “Son of David” to fulfill all of God’s promises (see *2Samuel 7: 11-17*). But he does not do this unilaterally, by a divine act of magic. God chooses to make the work of salvation depend on human response, human cooperation (see the invitation to Mary, *Luke 1:26-38*). The grace to cooperate is given to us, but we must use it.

Matthew 7: 21-27 tells us it is not those who just cry out, “Lord, Lord!” who will enter the kingdom of God, but only those who do the will of the Father. It is true that “in the Lord God we have an everlasting rock,” but this does us no good unless we build on it. “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.” But those who do not base their lives on Christ’s words, those who do not act on them, “will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand.”

Jesus came to fulfill all of God’s promises to the human race, to offer us total, all-satisfying fulfillment in this life and the next. But to be fulfilled by Jesus we must fill ourselves with his words: read them, reflect on them, accept them as true and build our life on them. We have to let his words be made flesh in us in action.

Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (*John 14:6*). He is the fullness of *life* for us, but only if we fully accept his *truth* and faithfully try, at least, to follow his *way*. If we intend to receive him into our daily lives, to make him welcome, to give him an active part in everything we do — in our home and school and social life, our business and politics — then we can say with true joy and celebration: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Initiative: If you seek fulfillment, seek it where it can be found. *Respond* to Jesus. During Advent, try to make at least one decision a day based explicitly and consciously on God’s word. (For this you need to read or recall it and reflect on it).

December 6, 2013

FRIDAY, first week in Advent:

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives us the guiding light to fulfillment: “*The Lord is my light and my salvation!*” (*Psalm 27*).

Isaiah 29: 17-24 tells us that the Lord leads us “out of gloom and darkness” and into fulfillment by making the deaf hear and the blind see. Then “those who err in spirit will come to understanding, and those who find fault will accept instruction.”

We are gloomy and we gripe because we don’t feel fulfilled. Life is frustrating because we are off course and society is off course. And there seems to be no remedy for it. But there is. There is light at the end of the tunnel.

Matthew 9:27-31 tells us Jesus is the remedy. Two men came to him who were blind. They weren’t just walking around with their eyes closed or looking in the wrong place. They were blind. They could not see. And Jesus healed them.

If we think we are hopelessly confused — or our society is — we are not really hoping in Jesus. He came to be the Light of the world. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” He is “the true light, which enlightens everyone” (*John 1: 4-14*). The light is here. It is available. If we come to Jesus he can enlighten us. If we just walk in his light we will get to where we really want to go.

But first we have to believe that Jesus really can enlighten us. He asked the two blind men, “Are you confident I can do this?” We have to ask ourselves whether we really do have confidence in him. If we don’t, we will listen bored to Christ’s words read at Mass and look at the example of his life without real attention. We won’t be listening to what we hear or really looking at what we see. We won’t have hope.

“The Lord is our light and our salvation!” If we let him be our light we will experience that he is our salvation. But he can’t be one without the other.

Initiative: If you seek fulfillment, seek it where it can be found. *Listen* to Jesus. The wise men (Magi) followed the light of a star and found Jesus. The shepherds listened to the song of the angels and found Jesus. Am I willing to listen to whatever will help me find him? Will I read Scripture? Will I listen in prayer to the voice of the Holy Spirit in my heart? Will I listen to the teaching of the Church? Am I willing to make a decision now about when, where and how I will do this?

December 7, 2013

SATURDAY, first week in Advent:

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us who will find fulfillment: “*Happy are all who long for the coming of the Lord!*” (*Isaiah 30:18* and *Psalms 147*).

Why is longing so important?

Isaiah 30: 19-26 tells us it is because the Lord can answer the prayers of those who really want them answered – if they are praying for what is important. “He will be gracious to you when you cry out. As soon as he hears he will answer you.” But we have to “cry out.” God has to hear urgency in our voices.

If we ask for true fulfillment in life — for light to see what we should do and for strength to do it — and really want what we ask for, God can give it to us. But if we don’t really want to be fulfilled — if we just want a halfway satisfying life on earth — then when Jesus offers us “life to the full” we won’t accept it.

If we say we want God’s guidance but really just want him to lead us down a path we have already chosen, then when God writes out the directions for us in Scripture we won’t read them. Then Jesus himself will be unable to guide us into happiness and fulfillment. He won’t be able to answer our prayers. We have to want what we pray for (and we can pray for this too!)

We also have to be willing to accept Jesus’ help, no matter how he gives it.

Matthew 9: 35 to 10:8 tells us that “at the sight of the crowds, Jesus’ heart was moved to pity...because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” He wanted to respond to their need, but knew that alone he could not. So he “summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority to expel unclean spirits, and to cure every sickness and disease.”

Then he sent them out with instructions to do what he was doing: “proclaim the good news.... Cure the sick, raise the dead, heal the lepers, expel demons.” Jesus can, and will fix whatever is wrong with the world. He can do it through his Church, his disciples. But people have to accept them. All the members of his Church have sins. If Jesus wants to help us badly enough to use sinful people, we have to want his help badly enough to accept it from them.

Jesus only sent his disciples to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” If any place was not ready to hear the Good News, the disciples should not announce it there. The Good News is a gift given freely, but it can only be given to those who want to receive it. The Jews had been prepared by centuries of Scripture and God-guided history. It took the death and resurrection of Jesus to open up the rest of the world. What opened me?

“*Happy are all who long for the coming of the Lord!*” The Lord will come to them! He will come because they long for him.

Initiative: If you seek fulfillment, seek it where it can be found. Long for Jesus. If you want Jesus to come to you more deeply during the Christmas season, to make himself more real to you, to let you experience “the warmth of his love” and “the light of his Word,” the key to receiving him is *desiring* him. How badly do you want him? What do you want him for? When did this begin in you?

This is what the season of Advent is for: to focus our hearts on our desires. Advent invites us to ask ourselves what it is we really want out of life.

It is a time to stop following blindly the beaten path of culture; a time to take our bearings, to look up to the heavens and chart a course by the stars — by the “fixed star,” which is Jesus. “*To you, my God, I lift up my soul...*”

Advent is an *invitation to prepare the way of the Lord*. Decide how you will do it.

Father in heaven, our hearts desire the warmth of your love and our minds are searching for the light of your Word. Increase our longing for Christ our Savior and give us strength to grow in love, that the dawn of his coming may find us rejoicing in his presence and welcoming the light of his truth. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord.

December 8, 2013

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT, (YEAR A)

Jesus Gives Meaning to Life

Appreciating and Accepting Jesus as:

“Son of David” — who gives a guiding goal to all human endeavor

Inventory

Where do I think the world is going? Do I feel empowered to affect it? What role do I think Jesus plays in the transformation of society?

The *Entrance Antiphon* is a summons to hope: “The Lord will come to save all nations.” Does my “heart exult” to hear this?

Input

The *Opening Prayer* reminds us that God is a God of both “power” (he *can* bring about changes in the world) and “mercy”(he *wants* to).

“God of mercy” reminds us that to “have mercy” means to “come to the aid of another out of a sense of *relationship*.” Because we are “in Christ” we are God’s *family*: children of the Father, brothers and sisters of one another. When people grow into such awareness of this relationship that all *power* on earth is used with *mercy*, we will all live together as one family in a world of justice and peace.

The *Alternate Opening Prayer* tells us the renewal of society has begun: “The day draws near when the glory of your Son will make radiant the night of the waiting world.” Christians believe it is happening now. It began with Jesus. The “reign of God” is at hand. Advent alerts us to this.

But there is opposition, both in our own hearts and in others. So we enter Advent with a prayer that the “lure of greed” will not keep us from God’s joy and “the darkness will not blind us” to his truth and wisdom.

The call of the King:

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives us the theme of the readings: “Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace forever.” It all begins with Jesus. This is our guiding goal.

Isaiah 11: 1-10 announced the birth of Jesus as the beginning of renewal: “A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse” (King David’s father). Jesus, as the promised “Son of David” (*2Samuel* 7: 11-17), will establish the reign of God on earth.

But Jesus will not rule like the governments we know. The “spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him” — not a spirit of violence and domination, or of short-sighted focus on only one nation’s prosperity and security. His will be a spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and courage, of knowledge enlightened by reverence for all that is sacred. “Not by appearance shall he judge,” or be swayed by the prejudices and pressures of the powerful He will “decide aright for the land’s afflicted.” He will bring justice and mercy to the world.

The result will be the reign of God on earth: “an eternal and universal kingdom, a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace” (*Preface* for the feast of Christ the King). The wolf shall lie down with the lamb, and there shall be “no harm or ruin on all God’s holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord as water covers the sea.”

“Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace forever.” But to bring this about we have to rally to

Jesus — gather with him, learn from him and work with him according to his spirit: the spirit described above. He is “set up as a signal for the nations.” Advent is a summons to answer his call.

New root, new fruit:

Matthew 3:1-12 is a call to reform our lives from the roots up. This is the necessary condition for the renewal of society. The call to accept and follow Jesus is a call to re-structure our lives. John the Baptizer begins his preaching with the word “repent,” which is a poor English translation of the Greek *metanoiete*. In Scripture, to “repent” means to change one’s mind, to change one’s direction in life. It is always a joyful word in Scripture, because it is always coupled with God’s promise to give us a “new heart and a new spirit,” and so bring us into the fullness of life (see *Ezekiel 11:19, 18:31*).

John calls us, not just to “repent” of recognized sins, but to go to the *root* of all our sins and change that: “The ax is lying at the root of the trees.” If we change the root, all the fruit will change. The call to accept the reign of God is a call to give God “root and fruit.”

The “good fruit” we are called to bear is not just acceptable human behavior. It is the fruit of grace, the life of God within us, and we can only give it by the power of the Holy Spirit poured out in our hearts. John was able to offer people a baptism that was a human gesture of repentance, of willingness to change. But he said this was just a preliminary: “The one coming after me is mightier than I... He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Jesus will bring about changes in us beyond our power to “ask or imagine” (*Ephesians 3:20*). And, working through us, he will bring into being on earth a kingdom of justice, love and peace equally beyond our power to ask or imagine. “Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace forever.”

But the condition for this is a conversion on our part that is “radical,” that touches the *roots* of our existence.

We return to the question: “In what do I seek fulfillment? Where do I expect to find happiness?” The answer gives direction to my life. The overall or ultimate *goal* I am aiming at is the deep root of every choice I make. What I choose to do springs from what I see as leading to a preferred and possible fulfillment. So I need to know consciously what “fulfillment” means for me.

One element of fulfillment is certainly the assurance that our lives are counting for something on earth; that our time here is not being wasted but is producing something of value.

What is more valuable than to work with Jesus Christ to bring about the reign of God on earth?

The kind of world that human efforts could never produce is promised and possible. Jesus has come to bring it about. This is the message of Advent: “*the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*” “Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace forever.”

To work with Jesus to bring this about can be the guiding goal of my life — if I choose to make it that. This week poses the question.

Trust and praise:

Romans 15: 4-9 tells us that if we accept the truth of Scripture and carry it out in action, we grow in hope. This is a hope based on *instruction* that addresses our intellects, *encouragement* that addresses our wills, and *perseverance* in living the Gospel that gives confirmation through experience. “Whatever was written previously was written for our instruction, that by endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

Paul is telling the early Christians, who were divided over issues of law-observance, that “love is the fulfilling of the law” (13:10), and so they should not be “quarreling over opinions” (14:1), but “pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (14:19). By keeping focused on what Jesus came to do, and by living in peace with each other, we will encourage each other to believe in God’s promises and in Jesus as fulfilling them.

But for us all to become aware of the Good News we have to *celebrate* it. Otherwise instruction can remain pure theory and Christian witness can go unnoticed. When Jesus came to “confirm the promises given to the patriarchs,” an important element in the process was that the Gentiles should “*glorify* God for his mercy.” That is why each of us must join the Psalmist in saying, “I will *praise* you among the Gentiles, and sing *praises* to

your name."

So that people might be *aware* that they believe and appreciate the Good News, Scripture insists on celebration: "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people," and "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, let all the peoples *praise* him."

Paul repeats Isaiah's prophecy: "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope." And he concludes, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." This is the spirit of Advent!

Insight

If I make it the goal of my life to help Jesus establish the reign of God on earth, how could this affect my home life? Social life? School or professional life? What changes can I dream of that are "far more than all we can ask or imagine"?

Initiative:

Write out the goal of your life. Can you see the connection between it and the major choices you have made in your family, social and professional life.

December 9, 2013

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

“My soul magnifies the Lord!”

Appreciating God “who has blessed us in Christ
with every spiritual blessing in the heavens.”

Inventory

Does the fact of the Immaculate Conception of Mary say anything to you about your own life? What is there in this feast that you feel like celebrating?

The *Entrance Antiphon* quotes *Isaiah* 61:10: “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” Are these words just for Mary, or can we all say them?

Input

Paul VI calls this feast is “a joint celebration” of three things: “of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, of the basic preparation for the coming of the Savior (*Isaiah* 11:1, 10), and of the happy beginning of the Church without spot or wrinkle.” This is a challenge to faith: can you really see yourself as “perfect” in heaven? Do you believe no trace of any sin you ever committed will remain? That you will be as totally free of sin and all its consequences as the Blessed Virgin Mary? That everyone there — in fact, the whole redeemed human race — will be “without spot or wrinkle,” totally without “blemish” or “blame”? Is that something to exult in?¹

The *Introductory Rites* at Mass call us to “rejoice in the Lord” for all he is and has done, but especially for the Good News. We would not understand the Good News nearly as well if it were not for the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. This feast clarifies what the end result of Christ’s coming will be for us.

The *Opening Prayer* tells us God let Mary “share beforehand in the salvation Christ would bring... and kept her sinless from the first moment of her conception.” The power to preserve is the power to restore. The *Preface* calls her “our pattern of holiness,” God’s “sign of favor to the Church in its beginning and the *promise of its perfection* as the bride of Christ, radiant in beauty.” What Mary was from the beginning of her life, we will be at the end of ours. The *Preface* for the feast of the Assumption, seeing in her “the “pattern of the Church in its perfection” and already the beginning of it realized, cries out to God in praise, “She is a “sign of hope and comfort for your people on their pilgrim way.” That is what we celebrate

The first reading from **Genesis 3:9-20** shows us “the beginning and the pattern” of the human race in its sinfulness. The sad story of Adam and Eve’s unfaithfulness to God has been repeated countless times in human history and is still being repeated every day. Adam and Eve just weren’t grateful enough for what they had. And they weren’t conscious enough — although perfectly cognizant — of where it came from. They actually thought for a moment that they could enhance their being by acting in opposition to Being Itself. They thought

¹ *Devotion to Mary (Marialis Cultus)*, 1974, no. 3. See *Ephesians* 5:27; *2Peter* 3:14; *1Timothy* 6:14.

they could have more by trying to be independent of the One from whom everything comes. That they could make the gift of life better in separation from the Giver.

We ourselves do it all the time. What is sin but the same stupidity? And what will protect us against it?

Praise.

Suppose you had been created as an adult. One minute you didn't exist; the next you were looking at God, who made himself visible to you and explained that he had just created you. And had created everything else you saw, just for your benefit and pleasure. How would you feel about God?

How would you feel then about everything you experienced? The beauty of plants and stars and planets, of animals, trees and birds. The taste of fresh fruits, vegetables, gourmet cuisine and candy. The sounds of surf and storm and silence. The fragrance of flowers, food and fresh air. The feel of rocks and trees and earth, of cool air and warm bodies. The joy of intellectual insights and aesthetic appreciation, of discovery and daring choices. You would know, you would be conscious, that God invented and designed all these things, was giving them existence right now so that you could use and enjoy them.

And giving you existence too. Creation is not a one-time act. It is ongoing. If God stops saying "Be-e-e-e..." we would just cease to exist. Turn into nothingness. God is in us and in everything we see: "breathing out" existence. If you were always conscious of that, how would you feel about God?

Wouldn't you walk around in a constant state of admiration, appreciation and praise? Could you even consider sinning against him if you were still in the glow of having been brought into existence by him? Of being held in existence by his continuing desire? What can keep us in that glow?

Praise. Constant praise. Praise all day long. Praise upon waking. Praise for everything you experience and find yourself able to do. Praise for everything he is revealing and has revealed of himself. The *Responsorial (Psalm 98)* sums it all up: "*Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds.*" He has. So do.

The dimensions of praise:

Ephesians 1:3-12 expands our understanding of what we have to praise God for. "In Christ," Paul says, God "has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens." And he spells out the main ones:

- to be chosen;
- to be holy and blameless in his sight;
- to be full of love;
- to be his children: sons and daughters "in the Son";
- to receive his glorious grace freely bestowed on us in the Beloved;
- to be redeemed through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins;
- to know the mystery of his plan to "gather up all things in him";
- to be destined to live for the praise of his glory. This is our inheritance.

Advent would be a good time to think about each one of these — calmly, reflectively, prayerfully. Asking what each one means and has meant to you.

During Mass, be quietly alert to how many of these blessings are echoed. Listen for them especially during the *Introductory Rites*. Let them inspire and guide you, as they are designed to do, to "*Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds.*"

A New Start

Luke 1:26-38 is the new *Genesis* story. There is a woman: Mary. And an angel speaks to her, as one did to Eve in the garden. She is at first "troubled" or "perplexed" by his words, as we can presume Eve was at first by the suggestion of the serpent. The angel's words contain a promise, as the words of Satan did. Mary believed in the promise, as Eve believed in the promise made to her. Both accepted to do what they were urged to do. What

was the difference between them?

Mary was listening to good; Eve to evil. What Eve was urged to do was disobedience; God had forbidden it. What Mary was urged to do was obedience; God was asking it. Eve acted in pride, wanting to be “like God.” Mary acted in humility, wanting only to serve God. Because of Eve’s “Yes,” the human race was deprived of grace, the gift of being like God. Because of Mary’s “Yes,” all who echoed her would become like God in a way beyond imagination: by sharing in the divine life of God himself. Because of the fruit Eve took, until the end of time the “fruit of her womb” would be cursed with suffering and sin. Because of the fruit Mary gave, in the “fullness of time” all who accepted the “fruit of her womb” would be “blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavens.”

What was the difference between these two women? It was in the words they listened to. Mary listened to the words of God. Eve listened to the words of Satan.

So before we take our first breath as Christians, at the very beginning of the ritual of Baptism, we are asked to declare the voice we will follow:

“Do you reject Satan?... And all his empty promises?”

Do you reject sin and the “glamor of evil,” the empty promises of this world, the seductive and deceptive values found in every human culture? Do you “refuse to be mastered by sin,” so as to “live in the freedom of God’s children?”

“Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness?”

Do you believe in the words and in the Word of God? Do you choose to follow his voice?

Every Eucharist announces to us again the Good News of Christ’s coming. Every Eucharist leads us in hymns and prayers of praise. Every Eucharist invites us to believe in the promise of our redemption, and to let the words spoken to us be made flesh in action. Every Eucharist says to us, “If you hear and do, blessed is the fruit of your life.”

“Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds.”

Insight

Do I believe that Mary’s Immaculate Conception is the preview and promise of an “immaculate conclusion” to my life? Does this encourage me to “refuse to be mastered by sin,” and to strive for the “perfection of love?”

Initiative

Examine your heart to see if you have “settled for less” in your spiritual life. Seek now to grow into the perfection you are promised in heaven.

December 9, 2013 (extra)

MONDAY, Advent week two:

The *Responsorial Psalm* is our song of support as we work for change: “*Our God will come to save us!*” (*Psalm 85*).

To take on a task as daunting as the renovation of human society all over the world, we need something to encourage us! And we find it in **Isaiah 35: 1-10**: “Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak. Say to those whose hearts are frightened: ‘Be strong, fear not! Here is your God.... He comes to save you.’ ”

People can’t see the truth? “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened.” People won’t listen? “The ears of the deaf will be cleared.” People are just unable or unwilling to act or respond? “Then will the lame leap like a stag; the tongue of the mute will sing.”

To find courage we must believe in what God can do. And when we don’t see visible results we look ahead, to the “end times,” when Christ’s victory will be complete. The fact is that, sooner or later, if we persevere in working to establish the reign of God on earth, “The desert and the parched land will exult.... Streams will burst forth in the desert.... And those whom the Lord has ransomed will... enter Zion singing, crowned with everlasting joy.” We *work* to make it happen now, but we *wait* for it to happen in God’s time. What we know for certain is, “Our God *will* come to save us!” That is a certain fact.

It is true that at times the world seems paralyzed. In **Luke 5: 17-26** Jesus tells us why. When some men brought to him a man so paralyzed he could do nothing but lie on a mat, the first thing Jesus said to him was, “My friend, your sins are forgiven you.”

Jesus was making a point. Sins don’t cause physical paralysis. But sin is the source of moral paralysis. If society seems unable to break out of established patterns of exploitation, violence and deceit, this inflexibility is the inertia of sin.

Jesus can cure that. He healed the paralyzed man to prove it: “Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’?”

When the man did get up and walk, the crowd was “full of awe,” and they “gave praise to God.... ‘We have seen incredible things today!’”

Advent is a time to think about what Jesus can do, what we can do working with him, and to come to some decisions about that.

“Our God will come to save us!” Are we ready to go with him?

Initiative: If you seek fulfillment, seek it where it can be found. Use *Jesus*. When discouraged, say, “Our God will come to save us!” And keep going.

December 10, 2013

TUESDAY, Advent week two:

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us what to rely on in seeking to change the world: “*The Lord our God comes in strength*” (*Isaiah 40*).

When **Isaiah 40: 1-11** tells us “The glory of the Lord shall be revealed...” he uses the language of power. God “rules by his strong arm.” But God doesn’t use “strongarm” tactics. Rather, “like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs... leading the ewes with care.”

In the Old Testament deeds of evident power revealed the “glory of the Lord”: impressive signs and military victories over enemies. But in Jesus Christ the New Testament reveals the “glory of the Lord” in a very different way.

When the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace....” (*Luke 2:14*), it was because Jesus was born as a weak infant in a poor stable in Bethlehem.

In Jesus the power of God is revealed in weakness. When “the Lord our God comes in strength,” it is the strength of vulnerability, gentleness, and love. This is the strength that overcomes sin, transforms hearts and renews the face of the earth. This is the strength we must trust in.

This strength seeks, not to change people by changing the environment, but to change the environment by changing people. The “reign of God” exists only in the measure that our hearts freely surrender to him.

To work with Jesus, then, in establishing the “reign of God,” we must focus above all on loving, nurturing, forgiving and forming human persons. Changing people, winning their hearts, is what it’s all about. For this the only power that succeeds is the power of truth and love.

In **Matthew 18: 12-14** we see how Jesus exercises his power. As the Good Shepherd, he goes in search of the lost sheep, puts it on his shoulders, and brings it home. And he tells us that this is what God wills: “It is no part of your heavenly Father’s plan that a single one of these little ones shall ever come to grief.”

We are called to find meaning in life, the highest meaning and value there is, in doing what Jesus did: caring for his sheep. For this we don’t need great talents, training, money, connections, or special circumstances. We just have to unite ourselves to Jesus Christ and let him love every person on earth through us.

This is the way that “The Lord our God comes in strength.” Does this give you confidence?

Initiative: If you seek fulfillment, seek it where it can be found. Imitate Jesus. Decide now to find your fulfillment in showing love to every person you meet.

December 11, 2013

WEDNESDAY, Advent week two:

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives us an answer to discouragement: “*O bless the Lord, my soul!*” (*Psalm 103*).

Discouragement is the greatest obstacle we have to overcome in seeking fulfillment in life. After all, to be totally fulfilled, to live life “to the full,” is to be like God. And **Isaiah 40: 25-31** quotes God asking: “To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal?”

And yet, Jesus said that the goal of his life was just this: “I came that they might have life, and have it to the full” (*John 10:10*).

To be “full” is to be filled to our capacity, whatever that is. Since the human mind can know God exists, we can never be totally satisfied until we know God as he is — which is beyond human nature. We, alone among creatures, have a desire for something we cannot attain. There is something in us that is open — and longing — for a fulfillment that nothing in us can achieve. Yet Jesus came to give “life to the full,” and he said, “This is eternal life, that they may *know you*, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (*John 17:3*).

That is why it is in Jesus alone that we can find “life to the full.” By being incorporated into him at Baptism, we share in his divine life. “In Christ” we are “sons in the Son,” children of God who share in God’s divine nature. “In Christ” we know God by sharing in God’s own act of knowing himself.

“In Christ” we can also do what Christ does. “The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do....” “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing “ (*John 14:12, 15:5*). This is why Paul said, “I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (*Philippians 4:13*). “*O bless the Lord, my soul!*”

In **Matthew 11: 28-30** Jesus draws the conclusion: “Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you.” To succeed, let Jesus work with you, in you and through you. When you feel down, “Lift up your eyes on high.... The Lord does not faint nor grow weary.... They that hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar as with eagles’ wings.” When you feel discouraged remind yourself, “Jesus Christ is acting in me and through me! *O bless the Lord, my soul!*”

Initiative: If you seek fulfillment, seek it where it can be found. *Work with Jesus.* Keep saying all day, “Lord, do this with me, do this in me, do this through me. Let me think with your thoughts and speak with your words and act as your body on earth.”

December 12, 2013

THURSDAY, Advent week two:

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives the secret of fulfillment: “*The Lord is kind and merciful; slow to anger and rich in compassion*” (*Psalm 145*).

There is in all of us a lust for power and achievement. We want to “be like God” (*Genesis 3:5*) by breaking all resistance to our goals, our will. And anger can energize us for this. But this is not God’s way: “The Lord is... merciful; slow to anger....”

St. Thomas Aquinas said that God gave us the emotion of anger for self-defense — not just against aggressors, but against our own apathy and fear. Anger energizes us to overcome obstacles. But anger and force are two different things. Force and violence are not God’s way.

Fear also drives us to violence. But **Isaiah 41: 13-20** gives us the answer to fear: “I am the Lord, your God... Fear not, I will help you.”

If we refuse to rely on power and force — or to place our trust in any human resources (see *Matthew 10: 9-10; Luke 1:34-35*) — God promises to help us in such a way “that all may see and know... that the hand of the *Lord* has done this” — not our power. This builds hope.

It is true that God has chosen to rely on us. We can do nothing without God, and God will do very little without us. He chose to use human beings to save the world, beginning with the Word made flesh in Mary, and continuing through Jesus risen and living in us, his body on earth.

But we have a problem: we don’t feel holy enough to do the work of God. We look at Mary and the great saints, and feel like just walking off the field: we are out of our league.

Matthew 11: 11-15 relates to this. People in Jesus’ day were awed by the austerity of John the Baptizer. Jesus took nothing away from what they saw in John: “History has not known a man born of woman greater than John....” But he added something they did not see: “Yet the least born into the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

The key to greatness is not human success, but surrender to God living and acting within us by grace. Mary’s greatest achievement was to say, “I am the servant of the Lord; *let it be done to me....*” (*Luke 1:38*). Mary is the greatest in the kingdom of God because she was “full of grace”; that is, fully *surrendered* to whatever God wanted to do in her.

The greatest fulfillment is not to achieve goals by force fueled by anger. It is to be surrendered to God. That is the secret of fulfillment.

Initiative: If you seek fulfillment, seek it where it can be found. *Surrender to Jesus.* Keep saying all day long, especially when you feel discouragement, fear or anger, ““I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word.”

December 13, 2013

FRIDAY, Advent week two:

The *Responsorial Psalm* sets us on the path to fulfillment: “*Those who follow you, Lord, will have the light of life*” (*Psalm 1*).

Why is the world in such bad shape? Why, after two thousand years of Christianity, is there still so much poverty and violence, so much hatred and division on earth? Why is there so much indifference to the need of those who are crushed by poverty, enslaved by drugs, alcohol and addiction to money and power?

It is not God’s fault. He tells us in **Isaiah 48: 17-19**, “I, the Lord your God, teach you what is for your good and lead you on the way you should go.” God teaches and leads; we just won’t listen and follow.

But if we would, everything would change. We have God’s word for it: “If you would hearken to my commandments, your prosperity would be like a river, and your success like the waves of the sea.”

Is it the Church’s fault? Is it because priests and parents fail to “teach us what is for our good,” and we fail to “lead each other on the way we should go?” Are the parishes the problem? The schools? Families?

We can answer in every age: “All of the above,” because people are never perfect; all of us fall short.

