DAILY BIBLICAL SERMONS

Fr. Steven Scherrer

Year B
(I)
2008-2009
“...the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:6-8).

Today we begin the well-loved season of Advent, a time of hope and preparation for “the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:7). The purpose of this preparation is that we be confirmed unto the end, so that when that day comes, we may be found “blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:8). This time is, therefore, a time of joy, for it is dominated by a joyful expectation for the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ. We await with longing his greater coming in our life, in our heart, and in his parousia at the end of history to consummate all things in glory.

On that final day, he shall come as judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42). He will come with wrath (Rom 1:18) and vengeance (Rom 12:19; 2 Thess 1:8) to punish the disobedient (Mt 25:41,46); and with love and joy to reward the just (Mt 25:34) with eternal life. Such then will be the final day. He will manifest himself to give rest to those who are afflicted for their faith, “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed” (2 Thess 1:7-10).

We prepare ourselves now, then, that we not be among those punished by the wrath of God, but rather among those who are saved, to be glorified by him. By the grace of Christ we hope to be confirmed and “blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:8).

Now, therefore, is the time for vigilance. “Take heed, watch and pray,” says Jesus today; “for you do not know when the time will come” (Mk 13:33). We do not want him to catch us unprepared, but rather always awaiting his coming with eager expectation, prayer, and a life filled with the good fruits of his work of justification in us. Like a servant, who is supposed to keep awake and await the arrival of his master, does not want to be caught sleeping when he arrives, so we do not want to be caught unprepared when Christ comes. “Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep” (Mk 13:35-36).

Hence we ought to live in constant vigilance and eager expectation. But we also watch because we want to grow more in holiness every day, being ever more transformed...
in every aspect of our being by the salvation which we have received through our faith in
the merits of the propitiatory and expiatory death of Jesus Christ on the cross. He saved,
forgave, and justified us, having suffered our punishment for us, so that we might be
completely free from this punishment, and made new and resplendent before God. And
by his resurrection he illumined us that we might walk in his light. And when he was
glorified at God’s right hand, he sent, from the Father, the Holy Spirit upon us, to rejoice
our hearts with his illumination.

Having been made resplendent like this by him, we are now to bear good fruit in a
new and holy life, lived completely for him. We are to serve him alone, serving but one
Master only (Mt 6:24), with all our heart, with an undivided heart.

It is our joy now, therefore, to move into the future, hoping to grow more each day in
holiness, as we approach the day of our salvation for “you know what hour it is, how it is
full time now for you to wake from sleep. For our salvation is nearer now than when we
first believed; the night is far spent, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of
darkness and put on the armor of light; let us walk becomingly as in the day, not in
gluttony and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and
jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify
its desires” (Rom 13:11-14).

So therefore, “take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down by gluttony
and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare;
for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole earth” (Lk 21:34).

Our joy should therefore be in the Lord Jesus Christ and in his coming into our life to
illumine and rejoice it with his presence, and by his sending to us, from the Father, the
Holy Spirit. Let us, therefore, put all our hope in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in
our preparation for it. “Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon
the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13). And this
is because “The end of all things is at hand; therefore keep sane and sober for your
prayers” (1 Peter 4:7), “so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before
our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints” (1 Thess
3:13). And on that day there will be a great light (Zech 14:6).

THE HOPE OF THE CHRISTIAN FOR THE PRESENT AND FOR THE FUTURE

Monday, 1st Week of Advent
Is 2:1-5; Ps 121; Mt 8:5-11

“I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and
Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the
outer darkness; there they will weep and gnash their teeth” (Mt 8:11-12).

Christ came into the world for this, to invite people of every nation to the Messianic
banquet, and to save them, so that they be not thrown into the outer darkness. He came to
save the human race from the just wrath of God for the sin of Adam and for our sins. If
he had not come, we would be thrown into the outer darkness where they weep and gnash
their teeth, for even the ancient Jews were forgiven by God for their sins only in view of
the coming expiation of Christ’s death. But since Christ has come and died for us on the 
cross, he absorbed the divine wrath into himself, suffering our just punishment for us, in 
place of us, and instead of us, thus satisfying the wrath of God, to save us, that we might 
go free from both punishment and guilt, and be made a new creation and new men. 
Christ gives us a new opportunity to become righteous and resplendent in God’s sight, 
clothed with his very own righteousness (2 Cor 5:21).

Hence, through our faith in Christ, we have new hope, as much for the present as for 
the future. For we who believe in Christ and in his atoning death, already take part in the 
messianic banquet, already enjoy his grace, his new life in us, and the gift of the Holy 
Spirit, which rejoices our hearts. And more still, we know that one day we will enter into 
the fullness of the Messianic banquet in the Kingdom of heaven with God, as Jesus tells 
us today, when “many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, 
and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 8:11).

What will that final day be like? Isaiah prophesies about this great day today, saying 
that many nations will come to Jerusalem and to the holy mountain of the Lord “in the 
latter days” (Is 2:2). At that time they will want to learn the ways and teachings of the 
Lord, “For, out of Zion,” they will say on that day, “shall go forth the law, and the word 
of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Is 2:3). This is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the new 
temple of the New Covenant. All nations now come to him to learn the things of God; 
and it will be the same, and even more so, in the future. Jesus Christ is the fullness of 
God’s revelation to man. All who want to learn of God come to him, and they will come 
to him in the last days. He is the new temple, to which all nations shall come.

He proclaims peace to the nations, for in those days, Isaiah tells us, “they shall beat 
their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” and “nation shall not 
 lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Is 2:4). In Christ, 
war should be a thing of the past. He brings a Kingdom of peace to the earth. We should 
renounce and refuse war from now on.

In Christ, we have already begun to sit at table in the Kingdom of God. In him, we 
have true joy, life, and hope for the future.

GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST, 
AND ON EARTH PEACE, GOOD WILL TOWARD MEN!

Tuesday, 1st Week of Advent
Is 11:1-10; Ps 71; Lk 10:21-24

“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the 
calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and 
the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like 
the ox” (Is 11:6-7).

Isaiah prophesies today the restoration of the paradisiacal peace in the Messianic age. 
This peace symbolizes the restoration of harmony between God and man, between man 
and nature, and between men, a harmony that was lost by the sin of Adam. It will be 
Jesus Christ, the Messiah, who will restore this harmony.
The whole Old Testament was a preparation for his coming to unite us once again with God. In him, we have a new life, cleansed and forgiven of all sin if we believe in the power of his sacrificial, propitiatory and expiatory death on the cross. This death in sacrifice of the only Son of God saves us when we put our faith in it. It restores our harmony with God, so that those who believe might live even now in the peace of paradise with God.

This is the purpose of his coming—the restoration of paradisiacal peace on earth; and those who take refuge in him live now already in this peace. And every time they fall outside of this peace by sinning, they can repent anew and invoke the merits of his death on the cross—especially in the sacrament of reconciliation, and thus be restored again in this peace of Christ, the peace of the Messiah.

Christ came to bring peace on earth. “He shall speak peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zech 9:10 NKJV). We live now in the Messianic time when “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb” (Is 11:6), and when “I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off” (Zech 9:10). In these days, “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Is 2:4). “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom” (Is 9:7).

We now live in the days of the Messiah, in his Kingdom; and his dominion extends “from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zech 9:10). In Christ, we have the essentials to live in great peace with God, an interior peace, a paradise of the heart; and as a fruit of this interior peace, we should try to extend it exteriorly too, in our relations with others, so that there might be peace on earth. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Lk 2:14 KJV).

THE IMPORTANCE OF DOING THE WILL OF GOD

Thursday, 1st Week of Advent
Is 26:1-6; Ps 117; Mt 7:21,24-27

“Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 7:21).