But the most basic problem is that too often we refuse to accept what we are given, no matter how well it is presented. **Matthew 11: 16-19** tells us people had this problem with Jesus himself. People rejected him because he didn’t live the austere life John the Baptizer did. But they didn’t accept John either, because they said his life was too austere! “John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”

When we say something to people they don’t want to hear, we can’t win! But those who listen to Jesus — and to what the Church is really saying — will come into the fullness of life. And the world will be renewed: “*Those who follow you, Lord, will have the light of life.*”

Initiative: If you seek fulfillment, seek it where it can be found. *Respond to Jesus.* During Advent, listen with a new attention to the readings at Mass. Each Sunday make *one decision* in response to what you hear. Find one concrete way to live it out in action.

December 14, 2013

SATURDAY, Advent week two:

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives us the starting point of fulfillment: “*Lord, make us turn to you*” (*Psalm 80*).

Sirach 48: 1-11 tells us this was the role of the prophet Elijah: “to turn back the hearts of fathers toward their children, and to re-establish the tribes of Israel.”

This was also John the Baptizer’s role: “He will

turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of... the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (*Luke 1: 16-17*).

Jesus said that for those who were “willing to accept it,” John the Baptizer was “Elijah who is to come” (*Matthew 11:14*). But the “spirit and power” of John (and of Jesus) was very different from Elijah’s.

Elijah killed his enemies (*1Kings 18:40; 2Kings 1:10*). But **Matthew 17: 10-13** tells us God let John and Jesus both be killed by theirs: “Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.” So If we want to seek fulfillment in working with Jesus to establish the reign of God on earth, we have to convert — “turn” — to the way John and Jesus did it. When we pray, “Lord, make us turn to you,” we need to know that we are asking to accept the way of nonviolence, the way of vulnerability, gentleness and love. To “turn the hearts” of the world back to God, we have to be willing to speak truth and be made fun of, to minister with love and be rejected, to help others carry their cross and then be put on it to die in their place. The only way to save the world is to “endure evil with love” — to accept whatever people do to us and “love back.”

If we seek fulfillment in working with Jesus for the renewal of society — striving to bring about changes in family and social life, in business and politics, in the Church — we need to know that we will find fulfillment only in “emptying” ourselves as Jesus did: “who... did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross” (*Philippians 2:5-8*).

This is the spirit of Jesus. This is what we are asking for when we pray, “Lord, make us turn to you.” This is the only way to fulfillment.

Initiative: If you seek fulfillment, seek it where it can be found. *Work with Jesus.* Resolve to work for changes — at home, at school or work, at church — but only if you are willing to *love back* when you are attacked or rejected for doing it.

December 15, 2013

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT, (YEAR A)

Jesus Saves Us from Sin

Appreciating and Accepting Jesus as:

“Jesus – God Saves” — who frees us from darkness and diminishment

Inventory

What gives me more joy than anything else on earth? What do I think about with joy (rejoice in) most often? To what do my thoughts keep turning?

A person I love? A child, perhaps? Life? Beauty? A work I am involved in?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* suggests we go deeper. “Rejoice in the Lord always!” Why? Because “the Lord is near.” This is what makes us able to rejoice in everything else.

The joy we find in those we love, in life, beauty and the contribution we are making to life on this planet would be bitter-sweet if we were going to lose it all through death. But we aren’t. All true joy will last forever. Because of Jesus, our joy on earth will be our joy in heaven — only more so.

The *Opening Prayer* asks that we who “look forward to the birthday of Christ may *experience* the joy of salvation.” How do we make this joy an experience?

The answer is: by *reflection* and *celebration*. To “celebrate” is to “single out for grateful remembrance.” To do this we have to *think* about what we remember enough to understand and appreciate it. But unless we also *celebrate* it, *expressing* our joy with conscious enthusiasm, our appreciation will be like a stifled fire. Joy needs air to breathe. We have to open the windows for it to explode.

Advent is dedicated to this. And this third Sunday of Advent is named “Rejoice Sunday” (*Gaudete* in Latin) to remind us that “the Lord is near.”

He comes to save us:

The *Responsorial Psalm* (*Psalm* 146: 6-10) gives the root of all rejoicing: “*O Lord, come and save us!*” To say this with meaning, we have to be aware of three things: that we *need* to be rescued; that Jesus *can* make things better for us; and that he really *will*.

Isaiah 35: 1-10 promises that “the desert and the parched land will exult.” To appreciate this we have to see we are in a desert, a wasteland.

How can we see this? We are well-fed and clothed, life is fairly pleasant. We have friends and work, TV and sports and lots of ways to enjoy ourselves. What else do we need?

Isaiah speaks to “hands that are feeble... knees that are weak... those whose hearts are frightened.” Is he speaking to us? He promises that when the Lord comes to save us “the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf cleared, the lame will leap and the mute sing.” Does that describe us? Does it describe me?

Is everything in my life what I want it to be? My home life? Social life? My school or professional life? My personal life? Do I need a savior only to make what I have now last forever, or do I want something more? Does it give me hope to say, “*O Lord, come and save us!*”

What do we wait for?

Matthew 11: 2-11 tells us what to expect from Jesus. John the Baptizer had it wrong: he expected Jesus to get him out of prison. But Jesus is not that kind of savior. He sent word to John: “the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.” Jesus frees from interior slavery, not external oppression.

The truth is, we are all blinded to some extent by our culture. We have been programmed to false attitudes and values, wrong priorities. This is why we can't walk as we should in the footsteps of Christ. It is why we are deaf to so much in his word. This is why we are not cleansed of so many things that incline us to selfishness, incite us to evil and inhibit us from doing good.

Do we need the light of Christ to guide us in making our home life what we want it to be? (Do we need his light just to dream of what it could be?) Do we need his help to walk straight on the crooked paths of our culture (and of every human society and culture infected by sin)? Do we think that without his light and strength to support us we can consistently be part of the solution instead of adding to the problems we run into at school and at work, in our social lives and civic involvement? Do we really think we are so immune to the infection in our culture that we can remain pure of selfishness and self-indulgence? Be free from prejudices and compulsions, and stay faithful to the ideals and principles we believe in?

Not likely.

It doesn't take too many years of adult experience to convince us that, left to ourselves, we are gradually, even unconsciously, going to veer off toward destructiveness and distortion, toward mediocrity and meaninglessness in all we do. It is hard to row against the tide of culture.

When we realize this — when we come to this act of “life-giving despair” — that is when we are able to cry out with passionate desire, “*O Lord, come and save us!*”

And he will. He is already doing it. “Rejoice in the Lord always!” Rejoice: “the Lord is near.”

Advent invites us to recognize his presence, to seek his face in prayer, to listen to his words, to reflect on them in our hearts, and — by interacting with him at home and at school, at work and at play — to live them out in action.

This is to accept Jesus for what his name really means: “God saves.” This is what the angel told Joseph: “You are to name him Jesus, *for he will save his people from their sins*” (*Matthew* 1:21). That is what encourages us to keep crying out, “*O Lord, come and save us!*”

The test of truth:

James 5:7-10 speaks to the Christians of his time, who were people just like us. Is it not true that, like them, we are people who “endure temptation” (1:12); who are sometimes hearers of the word and not doers (1:23); who make distinctions between the rich and the poor, and show partiality (2:4-9); who have faith but do not always live it out in works (2:14); who sometimes say to a brother or sister who is naked and lacks daily food, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet do not supply their bodily needs (2:15); who make many mistakes (3:2); who are not able to tame our tongues (3:8); who from the same mouth speak at times both blessing and cursing (3:10); who sometimes have bitter envy and selfish ambition in our hearts (3:14); who are not always pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy (3:17); who still experience conflicts and disputes among ourselves which come from cravings that are at war within our own hearts (4:1); who speak evil against one another (4:11); and judge our neighbors (4:12); who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town doing business and making money” instead of saying “If the Lord wishes, we will still be alive and do this or that” (4:13-15); who by fraud or injustice in manipulating world market prices have depressed the wages of laborers (5:4); who, compared to other nations have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure (5:5); who have fattened our hearts in a day of slaughter (5:5) by making wars for profit and profit from wars?

And yet James began this list of failings by saying, “Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (1:12). And he ends it with today’s reading: “Be patient, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord.... Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand” (5:7-8). There is hope for those who have a sense of sin. It is they who can pray from their hearts, “*O Lord, come and save us!*”

Insight

What is there in my life that, more than anything else, I would like Jesus to make better? Have I been crying out to him, “O Lord, come and save us!”? Have I also been interacting with him in this area of my life, applying his words to what I do there, consulting him “on the spot” all day long? How could I do this?

Initiative:

Put in a place or places where you will see it all day long some image or symbol that says to you Jesus can make things better. Water? A candle? A star? A manger? A picture? A small Advent wreath (or sprig of greenery)? What will work for you?

December 16, 2013

MONDAY, Advent week three:

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us *how* Jesus saves us: “*Teach me your ways, O Lord*” (*Psalm 25*).

Numbers 24: 2-17 Makes its point with humor. Moab was being attacked by the Jews. The king summoned Balaam, a prophet, to curse the Jewish army. But on the way the donkey Balaam was riding saw an angel standing in the path and turned off the road. Balaam beat it. Finally the donkey just lay down, and Balaam beat it some more.

Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!" But the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way?" And he said, "No." Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face.

Then Balaam pronounced a blessing on Israel, not a curse: “A star shall come out of Jacob... it shall crush the borderlands of Moab...”

What we hear from God is true, even if he uses a donkey to say it! So the reading alerts us to *listen*. We may not like the way the lector at Mass reads God’s word or the preacher explains it; but if we don’t listen, who is the greater jackass?

In **Matthew 21: 23-27** Jesus tells us that we should look for the *origin* of what we are asked to accept and follow. Who is saying it? Do I have reason to believe that what I am hearing is inspired by the Spirit of God? Jesus asked, “Where was John’s baptism from? Was it of heavenly or of human origin?”

What about the advertisements we see on TV? Where are they from? From people who want to show us what will make us happy?

What about the desires the ads claim to satisfy? Aren’t these usually the “going trends” in our culture? The ads offer us what will make us look good to other people or feel that we are up there with the front runners.

But where is our society running to?

The ads appeal to our desires for pleasure, admiration, good looks, wealth, sex, power, prestige, even self-fulfillment according to the standards of our peer group. Are these God’s standards? Whose voice is coming through the donkey?

Initiative: If you want Jesus to save your life on this earth, use him! Consult him. Every time you are urged to do or buy something, ask what Jesus says about it.

"O Antiphons"

Explanation adapted from The Roman Catholic Lectionary Website

<http://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Advent-O-Antiphons.htm>

compiled by Felix Just, S.J., Ph.D.

For the Week before Christmas, from December 17 to 23, there are special Masses and Lectionary Readings that take precedence over the ordinary weekdays (but not Sundays) of Advent.

For these seven days, during the Evening Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours (Vespers) the Antiphons that introduce the reciting or singing of Mary's hymn, the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), all begin by addressing Jesus by a special title preceded by the exclamation "O." They are called the "*O Antiphons*." Each Antiphon calls on the Messiah to come, beginning with a biblical title and closing with a specific petition.

These seven traditional "O Antiphons" are more than a thousand years old. Since the Second Vatican Council, they have been adapted (slightly reworded and rearranged) for the "Alleluia Verse" of the Mass:

O Wisdom of our God Most High, guiding creation with power and love: come to teach us the path of knowledge!

O Leader of the House of Israel, giver of the Law to Moses on Sinai: come to rescue us with your mighty power!

O Root of Jesse's stem, sign of God's love for all his people: come to save us without delay!

O Key of David, opening the gates of God's eternal Kingdom: come and free the prisoners of darkness!

O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: come and shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death!

O King of all nations and keystone of the Church: come and save us, whom you formed from the dust!

O Emmanuel, our King, and Giver of Law: come to save us, Lord our God!

In the reflections that follow, the Antiphons are a more literal translation of the Latin.

In the traditional arrangement, when viewed from Christmas Eve backward, the first letters of the Latin texts (Emmanuel, Rex, Oriens, Clavis, Radix, Adonai, Sapientia) spell out the phrase *ero cras* ("I will be here tomorrow").

December 17, 2013

“O Wisdom”

The *Responsorial Psalm* says Jesus will save us and our society from the destructive situations we keep getting into: “*Justice shall flourish in his time and fullness of peace forever*” (*Psalm 72*).

For this **Genesis 49: 2-10** looks to a *person* — not to a philosophy or a political platform; not even to a religion of true doctrines and good rules — but to a living person who will set things right: “*You, Judah...*”

The *Psalm* underlines this: “Endow the *king*... *He* shall govern... In *him* shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” We apply this to Jesus: “*Justice shall flourish in his time and fullness of peace forever*”

Matthew 1: 1-17 makes it clear that Jesus was the particular human descendant of Judah, about whom Jacob prophesied. (See also *Matthew 2:6*; *Luke 3:33*; *Hebrews 7:14*; *Revelation 5:5*). If we expect God to save us from all the destructive consequences of our sins and the sins of others that have added up in history and spread throughout the world — we must look to Jesus Christ for it. To save us God sent a person, not a system.

This is God’s way. He uses *people*. Matthew’s Gospel begins with a diagram of Israel’s history as a line of people: first leading *up* from Israel’s beginning in *Abraham* to its first peak in *David*; then going *down* from *David* to the low point of the *Babylonian captivity*; and finally going *up* again to its apex in the promised *Son of David*: “Jesus who is called the Christ.” God directed Israel’s history by using people’s lives to bring us to the final Leader and Shepherd, Jesus.

This week the Church’s expression of longing intensifies in the “O Antiphons,” the Alleluia verses from December 17 to 23. In the first of these we cry out to Jesus, “*O Wisdom of our God Most High, guiding creation with power and love, come to teach us the path of knowledge.*” We affirm our faith that Jesus will save by guiding creation with wisdom. “*Justice shall flourish in his time and fullness of peace forever.*”

God’s time is not our time. In God’s time all is present now: the past, the present and the future. In God’s time the victory is already won; Jesus reigns. But in our time there is work to do, and Jesus wants to do it *with us, in us and through us*. We are the people through whom Jesus Christ is saving the world today. If we believe in him as Savior, we will constantly ask him to guide us by acting with us, in us and through us in everything we do.

Initiative: If you want Jesus to save your life on this earth, use him! *Interact with him*. Say before everything you do, “Lord, *do this with me, do this in me, do this through me.*” Don’t just follow his laws. Follow his voice.

December 18, 2013

“O Leader”

The *Responsorial Psalm* is the same as yesterday: “*Justice shall flourish in his time and fullness of peace forever*” (*Psalm 72*). But now we go deeper. We ask how Jesus will bring this about.

Jeremiah 23:5-8 tells us God will “raise up a righteous shoot (stem) to David... to reign and govern wisely.... In his days Judah shall be saved and Israel dwell in security.”

The *O Antiphon* tells us this will come about through the wisdom of his laws: “*O Leader of the House of Israel, giver of the law to Moses on Sinai...*” But Jesus does not save us by laws alone. The antiphon continues, “come to rescue us with your mighty *power*.” Good laws can bring about justice, but Jesus does much more than that. The “fullness of peace” he gives is the peace of knowing that our sins have not just been “forgiven” and our lives re-directed, but that our sins have been *taken away*. They are no longer part of us or of our history. They have been annihilated. No human action can do that.

But in **Matthew 1: 18-25** the angel makes it clear that the son of Mary will not be just human: Mary’s virginity was proof that Jesus was conceived “through the Holy Spirit.” The absence of a human father is proof of the divine Father. Therefore the added name “*Emmanuel*” means “God with us” literally. The one who came to be with us in Jesus is God Himself.

Joseph is to name the child “Jesus, because he will *save his people from their sins*.” Jesus can do this because he is divine. Our sins are “taken away” — annihilated — because Jesus took us, with our sins, into his body on the cross. When he died we died “in him.” When he rose, we rose in him, to live as his continuing, extended risen body on earth, free from sin. Our redemption is a mystery beyond forgiveness: our sins are “*taken away*” (*Galatians 6:15*).

All who have risen in Christ are a “*new creation*” (*2Corinthians 9:17*). The “old self,” the self with sins, “was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed.” We rise with no record of sin to live a new life as Christ (*Galatians 2:20*).

This is why John calls Jesus the “Lamb of God, who *takes away* the sin of the world” (*John 1:29*). Jesus does this through the divine mystery of his death and rising. He is a Savior who gives, not just justice, but “fullness of peace forever,” because he gives as God made flesh.

Initiative: If you want Jesus to save your life on this earth, use him! *Live in him*. What saves our lives from veering off to destructiveness is being guided and empowered by the person of Jesus-Emmanuel, “God with us.” Interact consciously with him to live and act as his own body.

December 19, 2013

“O Flower of Jesse”

The *Responsorial Psalm* is: “*Fill me with your praise and I will sing your glory*” (*Psalm 71*). We need to praise God, celebrating what is good about him, or we will not appreciate his glory.

Judges 13: 2-25 tells us Samson was born of a woman who “had borne no children.” But “an angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, “Though you are barren and have had no children, yet you will conceive and bear a son.”

This reminds us of the story of **Sarah**, the mother of Isaac (*Genesis 11:30; 17: 15-19; 21: 1-3*); **Rebekah**, the mother of Jacob (*Genesis 25:21*); **Rachel**, the mother of Jacob’s sons Joseph and Benjamin (*Genesis 29:31, 30: 22-24; 34: 16-18*); **Hannah**, the mother of Samuel (*1 Samuel 1: 2-20*); and **Elizabeth**, the mother of John the Baptizer (*Luke 1: 7-13*). All of these women were barren, and by God’s special intervention, all conceived sons who had a special role to play in the history of salvation. The barrenness of their mothers was the sign and proof that their birth was not just an ordinary human event, but due to a special intervention of God. This also said they were not just ordinary men, but ones specially chosen by God to do his work. This was the reason for the virginity of Mary. Jesus had to be born of a virgin so it would be clear he was the Son of God. In the absence of any human father, Mary’s virginity was the sign and proof that the Father of Jesus was God.

But the *O Antiphon* reminds us that his mother was human: “*Flower of Jesse’s stem, sign of God’s love for all his people, save us without delay!*” Our salvation is the mystery of divinity made human and humanity made divine. God uses us to do his divine work. If we “*fill our minds with praise of this mystery, our hearts will sing God’s glory.*”

In **Luke 1: 5-25** Zechariah, like Mary later, was “deeply disturbed” at the sight of the angel. But where Mary asked, “*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*” Zechariah asked, “*How will I know that this is so?*” and was reproached for his lack of faith.

We can’t help wondering sometimes how God is going to fulfill his promises, but we must not doubt that he will. And if we do believe when what God promises seems humanly impossible, then we are experiencing a miracle already: the miracle of being empowered to believe what human reason is not adequate to explain. This is to experience God filling us with the divine power of grace — the power to act on the level of God. “*Fill me with your praise*” — as only you can — “*and I will sing your glory*”

Initiative: If you want to live life to the full, be Christ! *Live divinely!* Use the gifts of faith, hope and love to do what goes beyond human motivation..

December 20, 2013

“O Key of David”

The *Responsorial Psalm* (Psalm 24) invites us to open our hearts to the Son of God: “Let *the Lord enter; he is the king of glory.*” But only by the power of God can we open ourselves to the mystery that God offers us: “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,” which is the *favor of sharing in God’s own divine life.* And so in the *O Antiphon* we call out: “*O Key of David, opening the gates of God’s eternal Kingdom, come and free the prisoners of darkness.*”

In **Isaiah 7: 10-14** Ahaz was afraid to ask for a sign from God. And in **Luke 1: 26-38** Mary was “troubled” because the angel called her “highly favored” and “blessed among women.” There is something in us that is afraid to believe God could be blessing us — or even dealing with us — in a special, personal way.

We find it hard to believe that God is calling us by name to do some great work, or blessing us with more than the help to live ordinary, good human lives. It shocks us when St. Augustine says, “We have *become Christ.*” It shocks us more to read in the Liturgy of the Hours, “Those who by faith are spiritual members of Christ can truly say that they are what he is: the Son of God *and God himself!*” (Blessed Isaac of Stella, Friday reading, fifth week of Easter). Some theological precisions follow: “What Christ is by nature we are as his partners; what he is of himself in all fullness, we are as participants. Finally, what the Son of God is by generation, his members are by adoption.” But the precisions are just qualifications of the basic fact: that by “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” we become divine. “Our nature is transformed so that we are no longer merely humans, but also sons and daughters of God, spiritual people, by reason of the share we have received in the divine nature” (St. Cyril of Alexandria, reading, 2nd week of Easter).

Why is it so hard for us to accept the mystery of our being? Is it because we don’t want the responsibility of living on the level of God? Would we rather forget, in the daily decisions and activities of life, that we are the body of Christ?

The truth is, *to accept to be Christian is to accept to be Christ!* Have I accepted this? Am I willing to “offer my body” daily as a living sacrifice” (*Romans 12:1*) so that Christ can act with me, in me and through me in all I do?

Mary said to the angel: “Let it be with me according to your word,” and gave up her body. This is what we are asked to do. “Let *the Lord enter; he is the king of glory?*”

Initiative: If you want to live life to the full, be Christ! *Accept your divinity.* Dedicate yourself to letting Jesus act with you, in you, through you in all you do.

December 21, 2013

O Radiant Dawn

The *Responsorial Psalm* calls us to: “*Exult, you just, in the Lord! Sing to him a new song.*” We exult because “our soul waits for the Lord...” with deep longing, and he is given to us (*Psalm 33*).

Song of Songs 2: 8-14 is a poem of desire between lover and beloved. She awaits; he invites: “Arise, my love, my dove, my beautiful one, and come!... See, the winter is past, the rains are over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth.”

Advent is a time of triple expectation: we await the celebration of Christ’s coming to earth at Christmas; we await his coming in glory at the end of the world; and we await his coming for us, as lover to beloved, at the moment of our death.

No one of these expectations makes sense without the other. They are all elements of a single desire: the desire for union with God, for whom we were made, for union with Jesus Christ who came to make this union possible, for union with him now and forever, in life and in death.

The liturgy encourages us, who are the beloved, to “*Exult in the Lord! Sing to him a new song,*” because he comes. Our hearts say, “Let me see you, let me hear your voice. For your voice is sweet....”

Luke 1: 39-45 brings this expectation into focus in daily life. Jesus comes to us constantly, daily, in the form of inspirations, movements of heart, encounters with him present in other people, speaking to us in them, through the Scriptures, through experiences in our family and social life, at work and at school. He is like the “*Radiant dawn*” (*O Antiphon*): the same eternal light, shining as new and different every day through different people and events.

We recognize him when our hearts “leap for joy.” The leap may be a tiny skip, a brief second of feeling loved, of perceiving truth or beauty. Then, if we are aware that this is a response to the divine presence, we say like Elizabeth, “How does this happen to me,” that the voice, the touch, the beauty “of my Lord should come to me?” Then our hearts “*Exult in the Lord*” more than “*sentinels in the dawn*” (see *Psalm 130*).

Initiative: If you want to live life to the full, be Christ! Keep yourself aware that Christ is in you, speaking through you, showing love to others through you. If you remain aware of his presence in you, you will experience his presence in others.

December 22, 2013

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT, (YEAR A)

Jesus Gives Us Divine Life

Appreciating and Accepting Jesus as “Son of God”

who empowers us to live on the level of God

Inventory

What does it mean to me to live a “good life”? Is it the same as a “Christian life”? Is it enough for a Christian to be just a really good human being?

Input

In the *Entrance Antiphon* we ask God both to let the “earth to bring forth” and the “clouds rain down” our Savior. Jesus comes from both heaven and earth — to give us the fullness of life, both human and divine.

In the *Opening Prayer* we ask God to “fill our hearts with *your* love” —the divine love proper to God himself. This is Jesus’ “new” Commandment: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.... *just as I have loved you....*” This is the “perfection of charity” that Vatican II holds up as the goal of every Christian way of life. “It is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the *fullness of the Christian life* and to the *perfection of charity*” (*Church*, no. 40; *Ecumenism*, no. 4). This is love on the level of God.

The “King of Glory”:

The *Responsorial Psalm* (*Psalm 24*) alerts us to the theme of the readings: the Savior whom Advent prepares us to welcome is no ordinary human. He is “*the Lord... the king of glory.*”

Isaiah 7: 10-14 predicts the sign that is actually given in the Gospel reading (**Matthew 1: 18-24**): “The virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him *Emmanuel*” — which means, “*God is with us.*”

Mary’s virginity, the absence of a human father, is proof that Jesus was conceived “through the Holy Spirit.” The absence of a human cause reveals the presence of a divine cause (cp. *Luke 10: 3-4*). That is why the angel concludes, “Therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called *Son of God*” (*Luke 1:35*). The Father of Jesus is God.

Call to holiness:

Romans 1: 1-7 bases our call to holiness on this. Paul identifies himself as sent to proclaim “the gospel [good news] of God... about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh, but established as *Son of God* in power according to the Spirit of holiness... Jesus Christ our Lord.” All who are “called to belong to Jesus Christ” are “*called to be holy.*”

This holiness is not some human goodness attainable by human efforts. No, it is “grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” It is the holiness we have through union with Jesus as “sons in the Son.” It is the holiness of the “children of God,” who are born “not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of

man, but of God” (*John* 1: 12-13). Because we “became Christ” at Baptism, our standard of morality is the holiness of Christ. “Jesus' way of acting and his words, his deeds and his precepts constitute the *moral rule of Christian life*. Indeed, his actions, and in particular his Passion and Death on the Cross, are the living revelation of his love for the Father and for others. This is *exactly the love* that Jesus wishes to be imitated by *all who follow him*” (John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth*, no. 20).

Called to “be Christ”

This follows from the fact that at Baptism we “became Christ.” John Paul continues (no. 21): “By the work of the Spirit, Baptism radically configures the faithful to Christ in the Paschal Mystery of death and resurrection; it “clothes them” in Christ (*Galatians* 3:27): ‘Let us rejoice and give thanks’, exclaims Saint Augustine speaking to the baptized, ‘for we have become not only Christians, but Christ. Marvel and rejoice: we have *become Christ!*’ Having died to sin, those who are baptized receive new life (*Romans* 6: 3-11): alive for God in Christ Jesus, they are called to *walk by the Spirit* and to manifest *the Spirit's fruits* in their lives (*Galatians* 5: 16-25)”.

Our call to holiness is not primarily a call to human effort. It is a call to surrender to God, to open our hearts to his activity within us: “*Let the Lord enter; he is the king of glory.*” The “glory of God” is the life of God in humans made visible.¹ When our words and actions are so far beyond good human behavior that they cannot be the product just of family upbringing (“blood”) or of culture (“flesh”) or of human intelligence and willpower (the “will of man”), then they must come from attitudes, values and ideals conceived in us “through the Holy Spirit.” Then we can say with Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but it is *Christ who lives in me*. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the *Son of God*, who loved me and gave himself for me” (*Galatians* 2:20). To accept this is to “*Let the Lord enter, the king of glory.*”

¹St. Irenaeus, martyred c. 200 A.D wrote, “Life in man is the glory of God; the life of man is the vision of God” (*Against Heresies* Bk. 4, ch. 20, no. 7).

Insight

What goals, values or attitudes in my life have I learned more from the teaching of Jesus or the example of other Christians than from anything else? How does Jesus inspire us to go beyond ordinary human standards in our attitudes toward the poor, other races and cultures, violence and respect for life? In what else?

Initiative:

Say the WIT prayer before every action, “Lord, Do this with me, do this in me, do this through me.”

December 23, 2013

O Emmanuel

The *Responsorial Psalm* invites us to recognize and accept the divine mystery of our redemption: “*Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand*” (*Psalm 25: 4-14*) The Incarnation, the Word made flesh in Jesus, is the key to everything: “*O Emmanuel, God’s presence among us... save us, Lord our God*” (*O Antiphon*).

In **Malachi 3: 1-24** God promises he will send a “messenger to prepare the way before me.” But we may feel apprehensive: “Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire.... he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.”

Jesus calls for more than the most exemplary human behavior and worship. The offering he requires is the offering of our bodies to him as a “living sacrifice” in Baptism, so that “in Christ” we may no longer be “conformed to this world, but... *transformed* by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect” (*Romans 12: 2*). This is the sacrifice that incorporates us into the body of Jesus offered on the cross, the sacrifice by which we die and rise in him to live henceforth as Christ himself, as his risen body on earth. We must be able to say with St. Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but it is *Christ who lives in me*.” This is the mystery of our being as “sons and daughters in the Son.”

Luke 1: 57-66 tells us they were going to name John the Baptizer after his father, Zechariah. But the angel had commanded, “You shall name him John” (*Luke 1:13*), which means “Yahweh has shown favor.”

Although, unlike Jesus, John had a human father, the order not to give him his father’s name keeps us from stopping there. This is already a preview of the Good News. When we “become Christ” by Baptism we all have God as our Father. We are all “sons of God.” Our name is “Yahweh has shown favor.”

John’s name announces that, like Mary, we are all “highly favored” sons and daughters of God (*Luke 1:28*): we are all asked to give our bodies to be the body of Jesus-Emmanuel. “Yahweh has shown favor.” Our favor is “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,” the favor of *sharing in the life of God*. The Church invites us to “Lift up our heads and see” the mystery of our redemption. “In Christ” we are divine.

Initiative: If you want to live life to the full, be Christ! *Cultivate awareness* that he is always acting *with you, in you, through you*. Say the WIT prayer all day long.

December 24, 2013

The *Responsorial Psalm* proclaims: “*Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord*” (*Psalm 89: 2-9*). The goodness celebrated here and in both the readings is God’s “steadfast love,” a phrase found 173 times in the Bible.

When Moses asked God, “Show me your glory,” God answered, “I will make all my goodness pass before you.” Then “the LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in *steadfast love and faithfulness*” (*Exodus 33:12 to 34:6*).

Steadfast love (in Hebrew *hesed*, in Greek *charis*) and *faithfulness* (Hebrew *emet*, Greek *aletheia*), which we find translated either as “grace and truth” or as “kindness and fidelity,” are the traits most characteristic of God. Together “they appear as a virtual definition of God” (*Jerome Biblical Commentary on John 1:14*). And John’s Gospel proclaims they were embodied in Jesus Christ: “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace (*charis*) and truth (*aletheia*)” — or simply “filled with enduring love” (*1970 New American Bible*).

2Samuel 7: 1-16 shows God promising “steadfast love” to David, a promise he kept even though David, four chapters later, committed adultery and covered it up with murder (*2Samuel 11*).

Luke 1: 67-79 celebrates this same “steadfast love”: “Blessed be the Lord... He has raised up for us a mighty Savior... as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets.... Thus he has shown the mercy promised.... and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore....”

If we are to be *fili in Filio*, true “sons and daughters in the Son of God,” we must strive to love as he loves; that is, to love on the level of God. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. *Just as I have loved you...*” (*John 13:34*). This is the greatest challenge in Christianity. And we meet it by letting Jesus himself love in and through us regardless of what is done to us: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (*Romans 5:5*).

This is why we “sing forever the goodness of the Lord” It is because by “the *grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*” we share in “the *love of God*,” and can live with one another in “the *communion of the Holy Spirit*” (*2Corinthians 13:14*). This is the work of Jesus, “Son of God.”

Initiative: If you want to live life to the full, be Christ! Love like Christ. No matter what anyone does, love with the “enduring love” Jesus showed on the cross.

**We are passing from the season of Advent
to the Christmas season**

Advent lasts from the first Sunday of Advent until Christmas.

The Christmas season continues through the *week after Epiphany*. Celebrate until then. Don't take down your Christmas tree until the feast of the *Baptism of the Lord*. Give Christmas its due.

"Ordinary Time" begins with the feast of the *Baptism of the Lord*, which is the Sunday after Epiphany.

The spirit of Advent is *waiting* and *longing*.

The spirit of Christmas is *seeing* and *rejoicing*.

This is a time to open your eyes and see:

- **Seek the experience** of Jesus. Go where you will encounter him: "The shepherds *went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.*"
- **See and acknowledge** in your heart the ways you have experienced him, what Jesus means to you: "*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.... But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.*"
- **See how he is visible** in people who have come alive by his grace. Recognize his presence and action in them, in the Church: "*Simeon took the infant in his arms and praised God, saying... my eyes have seen your salvation... a light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.*"
- **Celebrate Christmas. Celebrate Christ.** Give *expression* to your faith, your hope, your love. To *express* is to *experience*. To *praise* is to *appreciate*. A silent faith is a dying faith. When expressions of love are lifeless they are lethal. In joy and thanksgiving love comes alive: "*When the shepherds saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child*" (See Luke 2: 8-32).

CHRISTMAS VIGIL MASS (not midnight)

The Feast of Christ's Birth

Inventory

Do you appreciate Jesus? What effect does he have on your daily life? Does the thought of him make you happy? How often do you think of him?

What does it mean to you (affectively as well as intellectually) to say Jesus is the Savior of the world and *your* Savior?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* tells us, "*Today you will know the Lord is coming to save us, and in the morning you will see his glory.*" This is from *Exodus* 16: 6-7, when God promises to "rain bread from heaven" for his People each day while they are in the desert. The "manna" has been replaced by Jesus, the "living bread that came down from heaven" (*John* 6:51). This Bread of Life is available to us every day in the Eucharist. It is ours for the taking.

That is something to appreciate.

In the *Opening Prayer*, we say that "*every year we rejoice as we look forward to this feast of our salvation.*" We celebrate Christmas every year to help us look forward to Mass every Sunday — and just to waking up every day. In every Mass we celebrate the gift, and the ongoing experience, of salvation. Whenever we think of him, we "*welcome Christ as our Redeemer.*"

"Salvation" becomes real for us the day we realize that there is something *going on* between ourselves and God, and we decide to get involved in it. That is when we begin to "*meet him with confidence,*" not just "*when he comes to be our judge,*" but as we undertake, with his help, to let him act *with us, in us and through us* in every action of our day.

In the *Prayer after Communion* we ask God to "*give us a new birth as we celebrate the beginning of your Son's life on earth*" and to "*strengthen us in Spirit.*" We can have this new birth and new strength in the Spirit every day. All we have to do is celebrate every day *the beginning of your Son's life on earth*. Say every morning, "*Lord, live this day with me, live this day in me, live this day through me.*" Say it before everything you do, all day long.

"As a bridegroom..."

The *Responsorial Psalm* is: "*Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord*" (*Psalms* 89). The Psalm specifies, "Happy the people who *know...*" enough to do this. "At your name they rejoice all the day." If we *reflect on* what Jesus did and is doing for us, and if we *remember* it frequently, we too will "rejoice all the day."

What is there to know?

Isaiah 62: 1-5 deserves to be read and re-read every day of Christmas! It gives us a reason (many reasons, and there are many, many more!) to be Christians. It tells us what is so great about recognizing there is something "going on" between ourselves and God and deciding to get involved in it. It tells us what we get out of participating in the life of the Church.

Isaiah leaves no doubt about what our relationship with Christ is: "The Lord delights in you and makes your land his spouse.... As a bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so shall your God rejoice in you." The Church is the "bride of Christ" (*John* 3:29; *Ephesians* 5: 25-32; *Revelation* 19:7-9; 21: 2-10; 22: 17). And all of us (male and

female alike) are “brides in the Bride.” What this means is that we are all committed to seek *perfect union of mind and will and heart* with Jesus as Spouse — just as married couples are committed to seek perfect union of mind and will and heart with each other. When Paul speaks of marriage he says, “This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the Church” (*Ephesians* 5:32).

This may sound daunting, but look at what it gives! “You shall be called by a new name” — you will have a whole new sense of your identity. “No longer” shall you see yourself as “Forsaken” or “Desolate,” “but you shall be called [and know yourselves as] ‘My Delight’ and... ‘Espoused.’” Think for a minute about what this says. Is this a relationship with God worth entering into? Once we appreciate what this means, our response will be, “*Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord!*”

“Have no fear...”

Matthew 1: 1-25 answers the hesitancy we have about entering into a relationship of spousal love with Jesus Christ. It tells us how Joseph felt when he learned that God had chosen his fiancée to make her the mother of his own Son.

Contrary to legend, Joseph was not suspicious of Mary when she told him she was pregnant. He believed what he told her about the angel’s message. But like any devout Jew — or any one of us! — when he learned that God had chosen Mary for his own spouse, he bowed down in reverence and began to back out of the picture. Who was he to interfere in the mystery of God’s relationship with Mary? We would do the same!

But the angel came to Joseph and said, “Have no fear about taking Mary as your wife. It is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child.” But *you*, Joseph “are to *name* him” with the name God has chosen. You are chosen by God to fulfill the role of earthly father to Jesus. And you are to be the earthly spouse of Mary in every way but sexual. She is to be your wife and you her husband — and you are to be a father to the Son of the Most High.

Was this a scary, a daunting call? Yes. Did it call for sacrifice? Yes. Was the sacrifice worth the privilege of playing such a role in the redemption of the world? When Joseph was assured that God wanted him to do this, and that God would be his strength, wasn’t his response, “*Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord!*”? Is that our response to the call we have received to seek perfect union of mind and will and heart with Jesus Christ?

The strength of call

In **Acts 13: 16-25** Paul is presenting Jesus as the culmination of Israel’s long history of being chosen, guided, supported and empowered by God. It should give us confidence to embrace the relationship with God to which Jesus calls us.

Paul reminds the Jews that God “chose our fathers. He made this people great... led them out of Egypt... raised up David... ‘a man after my own heart, who will fulfill my every wish.’”

Then “according to his promise” he brought forth from David’s descendants “Jesus, a savior for Israel.” John the Baptizer, who announced him, was thought by some to be the Messiah himself. But John said, “What you suppose me to be I am not. Rather, look for the one who comes after me. I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals on his feet.”

It is possible that Christianity itself is not “what we suppose it to be.” If we don’t feel like shouting every day, “*Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord!*” it means we haven’t really understood or appreciated the Good News. This is not a matter of emotions, but of deep, interior understanding, awareness and joy; joy even on those days when we would have preferred not to get out of bed! If, when we feel depressed and discouraged, naming ourselves “Forsaken” and “Desolate,” we *remember* what Jesus has done for us, *think* about all he is doing and willing to do for us in our lives right now, and *decide* to believe in this — to believe in *him* — and *act* as if we believed, then we will come to appreciate the Good News. We will appreciate the “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,” the *favor* of “sharing in the life of God.” The privilege of being *chosen* to continue and carry out Christ’s mission on earth. And yes, even the opportunities we have to show our love for him, and to show his love for the world, by putting out when it costs us. We will appreciate what it means to be a Christian, what it means to take part in the life and life-giving labor of the Church. What it means to *know Jesus Christ*.

This is what Christmas is all about: a celebration to help us celebrate with more appreciation all year. It is the celebration of Jesus as Savior of the world and Savior of our lives in the world. Savior of our family and social lives, of our business and professional lives — the Savior of life itself. Then it will be natural for us to say, “Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord!”

Insight

What would you say to someone who asked you what Christmas means to you? Does your daily life — your visible attitudes, values and priorities, the stance you express in action toward the Church and the world — say the same thing?

Initiative:

Every day during Christmas season (until the Sunday after the Epiphany) consciously and deliberately think of one thing Christianity gives you. Set a time to do this. And enter with special attention into the Introductory Rites at Mass.

CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS

The Good News of Jesus the Savior

Inventory

“Gospel” means “Good News.” Have you experienced Christianity as good news or just heard that it is? How is Jesus “news” to people today? What is so good about whatever Christianity is? When do you personally think about this and celebrate it?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* tells us, “*Let us all rejoice in the Lord, for our Savior is born to the world. True peace has descended from heaven.*” What gives hope of peace is something (Someone) from heaven who is now present on earth. The Good News is a new and special presence of God in the world: the “*Incarnation*”; that is, God’s “taking flesh” as a human being on this earth.

The alternate *Entrance Antiphon* is, “*The Lord said to me, ‘You are my Son; this day have I begotten you.’*” The Psalm speaks of an Israelite king, called God’s “anointed” because “in Israel kings and high priests received the power of their office through anointing.” The Church applies this to Jesus, *the Anointed One* (“*christos*” in Greek, “*mashiah*” or “*Messiah*” in Hebrew).¹

If we truly understand the mystery of our Baptism, we will also apply these words to ourselves. Each of us will say, “The Lord said to *me*, “You are my son, my daughter,” because on “this day” — the day of our Baptism — we *became Christ*. In *Him* we have become *fili in Filio*, true children of the Father. And we were *anointed* at Baptism with *chrism* to share in Christ’s own divine anointing and consecration as *Priest, Prophet* and *King*.

The Good News continues to be news in the world as Jesus reveals himself anew in each one of us, in the words he speaks through us and the “works” he performs through us. Jesus promised this before he died: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also *do the works that I do* and, in fact, will do *greater works than these*, because I am going to the Father.”²

In the *Opening Prayer(s)*, we celebrate the “splendor of Jesus our light,” and the “glory that breaks on the world” with his birth. We also ask for “a foretaste of the joy” that will be ours “when the fullness of his glory has filled the earth.” In the *Prayer after Communion* we acknowledge that *we ourselves* will be God’s answer to this prayer. We will fill the earth with the splendor and glory of Jesus when we “share his life completely by living as he has taught.” We — with Christ acting *with us, in us, and through us* — are the Good News made visible on earth today.

The Light of Life

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives the key to the readings: “*Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord*” (*Luke 2:11* and *Psalms 96*).

This is what Christianity is about: on Christmas Day and every day.

Isaiah 9: 1-6 tells us to expect four things of the Savior:

1. “*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.*” He will show us the way to live by being the *Way*, and will teach us by being the *Truth*.
2. He will bring us “abundant joy.” Jesus came that we might “have life, life to the full.” He is the *Life*.³
3. He will set us *free* from “the yoke that burdened us and the rod of the taskmaster.” Our religion will not be fearful or slavish obedience to laws, but responses of love made in the intimacy of personal friendship with

God.

4. His rule will establish *peace through justice* throughout the world: “For every boot that tramped in battle will be burned... His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, [sustained] by judgment and justice, both now and forever.”

Jesus is not a Savior who will do all of this “from on high,” with purely divine power. He *took flesh* to save the world *as a human being*, living and working on “ground level.” Everything promised above Jesus will give to the human race *through humans*, by speaking and acting in humans, in the members of his body on earth, in *us*. If we don’t do it — by letting him do it *with us, in us and through us* — it will be done, but not in our lifetime. Only when we “share his life completely by living as he has taught,” as we asked in the *Prayer after Communion*, will we experience the joy that will be ours “when the fullness of his glory has filled the earth.”

We are the glory of God. The glory of God is God’s life shining in us. St. Irenaeus said it: “Life in humans is the glory of God; the life of humans is the vision of God.” But Jesus said it first: just as he glorified the Father by letting the Father’s life appear in him, so Jesus is glorified when his life is visible in his disciples.

We are “the light of the world.”⁴

God’s life is visible in us when our lives show forth the “fruit of the Spirit... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” When our lives, our actions, our choices, our joy cannot be explained except by the life of God in us, then we are proof to the world that “*Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.*”⁵

Glory and Peace

The *Gloria* at Mass echoes the angels’ song in **Luke 2: 1-14**: “Glory to God in high heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests!” We celebrate this Christmas theme all year long. We live in a vision of glory and peace. Christianity focuses us on glory and peace. But we have to *listen* to the words that are said and sung at Mass. And we have to *consciously say them and mean them*.

It is possible to grow up Christian from childhood and never appreciate the Good News. To *appreciate* we have to *praise*. (Read that again: this is a working principle in life). If we do not praise God we will not appreciate him. (If we do not praise other people, we will not appreciate them either). So when we make the decision to consciously, intentionally praise God through the words we say at Mass, we are making a decision to grow into appreciation of the Good News.

The contrary is also true: if we do not decide to consciously praise God at Mass, we are in fact accepting to deny ourselves the appreciation of the Good News that Mass can give. Many Catholics do this: they simply don’t “get into” *praising* God at Mass (or anywhere else, for that matter). They just say the words without thinking about them or meaning them. As a result, many just drop out of active participation in the Mass, saying it “never meant anything” to them. And it didn’t: they never paid attention to the meaning of the words, never said the words with awareness that they were meaning them, never addressed them consciously to God, speaking directly and personally to him. To echo John of the Cross, “Where you don’t find meaning, *put* meaning and you will find it!”

The truth is, many who identify themselves as Christians have never really been “evangelized.” They grew up hearing the Good News without hearing it, because they gave no conscious, personal response to it in their hearts. If they had, they would still be, like the shepherds, “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.”

That is why we celebrate Christmas: to *re-evangelize* ourselves. To appreciate deeply and personally the Good News that “*Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.*” Christmas is a time to recapture the vision of glory and peace.

The Blessed Hope

Titus 2: 11-14 reminds us that Christianity also focuses us on *waiting*. Jesus has come, announced and inaugurated the “reign of God,” and he will come again when, by working *with us, in us and through us*, he has established God’s reign in every human heart. Jesus is the Savior who came in the weakness and self-emptying

of human nature, ending his life in apparent defeat on the cross. He will come again in the glory of his resurrection and the triumph of his kingship. In the interim he is the Savior still present and working in us, his body on earth.⁶

Paul's words to Titus are quoted in the *Rite of Communion* at Mass: "as we await our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of... our Savior Jesus Christ" (currently translated: "as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ").

¹See *The Catholic Study Bible* edition of the *New American Bible*, Oxford University Press, 1990, footnotes to *Psalms* 2 with references to *Acts* 4:25-27; 13:33; *Hebrews* 1:5; *Judges* 9:8; *1 Samuel* 9:16 and 16:12-13; *Leviticus* 8:12; *Numbers* 3:3. ²*John* 14:12. ³*John* 14:6; 10:10. ⁴*John* 13:31-32; 14:13; 15:8; 17:4-10; *Matthew* 5:14. And see the treatise of St. Irenaeus *Against Heresies*, quoted in the *Office of Readings* for his feastday, June 28.

⁵*Galatians* 5:22-23. ⁶*Philippians* 2:5-11.

Insight

What is the Good News? How do we come to appreciate it?

Initiative:

Begin every Mass consciously praising and thanking God. Listen to the words.

December 25

CHRISTMAS MORNING

(Mass During the Day)

The *Responsorial Psalm* proclaims: “*All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God*” (*Psalm 98*). And all three readings emphasize the uniqueness of this “saving power,” which abides in Jesus, who is uniquely the “Son of God.”

Isaiah 52: 7-10 keeps insisting that the power that saves us is God’s own: “Your God is King!” “They see... before their eyes, the LORD restoring Zion.... The LORD comforts his people... the LORD has bared his holy arm....”

Hebrews 1: 1-6 is unequivocal about the uniqueness of Jesus: “God spoke to our ancestors in partial and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.... He is the refulgence of God’s glory, the very imprint of his being, who sustains all things by his mighty word.”

John 1: 1-18 is perhaps the most mystical of all the passages in the Gospels, and the most explicit about Jesus’ divinity: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.” (“Grace” is *hesed, charis*, “steadfast love”; and “truth” is *emet, aletheia*, “fidelity.” Jesus is the embodiment of God’s *enduring love*).

John concludes, “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” So we sing, “All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.”

This power is able to accomplish “far more than all we can ask or imagine” (*Ephesians 3:20*). To all who believe in him, Jesus gives “power to become children of God.” Jesus is the Son of God who makes us “sons and daughters in the Son.” By his death and resurrection he became able to say to his disciples, “I am ascending to *my Father and your Father*, to my God and your God” (*John 20:17*). He has made us divine.

Christianity is unique in believing that God became human. And equally unique in believing that “in Christ” — and only in Christ, by sharing in his divine life — humans become God (see December 20). This is why Christians are called to be, not just exemplary human beings, but people who live and love on the level of God. The more we grow into this by surrender to Christ within us, the more “All the ends of the earth will see the saving power of God.”

Initiative: If you want to live life to the full, be Christ! *Accept to live on the level of God.* Say before every action, “Lord, do this with me, do this in me, do this through me.” In everything you do, act with the love of Jesus himself.

December 26, 2013

St. Stephen

The *Responsorial Psalm* is the Christian response to death:

“Into your hands, O Lord, I entrust my spirit” (Psalm 31).

Acts 6:8 to 7:59 reminds us that the Good News is good news even when it seems to be bad! Stephen is stoned to death by his own people for proclaiming Jesus. But before they attacked him, “filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” That is what gave him the faith, the hope and the love to pray, while they were stoning him, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Because of Jesus, even death is good news!

What enraged Stephen’s hearers was the truth. Stephen gave a short summary of God’s dealings with his Chosen People. It was a history of God’s fidelity and their infidelity. God called and blessed his people; then they rejected him; then he rescued them. Over and over.

After God made the covenant with Abraham, his descendants sold their brother Joseph into slavery. But God used Joseph to rescue them from famine. Through Moses he led them out of slavery in Egypt. But they “were unwilling to obey him; instead, they pushed him aside, and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.” God still brought them into the Promised Land. There Solomon built the Temple — which Jesus, and later Stephen, were both accused of wanting to destroy (*Mark 14:58; 15:29; John 2:19; Acts 6: 13-14*). But the temple God promised “David’s son” would build (*1 Samuel 7: 12-13*) was greater than this.

Both Jesus and Stephen were rejected for offering something *better* than what people were used to. “The Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands,” but in the living Son of God made flesh and in his living body still on earth, the Church. This is the mystery of salvation. It is “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (*Colossians. 1:27*). The mystery of salvation is to “be Christ” by sharing Christ’s own divine life. Because we have Christ’s eternal life within us, when death comes we say with Jesus (*Luke 23:46*) and Stephen, “*Into your hands, O Lord, I entrust my spirit.*”

Jesus warns us in **Matthew 10: 17-22** that we too will be persecuted: “You will be hated by all because of my name.” But not to worry: “The one who endures to the end will be saved.” We too will say with faith, hope and joy, “*Into your hands, O Lord, I entrust my spirit.*” This is the good news that erases all bad news.

Initiative: If you want to live life to the full, be Christ! *Accept the good news that you have divine life within you, the fullness of life that will never end. Whenever you feel fear say, “Into your hands, O Lord, I entrust my spirit.”*

December 27, 2013

Saint John

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives us the key, not only to the readings, but to Christian life: “*Rejoice in the Lord, you just*” (*Psalm 97*).

1John 1: 1-4 explains why we rejoice: “Our *fellowship* is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” In Jesus, the Word of life, “life was made visible... the eternal life that was with the Father was made visible to us.” And John, called the “Evangelist” (the “Good-News-er”), proclaims it to all who will listen “so that you too may have *fellowship* with us.”

This is what Christianity is all about: *koinonia*: “fellowship,” “community,” “communion in the Holy Spirit” with God and with one another in the intimate union of one shared life, one shared light, one shared love.

This life was made visible in Jesus Christ. John testifies that it is “what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands.” God’s divine life was made visible in Jesus. And it is made visible in us.

John writes about it, and calls us to make this life visible to one another, “so that our joy may be complete.”

In **John 20: 1-8** John takes us to the theological root of our belief that God’s life is present and visible in every Christian. Beginning with Mary Magdalen’s complaint after finding Jesus’ tomb empty: “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we do not know where they put him,” he tells how he and Peter ran to the tomb to see. There they saw “the burial cloths,” but not the body of Jesus. And John says of himself, “He saw and believed.”

What did he believe? He believed Jesus was risen from the dead. Where did he believe he would find him? In his risen body. Where do we find his risen body today? In all the members of the Church who are Christ’s body on earth.

Jesus explained before his death that he had to die in order to rise multiplied in all the baptized: “Very truly, I tell you, 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*). The “eternal life that was with the Father was made visible to us” in Jesus. And it is made visible to the world in us, who are his risen body on earth. Jesus is “*Emmanuel*: God-with-us” in his Church. We find him in the “fellowship,” the “communion of the Holy Spirit” we experience with one another. “*Rejoice in the Lord, you just.*” Jesus is risen and dwelling among us still.

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, seek him where he can be found. *Get involved with the Christian community.* Assemble with those who believe.

The Holy Innocents

The *Responsorial Psalm* speaks of God's power and will to save us:

"Our soul has been rescued like a bird from the fowler's snare" (Psalm 124).

1John 1:5 to 2:2 is based on recognition that the essential sin is simply to reject union — *koinonia*, fellowship, communion — with Jesus Christ. All other sins are just signs that tell us if we are in union with him or not.

For John, being in communion with the Christian community is the greatest sign of union with Christ. And living by Christ's light is the sign we are in communion with the community: "If we walk in the light... we have fellowship with one another...."

In our day we are very conscious of the number of people who are not visibly members of the Church — who do not "assemble" with us, and perhaps do not explicitly believe in Jesus Christ. Does this mean they do not share in the divine life of grace? That they are in the death of darkness and separation from God? Not for us to judge. They might judge themselves by the presence or absence of the "fruit of the Spirit" in their lives (*Galatians 5:22-23; Matthew 7:15-20*).

And what of us who believe but still commit sins? Are we excluding ourselves from the community? John answers that sin does not exclude us if we *acknowledge* it as sin and keep *trying*. "If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful... and will forgive... and cleanse us from every wrongdoing."

The *confession* of sin is a *profession* of faith in Christ's ideals. But if we rationalize our behavior and say, "We have not sinned," then we reject his teaching and "his word is not in us."

Matthew 2: 13-18 helps us understand how those who do not explicitly believe in Jesus are saved. It speaks of little babies who never knew Jesus — who were not even developed enough as human beings to make a free choice or a conscious act of faith. And yet the Church celebrates them as martyrs who died in witness to faith in Jesus Christ.

There are levels in the human soul that are deeper than conscious thought. And God is able to communicate with us in ways that bypass access through the brain. This is why babies, people who are "brain dead," and people with insurmountable intellectual or emotional blocks against Christianity can respond to God's call in ways invisible to us. Heaven is full of unlikely people singing "*Our soul has been rescued like a bird from the fowler's snare.*"

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, seek him where he can be found. *Confess sin as sin.* But continue to assemble with the community and to receive Christ, who is able to "rescue you from sin like a bird from the fowler's snare."

December 29, 2013

HOLY FAMILY SUNDAY

(The first Sunday after Christmas)

Appreciating and Accepting Jesus as:

“Emmanuel – God-with-us” who interacts with us in human ways

Inventory

Whom do you know best in your family? How did that happen? Did you spend more time together? Talk more deeply to each other? What is it you do with your friends that makes you friends? How many of these things can you do with Jesus?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* tells us Jesus was first seen by shepherds, who “found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.” The first people to find Jesus found him in the context of a family. And this is where most people find him. Most of us meet Jesus at home.

But many don’t. In many families the presence of Jesus is not felt or visible. This is true also in the family of the human race. In all of us, to some degree, God’s image is distorted. Other people can draw us to Jesus or drive us away from him. Or just leave us ignorant of the Savior of the world.

That is why, in the *Opening Prayer*, we ask that we might “live as the holy family, united in respect and love” — not just with our blood relatives, but with every member of the human race on earth. It is not ordinary human togetherness we are asking for. We are asking to be deeply united in the “communion of the Holy Spirit,” with an awesome respect for each other as made divine by “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” We ask to experience the love between us as “the love of God” poured out in our hearts, expressed by us to one another.

This is possible because in Jesus God came and “made his home” with us (*John* 1:14). That is why his name is “*Emmanuel*: God-with-us.” In Jesus God is present to us as a human among humans. We can deal with him in the same human ways we deal with each other. And Jesus acts in and through each one of us to reveal his truth and express his love to everyone we deal with — beginning in the home.

We ask that our homes might be previews of heaven, homes in which we experience the “joy and peace of our eternal home” with God. This is the sign that we are living by the Spirit of God: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (*Galatians* 5: 22-23).

Where these are the Spirit is, and we are united in Christ. If these are in our home, we will reveal and find Christ there.

“Blessed are those...”

The *Responsorial Psalm* pinpoints the difference between a merely human family and a graced family in which we experience the presence of God: “*Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways*” (*Psalms* 128).

“Fear of the Lord” is not fright, but respect based on awareness of who God is. Anyone who sees in perspective the power, the goodness and the wisdom of God would be insane not to “walk in his ways.” Those who do walk in his ways will make God known to one another. This is the key to family life and all Christian community.

Sirach 3: 2-14 promises that those who honor and obey God’s authority in parents will be preserved from sin, be heard when they pray, and “live a long life” — which in Scriptural language means a “full life.” They will be a comfort to their parents, find fulfillment in life and be made glad by their own children.

When children obey their human parents they express and experience their response to God who is “made

flesh” for them in their parents. God’s love is made flesh in parents’ care for their children. The physical interaction between all people who are aware that in their actions they are responding to God and letting God work through them is an experience of real, physical, down-to-earth relationship with God. By acting recognizably by grace, we become for each other “*Emmanuel: God-with-us.*”

Jesus came to save the world by being *in it*. Every human society is saved or corrupted by the people in it: by the effect their words and actions have on others: instilling true or false attitudes and values, making sin appear normal or abnormal, inciting to violence or to peace, enticing to healthy or harmful gratifications, inhibiting or encouraging the expression of higher ideals and faith. It takes millions of human choices, both for good and for evil, expressed in action, to create a culture. As the culture develops, for better or worse, it influences everyone in it. Jesus came to start a reversing trend against what is false and destructive in human society.