We entered the world under the just wrath of God for the sin of Adam; and after we had grown up, we added to this our own sins, and so found ourselves far from God. But God sent his only Son to restore our relationship with God, for he suffered for us the just punishment for the sin of Adam and for our own sins, thus cancelling out the wrath of God towards those who believe in his salvific work on the cross. Thus, for those who believe in the Son, invoking the merits of his death on the cross, we have new life in Christ, the forgiveness of our sins, and the removal of our guilt. And still more, we are made new and resplendent in God’s sight by being clothed with the very righteousness of Christ himself.
But in order to remain in this new and splendid state of being justified by our faith in the merits of Christ, we have to do the will of God. If we do not do his will, we fall out of this beautiful state of splendor, and have to repent anew, invoke again the merits of Christ on the cross, especially in the sacrament of reconciliation, and wait for his forgiveness and consolation. So we see how important it is to try not to fall out of this enchantment by sinning. In this we see the importance of always doing the will of God. If we do it, we avoid these painful falls, and we can also grow in holiness and in the love of God; and avoid experiencing his wrath in the pain of our heart.

Today Jesus teaches us the importance of doing the will of God. He says that we have to do more than just call upon Christ, saying, “Lord, Lord,” for only he who does the will of his Father will enter the Kingdom of heaven (Mt 7:21). Our justification must bear fruit in good works if we are to be saved on the last day. If we do his will, the house of our life will not fall, for it is built on rock. So shall we then live in joy and interior splendor in Jesus Christ, rejoicing in the new life which he has given us. But if we only invoke Christ, saying, “Lord, Lord,” but do not do his will, the house of our life will fall, and we will not enter into the Kingdom of heaven.

How happy is the obedient life! And how sad we are when we disobey God! To live a happy life, we have to obey the will of God. Thus do we remain in the splendor of the righteousness of Christ. He clothes us with his own splendid righteousness (Is 61:10), and we remain in it (Jn 15:9-10). And if, due to inadvertence, we should fall into some sin or imperfection, we can confess it, and return again to live in this splendor.

THE HUMBLE OF THE EARTH WILL REJOICE IN THE LORD

Friday, 1st Week of Advent
Is 29:17-24; Ps 26; Mt 9:27-31

“The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among men shall exult in the Holy One of Israel” (Is 29:19).

Isaiah is prophesying the Messianic age as a time of joy. In those days, he says, “the poor among men shall exult in the Holy One of Israel” (Is 29:10). Those who will experience this joy are the humble of the earth, for “The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord” (Is 29:19). The poorest and the humble are the ones who will rejoice on that day, in the Messianic times. It is the poorest of the poor, who have no other source from which they can find happiness, who will rejoice in the Lord in the Messianic days. The humble and meek are those who have nothing in this world. They have lost everything, and remain only with the Lord as their only source of joy in life. The world rejects them, and does not recognize or accept them. They remain locked out of its pleasures and honors, and do not follow its values. But it is they, the humble and the “poor among men,” not the rich of this world, who will rejoice in the Lord in days of the Messiah.

We now live in the Messianic age. Jesus Christ is the Messiah and Savior. He gives us great relief and jubilation of spirit through the forgiveness of our sins, and he removes from us the sadness and pain of guilt, for he takes away our guilt. He does this through the merits of his death on the cross for those who believe in those merits, and invoke
them with faith. Then, in his resurrection, his splendor illumines us, and we walk in its light, which is a new light in our life and heart.

But who are those who most experience this? They are the humble, the meek, the poorest of the poor, the *anawim* of Yahweh, the poor of the Lord.

And who are the poor of the Lord, the *anawim*, today? They are those who have left all else, to remain only with God as their only source of happiness. They are those who follow John the Baptist into the desert, especially during Advent, living in a cave, clothing themselves with camel’s hair, and eating locusts and wild honey (Mk 1:6). If we have other sources of happiness besides the Lord, we will not experience much of the happiness of the Lord, because we will not have an undivided heart in our love for him. And to “rejoice always” (1 Thess 5:16) in the Lord, we need to have an undivided heart in our love for Christ; that is, we need to live a humble, poor, and simple life, looking to him alone for our joy in life. We have to be the humble of the earth, the *anawim* of Yahweh, the poor of the Lord. Then we will grow in our joy in the Lord, and “exult in the Holy One of Israel” (Is 29:19). We shall rejoice in him in the midst of the problems and illnesses of life. And the less we have in this world, the more we will rejoice in the Lord in these Messianic times.

PREPARING THE WAY OF THE LORD
WITH JOHN THE BAPTIST IN THE DESERT

2nd Sunday of Advent
Is 40:1-5,9-11; Ps 84; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mk 1:1-8

“Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight… Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey” (Mk 1:2-3,6).

Today, on this Second Sunday of Advent, it is John the Baptist who is our model, whom we are to imitate in our preparation to receive and benefit from the coming of Jesus Christ in a fuller and richer way.

We prepare ourselves during Advent for the coming of the Lord, that he may fill us with his light and heavenly peace. John was sent by God to prepare his way in the desert, and to make his paths straight.

How did he do this? He did it by clothing himself with “camel’s hair,” by wearing “a leather girdle around his waist,” and by eating “locusts and wild honey” (Mk 1:6) in the desert. Why did he do this? He did this because, like the prophets who dressed this way before him (Zech 13:4; 2 Kings 1:8), he wanted to live only for God in a very radical and visible way. He lived like this because he wanted to love God with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his strength (Dt 6:5). He did not want to divide his heart among the delights of this world. He also sought a life of silence and solitude with God, without distraction. So he lived, says St. Luke, in the desert, from his youth up. St. Luke says about him that “the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel” (Lk 1:80).
Having lived intimately with God in this way in his cave in the desert of Judea, without division of heart, when the word of God came to him, where he was in the desert (Lk 3:2), he began his career of being “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Mk 1:3). His life in the desert prepared him for his mission of calling Israel to repentance in preparation for the coming of God to the earth as a man.

Now is the time in which we also prepare the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight. And we do it as John did it, in the desert, living only for God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength. Advent, therefore, is a time that we spend with John in a cave in the desert, eating “locusts and wild honey,” and clothing ourselves with “camel’s hair” and with “a leather girdle” around our waist (Mk 1:6).

And what is it that we are doing in the desert with John during Advent? We are preparing the way of the Lord in our heart, that his Kingdom might more fully come into this world, that the world might be ever more transformed into the Kingdom of God.

It is Jesus Christ, through our faith in him, who makes us resplendent before God with his own righteousness. It is his death on the cross which has won for us the forgiveness of our sins, and has removed from us the burden of our guilt when we invoke him in faith, especially in the sacrament of reconciliation.

He then wants us to cooperate with his great gift, and bear good fruit in a virtuous life. It is to do this that we go into the desert during Advent. It is so that the gift of Christ might extend to every aspect of our life. It is not easy to live for God with all our heart in the world, because there are so many distractions, pleasures, and delights which attract our heart in every direction. This is why monks have always fled from the world and gone to the desert, so that they could live for God, as did John the Baptist, with all their heart, with an undivided heart.

This is the contemplative life, that is, the desert life. This is the best context for contemplation, for union with God in light and love during prayer, and all day long. Our whole life has to be contemplative, not only our times of prayer. We have to empty ourselves of other things for the sake of God in every aspect of our life, especially during Advent, when John the Baptist is our model for preparing for the coming of the Lord. God comes to us more richly in the desert, when we eat simply, dress simply, and live in silence and solitude, far from the pleasures and distractions of the world, in the wilderness, in a wasteland, like John the Baptist. By doing this, we discover that the desert is the place par excellence for experiencing God’s interior light and heavenly peace; and we discover for ourselves that monks were not mistaken in choosing the desert with predilection for living in intimacy with God.

Let us, therefore, prepare in the desert the way of the Lord, for in the desert “The Lord is near” (Phil 4:5).

Where is your desert this Advent? How will you live in the desert with John the Baptist this Advent?
A SIGN OF THE NEW HUMAN RACE  
IN THE MIDST OF THIS OLD WORLD  

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, December 8  
Gen 3:9-15,20; Ps 97; Eph 1:3-6,11-12; Lk 1:26-38

“The Lord said to the serpent…I will put enmity between you and the woman, and  
between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel”  
(Gen 3:14,15).

This is the origin of all our problems, because it is the Original Sin which destroyed  
our relationship of intimacy with God. Sin is spiritual death because it separates our  
spirit from God. This was the first sin, but it was followed by many more sins, including  
our own. This sin caused us to lose paradise, where we would have lived in harmony,  
peace, and love with God.