He began by preaching and teaching — through word and example — in the body he received from Mary. He continues by speaking through the words of all who are his body on earth today, and by modeling, in them, a better way to live. This is one way he continues to be “*Emmanuel: God-with-us*” still. “Blessed are those” who *let him act in them* and “walk in his ways.”

“With us” in trust

Matthew 2: 13-23 is a shocking story. An angel tells Joseph in the middle of the night to “flee to Egypt” because Herod is searching for Jesus to destroy him.

Joseph must have wondered. He knew that Jesus was the Messiah, and God’s own Son. Why did Joseph have to save the Savior? Why didn’t the angel just wipe out Herod’s patrol the way a single angel once wiped out one hundred and eighty-five thousand warriors who threatened Jerusalem (*2Kings 19:35*)?

The answer to this comes later in the Gospel. What we see now is that even those whom God loves best need to trust him — and sometimes that isn’t easy. In accepting Jesus as Savior we have to accept what he came — and did not come — to save us from. Even John the Baptizer had to learn this (see the Third Sunday of Advent). God wants us to trust that he is “with us” no matter what happens. We experience his presence in our steadfast faith, hope and love, if only we “*fear the Lord and walk in his ways.*”

Words made flesh:

Colossians 3: 12-21 shows us how people can affect each other most deeply in family life and in the Christian community. Paul urges all the members to *embody the virtues of Jesus in action*: “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience....” Above all he urges us to express *love* in everything we do, since love shows appreciation for all that is good.

If we live by the values of Christ, the fruit of this will be evident, experienced *peace* — in our hearts, in our homes, in our communities. Peace is the fruit and proof of love. Christ calls us to peace.

But for this to happen, we have to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Romans 13:14*) and “let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus” (*Philippians 2:5*). In the Scriptures that record Jesus’ life and explain his teaching, we find the pure Light of the world, untainted by darkness. In his actions we see the divine Word of God expressing himself without distortion in our world. We have to go to this well and drink from it, the source of life-giving water.

We can do this because Jesus is “*Emmanuel: God-with-us*” in another way, in addition to his presence in others. He is with us still in the *Scriptures*, in which the Church recognizes a “real presence” of the living God: “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and of Christ’s body.... For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven *meets his children with great love and speaks with them*” (Vatican II on *Divine Revelation*, no. 21).

So, to make Christ present among us, St. Paul urges, “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.” For Jesus to be “*Emmanuel,*” recognizable in us, in our words and actions, we have to fill our minds with his words and nourish our hearts with his example.

If we read Scripture and worship together in our homes, we will say from lived experience, “*Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways.*”

Insight

In how many human ways do I interact with Jesus? What ways are open to me? Can I interact with him in all the ways I interact with my family and friends?

Initiative:

Seek to experience Jesus dealing with you in every human way — through his words, sacraments, and members of his body — so that when you feel the trial of his absence you will be able to find him in pure faith, pure hope, pure love.

December 30, 2013

Sixth day of Christmas

The *Responsorial Psalm* invites us again, “*Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice*” (*Psalm 96*).

1John 2: 2-17 tells us why: “because your *sins have been forgiven*... because you *know him* who is from the beginning... because you have *conquered the Evil One*... because you *know the Father*... you are *strong* and the *word of God remains in you*...”

John acknowledges the power of “the world,” meaning the infected societies in which all humans live, whose false attitudes and values keep affecting us because we see and hear them every day.

But the powerful impact the “world” has on us with its images, words, sound-bites, music, and enveloping tides of cultural trends has been countered by the visible presence of Jesus-Emmanuel: “God-with-us” speaking and acting in the Christian community by a new spirit: the Spirit of God. To let Jesus do this in us, John exhorts us, “Do not love the world or the things of the world.... For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticements for the eyes, and a pretentious life.... is passing away. But whoever does the will of God remains forever.” This is reason to sing, “*Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice.*”

Luke 2: 36-40 tells us that after Jesus was recognized in the temple by Anna, he went back to his “own town,” and there “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom....”

This is happening now. In each one of us, who are his “own body,” Jesus is “growing to full stature.” To each one of us God has given the gift of grace, the “favor” of sharing in the divine life of God. With this comes the gift of the Holy Spirit, working within us “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (*Ephesians 4: 12-13*).

We are the body of Christ. We have “become Christ.” But we are still programmed by our society to think, feel and act in ways contrary to his. Our task is to keep interacting with Jesus, keep listening to him speaking to us in our hearts, in his word, in the community, until all our thoughts and desires are in union with his. Then Jesus will shine out in us as “*Emmanuel: God with us.*” Then “*the heavens will be glad and the earth will rejoice.*”

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, seek him where he can be found. *Be aware of his presence within you.* Try to grow into deeper union with his mind and heart by paying attention to how you feel when you consult him.

December 31, 2013

Seventh day of Christmas

The *Responsorial Psalm* still invites us, “*Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice*” (*Psalm 96*).

1John 2: 18-21 gives us an unexpected reason for rejoicing: “Many antichrists have appeared.... They went out from us, but.... their desertion shows that they were not really of our number.”

John is talking about people who left the Church preaching a view of life in radical contradiction to the truth revealed in Jesus. He judges that they didn’t lose the faith; they just never truly embraced it. What is there here to rejoice in?

We rejoice, not because others are in error, but because we are in a community of truth. And it is a gift from God “You have the anointing that comes from the Holy One, and you all have knowledge.”

In our day many Catholics have defected. They may not have actually “left” the Church, but they are “leaving it alone” for awhile. They no longer assemble with us to hear the word of God, to offer themselves with Christ at Mass for the life of the world, and to be fed with the Bread of Life. What does this say to us?

It certainly makes us question whether our teaching is too narrow, our religious observances too automatic, our pastoral practice too legalistic, and our participation in Eucharist too individualistic and apathetic. It makes us ask whether we are helping each other enter into live, personal, vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ. But the bottom line is, when people leave us, they are not turning toward the truth but away from it. When people leave the whole to focus on the part, we need to focus more intently on the whole.

John 1: 1-18 brings us to basics. Jesus is the Word of God. All that is real, true or good came to be through him. The Word became flesh and dwells in the Church, his body on earth. In him is life, and this life is the light of the human race, the true light which enlightens everyone. To those who accept the light, he gives divine life. If we abide in him our lives will bear the fruit of divine truth and goodness, and the Father will be glorified in us (*John 14:5-8*). If we do not “gather” with him (same root as *synagogue* or “assembly” in *James 2:2*) we will scatter.¹ For us to receive “from his fullness,” then, we need to *assemble with him* in the Church. There the Word of God is “*Emmanuel: God-with-us.*”

¹See the same root as “assembly” in *Matthew 12:30, 23:37; Mark 13:27; John 11:52.*

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, seek him where he can be found. Assemble with him in the Church. Let the Word made flesh speak to you in preaching, teaching and spiritual discussions. Seek the fullness of Light and Life.

THE FEAST OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD:

We are “re-born to praise”

Appreciating and Accepting ourselves as:

“sons and daughters in the Son,” true children of the Father

Inventory

How do you feel about the start of the New Year? Does the celebration of Mary as Mother of God help you to orient yourself as you begin it? What does this feast mean to you personally?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* proclaims, “A light will shine on us this day...” God’s light shone in a special way when the Church declared it a dogma of faith at the Council of Ephesus, 431 A.D., that Mary is rightly called “Mother of God.” This doctrine was defined, not because of what it says about Mary, but because of what it says about Jesus; that we must not “divide” Jesus by separating his humanity from his divinity, as some at the Council would have done by specifying that Mary was mother of Jesus’ humanity — or of his body only — but not of his divinity, and therefore not “mother of God.” The Church’s answer was that our mothers are the mothers of all we are, whole and entire; and therefore Mary is the mother of everything Jesus is as both God and man.

The dogma was defined to say something about Jesus. But it also says something about Mary and about us. In the *Prayer after Communion* we “proclaim the Virgin Mary to be the mother of Christ and the mother of the Church,” and we pray that “our communion with her Son” will “bring us to salvation.”¹ What this says is that if Mary is *really* the Mother of *all* Jesus is, and if we have *really* “become Christ” by Baptism, by being incorporated into his body, then Mary is really our Mother as well. And we are really “sons and daughters of the Father.” Our “salvation” is to share in God’s divine life through our union with Jesus. If that union is real, then everything that follows from it is real also.

This tells us that, as we begin the New Year, we need to do so conscious of what we really are, of how we are really called to live, and of what we are really called to do, precisely as divine-human continuations of the divine-human life of Jesus on earth.

¹Literally, the Latin text asks that “your heavenly sacraments,” which “we have joyfully received” will “lead us to eternal life.” Receiving the sacraments expresses and increases the communion with Jesus we received at Baptism with the gift of “grace,” which means the “favor” of sharing in God’s own life.

Our blessing

The *Responsorial (Psalm 72)* has us asking — for the New Year — “*May God bless us in his mercy.*”

In **Numbers 6:22-27** the blessing God tells Moses to ask for the People is all about *knowing* God:

May Yahweh let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you... show you his face and give you peace
(*New Jerusalem Bible*).

We were taught as children that we were created to “know, love and serve God.” This is a marvelous formula. It gives us the basic, simple principle we need for self-orientation. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we have a sure compass that tells us how to direct our lives. We know what God is giving us life for and how he wants us to use it. This is priceless.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, gives a slightly different version of this formula. He says we were created to “praise, reverence and serve God.” Basically, he replaces “knowing” with the first action that should follow from it — *praising* — and “loving” with the attitude that, throughout all of his writings, he teaches is the foundational requirement for loving God as we should: *reverence*, or acknowledgment of the distance between God and us — distance God overcame in Jesus by taking flesh as a human like ourselves. Ignatius would say the first service we owe to God is *praise*.

We are not sufficiently conscious of this. Today is a good time to recall it —and to make a “New Year’s resolution” to make praising God a more conscious, constant part of our life.

The Mass is a good place to begin.

Praising God is not what most Catholics are most consciously thinking of on their way to Mass. Actually, they may not be thinking of anything much at all except what is on the car radio and what the kids are fighting about in the back seat. But New Year’s would be a good time to change this. It would be a very enlightened New Year’s resolution to decide — as a family, if possible — to jump into Mass praising God like a cheering section!

Farfetched? Unrealistic? Something nobody would go along with? Okay. The same could have been said (and was said; I was there!) in the ‘sixties and afterwards, when we fought for racial integration; for putting the Mass into a language people can understand; for giving the laity a more active role in the Church as lectors, Eucharistic ministers, religion teachers, theology professors and parish administrators; for banning smoking in public places; for adapting our speech to avoid unconsciously belittling women; for just treatment of migrant workers; for raising people’s consciousness about the evil of war, about human rights and the ideal of nonviolence; for recycling and concern about ecology; for exposing child abuse; for recognizing the promotion of social justice as a “constitutive element” of Christian life; for ordaining married men as deacons; for stricter laws against drunk driving; for anti-pollution measures such as unleaded gas; for shattering the “glass ceiling” that kept women from higher positions in corporate management; for enforcing security measures such as seat belts and helmets for bike riders; for playground safety; “sell by” dates on food products and required hand-washing for restaurant employees; for health foods; and efforts to discourage fast-food obesity. And that is just the tip of the iceberg. Before these changes took place, “general opinion” would have thought most of them a pipe dream.

So is it unrealistic to think that almost overnight Catholics could start coming to Mass to praise God? And that they will in fact praise him as a united community — in song and spontaneity, through “full, conscious, active participation” in the liturgy? A new year is beginning; why not start doing your part now? The liturgy encourages us to hope: “*May God bless us in his mercy.*”

In **Luke 2:16-21** the shepherds “returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard.” Haven’t we seen and heard the same thing? And more! Who knows that we have? Do even our children know?

Mary “treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart.” We know her heart was full of praise. But she also expressed it. The words of her “*Magnificat*” to Elizabeth were certainly not the last time she spoke her praise out loud!¹

Before the reform of the liturgy after Vatican II, January 1 was the Feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord. “Around 500 AD the Eastern Church celebrated a ‘Day of the *Theotokos*’ [*Dei Genetrix* or “Mother of God”] either before or after Christmas....” In the West, since 1914 Catholics grew up celebrating the feast of “the Motherhood of Mary” on October 11. When, in 1974, Pope Paul VI made January 1 the feast of “Mary, Mother of God” he also designated it as the “World Day of Peace”:

to renew the adoration rightfully to be shown to the newborn Prince of Peace... and to pray to God, through the intercession of the Queen of Peace, for the priceless gift of peace; and because of... the fact that the

¹ *Luke* 1:46-55.

octave of Christmas coincides with a day of hope, New Year's Day.¹

In the *Gloria* we repeat the angels' message, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace*." We need to make this conscious, fervent praise.

The Gospel continues: "After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child." Circumcision was the sign of accepting the Covenant God made with his People. In **Galatians 4:4-7** Paul casts new light on the Covenant:

When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to deliver from the law those who were subject to it, so that we might receive our status as adopted children....

So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir....

To be subject to God's law is not slavery; but a spirit of slavish obedience can make it that. If our focus in religion is on law-observance, we have not yet absorbed the Good News. Jesus came so that we might know the Father as both our Father and his. This is not just learned, intellectual or "catechetical" knowledge; it is an experience of the Holy Spirit:

The proof that you are children is the fact that God has sent forth into our hearts the Spirit of his Son crying, "Abba! Father!"

We know God as Father in a way deeper than thought. We "know we know" him by the results in our life: a deep, underlying awareness that we are loved and cared for as children; a trusting desire that the Father's "will be done," even when we don't understand it; an assurance that his home is our home:

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?²

The New Year is a time for hope — hope based on new understanding of the New Covenant. We need to pray, "*May God bless us in his mercy*," and praise him because we know he does.

Insight

Am I more motivated now to make praising God a strong element of my religion?

Initiative:

Renew the Mass. Begin every celebration consciously and enthusiastically praising God. Begin with the entrance hymn!

¹ See www.churchyear.net, and Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, Feb. 2, 1974, no.5. For the popes' World Day of Peace messages see www.vatican.va. See especially John Paul's radical message for 1993.

² *John* 14:2. And see *Matthew* 11:27.

January 2, 2014

Christmas weekday before Epiphany)

The *Responsorial Psalm* is proclamation of the Incarnation of God in Jesus:

“All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God” (Psalm 98).

1John 2: 22-28 exhorts us not to deny the grace we have received or the truth revealed to us.

That truth is that Jesus Christ is God himself made flesh. “Whoever has seen [Jesus] has seen the Father” (*John* 14:9,12:45). And vice-versa, “Anyone who denies the Son has no claim on the Father.” We can only claim God as our Father if we are “in Christ”; that is, incorporated into the body of Jesus, the “only-begotten Son of the Father.” Jesus alone is the Son, and we are *fili in Filio*, “sons and daughters in the Son.” We are children of God only by identification with Jesus, the only Son of the Father. Otherwise God is just our Creator.

And this is the grace we have received, the “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is the “grace,” the “favor,” of *sharing in the divine life of God*. We share in Christ’s divine life because we have been incorporated into his body. We are not just Christians. By Baptism we have “become Christ” (St. Augustine, quoted by John Paul II). If we deny that we have “become Christ,” denying that we have become *divine* by the gift of sharing in God’s own divine life, this is a denial similar to, or parallel to, denying that the human man, Jesus, was truly the divine Son of God. It is hard to accept that God truly became human in Jesus Christ. It is hard to accept that we truly become divine in Jesus Christ. But both are fundamentals of our faith. In Jesus and in the Church, his body on earth, *“All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.”*

In **John 1: 19-28** John the Baptizer declares unequivocally the difference between himself and Jesus. Jesus is the Messiah; John is not. The baptism John offers is nothing but a human gesture of repentance. But Jesus will baptize “with the Holy Spirit” (1:33). The baptism Jesus offers makes us divine.

John knew who he was: not the Messiah, but “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” If we know who we are, we will know that what we become by grace is greater than anything people were able to see in John. Jesus said it: “Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptizer; yet *the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he*” (*Matthew* 11:11). By Baptism we were born, “not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (*John* 1:13). This is the mystery of our salvation: *“All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.”*

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, be aware of his real presence in yourself and others. Recognize him as *Emmanuel*: “God-with-us.”

January 3, 2014

Christmas weekday before Epiphany)

The *Responsorial Psalm* calls us to recognize the mystery of our identity:
“*All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God*” (*Psalm 98*).

1John 2:29 to 3:6 tells us that the “world,” meaning those in whom faith is not enlightening, “does not recognize us.” As what? The answer is “children of God.” But John insists, “Yet that is what we are.”

Do we recognize this ourselves? We all accept the words and profess them as our faith. But do we really see ourselves, accept ourselves, value ourselves and rejoice in ourselves as “God’s children”? If we do, what difference should it make in our lives?

When faith is truly alive, it fills us with a new and special hope. We live with the expectation and confidence that when Jesus brings us into the vision of God, “*we shall be like him, for we will see him as he is.*”

It is this faith in our own identity, and this hope in what we actually will be, that encourages us to strive for “the perfection of love,” which the second Vatican Council holds up to us as the goal of every authentic Christian lifestyle:

Every Catholic must therefore aim at Christian perfection (cf *James 1:4; Romans 12:1-2*) and all, according to their station, must do their part so that the Church... may daily be more purified and renewed... (*Decree on Ecumenism* no. 4).

Thus it is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the *fullness of the Christian life* and to the *perfection of charity*. (*The Church*, no. 40).

We have “become Christ.” We are children of the Father “in the Son.” We will eventually be “like him” perfectly. “All who have this hope based on him keep themselves pure, as he is pure.” We keep trying!

John 1: 29-34 tells us that John the Baptizer himself did not recognize Jesus for what he was until he “saw the Spirit descend [and] rest on him.” To really “know Jesus,” it is not enough to have grown up with him, or grown up in the faith that declares what he is. We have to be enlightened interiorly by the Holy Spirit to appreciate his mystery as the Savior who can actually save our lives on this earth from all that diminishes them (which may be different from what we think!).

To really know Jesus we have to *interact* with him in human ways that are made divine by the “co-action” in us of the Holy Spirit. We have to pray with our *minds*, reflecting on what Scripture says of him. And with our *wills*, putting our faith into action, which is where we realize what it actually is. If we do this, we will “*see the saving power of God*”

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, know yourself as God’s own daughter or son. *Act as Jesus* in everything you do. Learn how to do this through prayer.

January 4, 2014

Christmas weekday before Epiphany

The *Responsorial Psalm* assures us, “*All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God*” (*Psalm 98*).

1John 3: 7-10 tells us “Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil.... Those who have been born of God do not sin.” How should we understand this?

John makes the distinction later (5: 16-18) between sin that is “deadly” or “mortal” and “sin that is not deadly.” For a sin to be “mortal,” what is done must be so evil in itself that it is absolutely incompatible with graced love of God and of other people. Contrary to what was taught to generations of Catholics before Vatican II, very few actions are this evil. And the experience of priests in the confessional indicates that actions that are this evil are seldom recognized as such by the people who commit them. Think of slavery, the tortures and executions of the Inquisition, the atrocities of war, the mass exploitation of the poor. These sins do not come up in the sacrament of Reconciliation because they are rationalized; or perhaps — John’s letter makes us wonder — because the love of God does not truly exist in those who commit them. “Those who have been born of God do not sin [in these atrocious ways], because God’s seed abides in them; they cannot sin [in ways so incompatible with love], because they have been born of God.”

To know if we are in sin, we need to look less at laws and more at love. John gives a simple rule: “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (4:8). If we look at what love has done and is still doing in the Church, we will agree: “*All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.*”

John 1: 35-42 tells us how we come into the experience of loving God as Christians do, which means “as Christ does.” It is by encountering God in Jesus himself.

When the first two future disciples met Jesus he asked them, “What are you looking for?” Their answer, though they did not know it at the time, was the basic answer of the human heart: “Where are you staying?” What we all are asking, consciously or not, is, “Where is God? Where can we find him?”

Jesus said, “Come and see.” If we see Jesus, we see the Father (*John 8:19, 14:9*). But no one can tell us about him; we have to “come and see” for ourselves, *interact* with Jesus consciously in prayer, Mass, sacraments, at home, at work, at school, all day. Then we will know we “*have seen the saving power of God.*”

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, accept his invitation to “Come and see.” *Keep looking* for personal contact with him at home, at work, in prayer, at Mass.

January 5, 2014

The Feast of the Epiphany Jesus is the Guiding Star

Appreciating and Accepting Jesus as Light leading the world into his glory

Inventory

Do you feel guided in your life? By what? What do you use from day to day to keep you on course toward your life's goals?

•Do you have more than one goal in life? If so, what unifies or harmonizes them?

Input

The Epiphany is all about Jesus leading us by his Light to his Light. The theme is light and motion — guided by a vision of glory.

Light and joy go together. Joy and praise go together. This is a feast of Light which we will experience as *joy* if we celebrate it with *praise*.

Joy without praise, joy unexpressed, is like a smoldering fire. It is real but not exuberant. If it is not shared, it is not fully experienced. It is stifled happiness.

The way to suffocate a house fire is to close all the windows. If someone opens one, the fire will explode outward and become an inferno. The fire of light and love that is God's grace within us follows the same law of nature. If it is not expressed it is suppressed.

The *Entrance Antiphon* announces, "*The Lord is coming: kingship is his, and government and power.*" But the antiphon will leave us cold unless we express a response to it. The best response is to join in the proclamation, make it our own. The way to hear the Good News is to proclaim it. If we do, the message will inflame the messenger.

In the *Opening Prayer* we ask God, "Lead us to your glory in heaven by the light of faith." The *Alternate Opening Prayer* specifies: "Draw us beyond the limits which this world imposes, to the life where your Spirit makes all life complete." Faith is a light from beyond this world — a sharing in the knowing act of God himself — and it is leading us to a "glory" that is also beyond this world, the glory of God himself. Does this make us poignantly, painfully aware of how limited the lives are of those who have never had, or who have given up, the faith? They are still bound in, enclosed within "the limits which this world imposes." Limited knowledge, limited understanding, limited hopes, a limited sense of destiny, and nothing to love except the limited goodness of creatures evoking a limited response — with every relationship terminating in death. Enclosed within that darkness, the best they can have is a dim view of everything — even when they experience it as brilliance.

But if we don't express our faith, give praise to God for what we see — praise him publicly, enthusiastically, authentically — others have no way of suspecting the "more." In this context the expression "to damn with faint praise" takes on new and sobering meaning.

That is why we celebrate the Epiphany: to remind us and to reflect to others the Light we have received, the Light by which we journey, the Light that is leading us "beyond the limits which this world imposes" into the fullness of life that is found in sharing the "grace of the Lord Jesus Christ." To him we proclaim in the *Gloria*:

*You alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High,
Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father.
Amen.*

We need to proclaim this to the world.

Isaiah's trumpet

Isaiah 60: 1-6 summons us to praise: “Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem!” This is exactly what the liturgy invites us to do at the beginning of every Mass: “Stand up! On your feet, believers! Rise up and sing. Show your splendor in letting the *Entrance hymn* rock the rafters!” Is anything less than this worthy of what we celebrate, of what we are about to do?

Why do we rise up? Isaiah tells us, “because your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you.” We have the light. We didn't find it for ourselves, we didn't figure it out. It was just given to us. But it makes us different!

“See, darkness covers the earth.” Isn't that disturbingly obvious every time we read a paper or turn on the TV? “And thick clouds cover the peoples” — clouds of ignorance, bad example, distorted education, prejudice, divisiveness, hostility, addiction to violence.

“But upon you the Lord shines, and over you appears his glory.” It appears to “those who have eyes to see.” But how many cannot see because we have thrown dust in their eyes? The dust of our own acceptance of violence, our own idolatry, the devotion we show to the gods of our culture: prosperity, prestige, productivity, position and power? How many can't see our glory because we are hiding it under a “bushel basket” of cowardly reserve, apathetic participation at Mass, conformist behavior in social and professional life, just plain laziness about Scripture reading and prayer? And yet the glory is there. The light is within us. We are the light of the world. We just have to let it shine.¹

“Raise your eyes and look about,” Isaiah invites us: “Nations shall walk by your light.... They all gather and come to you.” Actually, they are coming to us now. People are seeking the truth and finding it in the Church. Those who defected because they suffocated the light within themselves by not letting it shine are being replaced by those who “want out” of the darkness. These are coming, “proclaiming the praises of the Lord.” They need to find us proclaiming his praises also, so that we can all rejoice in the *koinonia*, the “communion in the Holy Spirit” that is the visible “glory of God” on earth.

If we “proclaim his praises” enough, that glory will bring about what the *Responsorial (Psalm 72)* exults in: “*Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.*”

The Preview

Matthew 2: 1-12: This can have humble beginnings. The visit of the Magi may seem impressive in the small-town setting of Bethlehem, but, aside from the fact that we don't really know what the “magi” were, there were only three of them and they didn't stay long! (Actually, we don't know how many there were. We guess three because three types of gift are mentioned). The story is not meant to show the nations streaming in to Jesus, but just to make the point that from the very beginning the Good News was meant for all.

This was to counter the “fundamentalist” Christians of the “judaizing” or Pharisee party, who claimed that letting the Gentiles into the Church without requiring them to observe all the Jewish customs was an innovation introduced by Paul and the Apostles, something “Jesus never did!” Here, as elsewhere, Matthew shows that, though the mission of Jesus himself while on earth was only to the Jews, the Father did send others to him and he accepted them.²

In our day we must guard against the tendency to restrict the Mass — or even Communion — to a special “elite” who meet all our customary benchmarks, even when these are stricter than our faith requires.

Just as obviously, we need to resist any attempt to impose one language on the liturgy. It is typical of

¹ *Matthew* 5:14-16.

² Compare *Matthew* 10:5-6 with 10:17-18. See *Matthew* 8:5-13; 15:21-28; *Luke* 10:29-37; 17:11-19; *John* 4:3-

colonialism, and contrary to catholicism (small c) to repress native languages. Christians do not have any “sacred language” such as Hebrew is for the Jews and Arabic for the Moslems. As a “catholic” Church, we consider all languages equal, both for worship and for proclaiming divine revelation. All we ask is that they be intelligible to their hearers. For us, this is a logical conclusion from “*Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.*”

This is the overwhelming theme of the celebration of the feast of the Epiphany: that *every nation on earth will adore him*. That his light will shine out to every human being on earth, through every human being enlightened and enlivened by his grace. This is what the Church lives and exists for, to evangelize the world. And the first act of evangelization is praise. How can we excite others about something we don’t appear to be excited about ourselves?

A Propulsion to Praise

In **Ephesians 3: 2-6** St. Paul says we have something to be excited about! It is “the mystery unknown in former ages but now revealed by the Spirit,” that “in Christ” the Gentiles are now coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise of the Gospel. We are compelled to praise God for the glory he is bringing about:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.... He chose us in Christ.... *to the praise of his glorious grace* He has made known to us the mystery of his... plan for the fullness of time, *to gather up all things in Christ....* so that we... might live *for the praise of his glory*. In him you ... were marked with the... Holy Spirit... *to the praise of his glory*.¹

If we are not moved to praise him, we haven’t really heard the Good News.

Insight

How do I feel now about praising God at Mass?

Initiative:

Join the “cheering section” at Mass. Sit with others. Sing. Get with it.

¹ *Ephesians* 1:3-12.

January 6, 2014

Monday between Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord

The *Responsorial Psalm* promises the Messiah: “*I will give you all nations for an inheritance*” (*Psalm 2*). The truth of Christ can enlighten and shine through every culture on earth. Christ’s love can transform and bring to perfection every human endeavor. All of creation has been redeemed by Jesus, and all of creation can be the medium through which his glory shines. Jesus and the Church say with the Roman poet: *Nihil humanum mihi alienum puto*: “I see nothing human as foreign to me.”

1John 3: 22 to 4:6 warns us against thinking that what can be already is. We look for the good in everything human, but we still have to “test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” If we reject nothing, then when we accept anything it means nothing. We have to distinguish between truth and falsehood, good and evil, right thinking and wrong thinking. How can we know the difference?

The first thing to look for is *love*. “Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them.” God’s commandment is that we should “love one another.” But his commandment is also, “we should *believe* in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ.” We have to bear in mind, however, that John was writing specifically to the Christian community. We do not judge non-Christians by a faith they have not received, or have received only on a level deeper than words (see December 28).

A test for conscious Christians, however, is whether they “acknowledge Jesus come in the flesh.” Christians find Jesus in the down-to-earth reality of life and worship in his body on earth, the Church. They embody his truth and love in the concrete expressions of daily life. A “spirituality” too snooty to express itself in the physical actions of “religion” or to accept identification with a sinful human community is not the spirituality of the Incarnate God.

Matthew 4: 12-25 shows God’s divine optimism about the human race and his confidence in the winning power of grace. When John is arrested Jesus “withdraws” to Galilee to preach to a “people who sit in darkness... in a land overshadowed by death.” He follows his own later advice to his disciples, “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next” (*Matthew 10:23*). We should never presume that any person, group, culture or milieu is unable to hear God’s word — if we live it and present it as we should. God’s promise is, “*I will give you all nations for an inheritance.*”

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, accept him as universal Savior. Be an evangelizer. Offer Jesus to everyone you deal with by the consistent witness of a life only faith in him can explain.

January 7, 2014

Tuesday between Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord

The *Responsorial Psalm* foretells, “*Lord, every nation on earth will adore you*” (*Psalm 72*). Picture it.

Adoration is a total, all-unifying response to the overwhelming truth and beauty of God. Before the infinite Being of God, in whom all truth, all goodness are One, we ourselves are reduced to one act. There is nothing to say, nothing to do, nothing to add. All is before us. We simply condense ourselves into one silent, wordless word of affirmation. In our silence we become a single word expressed, a word for which there is no word. All that we are becomes eloquent in silence. There is no other way to recognize the full Being of God.

When “*every nation on earth adores him,*” there will be no divisions between us, because we will all be focused just on what He is; not on what any one of us is not. The only goodness we will be aware of is his and our participation in it, and we will adore it in Him and in one another. Outside of Him — and of his beauty as found in the unique diversity of every person and culture — we will pay attention to nothing at all, because there will be nothing else. Everything good and true and beautiful — all that truly is — will be present in Him. And in everything and everyone that is we will see his truth, his goodness and beauty shining through the distinct life and characteristics of every being God has made. “*Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.*”

1John 4: 7-10 tells us love is like adoration in this, that it silences everything within us that is not of God, and focuses us only on what is of God in one another. True love does not blind us to the faults in one another, but they cease to be the focus. They are just the background out of which each one’s truth and beauty shine. “Let us love one another, because love is of God; and everyone who loves... knows God.”

On this earth our whole being cannot remain rapt and unified in one, silent act of adoration. We are here to grow and develop through interaction with all of creation. We have work to do, and we have to focus on many things that can distract us from the pure truth and goodness of God. So **Mark 6: 34-44** teaches us that *active love* can be the unifying focus in our lives. *To see good, do love.* Jesus was “moved with pity” for the crowds. He *taught* them, told his disciples to *feed* them, and made their eating a sign of *Eucharist*, where he assembles people to nourish them with himself. And in Eucharist, by sharing themselves with each other, they share in his own act of giving life to the world.

The lesson? To be love, do love.

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, accept him as universal Savior. *Let love be your eyes.* Focus on God’s truth and goodness in everyone. And share.

January 8, 2014

Wednesday between Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us, “*Lord, every nation on earth will adore you*” (*Psalm 72*).

This is a promise that supports *hope* and motivates us to *love*.

1John 4: 11-18 tells us that if we show love to one another, we will grow in love, and God’s love will be “brought to perfection in us.” But what is the sign that tells us this is actually happening?

If we think like Christ and love like Christ, we must be alive by the Spirit of Christ. This is what tells us we are truly in union with Christ, and that “he has given us his Spirit.”

To love like Christ is to help others *be* and *become* all they can be. Christ’s Spirit tells us “the Father sent his Son as *savior of the world*,” so we want to help others grow by sharing our knowledge and experience of Christ with them.

What holds us back?

Fear. We are afraid of failure. We think people are impervious to religion, or that we are inadequate to present it, or that even if we are discreet in our way of expressing the Good News, they may be offended.

Mark 6: 45-52 reminds us that the apostles felt this way in the early Church. Jesus had ascended into heaven (“gone up the mountain”) and left them

alone to take care of his people. The “wind was against them.” They were being “tossed about” in stormy seas of controversy and persecution. They were scared. And when “Jesus came toward them, walking on the sea,” they “thought he was a ghost... and were terrified.” When he got into the boat and “the wind died down,” they were “completely astounded.” They still didn’t get it. The problem was, “they had not understood the incident of the loaves.”

They did not understand that when Jesus *took* the loaves, “*looked* up to heaven, *blessed*, *broke*, and *gave* them to his disciples...” this was a preview of Eucharist. And Eucharist is presence.

When Jesus multiplied the loaves, neither Eucharist nor the Church was yet established, and the apostles had no responsibilities or anxieties. But Jesus’ words in this Gospel are a support for the present. They tell us that if we understand *Eucharist*, we understand that Jesus is always with us, always in the boat, and no contrary winds of culture can keep us from bringing “every nation on earth” to adore him. If we have *faith* to believe this, *hope* that overcomes fear, and *love* to keep trying, then through our efforts to give Christ to the world, we will see his love being “brought to perfection among us” until, in fact, “*every nation on earth will adore him*.”

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, accept him as universal Savior. Keep trying to bring people to him. Keep asking him to work with you, in you, through you.

January 9, 2014

Thursday between Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord

The *Responsorial Psalm* persists with the Epiphany theme, “*Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.*”

1John 4:19 to 5:4 concludes from this that we have to love the people of “every nation on earth.”

John argues, “Everyone who loves the Father loves also the one begotten by him.” This includes Jesus and all who have become “children of God” through belief in him. Therefore “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also,” all who are God’s children by grace.

It is only a logical extension of this to say that therefore we must also love all those to whom Jesus was sent; that is, “every nation on earth.” Those who love God love those whom God loves, which includes all those to whom he sent his only-begotten Son. All.

Oddly enough, we sometimes have the most difficulty loving those who are close to us: people we grew up with, people we live and work with.

This is because we lose the sense of the mystery that is in them. Because our dealings with them are so commonplace, we begin to think of them as commonplace also. We take each other for granted.

This happened to the people in Jesus’ home town. **Luke 4: 14-22** leaves out the end of the story, which was that after “all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth,” they began to ask each other, “Is not this Joseph's son?” (end of verse 22). And from then on it was all downhill — literally, because “They got up, drove Jesus out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.” They just couldn’t accept divinity in a hometown boy.

Those who watched Jesus grow up, taking it for granted he was “the son of Joseph,” simply could not accept him as the Son of God. And we who deal with each other constantly as ordinary human beings find it hard to accept each other as children of God and as the body of Christ himself, who have “become Christ” by Baptism. We need to keep reminding ourselves to see and believe in the mystery of their being and ours.

Jesus “came and proclaimed peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near” (*Ephesians* 2:17). That means we have to love equally those of “every nation on earth,” including our own. The background of all our dealings with each other should be, “*Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.*”

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, accept him as universal Savior. See others as God does. Recognize the mystery of God’s presence and call in each one.

January 10, 2014

Friday between Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord

The *Responsorial Psalm* sings, “*Praise the Lord, Jerusalem*” (*Psalm 147*).

1John 5: 5-13 tells us why: it is because we have the life of God in us, and we can know it. “And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever possesses the Son has life; whoever does not possess the Son of God does not have life.”

How do we know we really are in life-giving union with Jesus Christ? “There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood.”

If the experience of the early Church (*Acts 2: 41-47*) is a model, we receive the testimony of the *Spirit* when we “devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching,” to seeking felt, experienced growth in union with God through prayer and reflection on the Scriptures. We receive the testimony of “the *water*,” of the physical, visible life of the Church embodied in the sacraments, when we devote ourselves to “fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” with the community. And we receive the testimony of “the *blood*” when our actions bear witness that we have “died” to this world’s passing benefits and re-oriented our lives to seek fulfillment “in Christ.”

Basic to this is our attitude toward material goods. In the early Church some “would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” What matters is not *how*, but *that* our lifestyle should be proof of radical detachment from selfishness and absorption in this world’s promises.

Luke 5: 12-16 encourages us. We may feel that we are too “unclean” to experience God. The answer to this is to go to Jesus as the outcast leper did and say, “Lord, if you wish *you can make me* clean.”

Jesus will give us the same answer he gave him: “I do will it. Be made clean.” But he will tell us we also have to do something. The leper was already cleansed, but for his experience to be complete Jesus told him, “Go, show yourself to the priest....” In the Church the sacrament of Reconciliation carries forward the healing process by making forgiveness a felt experience.

The general principle here is that we must choose to *act* if we want evidence that we do in fact have life through Jesus Christ. The basic choices are *prayer* (the “Spirit”), physical involvement with the *community* (the “water”), and *decisions* that bear witness to Christ’s values (the “blood”). If we choose to *act*, we will feel like singing “*Praise the Lord, Jerusalem*” because we will know we are alive.

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, accept him as universal Savior. Seek to experience grace. Do what you have to do to know your response is real.

January 11, 2014

Saturday between Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord

The *Responsorial Psalm* assures us, “The Lord takes delight in his people” (*Psalm* 149). That includes us.

1John 5: 14-21 keeps insisting that “we know” God takes delight in us because “we are... *in his Son* Jesus Christ.” Because we are “in Christ,” sharing in his divine life, God is able to “see and love in us what he sees and loves in Christ” (Sunday Preface VII). God’s own truth and love are in us, and they are our own reality. That is a fact more basic than our lapses in living by them. Our sins are failures to live up to what we are, but we still are what we are.

There is “deadly” or “mortal” sin that separates us from live union with Jesus. There is also sin that does not: “All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not deadly.” How know the difference?

Before Vatican II Catholics were taught that many things were “mortal sin” which in fact were not. These errors probably grew from a sincere pastoral concern to keep people from doing things that could be very damaging to themselves or others. Legal terminology like “grave obligation” and phrases like “serious matter” used by preachers and teachers were gradually assumed to be interchangeable with the precise theological term “grave matter,” which is an identifying element of “mortal sin.” Then all who failed to keep any law labeled “grave obligation,” or through weakness engaged in any forbidden self-indulgence, especially sexual, thought themselves rejected by God, deprived of divine life, excluded from receiving the Body and Blood of Christ in Eucharist, and judged to deserve eternal Hell. This is “cultural-Catholic guilt,” and a long way from what John taught!

John’s focus is on the mystery of the divine life we receive by believing in Jesus Christ. God’s “steadfast love” will never withdraw this life from us. We can reject God’s life by withdrawing from Christ — either by explicit rejection of him (which John equates with rejection of the Christian community), or by the cool, deliberate choice to act in a way so maliciously evil it is totally incompatible with Christ’s life in us.

John 3: 22-30 highlights the mystery of our salvation by contrasting the gesture of repentance through the baptism John the Baptizer gave before Christ’s death and resurrection with the sacramental Baptism through which we “become Christ.” The first gave benefits proportionate to one’s repentance. The second gives a transformation on the scale of God’s infinite power and love. It is this transformation God sees when “*The Lord takes delight in his people.*” It is also what we should see.

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, accept him as universal Savior. *Don’t exclude* yourself or others from being “in grace” by un-informed judgments about sin.

January 12, 2014

FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

“Daughters and sons in the Son” —*fili in Filio*

Appreciating Christ’s Baptism as Revelation, ours as Transformation.

Inventory

How would you answer now the basic question of life: “Who is Jesus Christ for you?” How would you answer the second question: “Who are you?”

Does the answer to the first question give you the answer to the second?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* shows God the Father introducing Jesus to the world: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

In the *Opening Prayer* we claim the same identity for ourselves, with this difference: we are children of God, not by nature, but by a special kind of “adoption” that is the grace, the “favor,” of actually sharing in the divine life of Christ. Therefore, for us it is not natural to act on the level of God. We can, but only if we *choose* to act by the Spirit given to us. So we pray that the Father will always be well pleased” with us by keeping us “faithful to our calling.”

In the *Alternate Opening Prayer* we ask for this again. We ask that we whose humanity makes us like Jesus externally might be reformed interiorly — re-shaped, re-structured in mind and will and heart by reflection on his words — so that our actions will show us to be like him in sharing his divinity.

In the *Prayer over the Gifts*, as we present the bread and wine to be placed on the altar as symbols of ourselves, we acknowledge that we can only live on Christ’s divine level by “becoming one with him” in the sacrifice he made on the cross. We are divine because we died in Christ by Baptism and rose with him out of the waters of Baptism with a new identity: sons and daughters of the Father “in Christ” the Son. We “present our bodies” again under the symbols of the bread and wine as a pledge that we will try to live out the mystery by which we “became Christ.”¹

In the *Prayer after Communion* we ask the Father that “by *listening* to your Son with faith” we might “become your children in name and in fact” — that is, in action. For this we need to nourish our divine life with the “bread of heaven,” which the Church understands to mean both the word of God and the body of Christ received in Eucharist. Both are offered to us in the Mass.

Sent with News

In **Matthew 3:13-17** we see Jesus introduced to the world by the Father’s voice and the Spirit’s descent. In the *Preface* for the feast of the Baptism of the Lord we say to the Father: “Your Spirit was seen as a dove revealing Jesus as your servant.”

We who “become Christ” by Baptism need to be identified, introduced to the world in the same way. It is not enough that the Father, speaking through the Church, claims us as his children and Jesus gives us his name as Christians. It also has to be visible to others that God is “anointing us” with his Spirit to do for the world what Jesus came to do. We, as Christ’s body on earth, are “sent to bring to the poor the good news of salvation.” All of us.

¹ *Romans* 12:1 and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 795, quoting St. Augustine.

Pope Paul VI said the Church “exists to evangelize.” That means you and I exist to evangelize. We are the Church. If we are not evangelizing, we are not being “faithful to our calling.” We are not living up to our identity. We are not being authentically what we are.

This calls us to *discipleship* — not to just “following Jesus,” which is what people commonly assume it means to be a “disciple.” A disciple is a “student.” If we are not committed students of the mind and heart of Christ as revealed in his words, we are simply not disciples. And we are not equipped to evangelize.

When the Father introduced Jesus as his “beloved Son” the second time — when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain — Matthew, Mark and Luke all say he added the words, “Listen to him.” The point is pretty clear: If we have been properly introduced to Jesus, we will be listening to him; that is, to his words. In this age of literacy, to “listen” includes to *read*. So if we are listening, we are reading Scripture. If we are not reading Scripture we are not listening. And if we are not listening, we do not *know* Jesus Christ.¹

Strong words. In the Second Vatican Council the Church made them her own by quoting St. Jerome: “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.” If we are ignorant of Christ, we have not heard the Good News. And so the Church “earnestly and specifically urges all the Christian faithful... to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scripture the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ.” Until we do we cannot evangelize others, because we have not been evangelized ourselves.²

Is it any wonder that four of the last popes have called for a “new evangelization”? We know what is wrong. We know why Christians are not having as much effect on the world as we should have. We just need to do something about it.

Some Christians are transforming the world. We have an impressive number of modern saints, heroes and martyrs who are “bringing to the poor the good news of salvation.” Many of them are rich themselves, but are sharing their time, talents and resources with others in need. The question is, what have *you* done to spread the Good News? What are you doing? What will you do?

And what are you doing to prepare yourself?

Servant and Spirit

Isaiah 42: 1-7 makes the call to “be Christ” about as inspiring as it gets. He describes first what the Messiah will be; then how he is going to fulfill his mission, then what that mission is.

The Messiah, God says, “is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him.” Wouldn’t you like God to say this of you? Then be the “messiah of the Messiah,” anointed in Baptism to let Jesus continue his saving work in you.

The Messiah will do his work gently, with patience and compassion for people: “not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench.” Jesus will work with whatever we give him to work with. He rejects no one. Are you still afraid to volunteer?

Jesus’ mission was and is to “bring forth justice to the nations,” not through worldly power and force, but through the persuasive power of truth and the irresistible force of love. He came to be “a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out... from the prison those who live in darkness.” There are no prison walls so confining as the “box” of cultural conditioning. Unless Jesus frees us to think “out of the box” by faith, we will “sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” with no one to “guide our feet into the way of peace.”³

A good example of confining cultural conditioning is “Relativism,” which Benedict XVI has identified as the “central problem for faith today” because it is a “self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically verifiable.” It is “ultimately based on a rationalism which declares that reason... is incapable of metaphysical

¹ *Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35.*

² *Philippians 3:8; “On Divine Revelation,” no. 25; quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 133.*

³ *Luke 1:79; Matthew 4:16.*

knowledge.” It is a despairing “resignation before the immensity of the truth” that keeps human beings from aspiring to become anything more than highly skilled, effective technologists. Those who have subjected themselves to the “dictatorship of relativism” are imprisoned in the darkness of “Lucifer,” mendacious “bearer of light.” Jesus, on the other hand, is “the true light, which enlightens everyone.”

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Jesus invites us to enter into that light by becoming his *disciples*. If we do, the *Responsorial (Psalm 29)* tells us, “*The Lord will bless his people with peace.*”

The “Good News of Peace”:

In **Acts 10:34-38** Peter announces this blessing to the Gentiles assembled in the house of the Roman centurion, Cornelius. He delivers to them “the message of ‘the Good News of peace’ proclaimed through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all.”

Christians can offer this message of peace to the world. And we are charged to do so. First we need to experience it in our hearts through reflection on God’s words. Then we need to express it in our lives. And through this we need to give it to others. The Church “wants the whole world to hear the summons to salvation, so that through hearing it may believe, through belief it may hope, through hope it may come to love.” And through love “*The Lord will bless his people with peace.*”¹

Insight

Now who do you say that Jesus is? And who are you?

Initiative:

Read Scripture. Live what you read. Share what you experience.

¹ Vatican II, “On Divine Revelation,” no. 1.

January 13, 2014

Begin ORDINARY TIME 2014: Monday, Week One

To you Lord, I will offer a sacrifice of praise!
(Responsorial: Psalm 116)

The Old Testament readings for the first weeks of Ordinary Time will take us through the stories of Samuel, Saul, David and Solomon: all great “names” in sacred history, men chosen explicitly by God for the role they were to play.

As we see their lives develop and the meaning of their names unfold, we are conscious that we are all “writing our names” by the choices we make in life. What we *choose* determines who we are more than what we accomplish. Our real identity as persons is determined by what we are in our hearts more than by what we do in action. Sometimes our actions express the reality of our hearts; sometimes not.

The bottom line is, our names have no real or lasting significance except in terms of how they reveal the Name, the truth of God. For all eternity the human race will be exclaiming, “Hallowed be thy Name!” Our names will find their meaning in what they contribute to that.

1Samuel 1:1-8 begins with a woman’s desire for a name that would outlast her years on earth. Hannah (like Abraham before her) could not be happy unless she had a child. She wanted a posterity. She saw no fulfillment without one.¹

Hannah had a husband who loved her more than his other wife who gave him children. But when he asked her, “Am I not more to you than ten sons?” her answer, unspoken, was “It is still not enough.” She “wept bitterly.”

We may not identify fulfillment with having children, but we all want our lives to count for something. We find fulfillment in enhancing others’ lives. It may be short-term: a smile, a service that brightens someone’s day. Or long-term: planting a tree, building a house, establishing a business. But ultimately, what counts is enhancing human life.

Obviously, it is better to give life than simply to enhance it. And all of us are empowered to do that: to give, not just human life, but divine life. God wants to use every one of us as an instrument to give his divine life to other people. That is our real posterity. “I chose you... to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.” This is reason to sing, “*To you Lord, I will offer a sacrifice of praise.*”²

Mark 1:14-20 begins with Jesus announcing fulfillment: “The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the Good News!”

To “repent” means to “change our mind” about everything; to reform, revise and renew all our attitudes, values and priorities for the sake of a fulfillment beyond our power to “ask or imagine.” If the “Gospel,” which means “Good News,” has not motivated us to do that, the simple truth is that we have not heard the Gospel. We have never been truly “*evangelized.*”³

Initiative: Write your name on a paper. Be aware you are writing it on your heart.

¹ See *Genesis* 15:1-6.

² *John* 15:16.

³ *Ephesians* 3:16-21.

January 14, 2014

Tuesday, Week One

My heart rejoices in the Lord, my Savior!

(Responsorial: 1Samuel 2:1-8)

In **1Samuel 1:9-20** when Hannah asked the Lord for a child, “she conceived and gave birth to a son, and called him Samuel ‘since,’ she said, ‘I asked the Lord for him.’” (Samuel in Hebrew means “the name of God is...” but also sounds like the word for “ask”).

For Hannah, giving life through childbirth was fulfillment. And she begged God for it with such emotion, “pouring out her soul before the Lord,” that Eli the priest, watching her, thought she was drunk.

Do we want fulfillment that much? How much do we really care whether our “names” mean anything, our lives count for anything, on this earth? Are we content to just pass through life like a pinball, without purpose or plan, bouncing haphazardly off of one experience after another, racking up random points until we fall at last into the slot that tallies up our final score? Do we call that living?

Thanks be to God, no one has to live like that. Being “saved” does not just assure us of happiness after death. Jesus came to save our lives *on this earth*. And not only from the darkness that distorts our attitudes and values, and from the “death” of destructive behavior; but also from the sluggishness and stagnation of ordinary meaninglessness and mediocrity. No one who believes in Jesus Christ should ever be bored. Or boring to others.

Why? Because Jesus has both called and empowered every one of us *give life* to everyone we deal with. And to make our environment life-giving. He himself came so that humans might “have life, and have it to the full.” And in all who have “become Christ” by Baptism—brought to completion by the “gift of the Spirit”—he continues to exercise his ministry. *With us, in us and through us.*¹

That is exciting; and reason to say: “*My heart rejoices in the Lord, my Savior!*”

Mark 1:21-28 shows us that no one could be bored around Jesus. When he taught, “they were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” who interpreted the Law.

Just at the sight of him, “a man with an unclean spirit, cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’”

They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

An exciting man to be around. And still exciting in all who let him work *with them, in them and through them* as his body on earth. Where grace is allowed to work, things happen. *My heart rejoices in the Lord, my Savior!*

Initiative: Say the WIT prayer all day long. Make all you do explicitly divine.

¹ Cf. the WIT prayer: “Lord, do this with me, do this in me, do this *through me*.”

January 15, 2014

Wednesday, Week One

Here am I, Lord, I come to do your will!
(Responsorial: Psalm 40)

1Samuel 3:1-20 tells us how Samuel came to recognize the voice of the Lord and to know when God was speaking to him. This is what made him a *prophet*.

The reading begins: “It was rare for the Lord to speak in those days; visions were uncommon.” Many think this is true in our time. And we may identify with the description: “Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.”

But the truth is, we do “know the Lord.” We just may not be *aware* of it. We know him with the divine knowledge that comes with the gift of faith. But we will not be conscious of knowing him until we translate this into human knowledge by reading and reflecting on the human character of Jesus as revealed in the Scriptures. When we *express* our thoughts about him—to ourselves or others—in human words, that is when we realize we know him. But it is really the voice of the Spirit in our hearts.¹

And the “word of the Lord has been revealed to us.” We just hesitate to say we have divine *enlightenment*, even though we know that Jesus calls us the “light of the world.” He says that what makes his followers different is that they do not “walk in darkness but have the light of life.” It is us he is talking about. But if we do not keep ourselves aware that we have the light of light, we will not be attentive to walking in it. And we will fail to share our light with others as *prophets*.²

We don’t think of ourselves as prophets, even though at Baptism the Lord himself consecrated all of us *prophets, priests and kings*. We just never think about it.

The reading continues; “Samuel grew up and the Lord was with him.... And all Israel ... came to know that Samuel was accredited as a prophet of the Lord.” The Lord is with us too. We proclaim it repeatedly at Mass. *Dominus vobiscum* is not just a wish: “The Lord *be* with you,” but also a statement of fact: “The Lord *is* with you.” When we grow up sufficiently in the faith to be constantly aware of this, everyone who knows us should recognize that we too are “prophets of the Lord.”

They will recognize it if our way of living, speaking and acting makes it obvious that the enduring refrain of our hearts is: *Here am I, Lord, I com*

Mark 1:29-39: The morning after an evening spent curing the sick, Jesus “went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” When his disciples found him, he said, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” Jesus was aware of his identity and his mission.

Initiative: **Know yourself** as empowered by grace. Live as human and divine.

¹ *1Corinthians* 12:3; *Romans* 8:15-16, 10:9.

² *Matthew* 5:14; *John* 8:12.

January 16, 2014

Thursday, Week One

*Save us, Lord, in your mercy.
(Responsorial: Psalm 44)*

In **1Samuel 4:1-11** God punished the priest Eli, and Israel with him, “because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them.” God had sent word to Eli, “The fate of your two sons... shall be the sign to you—both shall die on the same day. I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart.”¹

When the Philistines attacked, “Israel was defeated, and they fled, everyone to his home... Of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers fell. The ark of God was captured; the two sons of Eli... died.”

In modern terms, what God punished Israel for was “clericalism.” Because Eli was the priest, and seen as so sacred he was above other people, his sons were able to steal from the offerings people made, and even abuse women, and no one, including Eli, did anything about it.

Because of the clericalism in today’s Church, both the laity and clergy, including bishops, refrained from calling the police when priests abused children. This caused enormous suffering to the victims. And the spiritual “Philistines” were able to use it to attack the Church in particular and religion in general. How many Christians, as a result, have given up the fight and “fled, everyone to his home”?

When we look upon any class or category of Christians as “more sacred” than others, we have ceased to be aware of the true mystery of grace. By Baptism every one of us became a son or daughter of God himself through incorporation into Jesus, the “only Son of the Father.” Because we are “in Christ,” we share in his own divine life. We are divine. Every one of us. And no sacrament, position or title in the Church makes anyone “more divine” than another. The mystery of our being is that we have “become Christ.” There simply is no dignity “higher” than that. “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit,” varieties of functions in the Church, but only one body of Christ, in which all are equally members. It is essential that we keep ourselves *aware* of this. Then, no matter what happens, we will be able to say with confidence, “*Save us, Lord, in your mercy.*”²

Mark 1:40-45 shows us two things about Jesus: First, he is able to heal and cleanse us—and the whole Church—of anything. He said to a leper, “Be made clean!” And “Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.”

Second, he acknowledged, respected and made use of the official role of the priests in his day. He told the healed leper, “Go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded.” The positions and functions in the “institutional Church” were established by God himself. We don’t have to believe the ministers are holier than others in order to use them.

Initiative: **Remind yourself**, when you show respect to anyone, that all are equal.

¹ See 2:34-5; 3:13.

² See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 795; *1Corinthians*, chapter 12.

January 17, 2014

Friday, Week One

Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.

(Responsorial: Psalm 89)

Too few people are aware that the bishops at Vatican II called on every Catholic to “undertake with vigor the task of renewal and reform” in response to abuses in the Church:

For although the Catholic Church has been endowed with all divinely revealed truth and with all means of grace, her members fail to live by them with all the fervor they should. As a result, the radiance of the Church’s face shines less brightly... and the growth of Christ’s kingdom is retarded.

Every Catholic must therefore aim at Christian perfection and... all play their part so that the Church, which bears in her own body the humility and dying of Jesus may daily be more purified and renewed, against the day when Christ will present her to himself in all her glory, without spot.¹

1Samuel 8:4-22 warns us, however, to choose our solutions with care. When Samuel became old, his own sons began to take bribes and pervert justice.

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and said to Samuel, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways. Appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.”

God did not like the idea of a king. He said to Samuel, “They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.” He then told Samuel to do what they wanted, but to warn them that human kings oppress:

“In that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves”... But the people refused to listen They said, “No! We are determined to have a king over us so that we also may be like other nations....”

When Church government is “like that of other nations’ we are in trouble! Cardinal Leger, Archbishop of Montreal, said in the Vatican Council that the “splendor” of the “ornaments and titles which we [bishops] often use against our will... are harmful to our pastoral ministry,” especially to the poor. “Perhaps this splendor was thought to be necessary when some bishops held secular authority as well. But in our time... such display is out of tune with our spirit.”

Jesus gave “our spirit” when he said, “The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... It will not be so among you. Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.” We need to remain *aware* of the dignity God sees in us and accept no pretense of any other.²

In **Mark 2:1-12** Jesus said to those who doubted him: “that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic, “Stand up, take your mat and go home.”

The only power the Church needs to project is the power to forgive. And to heal the afflicted. Then the whole world will “*sing the goodness of the Lord.*”

Initiative: Identify what affects your awareness. Make it speak truth.

¹ Decree on *Ecumenism*, no. 4. See also *Church in the Modern World*, no. 19; *Apostolate of the Laity*, nos. 3, 6, 10, 18, 25; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1913-1917; John Paul II, *Exhortation after the Synod on Reconciliation*, 1984, no. 16.

² *Council Speeches of Vatican II*, ed. Kung et al., Paulist Press, 1964, pp. 114-115; *Matthew* 20:25.