But since we have lost this peace with God through Adam’s sin, God sent Christ into  
the world, by means of the Virgin Mary, to redeem us from the effects of this Original  
Sin. He is the only Son of God, born of the Father from all eternity, but born now as man  
in the world through his incarnation in the womb of the Virgin Mary. She said today, “I  
know not man,” and the angel Gabriel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon  
you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore also that Holy One  
who is to be born will be called the Son of God” (Lk 1:34,35).

And so God was born in this world by means of the mystery of the incarnation. He  
was born to wound the head of the serpent, or the Devil, by being himself wounded in the  
heel, by the serpent. He did this on the cross, where men led by the Devil crucified him,  
so that he might suffer in his body on the cross the just penalty for the sin of Adam and  
for all sins, so that the elect who believe in him might go free from sin and guilt, and be  
made new before God.

The Virgin Mary profited from this redemption by anticipation even before Christ  
died on the cross, by being preserved by God from her conception from all stain of sin,  
both Original and personal. God did this, through the merits of Christ on the cross, to  
make her a fit mother for our Redeemer. She is thus the first member of the new  
humanity, redeemed by Christ, in the midst of this old world. She is thus a model of  
purity and holiness for us all.

We therefore honor Mary today as we rejoice in the benefits Christ has brought us by  
redeeming us from sin. Her loving relationship with God is a model for us as we seek to  
grow in his love and heavenly peace. She had a nuptial relationship with God, and so  
should we, loving him exclusively and with all the love of our heart. The more perfectly,  
radically, and completely we can do this, the better.

We know that it is sin that harms our relationship with God. The Virgin Mary was  
always sinless, and so her relationship with God was always perfect. She did not  
experience the pain of guilt because she never sinned. The more we, by God’s grace, can  
keep from sin, the happier we will be in the true happiness of God, in which the Blessed  
Virgin Mary always lived. This is the way to the happiness that everyone seeks. It  
consists in always doing the will of God, and not sinning. To the degree that we can do  
this, we live in the splendor of the righteousness of Christ himself, and do not fall out of  
it by sin. May Mary’s example inspire us to live in this splendor.
THOSE WHO COME TO CHRIST WITH FAITH WILL FIND REST FOR THEIR SOULS

Wednesday, 2nd Week of Advent
Is 40:25-31; Ps 102; Mt 11:28-30

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28).

Who are these who “labor and are heavy laden?” They are those who have left the way of the Lord, who have not listened to or heeded his voice or his teachings, but rather have followed their own desires and pleasures, violating God’s laws and will. God brings evil upon them in his wrath until they are completely exhausted. They are heavy laden because, as rebels against God, they do not find rest for their souls. There is no rest of spirit for those who live in rebellion against God and his laws and ways.

But Christ came to call sinners to repentance, so that they may be forgiven by his death on the cross. In him there is rest for our souls. But we must also bear his yoke and be meek and lowly of heart like him in order to receive this rest for our souls (Mt 11:29). His yoke is his teaching. It is humbly carrying our cross, and pouring out our life in sacrifice for others, offering ourselves as “a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:2). Those who live this way, according to the will of God, find rest for their souls (Mt 11:29), and find that his yoke is easy and his burden light (Mt 11:30). Jesus says today, “learn from me for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29)

This is the new way of Jesus Christ. Far from him, far from God, there is no rest for our souls. Only in God do we find this rest for our soul; and Jesus Christ was sent from God to give us this rest. When we believe in him, he redeems us from our tiredness of spirit, because he forgives us our sins, dying for them on the cross, to suffer their punishment, to allow us to go free, justified, and made righteous and resplendent before God. This is what gives relief and rest to our souls. Then we can live in the light (Jn 8:12), for his resurrection shines upon us. This is the means God sent into the world, so that our souls might find rest in him.

But in order not to lose this rest, we have to bear his yoke and walk in his way, in accordance with his will. How many are there who do not do this? They follow their own way, and continue living in rebellion against God’s will. They, therefore, do not know this rest of soul. The Lord says, “Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk in it… Hear, O earth; behold, I am bringing evil upon this people, the fruit of their devices, because they have not given heed to my words; and as for my law, they have rejected it” (Jer 6:16,19). But those who repent and return to Jesus Christ with faith will find rest.
“Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Mt 11:11 KJV).

The Kingdom of God comes after John the Baptist, and this Kingdom is infinitely greater than all that went before it, to the point that anyone in the Kingdom, even the least person, is greater than John, who was the greatest up until the coming of the Kingdom. Hence it is that “The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached” (Lk 16:16).

After John, begins the Messianic era, which Isaiah prophesies today, saying, “I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive; I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together” (Is 41:18-19). He also prophesies, saying about these Messianic times: “Behold I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert…for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people” (Is 43:19,20).

We are now living in the Messianic era, prophesied today by Isaiah, and announced today by Jesus Christ. The blessings of the Messianic era are so great that even the least person living in those times as a member of the Kingdom is greater than John, the greatest of those born of women! In this era, God gives us to drink of the water of life. This water is the divine life in us, gained for us by the Messiah in his incarnation, sacrificial death on the cross, and resurrection into glory. In the Savior, we have this water of life, rivers of living water in us (Jn 7:37-39) through the merits of the death of Christ on the cross, and through the illumination of his resurrection, which fills us with light. Zechariah prophesies this Messianic era, saying, “On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness” (Zech 13:1).

This is the new life which we now celebrate, the forgiveness of our sins and the complete removal of our guilt through the merits of Christ on the cross, channeled to us through our faith and through the sacraments. It is a new life of happiness and liberty of spirit in the Lord. It is the Lord giving us waters in the desert and rivers in the wilderness.

Let us, therefore, “thresh the mountains” and “make the hills like chaff,” while we “rejoice in the Lord” and “glory” “in the Holy One of Israel” (Is 41:15,16). This is our life and ministry, to combat the forces of the Devil, and extend the Kingdom of God in the world.
Our Relationship with God Perfumes and Beautifies Us

Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, December 12
Rev 11:19a; 12:1-6a,10ab; Jdt 13; Lc 1:26-38

“Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all powders of the merchant?” (Ct 3:6 KJV).

Today we honor the Blessed Virgin Mary, who appeared to the Indian Juan Diego in 1531 on the hill of Tepeyac, Mexico; and we honor her today under the title of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

The Virgin Mary is always an inspiration for us because of her beauty and purity, which was a special gift conceded to her as the mother of the only Son of God. She is a model for us to imitate in her nuptial relationship with God, whom she loved with all her heart. We too are to love God with all our heart (Mk 12:30) and in a nuptial way; and if we do, we too will be beautified and made resplendent by God.

It is our faith in Jesus Christ, Mary’s son, which justifies us and clothes us with divine glory. Then, as we are sanctified, we continue to grow in our love for God, loving him with all our heart, with an undivided heart. Thus do we become lights in the world for others (Phil 2:15; Mt 5:14-16), as the Virgin Mary is for us, beautified by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, cleansed by his death on the cross, and illumined by his resurrection. We are made, in short, a new creation in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:17).

The Song of Songs has often traditionally been interpreted in terms of the nuptial love between God and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Mary is “the litter of Solomon,” carrying the King of the Universe, now passing through the desert (Ct 3:6). The desert is the place par excellence of the encounter with God, where the Virgin Mary goes to be alone with him; and now she “cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all powders of the merchant” (Ct 3:6 KJV). Her loving encounter with God in the desert has filled her with the odor of sanctify, “perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the powders of the merchant” (Ct 3:6). When we see her, we say, “Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?” (Ct 8:5 KJV).

It is her encounter with God in contemplation that perfumes her. Even her clothing is filled with the scent of her mountain hideaways, where she takes refuge in silence and solitude to contemplate the beauty of her Lord, until even he says, “the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon” (Ct 4:11) with its cedars, cypresses and pine forests. Her lover himself is full of sweet fragrance, and comes to her in her mountain hideaway “like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices” (Ct 8:14). Her lover’s “cheeks are like beds of spices, yielding fragrance. His lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh” (Ct 5:13).