January 18, 2014

Saturday, Week One

*Lord, your strength gives joy to the king.
(Responsorial: Psalm 21)*

1Samuel 9:1 to 10:1 God tells Samuel he has chosen Saul to be Israel's king:

"You shall anoint him to be ruler over my people Israel. He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have seen the suffering of my people."

When Samuel told Saul this, Saul had a hard time believing it. He answered:

"My family is the humblest of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin. Why then have you spoken to me in this way?"

But Samuel anointed him anyway, as all of us were anointed at Baptism to continue the saving mission of Jesus as *Prophet, Priest and King*:

Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his head, and kissed him; he said, "The Lord has anointed you ruler over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of the LORD and you will save them from the power of the enemies surrounding them.

Lines after the reading tell us:

As Saul turned away to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart... and the spirit of God possessed him... When all who knew him before saw how he prophesied with the prophets, the people said to one another, "What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?"

It is hard for us to believe, much less remain *aware*, that we have been chosen and anointed by God as truly as Saul was. And for an even greater mission: to be the body of Jesus himself acting *with us, in us and through us* to save the people we deal with "from the power of the enemies surrounding them"—that is, from the "Philistines" of our society whose blindness distorts the attitudes and values of American culture.

God has given us "another heart" by Baptism: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

As *disciples* we have "become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which we were entrusted." As *prophets* we make evident through our lifestyle that "out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." As *priests* we "have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind." And as stewards of Christ's *kingship* we know, "with the eyes of our heart enlightened, what is the hope to which he has called us, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints." With the awareness of this hope in our hearts we work to establish God's reign on earth "while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."¹

We have reason to sing, "*Lord, your strength gives joy to the king.*"

God called Saul through Samuel. In **Mark 2:13-17** Jesus himself calls Levi to become Matthew the Apostle and Evangelist. And acting *with, in and through* the minister of our Baptism, Jesus called us. We just have to keep ourselves *aware of the mystery* of our new identity and call.

Initiative: Believe in your anointing. Keep yourself *aware* of what you are.

¹ 2Corinthians 5:17. See John 7:38; Romans 6:17; Ephesians 1:18; 1Peter 3:8; Titus 2:13.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: EPIPHANY, FIRST WEEK OF THE YEAR

Awareness of the Light: To be guided by the Light, we have to see and follow it.

Invitation: To focus on the Light.

For prayer and discussion: How many of these statements do you feel you understand? How often are you consciously aware of them?

Sunday: Before it can be seen, the light has to shine. “Preaching” the Good News means letting the glory of God’s light in us shine out in all we are, say and do. It is *we* who are the Epiphany.

The first thing we have to do, however, is cultivate *awareness*.

Monday: The essence of our redemption is that by Baptism we have “become Christ.” The Father now says about each one of us what he said about Jesus: “This is my Son, my Daughter, the Beloved.”

What we *choose* determines who we are more than what we accomplish.

Tuesday: Are we content to just pass through life like a pinball, without purpose or plan, bouncing haphazardly off of one experience after another, racking up random points until we fall at last into the slot that tallies up our final score?

Wednesday: ...the truth is, we do know the Lord.” We just may not be *aware* of it. We know him with the divine knowledge that comes with the gift of faith. But we will not be conscious of knowing him until we translate this into human knowledge by reading and reflecting on the human character of Jesus as revealed in the Scriptures. When we *express* our thoughts about him—to ourselves or others—in human words that is when we realize we know him.

Thursday: The mystery of our being is that we have “become Christ.” There simply is no dignity “higher” than that.

Friday: Too few people are aware that the bishops at Vatican II called on every Catholic to “undertake with vigor the task of renewal and reform” in response to abuses in the Church.

Saturday: God has given us “another heart” by Baptism.

Initiatives:

Form the habit of deliberately trying to express divine truth, life, love.

Put glasses of water where they will remind you of your Baptism. Bless yourself.

Write your name on a paper. Be aware you are writing it on your heart.

Say the WIT prayer all day long. Make all you do explicitly divine.

Know yourself as empowered by grace. Live as human and divine.

Remind yourself, when you show respect to anyone, that all are equal.

Identify what affects your awareness. Make it speak truth.

Believe in your anointing. Keep yourself *aware* of what you are.

January 19, 2014

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR A

“A Light to the Nations”

Seeing and Being the Light of Peace

Inventory

To what do you look for peace, both in your heart and in your world? Or have you concluded that there is no use looking at all?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* invites us and “all the earth” to “break into song.” Inspired by what? The answer is “your name, O God, Most High.” What puts music on our lips is the desire to give God “worship and praise.”

The *Opening Prayer* tells us that our Father’s “watchful care reaches from end to end.” He is present to everything that happens. And he “orders all things in such power that even the tensions and tragedies of sin cannot frustrate [his] loving plans.” Is this a reason to “break into song” and give God “worship and praise”?

Because we believe it is, we have enough faith — and hope — to ask God to “show us the way to peace in the world.” And to show it to others through us: “Give us the strength to follow your call” — to live out what we believe — “so that your truth may live in our hearts,” and be seen in our actions, and “reflect peace” to all who “believe in your love.”

In the *Prayer over the Gifts* we recognize the role Eucharist plays in this: when we “celebrate the Eucharist” we “proclaim the death of the Lord.” We publicize the love he showed on the cross, the unconditional, self-sacrificing love that is the only way to true peace in the world. When we celebrate Mass we make him present, expressing his love. In this way the Father “continues the work of his redemption.”

In the *Prayer after Communion* we recognize the Father, Son and Spirit working together: “You [the Father] have nourished us with bread from heaven [Jesus, the Son]. Fill us with your Spirit, and make us one in peace and love.”

“May all the earth give you worship and praise, O God Most High.”

Light to the Nations

In **Isaiah 49: 3-6** God says that through his servant “I will show my glory.” Whomever Isaiah meant, we apply this to Jesus and to the Church; that is, to ourselves. God wants us to be “made glorious in the sight of the Lord.” Of us he says, “I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”¹

¹ The four songs of the “Suffering Servant” are *Isaiah* 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13 to 53:12. The Servant’s identity is disputed. It could be collective (e.g. Israel as a whole) or individual. The New Testament applies it to Jesus (*Acts* 3:13; *Matthew* 3:17, 8:17, 12:18; *Luke* 22:37). “The identification of Jesus with the Servant is best attributed to Jesus Himself. The title and the conception... permitted Him to assume a role which fell into none of the existing categories of charismatic leader and savior.... The identity of the Servant and Israel is paralleled by the identity of Jesus and the Church. Jesus is the Servant who brings Israel to fullness. He is the true and perfect ‘corporate personality,’ one with the Church which is his body.... the Servant who suffers in his own person and who sanctifies the sufferings of the group which he represents.” See J. McKenzie, S.J., *Dictionary of the Bible*.

To this we respond with: “*Here am I, Lord. I come to do your will.*” As his servants we say, “He put a new song into my mouth,” and his “law is within my heart.” Because of the light, the truth his word reveals to us, each of us says, “I did not restrain my lips, as you, O Lord, know” (*Responsorial, Psalm 40*).

We know we are sent to be “a light to the nations,” so that, enlightened by the Good News and the words of God, “all the earth will give you worship and praise, O God Most High.”

If we absorb his words, believe what we read, and live out what we believe, then God’s truth will live in our hearts, and be seen in our actions. We will “reflect peace” to all who believe or can be brought to believe in God’s love. Isaiah’s prophecy will be fulfilled: “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” Is the prospect of this enough to make us “break into song to your name, O God Most High”?¹

“Come and See”

In **John 1: 29-34** John the Baptizer testifies that he “saw the Spirit descending [on Jesus] from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.” It was because of this that he was able to say, “Now I have seen for myself and have testified, ‘This is the Son of God.’”

Can you give that same testimony? And give it because you have “seen for yourself” who Jesus is? When John the Evangelist bore witness to Jesus, he said:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life....

This is the only witness that is credible — to others or to ourselves. To those who want to know him, Jesus says, “Come and see.”²

“All right, fine. How do we do that?”

Obviously, we have never seen Jesus in the flesh. And most of us have never had a vision like St. Paul (who also never saw Jesus in the flesh). But that doesn’t mean we haven’t seen him. And heard him. And been touched by him.

What made Paul’s vision real on the road to Damascus was not the “bright light” or the “voice from heaven,” or even being struck blind. It was the gift of interior enlightenment. The *Acts* account does not even say Paul “saw” Jesus in a vision. But he met him, and he knew who he was, and he bore witness for the rest of his life to what he knew and felt and heard. We can encounter Jesus and know him in the same way. And his self-revelation to us does not have to be dramatic.³

In the Second Vatican Council the Church spoke of a real presence of God in the reading of Scripture:

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

In the liturgy God speaks to his people and Christ is still proclaiming his Gospel.

In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven meets his children with great love and speaks with them.⁴

The encounter with Jesus, and with the Father and Spirit, that we have in reading God’s words in Scripture is just as real as the encounter Paul had on the road to Damascus. And much more reliable than any private vision of him that we might experience. When God reveals himself to us this way, we are able to declare with certitude “what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes,” and been touched by in our heart. We have seen and we can testify, “This is the word of life.”

¹ *Isaiah* 11:9.

² *1John* 1:1; *John* 1:39.

³ *Acts* 9:3-9. And see *Galatians* 1:10-19.

⁴ Vatican II, “Liturgy,” no. 33; “Revelation,” no. 21.

If you don't believe this, the Lord says, "Come and see." Pick up the Bible and get absorbed in it. Give God's words time to grow on you and grow in you. The day will come when you will have no doubt that you have been enlightened by God. Don't expect it tomorrow, but work for it today — and every day. You have to persevere until you know.

“Called to be holy...”

Does it shock you to hear that Jesus Christ — and the Father and Spirit — will speak to you personally through their inspired word? Does it shock you to hear Jesus saying in John's Gospel, "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*"? Or "When the Spirit of truth comes, *he will guide you* into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and *he will declare to you* the things that are to come"? These words were not meant just for the Twelve apostles; they were Christ's parting promise to all who would be joined to him in grace.

We know God as the One who created all things by his word, identified himself as the Word made flesh, and his "sheep" as those who "listen to my voice"; who urged us to "let my words abide in you," spent his time on earth verbally "teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom," and promised that although "heaven and earth pass away, my words will not pass away." Why, then, do we insist on treating him as someone who does not want to communicate with us any more? Why do we consider it a marvel when he does?¹

In **1 Corinthians 1: 1-3** Paul addressed the Christian community as "you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy." Does that shock you? Do you think of yourself as "called to be holy"? As "sanctified"? But that is, literally, the Gospel truth of what you are. Why, then, should it surprise you to hear that God will speak to you through his words when you read them, give you the light you need to understand them and the love you need to put them into practice?

Re-read what was quoted above about the *Liturgy of the Word*. The Church believes that the word of God:

- enlightens the faithful through the working of the Holy Spirit;
- moves the heart and its desires toward conversion and
- toward a life resplendent with both individual and community faith.

Can God do that without talking to us!?

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Insight

What do you know you have seen, heard and felt from God in reading his word?

Initiative:

Decide to make the word of God as much a part of your life as water, food and air. Be as specific about your time for reading Scripture as you are about meal times.

¹ John 14:23; 16:13; Psalm 95:7; John 1:14; 10:14-16; Matthew 4:23, 24:35.

January 20, 2014

Monday, Week Two

*To the upright I will show the saving power of God.
(Responsorial: Psalm 50)*

1Samuel 15: 16-23 makes it forcefully clear that the first and essential way to glorify God or “hallow” his Name is to do what he commands. The failure to do this is what gives religion a bad name.

When Saul attacked the Amalekites, God told him through Samuel to “utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep.” But:

Saul and the people spared the best of the sheep and cattle, and all that was valuable. All that was worthless they destroyed.

The Lord then said: “I regret that I made Saul king, for he has not carried out my commands.” Confronted with this, Saul claimed he had obeyed, because he had used the best of what should have been destroyed to offer sacrifice to God—like someone who makes money by taking advantage of the poor and then gives a big donation to the Church.

Samuel said, “Is the pleasure of the Lord in burnt offerings and sacrifices, or in obedience to the voice of the Lord? Yes, obedience is better than sacrifices.”

Scripture scholars tell us not to take literally the command to kill men, women and children. The God who spoke to Samuel is the same God who said in the second Vatican Council:

Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities... along with their population is a crime against God and humanity itself. It deserves unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.

The point *1Samuel* makes is that, if we see God and creatures in perspective with authentic “*Fear of the Lord*,” nothing—absolutely no created value—takes precedence over the will of God. And no human act, nothing we “give” to God, including all the prayers and worship in the world, can substitute for living the way God commands.

That command, from beginning to end, is love. If we do not love God and neighbor—and show it in actions—nothing “religious” we do is authentic.

So 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

We all know this. But we need to keep ourselves *aware* of it. How many people come untroubled to Mass though they speak with consistent venom about the President, politicians, and members of the Church they consider “unorthodox”? Haters cannot present themselves as “acceptable sacrifices” to God. ¹

In **Mark 2:18-22** Jesus calls us to be aware of what we are actually *expressing* in our religious acts. Fasting is a physical expression of spiritual hunger for union with the Bridegroom. If not, it has little spiritual value. Or at least, not the value that fasting, prayer and all other religious acts should take on now that Jesus has poured out the “new wine” of mystery into our hearts.

Initiative: Be aware of who God is and of who you are. Live mystery.

¹ The Church Today, no.80 Matthew 5:23-24; Romans 12:1.

January 21, 2014

Tuesday, Week Two

*I have found David my servant.
(Responsorial: Psalm 89)*

1Samuel 16: 1-13 tells how God chose David to replace Saul, to whom Samuel said that, had he obeyed, “The LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever.” But God called David “a man after his own heart,” and never rejected him. Why?

David raped the wife of a faithful officer, and ordered him murdered in a shameful way to cover up his crime. Was Saul’s sin worse than that?¹

David broke God’s law in a way that was horrible. But he did it out of passion and weakness. He abused his power like most kings did. But he did not go against God’s personal, direct command to him; while Saul disobeyed in a way Samuel called “rebellion” and “no less a sin than divination” or idolatry. “Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.”

We have to ask two things about sin; what it does to others, and what it does to us. What it does to us is determined mostly by what it *expresses*. By doing this, what am I saying (and therefore making real) about my relationship with others? And above all, with God?

Who I am, my personal identity, is determined by the choices that establish the *relationships* I choose to maintain with God, other people and the rest of creation. In that order. The relationships I choose define me as a person. By every choice I augment or diminish, am faithful or false to, some relationship.

Life-determining acts, good or bad, are those which express the choice, conscious or not, to maintain or destroy the relationship I have with another. Sins that destroy our graced relationship with God are called “mortal.” They include sins that destroy the fundamental relationship of love God calls us to have with other people. The two essential commandments are:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Every temptation faces me with the choice to love or not to love.²

In **Mark 2:23-28** all the Pharisees saw was Jesus’ disciples “doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath.” Jesus saw hungry men feeding themselves. The “law-observance” mentality, now as well as then, does not ask what is beneficial or harmful to individuals in particular cases. For Pharisees there are no particular cases; just the LAW: as unchanging and absolute as God. In practice, the LAW is their God.

When Jesus said, “The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath,” he taught that to keep God’s laws we have to start by asking what is good for people; what is love.

Initiative: Do God’s will in keeping his laws. Do the loving thing.

¹ See *1Samuel* 13:13-14; *2Samuel*, chapter 11.

² *Matthew* 22:36-40.

January 22, 2014

Wednesday, Week Two

*Blessed be the Lord, my rock.
(Responsorial: Psalm 144)*

In **1Samuel 17: 32-51** young David brings down the giant Goliath with a slingshot. But the heart of the story is the difference between what Goliath was *aware* of and what David was.

Goliath was just aware of what he saw: his size and strength compared to David's, his weapons compared to David's. David was aware of something not seen: the mystery of God's presence, God's involvement in the fight, and of himself as aided by God's strength.

We can't help seeing in the "five stones" David picked up out of the water of the riverbed something not intended by Scripture but still true: the five "weapons" God gives us in Baptism to help us "meet and defeat" life's challenges, even the most gigantic.

The first is _____—*awareness of our identity* as children of the Father. We "pick up" this stone every time we make ourselves *aware* of "*Our Father... in heaven!*" and of his divine life in us.

The second is *enlightenment*. We "pick up" this stone when we *commit* to the prayerful study of God that makes us able to "glorify" or "*hallow*" his Name.

The third is the *power* of the Holy Spirit that we begin to use when we *dedicate* ourselves to making his *Kingdom come*, beginning with a lifestyle that accredits us as *prophetic witnesses* to Christ.

The fourth stone is God's promise that we will have a *posterity* by giving life to others through priestly ministry. We pick it up when we *surrender* to letting the Father's *will be done* in us and through us by Christ expressing his truth and love in our words and actions.

The fifth stone is the sustaining assurance of *victory* in our efforts, as *stewards of his kingship*, to establish God's reign over all creation. We pick it up as we *abandon ourselves* to an all-consuming hunger for the *daily Bread* of Christ given in the "wedding banquet of the Lamb" to all who are *forgiving as they are forgiven* in the "unity and peace of his kingdom."

With these five stones, taken from the waters of Baptism, we can meet and defeat any enemy that comes against us.

Mark 3:1-6 continues yesterday's teaching. In the synagogue was a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees of the "law and order" party were watching "to see whether Jesus would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him." They didn't care about the man's suffering. All they cared about was law observance. We find this today.

Jesus asked them: "Is it keeping God's law to do good on the sabbath, or to do harm?" To save life or to kill?"

They wouldn't answer him. "They were silent." Every priest who has ever been accused of breaking rules by "legalists" in the Church knows that, if he explains the pastoral justification for what he did, they will simply "be silent." They are not interested in truth, just laws. When they did this to Jesus, he "looked around at them with anger." It is the only time he ever did. *Verbum sat*.

Initiative: Keep aware of the mystery of divine life. Do not become a nitpicker.

January 23, 2014

Thursday, Week Two

In God I trust; I shall not fear.
(*Responsorial: Psalm 56*)

In **1Samuel 18:6 to 19:7** envy of David's popularity makes Saul decide to kill him. This was really stupid. What had he ceased to be *aware* of?

Saul had forgotten he was only king by obedience: because God told him to be. Without God's support, what was he?

He was ignoring the gift of *Fear of the Lord*, which would have shown him that, seen in perspective, the real value of his kingship was in the *relationship* he had with the Infinite God who had chosen and anointed him. To give up this relationship with the All Good, All Loving One for the sake of the limited benefits of earthly rule was idiocy. And to try to defeat God the All Mighty by killing David was insanity.

He was also ignoring *Wisdom*, the gift of "taste" for spiritual things, joined to the habit of seeing everything in the light of the "last end." Saul first found joy in his kingship because he was being obedient to God, serving God, pleasing God. But gradually he became less aware of this spiritual joy and more conscious of the perks, popularity, prestige and power he found in palace life on a throne. Then he shortened his focus to the here-and-now and lost sight of the final goal: union with the Eternal God. He lost *Wisdom*. Became *unaware*.

Mark 3:7-12: The "Pharisee party" is strong in the Church and always will be. But more numerous are all the good people who come to Jesus honestly, but for the wrong reason.

A great multitude followed him... for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him.

They came, not primarily to learn from Jesus or to become holy, but because they were suffering and hoped he would heal them. Like people today who come to church for relief, strength to face the ordinary challenges of life, with some hope it will make them "feel good." Which is legitimate. And good.

Those who came to Jesus to be healed had *faith* that he could, *hope* that he would, and *love* for the God who showed in Jesus that he cared for them. They just didn't want, or even think about, what Jesus came to give; "life to the full," the "eternal life," that is to *know the Father*, "the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent." This is true of most Christians still.¹

Wisdom (as defined above) is rare. *Fear of the Lord* moves people to do what they have to to "get to heaven," but not much more. The perspective that shows God as All that is good, and everything else as nothing in comparison, is lacking. Bottom line: mediocrity.

That is why Jesus "ordered the demons not to make him known." He did not want people who came for healing to identify this as the role of the Messiah. He longed to tell them, "You will see greater things than these." But they weren't ready to hear it. Are you?²

Initiative: Write down what you want to "get out of" religion. Grade yourself.

¹ *John* 10:10; 17:3.

² See *John* 1:50.

January 24, 2014

Friday, Week Two

Have mercy on me, God, have mercy..
(*Responsorial: Psalm 57*)

1Samuel 24: 3-21 shows us a contrast in *awareness*. Saul was intent on killing David, his focus limited to only one thing: David was a threat to his position and power. When Saul came alone into the cave where David and his men were hiding, and did not see them, all his men could think of was, “This is our chance to kill him.” But David was keenly aware of something else: “He is the anointed of the Lord.” David felt guilty for even cutting off quietly a corner of Saul’s cloak, so he could show him later that he could have killed him and didn’t. This is called *Fear of the Lord*: not fright, but overwhelming respect for the awesome majesty and goodness of God and for everything and everyone connected to him.

By the same perspective David saw himself, and said Saul should see him, as having no more importance than a “dead dog” or a “single flea.” What was David, or what is anyone, if we ignore our relationship with God? Except for God’s present, continuing choice to keep us in existence, of ourselves we are simply nothing. We would drop into non-being. But if we make a point of always seeing people—ourselves and others—in the light of the relationship each has with God, whatever it may be, we will always respect others as we respect God. This is true *Fear of the Lord*.

It is also *Wisdom*: seeing everything in the light of the “last end.” We know the true “mystery of God’s will,” that he “set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time.” It is to “*bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ’s headship.*” All things in heaven and on earth will be “united,” “gathered up,” “summed up,” “recapitulated,” “brought together under a single Head.” This is Paul’s vision of the radiant glory, shrouded in mystery, of the “end time.”¹

How will we treat each other now if we keep aware of how we will be seeing and loving each other while sharing the Bread of the “wedding banquet of the Lamb,” when God will be forgiving us all as we forgive each other?

Mark 3:13-19: Jesus “called to him those whom he wanted....”

And he appointed twelve; they were to be his companions, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, with power to cast out demons.

The Twelve named in the Gospel were chosen as unique witnesses to the Resurrection because, as Peter said later when the community replaced Judas, they were present “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.” But “apostle” just means “sent,” and every one of us is “sent” by our “messianic anointing” at Baptism as *prophet, priest* and *king*. We just have to keep ourselves *aware* of it.²

Initiative: **Never forget** to be aware of everyone’s relationship with God.

¹ *Ephesians* 1:10; *Colossians* 1:16.

² *Acts* 1:15-26; *Romans* 16:7; *1Corinthians* 4:9; *Ephesians* 4:11;

January 25, 2014

The Conversion of Saint Paul, Apostle

“Go out to all the world and tell the Good News.”

(Responsorial: Mark 16:15; Psalm 117)

Acts 22:3-16 is Paul’s basic experience of Jesus. It gives the key to everything he preached and wrote for the rest of his life. The Jesus Paul met, the Jesus he was aware of from that minute forward, was Jesus *identified with those who believe in him*.

When Paul asked, “Who are you?” Jesus answered, “I am Jesus of Nazareth *whom you are persecuting*.” Paul could have responded, “I am persecuting your followers, not you.” But he knew better. What he saw, what God gave him to understand from that moment, and what he never lost sight of, is that those who believe in Jesus have *become Christ* and he has become what they are.

Every one of us must identify ourselves as Paul identified himself: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”

This was the core of Paul’s preaching: “the mystery hidden throughout the ages but now been revealed to his saints.” Through Paul “God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches... of this mystery.” And the mystery, the message Paul was sent to give to the world, is simply this: “*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*”¹

This was Paul’s ministry: to *bring Christ to be* in all who accepted him: “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.” For Paul the “work of ministry” consisted in “building up the body of Christ,” helping all grow “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” More precisely, the goal is the *mystery of Christ* coming to perfection in us and we in him: “to make every person complete *in Christ*”—until we “*form that perfect man who is Christ come to full stature.*”²

The first and foundational phase of our spiritual growth into the fullness of faith and knowledge, into maturity and the “perfection of love,” is simply to cultivate *awareness* of the mystery of our new identity. This is the mystery of *Christ in us*,” the “hope” and foretaste of the “glory” which is ours now and will be ours in its fullness when Christ has grown to “full stature” in us, the glorified Church, which is “*his body*, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” Then we will truly “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,” and “be filled with all the fullness of God.”

But the first step, the first phase, is to keep ourselves *aware* of who we are.

Mark 16:15-18: Jesus sent, not just the Apostles, but all of us to “proclaim the Good News.” We have to keep ourselves *aware* of this to do it.

Initiative: Cultivate your true self-image. Say the WIT prayer all day long.

¹ *Galatians 2:20; Colossians 1:25-27.*

² *Galatians 4:19; Ephesians 4:11-13.* See the 1970 New Testament of *The New American Bible*. The point of focus here in the Greek text is the *andra teleion*, Christ himself, head and members. Other translations have subtly shifted the focus to our growth rather than the mystery of Christ himself as the fulfillment of all creation. See also *Ephesians 1:3-10; Colossians 1:9-20.*

January 25, 2014 (extra)

Saturday, Week Two

Let us see your face, Lord, and we shall be saved.

(Responsorial: Psalm 80)

Because of Saul's mood swings, some Scripture scholars have speculated that he was bi-polar. If he was, it was irrelevant to David, who never for an instant forget that Saul was God's anointed. That was how he saw him and how he treated him.

Today's reading, taken from **2Samuel 1: 1-27**, omits the verses that tell how Saul's death was reported. The messenger said Saul thought he was mortally wounded and had asked him to kill him, so he did. But David said, "Were you not afraid to lift your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?" And he had the messenger executed.

Then David sang of Saul, and of Jonathan, who died in the same battle:

Saul and Jonathan, loved and lovely, neither in life nor in death were divided. Swifter than eagles were they, stronger were they than lions.

O daughters of Israel, weep for Saul, who clothed you in scarlet and fine linen, who set brooches of gold on your garments. How did the heroes fall...?

This is how David remembered Saul, who did everything he could to kill him. And this is the kind of awareness we should cultivate in our thoughts about every person we deal with. This is the kind of respect that grows out of authentic *Fear of the Lord*.

Mark 3:20-21 tells us that at times Jesus' own family thought he was crazy:

He went home; and such a crowd collected that they could not even have a meal.

When his relatives heard of this, they set out to take charge of him, convinced he was out of his mind.

To be "out of you mind" means to be out of touch with reality. But you might look the same way if you are *in touch* with more reality than "normal" people are aware of. Those who are aware of the mystery of God; of God's relationship with the world and of our relationship with him; of the awesome reality of grace making us and others authentic children of God and sharers in his divine life, do not relate to anything or anyone in this world in a way that is "normal" in our culture. This is the essence of Christian *witness*: to live a lifestyle that raises questions because it raises eyebrows.

If we are really in touch with the Good News, aware of the new *identity*, the *enlightenment*, the *power*, the "*posterity*" (fruitful ministry) and *victory* promised to those who really believe in Jesus Christ, how can we not be so obsessed by the need to share that with others that even our friends and family sometimes wonder if we are out of our mind?

This is what happened to Jesus.

It is mostly a question of *awareness*. "*Let us see your face, Lord—constantly—and we shall be saved.*" And save others.

Initiative: Cultivate awareness. Say the WIT prayer all day long. Read Scripture.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: SECOND WEEK OF THE YEAR

We Are Called and Sent: God knows us by name and calls us to mission.

Invitation: To focus on the explicitness of our call, and our response.

For prayer and discussion: How many of these statements do you feel you understand? How often are you consciously aware of them?

Sunday: Making—and keeping—ourselves *aware* of what we are, of what grace has made us and is calling us to be right now, this is the first phase of our conscious, explicit journey into the “perfection of love.” Everything begins with the realization of our graced (divine) relationship with God. Until we can say with wonder and awe, “Our Father who are in heaven....”

Monday: ...no human act, nothing we “give” to God, including all the prayers and worship in the world, can substitute for living the way God commands.

Tuesday: *Who* I am, my personal identity, is determined by the choices that establish the *relationships* I choose to maintain with God, other people and the rest of creation. In that order.... By every choice I augment or diminish, am faithful or false to, some relationship.

Wednesday: David was aware of something not seen: the mystery of God’s presence, God’s involvement in the fight, and of himself as aided by God’s strength.

Thursday: Saul first found joy in his kingship because he was being obedient to God, serving God, pleasing God. But gradually he became...more conscious of the perks, popularity, prestige and power.... Then he shortened his focus to the here-and-now and lost sight of the final goal: union with the Eternal God. He lost *Wisdom*. Became *unaware*.