Such is God for the Virgin Mary; and such can he be for us if we give him a chance to visit us in contemplation, leaving his fragrance behind in our hearts after his visits. So does he want to conquer our soul and perfume and illumine it from within, making his dwelling within our heart (Jn 14:23), if only we would give him the chance.
“And the disciples asked him, Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come? He replied, Elijah does come, and he is to restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not know him” (Mt 17:10-12).

The prophet Malachi prophesied that before the day of the Lord, Elijah would return to the earth to restore all things (Mal 4:5); and today Jesus says that Elijah has already come (Mt 17:12); and the disciples understood that he spoke of John the Baptist (Mt 17:13). Jesus has already said that “all the prophets and the law prophesied until John; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come” (Mt 11:13-14).

John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets. He fulfills the role of Elijah. His task is to restore all things. This is the role of a prophet. It is to be a light in the darkness. So were both Elijah and John. The description of Elijah in the first reading is also the description of the life and ministry of John. “Then the prophet Elijah arose like a fire,” says Sirach, “and his word burned like a torch” (Sir 48:1). Concerning John, Jesus said, “He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light” (Jn 5:35).

This is the role of a prophet. Through his way of living and through his sermons and preaching, he illumines the people of God, he warns them, points out their errors, and calls them to conversion, that they may abandon their false ways, be reconciled with God, and thus find interior peace, and peace with others too.

Advent is a time of prayer and preparation, a time for the restoration of all things (Mt 17:11). To benefit from the salvation of Jesus Christ, we first have to repent, abandon our evil and false ways, turn to the Lord, and be reconciled with our brethren. Advent is the time for this reconciliation and peace. If we reconcile ourselves with God by means of the forgiveness of Jesus Christ through the merits of his death on the cross, then we will have a new peace in our heart, and will be able to reconcile ourselves also with our brethren.

Malachi and Sirach prophesy that when Elijah returns, he will reconcile the fathers to the children (Mal 4:5; Sir 48:10). This was the ministry of John, as the angel Gabriel announced to John’s father Zechariah, saying, “he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Lk 1:17). This is peace on earth, reconciliation among men.

We should reconcile ourselves with God through Jesus Christ during Advent, and follow the example of John, being lights and prophets for the rest, as were Elijah and John.
“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord” (Jn 1:23).

We are now approaching the celebration of the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. This is a time of eager expectation. John the Baptist continues to be our guide for the preparation for this feast of salvation, light, and splendor.

God comes to the earth in Jesus Christ and illumines it with his glory. He unites his elect with God. He first of all unites us to God in himself, being both God and man. Being God in his Person and nature, he was born in Bethlehem with a human nature also. God and man are united in him, and our connection with him unites us to God. We are connected with him through our common human nature. If we have faith in him, his divinity flows into us by way of the link of our common humanity. And by his death on the cross, he saves us from our sins, paying, by means of his death, our debt for us. And through his resurrection, he lives now as our illumination, so that we walk in the light (Jn 8:12).

We should also always—but especially during Advent—be preparing ourselves for our ultimate encounter with the Lord in his final coming with all his saints in great light. Through the salvation which God gives us in Christ, we should be growing every day in holiness, unto the day of Jesus Christ. St. Paul says today, “May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 5:23).

Now, during Advent, we have great joy in preparing ourselves for the Lord’s coming, to be “blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thess 3:13). We do this through our faith in Christ who justifies us. He washes us from our sins, and relieves us from our guilt, removing it completely, and giving us a new joy in the Holy Spirit. We should, therefore, rejoice at this time of preparation for his coming, for we live now by our faith in Jesus Christ. “Rejoice always,” says St. Paul today (1 Thess 5:16). And he also says, “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, Rejoice!” (Phil 4:4 Entrance Antiphon), and again he says, “Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord” (Phil 3:1).

But we also prepare ourselves to be blameless at the coming of the Lord by obeying his will and living faithfully as he directs us to live for his glory. We are to fulfill our vocation, our service in this world, living as he wants us to live. John the Baptist shows us what we are to do: “Make straight the way of the Lord” (Jn 1:23), he says. We make straight his way in our life by our love for others, by our service to them, and by our way of life.

We are to live for God, and love him with all our heart, with an undivided heart. St. John the Baptist certainly had an undivided heart in his love for the Lord, living in the desert, dressed in camel’s skins, and eating locusts and wild honey (Mk 1:6). He renounced everything of this world to live in a cave in the desert with God.

How many have followed his example? Monks are his successors par excellence, living a life of prayer and fasting in the desert, far from the entertainments, diversions,
and pleasures of this world, to live only for God with all their heart, with an undivided heart, reserved only for him in all things, in every aspect of their life. In this way they live in the light, and always rejoice in the Lord. They live in the desert because they want to live in the light, in the splendor of Jesus Christ. Thus they prepare in the desert the way of the Lord. They make straight his paths, removing all obstacles. They live for him alone. They live in the salvation of Jesus Christ, growing daily in their love, that they might be blameless “at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thess 3:13).

If we prepare ourselves like this with John the Baptist in the desert, we will live in the happiness of the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to “bring good tidings to the afflicted…to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound” (Is 6:1).

It is his salvation which is the source of our joy in the Lord; and if we fall into an imperfection, he will justify us anew through the merits of his death on the cross when we invoke them with faith, especially in the sacrament of reconciliation, which he left us for this purpose (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23).

Hence, “Rejoice always,” says St. Paul today (1 Thess 5:16). There is reason for our rejoicing in Christ as we prepare for his coming, for to be justified by faith in Christ is to be wrapped in a robe of righteousness, the splendid righteousness of Christ himself, as Isaiah prophesies today, saying, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garment 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” (Is 61:10).

PEACE ON EARTH

Monday, 3rd Week of Advent
Num 24:2-7,15-17; Ps 24; Mt 21:23-27

“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not nigh; a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel” (Num 24:17).

Today we hear this beautiful prophecy of the famous pagan prophet Balaam when he first saw Israel from a great height as she was encamped on the plains of Moab before entering into the promised land. He sees that in the future a star shall come forth out of Jacob. Its fulfillment is Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. He is the Star of Jacob, the King of the Universe, both God and man, who would rule over a universal heavenly Kingdom of peace that would renew the face of the earth and rejuvenate the human race. He is the Star of Jacob.

We live in the days of the fulfillment of this prophecy. We live with this Star who is the Prince of Peace. He is called “Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Is 9:6 KJV). He is the world’s Savior, the Star of Jacob. He came to unite us to God and make us holy and blameless before him, forgiving our errors and sins, putting us in peace with God, and with ourselves. He puts into us a heavenly joy and peace.
In this new condition, we can finally also love our neighbor and live in peace and love with him, for we are finally at peace with ourselves, and with God. Being at peace with God enables us to be at peace with ourselves and with others. This King, this Star of Jacob, brings this peace with God to the earth, and therefore renews the face of the earth. In him we are a new creation, freed at last from the darkness of sin and guilt, and living in the liberty of the children of God. Thus we live in happiness with God, and can radiate upon others the blessings of his love.

Israel was his preparation. This was her great vocation, to produce the Star of Jacob, who would radiate upon the world a new light. “How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel!” prophesied Balaam. “Like valleys that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the Lord has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters. A hero arises from their stock, he reigns over countless peoples. His king is greater than Agag, and his kingdom held in honor” (Num 24:5-7; LXX for vs. 7).

Through our faith in this King, we are born again to be new men, living already in the nearness of the Lord, in his presence in our hearts, and his Kingdom has been exalted over all the earth.

During Advent we prepare to live more profoundly and more faithfully in this universal and eternal Kingdom of peace. Through this King, this Star of Jacob, the peace of heaven enters into the heart of man, and transforms him. This then is the nucleus of peace on earth, which the birth of Christ brings to the world. Let us live, therefore, in this peace, being obedient unto him.

DAYS OF GREAT ABUNDANCE ARE COMING

December 17
Gen 49:2,8-10; Ps 71; Mt 1:1-17

“The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples” (Gen 49:10).