Friday: ...if we make a point of always seeing people—ourselves and others—in the light of the relationship each has with God, whatever it may be, we will always respect others as we respect God. This is true *Fear of the Lord*.

Saturday: If we are really in touch with the Good News, aware of the new *identity*, the *enlightenment*, the *power*, the “*posterity*” (fruitful ministry) and *victory* promised...how can we not be...obsessed by the need to share that with others...?

Initiatives:

Listen to what God is calling you to do. Find yourself in it.

Be aware of who God is and of who you are. Live mystery.

Do God’s will in keeping his laws. Do the loving thing.

Keep aware of the mystery of divine life. Do not become a nitpicker.

Write down what you want to “get out of” religion. Grade yourself.

Never forget to be aware of everyone’s relationship with God.

Cultivate awareness. Say the WIT prayer all day long. Read Scripture.

January 26, 2014

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR A

Appreciating the Life in the Light

Inventory

What one book have you learned the most from in your life? Who wrote it? How often do you read or consult it now?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* calls us to “sing a new song to the Lord,” because “truth and beauty surround him.” To keep singing a new song, we have to keep entering into new truth, new beauty. The “Beauty ever ancient, ever new” that St. Augustine wrote of. We can find him, the Word, in his word. St. Jerome said, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” Can we also say that to stop reading Scripture is to stop growing in knowledge of Christ? Not absolutely, but with truth enough to make us pause.

In the (alternate) *Opening Prayer* we say to the Father, “The love you offer always exceeds the furthest expression of our human longing, for you are greater than the human heart.” Then so is his truth and his beauty. The *Prayer* continues: “Direct each thought, each effort of our life so that the limits of our faults and weaknesses may not obscure the vision of your glory.” Is this not a reason to keep reading his words? *Psalm 119* says: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

John’s Gospel begins by presenting Jesus, the Word of God, as the Light that is Life: “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” The *Prayer after Communion* echoes this, asking: “May the new life you give us increase our love and keep us in the joy of your kingdom.” We who by Baptism received the divine life of Christ share in his act of knowing, his light. This is the source of our love and our joy. And it is inexhaustible.

Three in One

The *Responsorial (Psalm 22)* declares the theme of the first reading and Gospel; “*The Lord is my light and my salvation.*” Being “saved” is linked to knowing. Light and life are joined in Scripture, as are darkness and death.

Isaiah 8:23 to 9:3 is giving a preview of the coming of Christ when it declares: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined.”

If we keep reading we come to what Christians read as a description of Jesus:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.

Life is ultimately pretty simple. Everything important is found in one word: “Jesus.” If that sounds like something a fundamentalist would say, then give the fundamentalists credit! *Hebrews* calls Jesus “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.” To know him is to know God. To know God is to have eternal life — which is more than “everlasting life.” Only God’s life is eternal, without beginning or end, and this is the life we share by the “grace [favor] of the Lord Jesus Christ.” God, and Jesus as God, is the “A” and the “Z,” the “Alpha and the Omega”:

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the

spring of the water of life.... See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

So if we are united to Jesus as members of his body and sharers in his divine life, what are we missing? The answer to this could actually be, "life to the full!"¹

We can share in Christ's life without sharing it fully. We can have human life also without being fully alive. We all have more latent talents than we have developed, more potential than we have actualized. We may be impeded by internal or external obstacles from functioning fully in body or mind. The same is true of the life of grace, the divine life that is ours "in Christ." There is nothing lacking in the Life itself, but we may not be living God's life "to the full."

This is where light comes in. We grow in God's life by growing in his light. This presumes we are living by what we see, of course; the essence of all real growth is love, But to grow in love we need to grow in light. St. Augustine said, "We cannot love what we do not know." It is through increasing familiarity with and understanding of God's word that we "see" the Word made flesh and come to "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God."

St. Paul wanted his converts' "hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they might have all the riches of assured understanding and... knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."²

So we can add a third word to the "trinity" of Christian essentials. They, like the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity, are distinct from each other but inseparable in their authentic being: *Life* (from the Father), *Light* (from the Son), and *Love* (from the Holy Spirit). And all of these come through Jesus Christ.

The Good News

Matthew 4:12-23 quotes the Isaiah text above to introduce Jesus' own proclamation of the Kingdom: "A people living in darkness has seen a great light. On those who inhabit a land overshadowed by death light has arisen."

To respond to the Good News is to welcome the light; to open our minds and hearts to it; to "reform our lives" by what it enables us to see.

Doesn't it follow that the sign we really believe in the Good News, that we appreciate it — in short, that we have truly been "evangelized" — is that we *continue* to welcome the light, continue to open our minds to it through reading and reflection, through listening, discussions and prayer? Is it too trenchant to say that if we are not *disciples* — that is, *students* — of the mind and heart of Christ, we have never been evangelized? Even though we may have several years of Catholic education and go to Mass every Sunday?

Does this explain why four of the last popes have called for a "new evangelization"? Does it make it less surprising — in fact, make it almost a foregone conclusion — that a large percentage of those brought up as Christians will no longer "assemble" with the believers? Or that those baptized and committed as Catholics are deserting to "evangelical" churches who have less mystery to impart, but who give what they have with greater enthusiasm and joy?

In the light of this, would it sound radical to say that Jesus' exhortation to "Reform your lives" in order to accept the Good News might be, for many of us, an either-or invitation to make reading and reflecting on the Bible a part of our daily life? An invitation extended which, if rejected, means we just won't "enter into the kingdom of heaven"? By our own choice.

Let's put our cards on the table. Is this the same as saying that if we don't read the Bible we are going to Hell? Some people might identify entering into the Kingdom with entering into heaven. That is not the intent of what is written here. It is not excluded that people can be "saved" without really experiencing the Good News, or

¹ *Hebrews* 1:1-3; *Revelation* 21:6-7, 22:12-13; *John* 10:10, 17:3.

² *Ephesians* 3:19; *Colossians* 2:2.

even consciously knowing that they have heard it! But to really “enter the Kingdom” in its full sense means to encounter Jesus personally, to receive the “gift of the Holy Spirit,” to take on a whole new understanding and level of life, to experience the “love, joy and peace” that are the “fruit of the Spirit,” and to be filled with the zeal for spreading the Good News that characterized the life of the early Christians.

And it means to go beyond a religion of doctrines, rules and practices, no matter how conscientious we may be about them.

No one was more “orthodox” than the “chief priests and elders” who opposed Jesus every time they are mentioned in the Gospels. But Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.”

No one was more law-observant than the Pharisees. But Jesus said, “I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

No one had more prestige and political influence than the Sadducees, who were the “priestly aristocracy and their supporters,” including “the conservative class of landowners and merchants.” But Jesus warned his followers against them and may have had them in mind when he said, “I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”¹

It does give us something to think about.

“To each person...”

On top of it all, even the most active religious people sometimes fight like cats and dogs. In **1Corinthians 1: 10-17** Paul appeals to the charismatic Corinthians “that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” Scripture should unite us to Christ and one another, not divide.

Insight

Has anything written above changed your mind about Scripture reading?

Initiative:

Put your Bible on your pillow. Never go to sleep without reading at least one line.

¹ Matthew 5:20, 7:21, 16:1-12, 19:24. See McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, under “Sadducees.”

January 27, 2014

Monday, Week Three

My faithfulness and love shall be with him.
(*Responsorial: Psalm 89*)

In **2Samuel 5:1-10** the people give power to David.

“The LORD said to you: It is you who shall... be ruler over Israel.” So all the elders... anointed David king over Israel.

They did it because they knew the Lord had chosen him. This is the only real and legitimate source of authority. We obey authorities because they are over us in our employment, or elected officials, or sometimes because, literally or not, they are “holding a gun to our head.” We don’t need to believe they were chosen by God. To obey as Christians, however, we do need to believe God wants us to obey them; even if as the lesser of two evils; for example, so we won’t lose a job in which, in spite of the power structure, we are able to do some good.

The point is, there is peace in this. It is stressful and unhealthy to be working while, the whole time, a voice inside us is saying, “I shouldn’t have to be doing this!” That is to live with inner conflict. But everything changes if we say, “This is stupid,” or unjust, “but I know that, under the circumstances, it is what God wants me to do now. Thy will be done.”

This is the way Jesus went to the cross.

Just to keep ourselves *aware*, that in the last analysis we are obeying God—doing God’s will even in surrendering to something that in itself is not God’s will—this is what changes our burden into our cross; our frustration into fulfillment. True fulfillment is found, always and only, in doing God’s will. If we can be satisfied that God wants us to endure what we are enduring, even if God hates it more than we do, we can find peace. There is no stress in surrender. But we have to keep ourselves *aware* of *whom* are obeying. Our obedience is worship. Always.¹

Mark 3:22-30 approaches this from another angle. The “scribes” did not accept Jesus as an authority. They said, “Beelzebul is in him,” and “He casts out devils through the prince of devils.”

Not all authorities are idiots and tyrants. Some, perhaps the great majority, really are chosen by God; at least in the sense that, however they were appointed, God accepts them and tries to work through them. Normally we should presume this, and presume they also are trying to hear and follow God’s voice. But the scribes wouldn’t do this. Not even for Jesus.

Far worse than not being able to surrender to God through a tyrant is not being *willing* to surrender to God through one he has sent. If we reject people in whom the Spirit is speaking, Jesus says this can be to “blaspheme against the Holy Spirit.” We may not like the message, but we should think twice before making rash accusations against the messenger. It may be God.

Initiative: Look always for signs of God’s presence before you reject anyone.

¹ Reflect on *Mathew* 28:18; *Luke* 4:6; 7:8; 12:5; *Acts* 5:29; *Romans* 13:1-8; *Ephesians* 1:17 to 2:3; *IPeter* 2:9-21; *Revelation* 20:4.

January 28, 2014

Tuesday, Week Three

*Who is this king of glory? It is the Lord.
(Responsorial: Psalm 24)*

In **2Samuel 6:12-19** David made a fool of himself in the eyes of his wife Michal, Saul's daughter. They were bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the city, and David was dancing, "whirling around before the Lord with all his might, wearing nothing but a linen loincloth." Michal "despised him in her heart" and told him sarcastically:

"How the king of Israel honored himself today, showing himself half naked before the eyes of his servants' maids, as if he were a nobody!"

David answered, "I was dancing in the presence of the Lord who chose me... as prince over Israel, his people. I will do it again, and humble myself even more."

There was a difference of *awareness* here. Michal was conscious of how David might look to other people. David thought only of how he looked to the Lord. Michal was wrapped up in her own dignity, while David had thrown his off together with his clothes. Michal wanted David to be more aware of himself as king. David was aware that everything he was came from God. He was filled with gratitude and appreciation. He simply couldn't say "Hallowed be thy Name" in a moderate tone of voice, standing still.

If we let ourselves be *aware* of what God is, we will be impelled to express what we feel. If we do not express it, or express it only in ways that "damn with faint praise," pretty soon we won't feel it anymore. Michal was too self-conscious, instead of God-conscious, to "let go." Her punishment (from God or from David?) was, "she had no child to the day of her death." To give God's life to others, we have to be so *aware* we are alive that it overflows. In self-expression. *Who is this king of glory? It is the Lord.* To see it we have to say it.

Mark 3:31-35 continues Saturday's account of how Jesus' family thought he was "out of his mind" because he would not stop preaching even to eat. Now the crowd tells him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." To which Jesus replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?"

And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother!"

He was really carried away! But he meant it.

If Mary had been like Michal, when Jesus finally did come in for supper, she would have told him: "I threw it away. Go get one of your other 'brothers and sisters and mothers' to feed you!"

Mary might have said this anyway. After all, she was a real Jewish mother, But then she would have stuffed him full, because she shared his enthusiasm.

If we are never so carried away that we "lose ourselves" in praising God, something is lacking in our awareness of who God is and how he has brought us into relationship with himself. And if we don't *let* ourselves be carried away, we will never be fully aware of it.

Initiative: Drop your reserves. Express physically what you feel about God.

January 29, 2014

Wednesday, Week Three

*Forever I will keep my love for him.
(Responsorial: Psalm 89)*

In **2Samuel 7:4-17** God made a breathtaking promise to David:

I will make for you a great name, like the names of the great ones of the earth... I will ... raise up your offspring after you... He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

What would it be like to live in *awareness* that God made a promise like that to you? Has God destined each one of us for greatness, or just a special few?

We find the answer by looking at Mary, the “Mirror of the Church.” What we see in her is the pattern of what God does for his Church; each member of it. And by custom, the Church calls us, three times a day, through the ringing of the *Angelus* to be *aware* of it:

“*The angel of the Lord declared to Mary, and she conceived by the Holy Spirit.*” Jesus became alive in Mary as a seed. That same seed is in us by Baptism: the “mystery of Christ in us,” growing to “full stature.”

“*Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to your word.*” This is the model of the total surrender to which God calls each one of us is if we believe in his promise. He calls us all to the perfection of saints.

“*And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.*” We are Christ’s body. Our flesh is his. We have “become Christ.” What does this say about what each of us is called to be and do on earth? Jesus is living and acting in us to continue his mission.

God did not promise David a “name” greater than ours. There is no “great name” greater than simply “Christian.” Jesus himself made us two promises as great as those to David:

I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.

What would change in the attitude we take toward ourselves, our work, our family and social life, if we just kept ourselves *aware* of this promise?¹

Mark 4:1-20: Jesus tells us what hinders and helps the growth of the “seed” of his words and life in us. Note at the outset that he is speaking of the unseen *mystery* of our spiritual growth: of Christ himself growing in us until we “*form that perfect man who is Christ come to full stature.*”

For Christ’s life to grow in us: 1. We have to be *aware of the new identity* that takes us off the “beaten path” of culture that his words cannot penetrate. 2. We must *commit to discipleship*: the reflection that lets the seeds of his word reach the “root level” of *choices*. 3. We must *dedicate* ourselves as *prophets* to “weeding out” whatever in our lifestyle is in conflict with his words. 4. As *priests* and *kings* we need to create *environments* that foster faith and love. 5. We need to *believe* in his promise.

Initiative: Stay aware of God’s promise to do “great things” in you. Believe.

¹ Luke 1:26-38, 45; *Ephesians* 4:11-13; *Colossians* 1:27. Vatican II: *Church* no. 40. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 795. ¹ *John* 14:12; 15:16.

January 30, 2014

Thursday, Week Three

God will give him the throne of David his Father.

(Responsorial: Psalm 132)

2Samuel 7: 18-29: There is something very interesting in David's response to God's promise. His focus is not on what it meant to himself, but on what it says about God:

According to your own heart, you have wrought all this greatness, so that your servant may know it.

Therefore you are great, O LORD God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you,...

Thus your name will be magnified forever in the saying, "The LORD of hosts is God over Israel."

It is natural for a child who receives a present to say, "Thank you," then run off and get absorbed in the present. But David was absorbed in what the gift said about God. What he was most grateful for was the *relationship* God chose to have with him. This is what he was most *aware* of. And so he just kept thanking and praising God.

God overwhelms us with gifts: earth, air, food, water, flowers, trees, animals, fish and birds. The gifts of grace: a new identity purified of sin, divine light, the power of the Holy Spirit, his word, instant access to himself in prayer, the Mass, the sacraments, a library of Christian reflections and records of mystical experience, the example of the saints, community with others, the promise of life-giving ministry, and of a contributing part in establishing the reign of God on earth. But his greatest gift is the gift he wants to give us *through* these, the gift these other gifts help us to arrive at; the gift Jesus said he came to give: that "life to the full" which consists in being *like God*.

Not just "in the image" of God. Not just somewhat like God. Not just creatures imitating God to the best of our ability. God created us to "become Christ" by Baptism. To become "in Christ" what Jesus himself is, in a way "far more than all we can ask or imagine": the "reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being." By "presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice" at Baptism to be his body, and reaffirming this at every Mass, we are accepting to be absorbed in Christ, so united to him that we can say with St. Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me!" Jesus' prayer for his disciples was not, "Father, may they be like us," but "may all be *one*. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be *in us*,"¹

That is the mystery we need to remain *aware* of.

Mark 4:21-25: It is the nature of God to love, to give himself. If we are like God, we must be giving to others, sharing with others, all that we are. Jesus says,

"Is a lamp brought in to be put... under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.

Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

We will *be* like God in the measure we *give* like God. Our light and our love.

Initiative: Be aware of God's gift. Share it. Sharing will keep you aware.

¹John 10:10; Hebrews 1:3; Ephesians 3:20; Romans 12:1; Galatians 2:20; John 17:21.

January 31, 2014

Friday, Week Three

Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.
(*Responsorial: Psalm 51*)

In **2Samuel 11: 1-17** David hit bottom. His sin was not only adultery but rape, because when he summoned to his palace the wife of Uriah, one of his faithful officers deployed in battle, she couldn't refuse. When she became pregnant, and David realized he couldn't hide from Uriah what he had done, he covered up his sin by having the army set up Uriah to die in battle. In this David was utterly contemptible.

And this is the man about whom God said, "I have found David... to be a man after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes." Now do we explain this?¹

First, we have to admit that we don't have the slightest idea of what the words "steadfast love" mean—the "virtual definition of God" in the Old Testament—until we see the unimaginable "kindness and fidelity" (same words) God shows to his friends.

More specific to David's case, however, is that God doesn't narrow his focus the way we do. We characterize someone as "a murderer" or "a liar" or, during wars, as "an enemy," and forget that no human can be reduced to just one element of being. How many wars would start or continue if every politician and soldier was acutely conscious that every "enemy" is a child of God? Or just whole human being with good and bad points like every other? How many people would we execute as "criminals," if we didn't forget everything else they are?

And how many people would leave the Church if they could not use the excuse of seeing just the sinners in the Church and not the saints? There is good and bad all through the Church, from the center, where clergy and laity live and work on ground level, all the way out through the bishops to the popes on the fringes. We need to keep ourselves *aware* of this and open our eyes.

Mark 4:26-34: To explain the growth of divine life in individuals and in the Church, Jesus says it is "as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." We don't know what is happening in peoples' hearts; we just know that God never stops working on people and in people according to his "steadfast love." He never gives up on anyone, and neither should we.

Or on the Church. If God could say to David, knowing how he would sin, "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever," how much more sure are we that God will continue to live and work within his sinful Church? We need to keep the same "steadfast love" for the Church and for every person on earth that God does. God's life may look like a mustard seed now; but it grows. We need to keep ourselves *aware* of that. *Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned* speaks hope.

Initiative: Don't judge anyone with partial vision. See all with God's eyes.

¹ *Acts 13:22. Cf. Psalm 89:20 and 1Kings 14:8.*

February 1, 2014

Saturday, Week Three

Create a clean heart in me, O Lord.
(*Responsorial: Psalm 51*)

In **2Samuel 12: 1-17** makes one thing clear to us; we don't know anyone else's deepest heart, and often not our own.

When Nathan confronted David with his sin, what David revealed was that he despised what he had done. He wasn't aware he was speaking of himself when he said, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die... because he had no pity." But when Nathan made him aware, he said, "I have sinned against the LORD."

With those words David discovered his heart.

It is hard to sin with full consciousness of what we are doing. We block out a lot. Afterwards, if we feel guilt and remorse, we are usually blocking out something else: we are judging ourselves by our actions without asking how authentically those actions reveal our heart, our true selves.

If something brings us to confess our sin, we discover in that act how good we actually are! Every priest who hears confessions realizes, after a while, that he is not really hearing sins; he is hearing ideals.

The sins are real. But it is impossible for someone to confess a sin as a sin unless something inside that person is better than what the action expresses. We cannot look down on anything unless something in us has risen above it. When David said, "I have sinned against the LORD," he realized that his heart condemned what he had done. In his deepest self, in the person that he truly was, he did not embrace adultery, rape and murder. Like St. Paul later, he could say, "I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." Nevertheless, "In my inmost self I delight in the law of God."¹

But if he had not said first, "I have sinned against the LORD," he would not have been able to say with the confirming experience of its discovery: "I delight in the law of God."

Every *confession* of sin is a *profession* and discovery of faith. When we pray, "*Create a clean heart in me, O Lord*, we realize God already has.

In **Mark 4:35-41** Jesus' disciples were aware that he was in the boat with them, but they were not keeping themselves aware of who and what he really was.

First, they assumed Jesus was not aware of what was going on. And in his human nature he may not have been. But he could sleep through a storm because he was always aware he was in the Father's hands. They weren't.

Second, they had ceased to be aware of his love for them. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" If we are truly aware of God's love and care for us, what can drive away our peace?

When Jesus calmed the sea, they asked one another, "Who then is this?" The answer to that is what we need to recall.

Initiative: How do you habitually think of Jesus? What are you leaving out?

¹ *Romans 7:22.*

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: THIRD WEEK OF THE YEAR

The Power of Light and Love

The reception of God's gift enables us to love as God does.

Invitation: To focus on *awareness* of the love of God that is within us.

For prayer and discussion: How many of these statements do you feel you understand? How often are you consciously aware of them?

Sunday: Christian life on earth is all about growth: growth into clearer light through faith, stronger encouragement through hope, more generous efforts through love. And growth begins with *awareness* of the mystery of God.

Are you *aware* that you were consecrated by God at Baptism to be a *prophet*? To deliver God's message to all you live and work with? Is your community—family, circle of friends or associates, your parish—aware of itself as a community of faith, called to reflect on God's words together in order to come to decisions that embody a communal response? What are you doing to make them (and yourself) aware of this?

Monday: True fulfillment is found, always and only, in doing God's will. If we can be satisfied that God wants us to endure what we are enduring, even if God hates it more than we do, we can find peace.

Tuesday: If we let ourselves be *aware* of what God is, we will be impelled to express what we feel. If we do not express it, or express it only in ways that “damn with faint praise,” pretty soon we won't feel it anymore.

Wednesday: This was the core of Paul's preaching: “the mystery hidden throughout the ages but now been revealed to his saints.” Through Paul “God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches... of this mystery.” And the mystery, the message Paul was sent to give to the world, is simply this: “*Christ in you*, the hope of glory.”

Jesus became alive in Mary as a seed. That same seed is in us by Baptism: the “mystery of Christ in us,” growing to “full stature.”

Thursday: God created us to “become Christ” by Baptism. To become “in Christ” what Jesus himself is, in a way “far more than all we can ask or imagine....”

Friday: We need to keep the same “steadfast love” for the Church and for every person on earth that God does.

Saturday: Every *confession* of sin is a *profession* and discovery of faith.

Initiatives:

Write down all you started doing because of others' example. Look twice.

Look always for signs of God's presence before you reject anyone.

Drop your reserves. Express physically what you feel about God.

Cultivate your true self-image. Say the WIT prayer all day long.

Be aware of God's gift. Share it. Sharing will keep you aware.

Don't judge anyone with partial vision. See all with God's eyes.

How do you habitually think of Jesus? What are you leaving out?

February 2, 2014

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR A

In Christ We Have All

Being Humble and Grateful for Inclusion in the Church

(REPLACED BY THE FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION – NEXT REFLECTION)

Inventory

How much do you appreciate being a Christian? Do you take it for granted? Does it make you feel superior to anybody? Do you feel gratitude for being in the Church? Do you ever thank God for that? (How about during Mass?)

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* (*Psalms* 106:47) seems to identify God’s “saving us” with “gathering us together.” And we are gathered “from the nations.” For the Jews this marked distinction from the Gentiles. For us today it says we are distinct from every human society or culture. We have received the gift of *knowing God* through faith in his revealed word. That gives us the *possibility* and the *privilege* — and, yes, the *mission* — of “proclaiming his holy name.” The *New Jerusalem Bible* asks “that we may give thanks to your holy name and may glory in praising you.” Is that something we relate to? What would it mean for us to “glory” in praising God?

The *Opening Prayer* focuses us simply on loving God “with all our hearts” and loving everyone else “as you love them.” The *Alternative Opening Prayer* repeats the theme of being “gathered together” with a special and distinct identity, but rooted in the history we share with the Jews, God’s Chosen People: “From the days of Abraham and Moses until this gathering of your Church in prayer, you have *formed a people* in the *image of your Son*.” This recalls a major theme in *Hebrews*: “*Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me*.” We were “chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world” to die and rise in Christ by Baptism so that we might be the body of Christ and let him grow to “full stature” in us. At the end of time, he will shine forth in us as “the perfect man,” the glory of God shining in and through all humanity made perfect. In him we will be brought to perfection, “*be holy and blameless before him in love*.” The *Opening Prayer* asks for it now: “Bless this people with the gift of your kingdom. May we serve you with our every desire and show love for one another as you have loved us.”¹

Blessed the humble

The *Responsorial* (*Matthew* 5:3 and *Psalms* 146) invites us to say and to mean: “*Happy the poor in spirit*,” not only because “*the Kingdom of heaven is theirs*,” but because God promises multiple blessings to those who are humble enough to acknowledge him as God and obey his laws. The *Psalms* mentions justice for the oppressed, food for the hungry, freedom for captives, sight for the blind, protection for strangers and support for orphans and widows. But the general rule is, “The Lord raises up those that were bowed down. The Lord loves the just.”

What is the connection between being oppressed or afflicted and being blessed by God?

It isn’t that God plays favorites. He loves the rich as much as the poor. The *Psalms* says, “The Lord loves the just,” whoever they are. And we know he also loves sinners. So what is the message here?²

¹ *Hebrews* 10:5; *Ephesians*, chapter 1 and chapter 4:11-13.

² *Matthew* 9:10-13; 11:19; *Luke* 15:1-32.

Zephania 2:3 to 3:13 gives a key: “Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who have observed his law. Seek righteousness, seek humility.” The “winning combination” is again *humility* and *justice* or “righteousness.” Being humble and “obeying God’s law” seem to go together. And apparently being oppressed or afflicted in some way contributes to both. Suffering can give people a new slant on things. Sometimes it takes catastrophe to bring about conversion. If enough people in a country come to their senses, God can do wonders with them and for them:

I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain. For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD-- the remnant of Israel....

St. Ignatius of Loyola condensed all this into three words. The “strategy of the devil,” is to tempt people to “riches” — which can mean any kind of success or power on this earth, provided it brings “honors” or *prestige* — because these two together set a person up for *pride*. From power to prestige to pride. From riches to honors to the blindness of taking oneself for the *criterion*. Pride is to make or consider one’s own mind the norm for distinguishing truth from falsehood, one’s own will the standard for determining what is good or evil. Once one has taken one’s own self for one’s rule of life, respect for God and obedience to God’s law become non-thoughts.

A Stomach-Punch

Matthew 5:1-12 seems to contradict everything “everybody” takes for granted.

Oh, we give lip service to the Beatitudes, because they sound so spiritual, so beautiful that they even sound consoling — until we think about what they are actually saying. Then, words of God or not, we turn them off before they get a chance to rub together and strike a spark.

Come on: who really wants to know they are inadequate (the “poor in spirit”)? Who wants to face issues that are unpleasant (the “sorrowing”)? Who wants to be “meek” when confronted by power, or nonviolent in the face of force? Jesus says we are “blessed,” lucky, fortunate when we experience any or all of these. In response, we nod our heads in admiration and go right on striving to be self-sufficient, trying not to think about anything that upsets us, and looking for ways to intimidate those who would harm us. We know that those who “hunger and thirst for holiness” — enough to spend time and energy seriously pursuing it — will never “have their fill” of anything advertised on TV or prized by American society: affluence, popularity, promotions, social acceptance, or success in any but a few select areas of achievement. So we pursue what everyone else thinks is rewarding, not what Jesus promises.

Does this indictment sound extreme? Go try to recruit people for a weekend spiritual retreat, a weekly Bible study, or a discussion group to deeply confront the ideas in these reflections — or in one of a hundred other challenging spiritual books. Suggest that people put aside a period for prayer every day. The most common answer you hear will be, “I haven’t got the time. Can’t take it away from work, play or self-improvement activities. I’m signed up to conform to my peer group’s expectations. Can’t put serious focus on ‘getting holy’ right now.”

Many families can’t get themselves all together in the same room long enough to pray together every day.

And to say “Yes” to these invitations, no one needs more than just a mild appetite for spiritual development; no need to “hunger and thirst” for holiness.

What people “hunger and thirst” for in our society is to make a grade, make a team, make a future for themselves or their families (on this earth). The immediate (but continuous because incessantly renewed) focus is on making a deadline, a quota or a payment, just to make it through the month, quarter or semester without major disasters. And what people hunger for, they usually get, because they seriously pursue it. But that’s about all they get.

The American work ethic is not designed to foster authentic “life, liberty or the pursuit of happiness,” much less holiness. The ruling triumvirate is more likely to be efficiency, escapism and enslavement to patterns of life laid down by an aimless herd.

We are not humble enough to take directions from God. The irony is that, while we think we are choosing our own direction in life, most of us are just following the crowd. Either our crowd or the crowd we would like to belong to. Whether or not we face it.

Who is Our Crowd?

1Corinthians 1: 26-31 describes the Christian crowd: “Not many of you are considered intellectuals; not many are influential or powerful; not many belong to the ‘upper class.’” So who are we?

“God has given you life in Christ Jesus” — we *are Christ*, his body on earth. Jesus, the Son of God “is our wisdom, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.”

Wisdom: We are “the light of the world” because Jesus is our light.

Righteousness: In him we have become “the righteousness of God.”

Sanctification: “We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.... By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”

Redemption: “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins.” “He entered once for all into the Holy Place... with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.”¹

All that we are, we are because we are “in Christ.” It follows: “Let the one who would boast, boast in the Lord.” We need no riches, because we share in the eternal life of God who is All. We need no honors, because Jesus said, “Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.” And instead of pride we lay claim to nothing but humble gratitude.²

We are still more blessed than any people on earth. If we are humble enough to realize that all we have is from God, and that from God we already have All, we will “give thanks to his holy name and glory — exult — in praising him.”

Insight

How does deprivation — of almost anything — help us appreciate God?

Initiative:

“Deprive” yourself of something that keeps you from enriching your spiritual life.

¹ *Matthew 5:14; John 12:46; 2Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 9:11-15, 10:10-22; Ephesians 1:3-10.*

² *John 12:26.*

February 2, 2014

THE PRESENTATION OF THE LORD

Also: The Purification of Mary and “Candlemas”

“The light of revelation to the nations, the glory of your people”

Appreciating the Light that purifies, frees and fulfills us.

Inventory

What does the Presentation of Jesus in the temple say to you? Have you meditated on this event frequently while praying over the “fourth joyful mystery” of the Rosary? How often have you read the account of it in the Bible?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* (*Psalm* 48:10-11) assumes that we meditate on what God has revealed to us: “Within your temple *we ponder* your loving kindness, O God,” we “*reflect* on your faithful, steadfast love.”¹

If we ponder, we will praise. If we praise God constantly and widely enough, the Father’s name will be “hallowed” — known and venerated — “to the ends of the earth.” Then we can hope for peace and justice in the world. “Your right hand is filled with justice.” God has “justice” to give: personal purification, national reform. Other translations say, “Your right hand is full of saving justice” or “victorious.” This feast is a celebration of *light, purification* and *power*.

In the *Opening Prayer* we ask that encounter with the incarnate Christ will “free our hearts from sin and bring us into your presence.” *Faith* purifies us through enlightenment and brings us into God’s presence.

In the *Prayer Over the Gifts* we ask God to “accept the gifts your Church offers... since your Son offered himself as a Lamb without blemish...” We present ourselves to be offered with and in Christ under the symbols of the bread and wine. We present ourselves to be purified for service “without blemish” in commitment to his mission — and for the same purpose Jesus did: to give “life to the world” through love. *Love* purifies us through *commitment* that brings us into God’s service and the service of others.

In the *Prayer After Communion* we ask, “May this communion perfect your grace [life] in us and prepare us to meet Christ when he comes.” *Hope* purifies us by empowering us to persevere, and brings us into fulfillment — both ours and the fulfillment of God’s plan for the world.

“My messenger....”

In **Malachi 3:1-4**, God says: “I am sending my messenger.” When God says that, the natural thing for us to do is get ready to listen! The message we are about to hear is from God himself.

Then he adds: “to prepare the way before me.” The natural response to that is to start preparing the way ourselves. If God wants something done, we need to start doing it. The message is a call to action. Not just any action, but action in response to God’s word, action guided by the message he is sending.

So what is the message, and what does it call us to do?

The message is that the “messenger of the covenant whom you desire, for whom you long, in whom you

¹ The *New Jerusalem Bible*, *New American Bible* and *New Revised Standard Version* translations are mixed in here and below for enrichment.

delight... is coming.”

He is coming “to purify the descendants of Levi” – that is, the priestly caste. That might surprise us. We are not used to thinking of priests as being the problem. But this is commonplace in both Jewish and Christian tradition. Malachi’s first theme (1:2-5) is “God’s Special Love for Israel.” His second (1:6 to 2:9) is “The Sins of the Priests.”

The lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi.

In the Gospels the priests are always presented as the opponents of Jesus, along with the Pharisees. In Christian tradition prior to the Council of Trent, “criticism, even though forceful and public, had a sort of ‘in the family’ quality to it.” But after the Protestant Reformation Catholics “saw criticism as a weapon that would be used by her enemies against the Church.” It shocks us to learn that “the paintings of the saintly Fra Angelico depict monks, bishops and popes condemned to hell.” Or to hear St. Bernard say, “Show me a bishop not more concerned with discharging his people’s purses than their souls of their sins.” He added, “Of course, it is a waste of time to go on like this. They will pay no attention.”¹

Should we presume things are radically better today? It would be just that: a presumption. But true or false, there are serious reasons why the laity should insist — with Malachi — on the reform of the clergy and hierarchy, without neglecting their own.

Centuries of misguided “clericalism” (one of the three attitudes explicitly rejected at the outset of Vatican II, along with “legalism” and “triumphalism”) have created the presumption that those made priests by Holy Orders (the correct term is “presbyters”) are more “sacred” and “holier” than those who are priests and members of the divine body of Christ by Baptism. The clergy are presumed to be model Catholics, or at least better ones than the rank-and-file laity, just as it is presumed that only really good priests are selected to be bishops. And so people will leave the Church if a priest acts in a way they might take for granted in other Catholics. Clericalism has ingrained in them the totally unfounded idea that priests and bishops are representative of Christianity and of the Church. This has disastrous consequences.

When a tiny minority of priests were found guilty of child abuse and what may be a majority of bishops were found guilty of inexcusable betrayal by covering it up, people drew conclusions about the “Catholic Church” from that — even though all the priests and bishops in the Church comprise less than one half of one-percent of Catholics. Bottom line: if you want to know whom the Church considers a representative Catholic, look at those she canonizes, not at those she ordains. Ordination, whether as priest or bishop, does not make anyone virtuous.

Light Made Voice

What is said above is not an attack on the clergy but on *clericalism*, which endangers the clergy by putting them on a pedestal that encourages them to think of themselves as “higher” than others. It also multiplies the harmful effect of every flaw in their personality, spirituality or training.

If the laity think the clergy are supposed to be better Catholics than themselves, it gives the laity an excuse for brushing off Vatican II’s clear teaching:

Every Catholic must therefore aim at Christian perfection, and all... play their part so that the Church... may daily be more purified and renewed.²

We may think clerics are “more obliged” to be good Catholics because people look to them for good example. Don’t parents and teachers have this same obligation? Is it less sacred to “form Christ” in a child at home or in

¹ *Jerome Biblical Commentary, Malachi 2:7-8; The Reform of the Papacy*, by Archbishop John Quinn, Crossroad, 1999, pp. 45-46 and all of chapter two. See also Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church*, Liturgical Press, 2008, and Bishop John Heaps, *A Love That Dares to Question*, Aurora Books, 1998. These are all bishops in good standing in the Catholic Church.

² *Decree on Ecumenism* no. 4.

school than in a parish? Does it require any less union with Jesus?

In the account of Christ's Presentation in the Temple, **Luke 2:22-40**, everyone mentioned is a lay person: Simeon, Anna, Mary and Joseph. Both Simeon and Anna were "messengers" speaking prophetic words for which their lives of prayer and reflection on God's word had prepared them. In the same way, each of us, whatever our state of life or circumstances, must "play our part" so that the Church "may daily be more purified and renewed." We need to speak up and speak out, and fill our minds and hearts with God's word so that when we do our words will be his.

We committed ourselves to this at Baptism, when we "presented our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God," that we might never "be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds" through prayer and reflection on God's word. This was "so that we might discern what is the will of God: what is good, acceptable and perfect."¹

Like us in every way

Hebrews 2:14-18 tells us Jesus had to be "like us in every way." This was "so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest," not just in fact, but in our eyes also. To use him as we should, we need to trust him, feel assured he understands us, sympathizes with our weaknesses and loves us.

But for Jesus to be "like us in every way," he needs to be multiplied. He is that in us, who have "become Christ" as his body on earth. In us who are sick he is sick like the sick. In us who are strong he is strong like the strong. Every human being can find Christ "like" himself or herself in one of us. Because in us "he himself is tested by what we suffer," through us "he is able to help those who are being tested" in similar ways.

But nothing works unless we are united to him — united in one shared life by grace; in mind by the light of faith; in will by dedication to his mission; in heart by expressing his love to others; in constancy and desire by the strength and power of faith-based hope.

In us Jesus continues to present himself: in the temple, in the workplace, in every room of our home, in board rooms, bowling alleys and bars. In us he continues to be "*The light of revelation to the nations, the glory of your people.*"

Initiative: Imagine yourself as Simeon or Anna in every encounter with people.

¹ *Romans* 12:1-2.

February 3, 2014, St. Blaise (blessing of throats)

Monday, Week Four

Lord, rise up and save me!
(*Responsorial: Psalm 3*)

2Samuel 15:13 to 16:13: When David was fleeing from the revolt of his son Absalom, he was too depressed even to react against Shimei, who was cursing him. When David returned victorious he felt too good to punish him: “Shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day?” But later, when he was dying, he told his son Solomon to “bring Shimei’s gray head down with blood to Sheol.”¹

Three different moods; three different choices. This teaches us to *be aware of what we are aware of*.

When David was only aware of betrayal and defeat, he accepted Shimei’s insults as part of the package. When he was completely caught up in his triumph, he could forgive them. But when he was aware his end was approaching, he began thinking of unfinished business. Because he did not keep himself *aware* of his moods and allow for them, they made him generous or lethal.

A classic swing in the spiritual life is between “consolation” and “desolation.” In consolation we are very aware of the truths of faith, of how good and reliable they are, and of the promises and power that accompany the gift of divine life. We feel joy and peace. In consolation it is easy to serve God. Our awareness puts wind in our sails.

In desolation, all that light is lacking. The truths of faith seem far away and obscure, lacking in credibility and power to motivate. The hard part is that, even if we deliberately remember them and call them into consciousness, they just don’t mean anything. Leave us cold. That is when we become aware that we have a free will, and that how we use it is ultimately all that counts in our relationship with God. And with others.

Feelings are not free. Choices are. Feelings have no moral value, good or bad. They may tell us some things about ourselves, but not whether we love God or not. Love is a *choice* that reveals itself in *commitment*. If we are trying to live by love, we do love, regardless of how we feel about it. If we aren’t trying to do what love calls for, we are not loving, no matter how much devotion we feel. It is often hard to keep ourselves aware of this, but essential.

God allows “desolation” to make us aware of what comes from us and what from him. We can be very faithful to God when he gives us good feelings. But often when he stops, we stop, which tells us where the power was coming from. When, however, we manage to keep *choosing* to persevere in the good things we were doing, we discover two things: that our feelings are not our real selves; and that even to keep making good free choices we need divine help. This makes us more aware; of the gift of God’s divine life in us. That is when we say, “*Lord, rise up and save me.*”

Mark 5:1-20: The Gerasenes were only aware of the fear they felt and the pigs they lost. It pays to look further.

Initiative: Learn to make yourself aware of gifts you are forgetting about.

¹ 2Samuel 19:22; 1Kings 2:9.

February 4, 2014

Tuesday, Week Four

Listen, Lord, and answer me!
(Responsorial: Psalm 86)

2Samuel 18:9 to 19:3: When Joab, the head of David’s army, caught up with David’s rebel son, Absalom, who was helplessly entangled in the branches of a tree, he had no scruples about killing him. By killing his prisoner, Joab won the war. But David did not rejoice.

The king was deeply moved... and wept... “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”

...So the victory that day was turned into mourning... The troops stole into the city that day as soldiers steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle.

All Joab thought about was winning the war. David thought about his son. And we are like Joab whenever we kill—whether in war, in executing criminals, or in taking the life of the unborn.

We are so used to “spin” in our society that we take it for granted. We fall into it ourselves. A clear example is the dishonesty of both “pro choice” and “pro life” militants. “Pro-choice” does not include the right to destroy one’s own body by suicide or pollute the environment. They are only “pro” the right to kill unborn babies. Dishonest.

Those who call themselves “pro life” are just as dishonest unless they are also “pro” saving the life of condemned criminals by abolishing the death penalty, and of enemies in wars by espousing nonviolence. If not, they have a limited focus. Just like Joab.

Do the parents of those condemned for murder want to see their children executed? How does God feel about it? Or when his children kill his children in war? We are not in tune with God when we celebrate war victories. Even those who believe Christ was excluding war when he said, “Those who want to save their life will lose it,” should agree there ought to be no such thing as a victory celebration over the bodies of the dead.¹

One gets the impression that those who have actually been in combat are the least enthusiastic about celebrating their victory. Their memories are not all joy.

It is a matter of what we choose to be *aware* of. The threat to our well-being posed by a baby in the womb, a criminal in jail or an enemy at war; or the mystery of the value each has in the eyes of our Father. And the even more overwhelming mystery of God’s unlimited, unrestricted love for the innocent and guilty alike. Jesus died for all. His “new commandment” is: “Love one another *as I have loved you.*” We need to keep ourselves aware of that.²

Mark 5:21-43: Nothing is more tragic than the death of a child. But Jesus was aware that death is simply a pre-resurrection nap—and raised up a twelve-year old to prove it. To give hope, faith requires *awareness*. And if we keep ourselves aware of the whole mystery of our faith, we may see dying as a better choice than killing.

Initiative: Open your eyes to the Christian understanding of life and death.

¹ This is one of the texts repeated word-for-word in *Matthew* (16:25), *Mark* (8:35) and *Luke* (9:24).

² *John* 13:34; 15:12. And see the story of the “prodigal son,” *Luke* 15:11-32.

February 5, 2014

Wednesday, Week Four

Lord, forgive the wrong I have done!
(*Responsorial: Psalm 32*)

2Samuel 24: 2-17 bewilders us. Why would God punish David so severely—and send such suffering on his people—just because he took a census?

Our bewilderment reveals a deep and serious flaw in the way we were taught morality. David's sin was that he was gratifying his love of *power*. Like a miser counting money, he wanted to gloat over how many troops he could put in the field. Even Joab tried to warn him: "Why does my lord the king want to do this?" But we were never warned against this sin or its dangers.

We were made very aware of the obvious sins: lying, stealing, uncommitted sex, etc. But no one alerted us to the greater sin, more dangerous and damaging than all the above: love of *power*. Those attached to power bring down destruction on themselves and on all who are affected by their exercise of authority. Lord Acton said, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."¹ It corrupts, not only those who enjoy it, but the whole community—family, institution, civil society or Church—that depends on their decisions for good government. Power by nature tends to blind the mind and deaden the heart. No one is exempt: government officials, ecclesiastical authorities, corporate executives or spouses (male or female) addicted to dominance: all are in danger. All who have power "thrust upon them" should walk in fear and trembling. Power corrupts. Those who do not fear it are probably already corrupted.

They didn't teach us this in grade school. We are reaping the results.

God's treatment of David was to warn us that, when authorities are in love with their power, both they and their communities suffer. In **Mark 6:1-6** we see that Jesus taught this by giving the opposite example. When he

came to his hometown... many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this?... What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...?"

Jesus made no display of power growing up. He shunned it. The power he finally began to use in his ministry was the power to heal. And that was normally a response to faith:

He could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.

He was emphatic with his disciples:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them.... It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant...

St. Peter echoed Jesus, writing as a fellow "elder" to priests and bishops:

Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.... Clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."²

We must remain *aware* of this. Or else.

Initiative: Measure your power over others. Ask how it makes you feel. React.

¹ He wrote this in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 1887, after Vatican I had declared that the Pope had absolute power in the Church.

² *Matthew 20:25-27; 1Peter 5: 1-5.*

February 6, 2014

Thursday, Week Four

Lord, you are exalted over all!
(*Responsorial; 1Chronicles 29:10-12*)

1Kings 2:1-12: On his deathbed David tells his son Solomon to act according to God's mind heart so that God will keep his promise to extend his family's reign over Israel forever. The expurgated version read at Mass omits verses 5 to 9, in which David tells his son not to let two people who offended him—Joab and Shimei—die a natural death.

God called David "a man after his own heart." How could he do that when David was also a savage warlord, a rapist and a murderer?¹

God looks to the heart. He never justified David's sins. Nor did David. But God knew David loved him. David never broke off his relationship with God or turned to false gods. And God never broke off his relationship with David or cancelled his promise to him.

We are still misled today by what the bishops at Vatican II acknowledged as "false or careless" teaching of Catholic doctrines in the period prior to the Council.²

Among these we must count the too simplistic explanations of "mortal sin" that made generations of Catholics fear they were condemned to Hell for momentary lapses in law observance or for sins of weakness that were confidently declared "grave matter" without clear and convincing justification. They took for granted that their covenant with God and God's "steadfast love" for them could be broken and renewed almost on a weekly basis. As a result, many who felt helpless against their temptations just stopped going to Confession, receiving Communion, and eventually quit participating in Mass and in the life of the Church altogether.

They should have taken a good, long look at God's relationship with David.

Mark 6:7-13: Just as David gave Solomon instructions for carrying on his rule over Israel, Jesus gives his disciples instructions for carrying out his mission to Israel; and after Pentecost, to the world. But what a difference!

David told Solomon to persevere in "walking in God's ways and keeping his... commandments... as written in the law of Moses." Jesus told his disciples to give *prophetic witness* through a lifestyle that depended on the presence and power of his Spirit in them. Solomon was to walk in God's ways; the disciples were to walk in God's Spirit. Solomon would be famous for his wisdom and riches. The glory of Jesus' disciples would be their poverty and their dependence on God for what they were to say. Solomon had the accreditation of human wealth, honors and prestige. Christ's disciples were accredited by the absence of human resources that kept them *aware* and revealed to others their reliance on the divine power of God working in them.³

Initiative: Embody some characteristics in your lifestyle that reveal it as divine.

¹ *1Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22.*

² See *The Church in the Modern World*, no, 19.

³ See *1Kings 3:12-13; 10:1-23; Matthew 10:19-20; 1Corinthians 1:17 to 2:16.*

February 7, 2014

Friday, Week Four

Blessed be God, my salvation!
(*Responsorial: Psalm 18*)

Sirach 47:2-11: What is striking about Sirach's praise of David is that after each accomplishment he lists, he tells us what David was *aware* of. When he slew Goliath, he "called on the Lord Most High." He was aware of who "gave strength to his right arm." In all the battles he won, "he gave thanks to the Holy One." He "put all his heart into his songs, out of love for his Maker." He enhanced the singing and music at feasts "causing the Lord's holy name to be praised." And so "the Lord took away his sins" and exalted him forever."

God looks to the heart. And so should we. We "put our heart into" what we are doing when we act with conscious faith, remembering who we are as children of the Father, sharing in his divine life through identification with the Son. Conscious of his prolonged creative word, "Beeee..." sustaining us in existence. Of the gift of his Spirit within us, empowering us to act on the level of God through faith, hope and love. Aware that we are enlightened, called and sent by God to continue the mission of Jesus. Aware of Jesus himself within us, expressing his truth, his love, in and through our human words and actions, to give and enhance his divine life in all we deal with. Aware that Jesus has won the victory, has conquered sin and death,, and is establishing his reign now through our efforts as "stewards of his kingship." To keep ourselves *aware* of the mystery of our ongoing, interactive relationship with God is the first phase of our journey into the "fullness of life" and the "perfection of love."¹

The refrain of our hearts should be always: "*Blessed be God, my salvation!* Lord, do this *with* me, do this *in* me, do this *through* me."

In **Mark 6:14-29** even Herod, spiritually numbed though he was by immersion in sensuality, power and prestige, was able to feel a prophetic, suspicion approaching truth when he heard what Jesus was doing. "John [the Baptizer]," he said, "whom I beheaded, has been raised."

He was right about the resurrection; just wrong in his timing and identification of the one who had been raised. What Herod saw in Jesus was divine life at work. And he would see it again in the disciples of Jesus after Jesus, not John, whom Herod, with Pilate, sent to the cross, was raised from the dead. The life and actions of those who have died and been raised with Christ through Baptism are inexplicable without the recognition of grace. It is only by sharing in the divine life of Jesus, risen and living in them, that Christians can live as the Gospel calls us to live. What Herod saw in Jesus, everyone on earth should see in his followers.

If they don't, the first reason is that Christians themselves are just not *aware* of the mystery of their being. That is the first thing we need to work on.

Initiative: Keep reminding yourself of who and what you have become by grace.

¹ See *John* 10:10; 16:33; *Romans*, chapters 5 to 8. Vatican II, *The Church*, no. 40.

February 8, 2014

Saturday, Week Four

*Lord, teach me your decrees.
(Responsorial: Psalm 119)*

The introductory verses to **1Kings 3: 4-13** tell us that “the people were sacrificing at the high places,” the hilltop shrines where the pagans sacrificed to idols. They did it, however, “because no house had yet been built for the name of the LORD.” And Solomon himself, though he “loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David” also “sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.” This was good and bad.

We can compare this to Catholics who have abandoned the Mass to worship in Protestant services. This is good, because they are worshiping sincerely with true Christian believers in authentically Christian assemblies (the word “church” means “assembly”). But it is also bad, because they are not in the “House built for the name of the Lord” where Eucharist is celebrated and the “catholic, universal faith that comes to us from the apostles” is preached in union with all the bishops throughout the world.” Why aren’t they?

Catholics go to Protestant churches for the same reason the Jews sacrificed in the “high places” when “no house had yet been built for the name of the Lord.” They go because we do not provide them with a parish where they can find what Jesus offers and they seek.

The essentials are present, of course, in every Catholic parish: instruction, preaching, all seven sacraments, the Mass, and even, for those who know how to recognize it, a community of faith. It would be heresy to deny this.

But to say realistically, in practical terms, that all Catholics can find what they need in their parishes would be to bury our heads in the ground. The second largest religious “denomination” in the United States, after the Catholics, are the ex-Catholics. When the most popular Protestant churches report that 40% of their congregations grew up as Catholics, we would be blinding ourselves to say we have really “built a house for the Lord” where they can find him. Whose fault is this?

Ultimately, of course, it is the Pope’s. Since over the centuries the popes have reserved to themselves many pastoral decisions that properly belong to the local bishops—for example, the regulation of liturgy and the requirements for ordination—the Pope has to say, like every “monovocal” authority, “The buck stops here.”

Then, in descending order, we blame the bishops and pastors. But this is a cop-out. All the popes, bishops and pastors together cannot provide an adequate experience of God at Sunday Mass unless the congregation—the *congregation*, the congregation—are expressing their faith enthusiastically, joyfully and credibly. God has called every baptized Catholic, as he called Solomon, to “build me a house.”

The first step is to be *aware*, when we walk in for Mass, that the effect the liturgy will have on many depends, in large part, on how we participate in it.

In **Mark 6:30-34** the disciples return from their mission tour and tell Jesus “all that they had done and taught.” In response he takes them away “to a deserted place by themselves” to build up their union with himself. But when he saw the crowd that sought them out, he realized that all the ordained priests and bishops in the world would never be enough. “He saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

The word “pastor” means “shepherd.” But no pastor can possibly be an adequate shepherd for a whole parish. He would need more “gifts of the Holy Spirit” than the catechisms can describe. When Paul said, I have become all things to all people,” he did not mean he could be and do everything that each person required. That is why he made it clear that to each and every one “the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good,” to

“equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”¹

Paul gives only a “short list” of all the gifts, services and activities needed to bring about the “common good” in a Christian community. No one person, and specifically, no ordained priest or bishop, could possibly have them all. It takes the work of every member to “build a house for the Lord” where all of his people can find him. That is why Paul goes on to use the phrase “building up” or “to build up” five more times in the same letter. It is a basic Christian obligation, rooted in our baptismal anointing as “priests,” to “build a house for the Lord” by building up the Church, beginning in our own parish. Not to do this (okay, here comes the bombshell!) is just as truly a violation of our baptismal promises as failing to communicate deeply with a spouse is a violation of the marriage vows. When are we going to start taking our commitments seriously? All of them.

The last statement may sound harsh. It isn't. It is challenging. So is an invitation to compete in the Olympics. All of us are “volunteer Christians,” and we are all Christians by invitation only. Jesus Christ has chosen us to be his body, to let him live, speak and act in us to continue his mission on earth. We did not choose him; he chose us, and has anointed us to “bear fruit, fruit that will last forever.” But having been chosen, and having been promised a “posterity” in those who have received or grown in divine life through our ministries, it is obvious that we need to live up to what we are, have become, and are called to be. And to do.²

Is it harsh, is it a threat to tell fathers and mothers they are “committed” to take care of their children? Or do parents consider this the greatest privilege and blessing of their lives? It is the same for us who are called to take care of the children of God as co-sharers in the life of the Father. We just need to keep ourselves *aware* of the mystery of our being, the mystery of our life, the mystery of our identification with Jesus, “only Son of the Father,” the mystery of what it means to be and live as a Christian.

Initiative: **Decide** to cultivate *awareness* of who you are and are called to be. Don't just dismiss this; make a concrete decision. *How will you do this?*

¹ *1 Corinthians* 9:22; 12:1-10; 14:4-26; *Ephesians* 4:11-13.

² *John* 15:16.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: FOURTH WEEK OF THE YEAR

God Speaks to Us

The word God speaks always brings forth life.

Invitation: Like all those in Scripture, our response makes all the difference.

For prayer and discussion: How many of these statements do you feel you understand? How often are you consciously aware of them?

Sunday: We know the Father as Jesus does, because we share in his divine life and his own unique, personal divine act of knowing the Father. “Because we are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” This is our experience of *being* through grace. It is perhaps the deepest experience we have. We need to be *aware* of it.

Recognizing the difference between perennial Church doctrine and current interpretations the Second Vatican Council urged clergy and laity alike to exercise constant vigilance over what is being taught by words and customs.

Monday: Love is a *choice* that reveals itself in *commitment*. If we are trying to live by love, we do love, regardless of how we feel about it.

Tuesday: Jesus died for all. His “new commandment” is: “Love one another *as I have loved you.*” We need to keep ourselves aware of that.

Wednesday: Power by nature tends to blind the mind and deaden the heart. No one is exempt: government officials, ecclesiastical authorities, corporate executives or spouses (male or female) addicted to dominance: all are in danger.

Thursday: Simeon’s underlying consciousness in life was characterized by expectation. Whatever he had, enjoyed or was suffering, that was not his main focus. His heart was focused on a fulfillment he believed in, hoped for and desired with the first love of his heart.

Friday: God looks to the heart. And so should we.

To keep ourselves *aware* of the mystery of our ongoing, interactive relationship with God is the first phase of our journey into the “fullness of life” and the “perfection of love.”

Saturday: The first step is to be *aware*, when we walk in for Mass, that the effect the liturgy will have on many depends, in large part, on how we participate in it.

Initiatives:

Decide when, where and how long you will read from Scripture each day.

Learn to make yourself aware of gifts you are forgetting about.

Open your eyes to the Christian understanding of life and death.

Measure your power over others. Ask how it makes you feel. React

Welcome the real Jesus. Say the WIT prayer all day long.

Embody some characteristics in your lifestyle that reveal it as divine.

Keep reminding yourself of who and what you have become by grace.

Decide to cultivate *awareness* of who you are and are called to be.

What has this booklet done for you?

These reflections were designed to help you deepen your appreciation of *Jesus as Savior*. That is *evangelization*.

Did they work?

When we are on a journey it encourages us to look back and see how much ground we have covered, how far we have advanced. So let's do that.

- Did you read these reflections:
 - at least once a week? • three or more times a week?

- Did they help you understand and appreciate Jesus more as Savior?

- Did they help you get more out of the readings at Mass?

- During this season have you read Scripture more often than you usually do?

- Did these reflections lead you to make any *decisions*; for example, to change something in the way you are living or acting?

- **More specifically** (*if you have a little more time...*)
 - Do you see better how to use Jesus as *Son of David* to find fulfillment:
 - in your personal life?
 - by contributing to the good of the human race?
 - Do you see better how you can use Jesus as *Savior* to keep your life on earth from being diminished by corrupting influences in society?
 - Do you see better how Jesus as *Son of God* enables you to live your life on another level, the divine level of God?
 - Do you see better how you can interact in human ways with Jesus *Emmanuel* (“God-with-us”) to get to know him and appreciate him more?
 - Do you see better how Jesus as *Lord of all Nations* unites the world in peace?

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These reflections follow the themes of the book

Why Jesus?, chapters one to six

which develop Step One in

Reaching Jesus — Five Steps to a Fuller Life

by David M. Knight