The Messiah shall be born of the tribe of Judah, according to this Messianic prophecy from the book of Genesis. This is the blessing which Jacob gave to his sons. He says that Judah shall be the leader of his brothers: “Judah, your brothers shall praise you…your father’s sons shall bow down before you” (Gen 49:8). But the Messianic part is when at last he shall come to whom the scepter and the ruler’s staff belong, for when he comes, the peoples will render him homage.

In his days, there will be such abundance on the earth that he will tie his donkey to a vine without concern that it may eat the grapes, for the fruit of the vine will then be so abundant that it will not be missed; and wine will be so plentiful that he will wash his garments in it. His eyes, furthermore, will be red for the great quantity of wine he will drink, and his teeth white from abundance of milk (Gen 49:11-12).

He to whom the homage of the peoples is rendered, “Binding his donkey to the vine and his donkey’s colt to the choice vine…washes his garments in wine and his vesture in
the blood of grapes; his eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk” (Gen 49:11-12).

It is this Messiah and these days of abundance that we are now celebrating as we pay homage to him to whom the obedience of the peoples is due (Gen 49:10). And furthermore, “In his days, righteousness shall flourish and abundance of peace till the moon is no more. He shall have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Ps 71:7-8 responsorial psalm).

We now live in these days of Messianic fulfillment with Jesus Christ, our Messiah. His elect in all parts of the world render him homage. We can even wash our garments in wine, so abundant are the blessings of these times for the elect who believe in him. The righteousness of Christ flourishes and clothes us with splendor, for “In his days righteousness shall flourish and abundance of peace” (Ps 71:7).

Ours is, therefore, a time of gladness. We are, at last, redeemed, made new, a new creation, new men, washed of our sins, with our guilt taken away through the merits of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, whereby he himself suffered our punishment to free us from punishment and give us of his abundance.

In his days, he will eat “butter and honey” (Is 7:15), rich food. And so it is in our days of fulfillment and grace. Ours are the days “when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13).

THE FRUIT OF THE LAND SHALL BE OUR PRIDE AND GLORY

December 18
Jer 23:5-8; Ps 71; Mt 1:18-24

“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:20-21).

This is the beginning of a new era, the time of the Messiah, the Messianic era, with the only Son of God living on earth as a man for the remission of the sins of his people, of his elect. “…he will save his people from their sins,” says the angel to Joseph, explaining that he was begotten by the Holy Spirit, and would be “Emmanuel,” “God-with-us” (Mt 1:23; Is 7:14). He is “the righteous Branch,” prophesied by Jeremiah today, saying, “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jer 23:5). And he will be called “The Lord is our righteousness” (Jer 23:6).

Jesus Christ is the righteous Branch, the just Shoot, who will bring the righteousness of Yahweh to the earth, who will be our righteousness, the source of our justification and salvation. Those days will be days of beauty and splendor when he comes, as Isaiah prophesied, saying, “In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel” (Is 4:2). Those days will be days of splendor and light for those who receive the righteous Branch.
He is Emmanuel, God-with-us, the only Son of God, and son of Mary, born in Bethlehem. It is he who “will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21), “for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him there is plenteous redemption. And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities” (Ps 129:7-8 KJV). In fact, “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The salvation of God is in him. He is the means through which God saves us, makes us resplendent, and fills the earth with his glory; and in his days, the fruit of the earth will be a beautiful adornment for his elect who are saved by him (Is 4:2).

We now live in these days of splendor and light with the righteous Branch who justifies us, forgiving our sins by washing us in his blood, poured out as the price for our redemption, paying for us the ransom for our liberation from the slavery of sin. In him we live in the splendor of God and enjoy the beauty of the fruits of the earth (Is 4:2). We only need to receive him, accepting our justification by faith from his hands. He will then beautify us with his own splendor and glory.

LET US BE IMITATORS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

December 19
Judges 13:2-7,24-25; Ps 70; Lk 1:5-25

“…he shall drink no wine nor strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Lk 1:15-17).

We see here the ministry of John the Baptist. He came “to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Lk 1:17). He had a special mission to “turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God” (Lk 1:16). He did this “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Lk 1:17), with which he went before the Lord to prepare his way in the desert. When, at last, Christ came, the people were prepared through the preaching and example of John. He was filled with the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:15), who gave him the inspiration and power to do this, and he lived an ascetical life his whole life long, never drinking wine nor strong drink (Lk 1:15), for he was “a nazirite to God from birth to the day of his death” (Judges 13:7).

We can imitate John the Baptist. He is an example for us. He went before the Lord to prepare his way and to cause many to believe in Christ.

Jesus Christ is the salvation of the world. We begin to live a new and illumined life in him. He frees us from the burden of our guilt, because on the cross he paid our debt, due to us for our sins. He suffered our punishment in our place, thus freeing us from punishment, and erasing our guilt. He washed and redeemed us by his blood, poured out in sacrifice, and he rose from the dead to be our illumination. If we have saving faith, we are illumined by him, and live and walk in his light. This is the splendor which he was born into this world to bring us.
We can then go before him, as did John, to cause many to be truly converted to him, so that they too might have a new life, liberated and illumined by him. Thus we can imitate John, going before Christ in the spirit and power of Elijah, led by the Holy Spirit, which fills us.

We do this by our sermons and writings, by our conversations and way of living, and by our love for our brethren and neighbors. We should always try to spread the good news of this new life in Jesus Christ, so that many might accept him with saving faith as their Savior, and thus be justified by him through faith, made resplendent before God, and rejoiced by the Holy Spirit, to henceforth live a new life in him.

Let us, therefore, prepare the way of the Lord with John, and invite many to believe in him.

WE NOW LIVE IN THE EVERLASTING KINGDOM OF THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

December 20
Is 7:10-14; Ps 23; Lk 1:26-38

“...and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:32-33).

These are the words of the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, announcing that she would be the mother of the longed-for Messiah, and that this Messiah would be the only Son of God, begotten not by man, but by the Holy Spirit, and that he would be given the throne of his father David, for he was of the house and lineage of David, and that he would reign forever over the house of Jacob—but also over all nations (Mt 25:31-32; Dan 7:14). Of this Kingdom, says Gabriel, “there will be no end” (Lk 1:33).

This Messiah, which Mary will conceive, is “God-with-us,” the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah which we heard today, namely, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Is 7:14). Concerning this son of David, Nathan prophesied to David, saying, “I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam 7:13). And Daniel prophesied about him, saying, “his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Dan 7:14). Isaiah also said, of him, “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore” (Is 9:7). And this child of Mary will be called: “Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Is 9:6 KJV).

If we have faith in Christ, if he is our Savior, who has saved us by his death on the cross from our sins and from the pain of our guilt, then we now live in this everlasting Kingdom, and we live with Immanuel, “God-with-us” (Is 7:14). In Jesus Christ, God is with us; we live with him, and he lives within us, illumining us and giving us his peace, a peace not of this world.

Problems which we are unable to solve, he solves for us, filling us with forgiveness, peace, and certitude concerning his will for us. He, moreover, makes us resplendent,
clothing us in his own righteousness when we believe in him; and he illumines us with the new light of his resurrection. He died to pay off our debt, and he rose for our justification (Rom 4:25). He definitively expiated our sins on the cross (Rom 3:25), and he now invites us to walk in his light (Jn 8:12; 1 Peter 2:9; Eph 5:8), that we might be sons of the day and of the light (1 Thess 5:5).

We rejoice, therefore, to live in this everlasting Kingdom of heavenly peace, this Kingdom of the Sun of righteousness upon the earth (Mal 4:2).

HE WILL REIGN OVER THE HOUSE OF JACOB FOREVER

4th Sunday of Advent
2 Sam 7:1-5,8-12,14,16; Ps 88; Rom 16:25-27; Lk 1:26-38

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of David for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:31-33).

This is the glorious Kingdom that was prophesied. At last it has come. The King of this everlasting and universal Kingdom of heavenly peace on earth is the son of Mary, who is the only Son of God, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:35; Mt 1:18,20). This King will reign forever, and will be called “Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Is 9:6 KJV). And “Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever” (Is 9:7 KJV).

We now live in this Kingdom of universal peace if we live in Jesus Christ. He brings heavenly peace to our hearts. He remakes us. He rejuvenates the human race, making it a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Rev 21:5). He makes us new men (Eph 4:22-24) by forgiving our sins and filling us with the splendor of his own righteousness. He clothes us with glory as with a robe of righteousness (Is 61:10). We are clothed with Jesus Christ himself (Gal 3:27; Rom 13:14) through our faith in him.

What depresses us are our sins and our sense of guilt. But he came to free us from that, transferring us from darkness into his own admirable light (Col 1:12-13; 1 Peter 2:9; Eph 5:8), so that we might walk in the light (Jn 8:12).

This is something completely outside of our ability to do to ourselves. Only God can so remake us; and he does so through his Son Jesus Christ for his elect who believe in him, confessing their sins, and receiving his forgiveness through the merits of his death on the cross. Then his resurrection illumines us interiorly, making us resplendent before God with the splendor of Jesus Christ himself.

This King has a Kingdom that lasts forever. The angel Gabriel told Mary his mother that God would give to him “the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:32-33). He is still reigning in the world, even unto now. He is the Prince of Peace. As the prophets prophesied, the dynasty and the throne of David are forever. The Prince of Peace brings
peace with God to all who take refuge in him in faith, especially making use of the sacrament of reconciliation, which he left us for this purpose (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23).

By means of him and of his Kingdom, heavenly peace extends to all parts of the world. This peace is a light in the heart (2 Cor 4:6), an interior illumination which rejoices the spirit, and enables us to live in heavenly peace and love with our neighbor. The peace of this Kingdom is without end or limit (Is 6:7) because this Kingdom has no boundaries. It is a universal and everlasting Kingdom of peace and salvation over the whole earth, for the renewal of the human race.

Today God promises David that he will establish the Kingdom of his descendent forever. He says, “I will establish his kingdom” (2 Sam 7:12). He also says, “your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7:16).

This is the everlasting Kingdom that we now celebrate in the birth of Christ. He has a throne that is established forever, in a Kingdom of heavenly peace over the whole earth, in which we can now live through our faith in him. It is a Kingdom in which he cleanses us and rejoices us, renews us, and fills us with his own peace.

Christ is the promised descendent, prefigured by Solomon. He is an everlasting King, not just an everlasting dynasty. Thus the fulfillment is greater than the prophecy that David would have an everlasting dynasty and an everlasting throne. In Jesus Christ, the dynasty and throne of David are everlasting; and Christ fulfills the prophecy of the psalmist, who prophesied, “I will establish your descendents forever, and build your throne for all generations” (Ps 88:4). And “I will establish his line forever and his throne as the days of the heavens” (Ps 88:29). In Jesus Christ this is fulfilled.

Christ came for the renewal of the earth and of the human race. His elect live with him in peace and light in his Kingdom through their faith and obedience to his will. He forgives them and justifies them through the merits of his death on the cross, so that they might live in the freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:21) in this Kingdom without boundaries.

“And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Dan 7:14).

THE POOR IN SPIRIT ARE THE ONES WHO REJOICE IN THE LORD

December 22
1 Sam 1:24-28; 1 Sam 2; Lk 1:46-56

“...my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden...he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty” (Lk 1:47-48,52-53).

Mary rejoices in the Lord. St. Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, Rejoice!” (Phil 4:4), and “Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord” (Phil 3:1), and “Rejoice always” (1 Thess 5:16). A Christian rejoices in the Lord because he is saved,
forgiven, has his guilt removed by Christ, is clothed by him in a splendid robe of righteousness (Is 61:10), and is justified by his faith in Christ, not by his own merits.

Salvation has already begun in the body and spirit of the Virgin Mary. She has already conceived the Savior of the world through the power of the Holy Spirit; and therefore she says, “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Lk 1:47). True human happiness is in the Lord. The joy of our heart is in Jesus Christ, in his saving work within us. Even Hannah, the mother of Samuel, knew something of this happiness in the Lord, and said, “my heart exults in the Lord… I rejoice in thy salvation” (1 Sam 2:1).

These final days of Advent are days of happiness in the Lord, a time when we rejoice in the Lord, for “The Lord is near” (Phil 4:5). During these days, we live in the nearness of the Lord. We live in moderation and silence in order to be recollected, focused on the Lord, and centered in prayer, meditation, contemplation, and spiritual joy. We prepare our heart during these days for the Lord’s coming. We want him to come into our heart in a special way during the Christmas season, the celebration of his coming into the world. We want to receive him well, with much love, in a heart well prepared by meditation and contemplation.

Mary also says today that the Lord has “exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty” (Lk 1:52-53). Here we see that the poor (Lk 6:20) and the poor in spirit (Mt 5:3) are blessed, are especially blessed by God, and that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). God loves the poor, the poor in spirit, the humble, the anawim, those who have lost everything for God, those who have renounced everything in the world for the love of God. He has filled them with “good things” (Lk 1:53), that is, those who love him with all their heart and all their soul (Mk 12:30), leaving everything else for love of him, to reserve their heart for him alone, a heart undivided in its love for him in every aspect of their life.

God fills and rejoices a heart which has renounced all the pleasures of this world for love of him, to have a heart reserved for him alone. The anawim, the poor in spirit, are the truly happy ones who always rejoice in the Lord.

A KING OF AN EVERLASTING KINGDOM
OF LIGHT AND PEACE OVER ALL THE EARTH

December 24, Mass in the Morning
2 Sam 7:1-5,8-12,14,16; Ps 88; Lk 1:67-79

“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom... And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7:12,16).

This is the great prophecy that the Messiah will come from the lineage of David. He “shall come forth from your body,” said the prophet Nathan to David, “and I will establish his kingdom” (2 Sam 7:12). In this offspring of David, David’s kingdom will be affirmed forever and his “throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7:16).
Jesus Christ has fulfilled this prophecy. After two thousand years he is still reigning on the throne of David. In Christ we have an eternal King and an everlasting Kingdom, a Kingdom of light and peace over all earth. Whoever believes in him will be a member of this everlasting Kingdom of peace and light.

In Jesus Christ salvation has come into the world, and the glory of the Lord has risen over Israel. “…behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you” (Is 60:2). We see the glory of the Lord in the coming of Jesus Christ to his people. He came to forgive our sins and imperfections by his death on the cross; and he came to rise in the splendor of God to be our illumination.

In Jesus Christ “the dawn from on high shall visit us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Lk 1:78-79), prophesied the father of John the Baptist. Jesus Christ is the dawn, the light from on high, the “Sun of justice” (Mal 4:2), the “Star of Jacob” (Num 24:17), who shines in our darkness. He lives in an eternally glorious Kingdom, and reigns upon a throne established forever. He is for us “a reflection of eternal light” (Wisdom 7:26).

If we repent and leave our sins behind, and if we confess them, he will redeem us and free us from our guilt, which depresses and saddens us; and instead of sadness, he will give us his illumination, which will shine in our heart (2 Cor 4:6), so that we might walk with him in the light of his resurrection.

Jesus Christ is the answer and solution to all our problems. He is our Savior, the Savior of the world. He reigns over the house of Jacob, and sits upon the throne of David forever, to shine upon us; and he wants us to live and remain in the splendor of his love by obeying him (Jn 15, 9-10).

**UNTO YOU IS BORN THIS DAY IN THE CITY OF DAVID A SAVIOR, WHO IS CHRIST THE LORD**

Christmas, Mass at Midnight, December 25
Is 9:1-3,5-7; Ps 95; Titus 2:11-14; Lk 2:1-14

“And it came to pass, that when they were there, her days were accomplished, that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (Lk 2:6-7).

Today is born the Savior of the world, who came to give “himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). He “gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2:6). He “gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Gal 1:4). Indeed, he “loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). Truly, “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:2). He came into the world “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28).
Today we receive our Savior. The angel said to the shepherds, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:10-11). This Savior came to reconcile us with God by his death on the cross for our redemption, thus expiating our sins and saving us from guilt through his blood poured out for us, in place of our punishment.

Today the divine person of the eternal Son clothes himself in human flesh to divinize it, first of all in himself, then later in all who believe in him and imitate him. This is for our transformation, illumination, and divinization.

This child brought light into the world, and those who walked in darkness have now seen a great light (Is 9:2). He illumines the world, being its Savior, its Redeemer, its divinizer. Our contact with him in faith transforms us into a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Thus did he bring peace on earth, and we sing in thanksgiving with the angels: “Glory to God in the highest!” (Lk 2:14).

We also see how he came. He came in poverty, in evangelical poverty, which he himself would promote in his preaching. He was born outdoors, on a trip, not in an inn, was laid in a manger, and visited by poor shepherds. His life was only for God. He lived only for God, his Father. It was a life of radical renunciation of the world, a life which he would recommend to his followers (Lk 18:29; 6:20; Mt 19:21; 6:24; 13:44-46), and he himself was an example of it, even in his birth. Thus he taught us through his example and by his preaching to do the same, that “renouncing ungodliness and worldly desires, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present age, looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” at his second coming (Titus 2:11-13).

PERSECUTION IS ESSENTIAL TO THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Feast of St. Stephen, the First Martyr, December 26
Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-60; Ps 30; Mt 10:17-22

“And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Mt 10:22).

Today, so close to Christmas, we meditate on the persecution and martyrdom of Christians, as we celebrate the feast of St. Stephen, the first martyr. The Church does not let us forget the reality of persecution, even in the midst of our celebration of the birth of our Savior.

It is essential to remember this, because the very fact of our salvation is the cause of our persecution, since it makes us different from and separates us from the rest of the world around us. Christ redeemed us from the burden and sadness of our sins and guilt through the merits of his death on the cross, which are channeled to us through our faith and through the sacraments, thus making us a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), new men (Eph 4:22-24), living in the freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:21), rejoicing in our new life and new intimacy with God, with the Holy Spirit rejoicing our spirit (Jn 7:37-39), and the risen Christ illumining our heart (2 Cor 4:6). Since all of this separates us from and
makes us different from the world around us (Jn 15:19; 17:14,16), the world no longer understands or tolerates us, and so we are persecuted.

Persecution is, therefore, an essential part of the life of all true Christians; and it is important that we know, accept, and live this well. It is even a reason for joy for a Christian to suffer persecution from the world for the sake of his faith. “Blessed are you,” says Jesus, “when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy” (Lk 6:22-23).

When we are brought before the authorities for the sake of our faith, Jesus says that “This will be a time for you to bear testimony” (Lk 21:13). And “I will give you a mouth and wisdom,” he continues, “which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict” (Lk 21:15). St. Stephen is an example of this today, for “they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke” (Acts 6:10).

We are to live and proclaim our faith without fear of those who oppose us. We have to live like new men, recreated by Jesus Christ, cleansed of sin and guilt by the merits of his death on the cross. As new men, we are to renounce worldliness and many worldly conventions, and, rather, live a new life in Christ, a risen life, seeking the things that are above, and no longer those that are below (Col 3:1-2); and we are to accept with thanksgiving all the vituperation and persecution which will come our way from the world because of our new way of life in Christ. This will be our testimony that we give to the world.

WE ARE DIVINIZED BY HIS INCARNATION,
AND ILLUMINATED AND JUSTIFIED BY HIS RESURRECTION

Feast of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist, December 27
1 Jn 1:1-4; Ps 96; Jn 20:2-9

“Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed” (Jn 20:8).

We continue celebrating Christmas, but today, on this feast of St John, we meditate on the resurrection of the Lord. What began in the incarnation of the Son of God as a man here on earth is completed in his death on the cross for our sins, and in his resurrection into final glory for our illumination and justification (Rom 4:25), for in his resurrection he clothes us in the splendid robe of his own righteousness (Is 61:10). We are clothed in Christ himself (Gal 3:27; Rom 13:14) when we believe in him for our salvation. Hence we are clothed with the illumination of his resurrection, to walk in the light (Jn 8:12).

Although the birth of Christ is separated by thirty-three years from his resurrection, we who believe in him for our salvation experience these two mysteries together at the same time. He saves us by becoming incarnate, by dying on the cross for our sins, and by rising so that we might live in his light, with him shining in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6), if we believe in him and offer ourselves completely to him.

The mysteries of the incarnation and birth of Christ are as luminous as that of his resurrection. Christ came into the world for the true enlightenment of man, to be a light
in our heart, that we might no longer walk in darkness, but in his wonderful light (Jn 8:12; 12:46; 1 Peter 2:9). He was born for this. He came into the world for this. He clothed himself in our flesh for this, to illumine and transform it with his divinity.

Our flesh is our human nature, already transformed by his incarnation if we believe in him and imitate him. His incarnation puts the light of his divinity into our humanity, into our human nature, into our human flesh, to illumine it from within, first of all in Jesus Christ’s own humanity, and then in the humanity of all who believe in him. His incarnation therefore, is our illumination if we believe in him and follow his will, for then we have his light in our flesh, in our nature. In this way he divinizes us.

He, furthermore, died on the cross to pay our debt for our sins, suffering for us their punishment, to free us from punishment. And when he rose from the dead, we also rise with him (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12; 3:1-2; Eph 2:6) henceforth to seek the things that are above, where Christ is, and no longer those of the earth (Col 3:1-2).

COME LET US ADORE HIM, THE CHRIST OF THE LORD

Feast of the Holy Family
Sir 3:3-7,14-17; Ps 127; Col. 3:12-21; Lk 2:22-40

“And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger” (Lk 2:16 Entrance Antiphon).

Today we celebrate the mystery of the Holy Family in Bethlehem at the birth of “the Christ of the Lord” (Lk 2:26). It is a mystery of light in darkness. The light of the world is born today in a cave in Bethlehem; and this is announced to certain poor shepherds, who come to see him and adore him. Simeon says today that he is “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel” (Lk 2:32). This light is for all nations. It is the glory of Israel. It has been revealed for all who would believe. Therefore, “Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Is 52:9-10).

This birth of the Savior is the consolation of Israel. It is the fulfillment of her history, which prepared for this moment, in which the Christ of the Lord would be revealed. Israel has completed her task when Christ was born. Now he is “a light to the nations” (Is 42:6), to bring God’s salvation to the ends of the earth (Is 49:6). And today “all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (Ps 97:3).

We rejoice in this salvation; we bask in its splendor. In this child, the Lord has brought near his salvation and righteousness to his people, and to all who believe in him. Truly. “I bring near my deliverance, it is not far off,” says the Lord. “and my salvation will not tarry; I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory” (Is 46:13).

Today is the day of salvation. We receive today with Simeon him who is “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel” (Lk 2:32). We now live in this light. It illumines our hearts (2 Cor 4:6). It is the glory of the Lord, the light of “the Christ of the Lord” (Lk 2:26). He unites us to God, he redeems us from our sins, he
illuminates us, he gives us a new life, and makes us a new creation. He puts true joy into
our hearts, and shines in them (2 Cor 4:6). In him, we walk in the light, and no longer in
the darkness, and are freed from the pain of our guilt.

All this came from his death for our sins on the cross. And today we welcome our
Redeemer, coming into the world. We say today with Simeon, “Lord, now lettest thou
thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation
which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the
Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel” (Lk 2:29-32). To Simeon “it had been
revealed...by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s
Christ” (Lk 2:26); and now he sees him. His eyes behold him who illuminates the world,
him who shines in the heart of all who believe in him. His eyes see the light of the world,
the salvation which all the ends of the earth have seen (Ps 97:3). After lowering the
mountains and raising the valleys, this is the glory of the Lord which is revealed, and
which all flesh shall see together (Is 40:5).

The mystery of the Holy Family in Bethlehem is the mystery of contemplation in the
dark of the night. We too, during these holy days, contemplate the glory of God
illumining the world from the manger. We contemplate his glory in the night. He
illuminates us with his glory, and shines upon us with his splendor. And we are
transformed by our contemplation of his glory, which “we all with unveiled face behold
(2 Cor 8:18). It is the glory of the Lord in the darkness, it is interior splendor in the heart
(2 Cor 4:6), it is the joy in the Lord of a heart freed from sin and the pain of guilt by the
sacrifice of this child on the cross, taking our part, and suffering our punishment for our
sins, so that we might walk in his light.

Today Mary and Joseph contemplate their child, the Son of God, the salvation of the
world, “the Christ of the Lord” (Lk 2:26); and they contemplate him at night, in the
solitude of the cave of Bethlehem, where no one knows them, and where they are,
therefore, alone, alone with “the Christ of the Lord” (Lk 2:26), who is “Christ the Lord”
(Lk 2:10).

We join them during these holy days of Christmas to contemplate the light of the
gentiles, the glory of Israel (Lk 2:32), who in the light who saves us and transforms us,
recreating us in the very image of the Son of God through the power of the Holy Spirit (2
Cor 3:18). We bask in his splendor, and radiate his glory wherever we go.
Come, therefore, let us adore him!

IN NO ONE ELSE IS THERE SALVATION
Fifth Day in the Octave of Christmas, December 29
1 Jn 2:3-11; Ps 95; Lk 2:22-35

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes
have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for
revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel” (Lk 2:29-32).

Simeon now sees the Savior of the world, “the Christ of the Lord” (Lk 2:26); and it
had been revealed to him that he should not see death before he had seen this Savior (Lk
now his eyes see him whom “many prophets and kings desired to see…and did not see” (Lk 10:24). He is the desired of all Israel through all her history. He is light for the Gentiles, and glory for his people. In him is our salvation.

Only he can save us from what saddens us, which are our sins and our imperfections. We cannot do this for ourselves. He is the only Savior sent into the world by God to do this for us. This would be a great revelation to the Gentiles, who were not prepared for this.

The light of God will shine upon them through this child in the manger; and it shines upon us Gentile Christians now. In fact, this salvation has been prepared “in the presence of all peoples” (Lk 2:31). There is no other Savior for them, for “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

After removing from us, through his cross, the pain and sadness of our guilt, caused by our sins and imperfections, he puts his glory into our heart, the gift of his resurrection, which shines upon our spirit with its new light. It is the merits of his death on the cross, which are channeled to us through our faith and through the sacrament of reconciliation, which he himself left us for this purpose (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23), which remove from us the depression of our guilt; and it is the light of his resurrection which puts glory into our heart.

We are, therefore, completely renewed by this Savior. He, and he alone, takes away our sickness, and gives us his glory instead. He makes our life resplendent and new. Only he can do this for us, because he is the only Savior whom God has sent into the world (Acts 4:12).

He, furthermore, remains with us, and guards and protects us. And if we fall into another imperfection, which saddens us, he is always with us to cure us again when we confess our sin or imperfection and invoke anew the merits of his death on the cross, whereby he suffered our punishment for us. He then shines upon us once again the glory of his resurrection.

WE HAVE SEEN THE GLORY OF THE ETERNAL WORD MADE FLESH AMONG US

Seventh Day in the Octave of Christmas, December 31
1 Jn 2:18-21; Ps 95; Jn 1:1-18

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14).

This is the mystery we are now celebrating, the presence of God among us in his only Son, his eternal Word, made flesh in the world so that we might rejoice in his presence, beholding and contemplating his glory. In him we see the only Son of the Father, incarnate on earth, our Emmanuel, God-with-us (Is 7:14; Mt 1:23). He came that we might contemplate his glory, for he is full of splendor, “full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14,17). Beholding and contemplating him in his glory, we ourselves are transformed in his image by the work of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18), and so does he shine in our hearts,
illuminating us from within by his glory (2 Cor 4:6). Since the day of his birth, we live in his glory, we live with God on earth, if we have faith, and do his will.

We eat his flesh and drink his blood, which contain his divinity, his divine Person, which enters into us and transforms, illumines, and divinizes us. We live in his fullness, and receive of his abundance. “And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace” (Jn 1:16). He is “full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:17), which we receive through him. He wants us to live in his splendor—for this reason he came into the world, and continues dwelling among us as Emmanuel. He wants us to remain in his love (Jn 15:9), which is filled with splendor; and we remain in it by doing his will. So did he tell us, saying, “remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love” (Jn 15:9-10). And if we disobey him in anything, we have to confess it, and then return again to live in his splendor.

He is in our midst now. His sacraments are the extension in the world and in history of his physical presence in the manger in Bethlehem. By means of them we can continue to rejoice in his presence, and remain in the splendor of the only Son of God dwelling among us for our illumination and divinization.

But it is above all his death on the cross and his resurrection which transform, purify, and illumine us, for he suffered in place of us for our sins, to redeem us from this punishment and guilt, so that we might walk clean and pure, illumined by the new light of his resurrection. This light will illumine us if we take refuge in him in faith and invoke the merits of his death on the cross, especially in the sacrament of penance. In this way he wants us to remain in his splendid light.

HE WHO SAVED US WAS BORN IN EVANGELICAL POVERTY

January 1, Octave of Christmas, Solemnity of the Mother of God
Num 6:22-27; Ps 66; Gal 4:4-7; Lk 2:16-21

“And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger” (Lk 2:16).

Today is the Octave Day of Christmas, a day on which we celebrate the mystery of Christmas again, and we do so from the perspective of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. St. Luke tells us today that “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2:19). It is from her recollections that the evangelists learned the personal details of the birth of Christ.

Today we see the Savior of the world laid in a manger, born in a cave for animals, outside, on a trip, in the city of David, and announced to poor shepherds by an angel as “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:11). And at his birth, the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Lk 2:14 KJV).

Christ the Lord, the Savior born this day in the city of David, is the only Son of God, sent into the world by the Father to satisfy divine justice and shield us from the wrath of God for our sins by dying on the cross, suffering the death penalty due to our sins in place of us, so that God might thus be reconciled to us. Such great love has God for man that he sent his only Son to free him from his sins through the death of his own
Son on the cross, for only thus could God truly forgive our sins, being himself a just God. Former sins were only postponed, not truly expiated until Christ came. A just retribution had to be paid, and sin punished, in order to be expiated and properly forgiven. Jesus, the Savior of the world, did this for us. He paid the penalty for us, suffering himself the punishment due for our sins, so that we might go free from sin, free from punishment, free from guilt, to enjoy the freedom of the sons of God (Rom 8:21).

Christ came into the world, was born in a cave in Bethlehem, and was laid in a manger for this purpose. Our freedom from sin and guilt is in this child in the manger. The light of God, that shines in our heart, comes from this child in the manger.

Christ’s suffering on the cross for our salvation began at his birth, that is, in the way in which he was born. He came in poverty, in the evangelical poverty that he himself would recommend; and he did so as an expression of his total dedication to his Father in every aspect of his life. He did not come for the pleasures of this world, but rather to serve his Father as his only Lord (Mt 6:24), renouncing all else, even a bed to sleep in and a house to be born in; and in this he is a model for us to imitate. We also are invited to divest ourselves of all else, in order to love and serve God with an undivided heart, with all our heart (Mk 12:30), and find our joy and pleasure only in God, to the degree that this is possible. We meditate today, therefore, on the evangelical poverty of Christ’s birth, and we imitate it in our life, serving only God with all our heart.

WE CONTINUE PREPARING IN THE DESERT THE WAY OF THE LORD

January 2
1 Jn 2:22-28; Ps 97; Jn 1:18-28

“They said to him then, Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said” (Jn 1:22-23).

This is the vocation of John the Baptist, to be a voice crying in the desert: Make straight the way of the Lord. He prepared the people for the coming of the Lord, preparing in the desert the way of the Lord. This is our vocation too. We too should live in the desert, far from the world and its worldliness, preparing ourselves and the people for the coming of the Lord. There must be preparation for his coming in order to receive him well and enjoy his blessings. This preparation includes ourselves, together with all whom we can reach with our word and the example of our life, so that we may all be able to live a new life in the “Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:11).

Christ gives us a new kind of life, a life reconciled with God, a life at peace with God, which is something we cannot give to ourselves, for we are lost in sin, and are far from God. Only the Son of God, our “Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:11), can free us from our sins, from our distance from God, and from his wrath for our sins.

Even once we have received Jesus Christ, we still need to go into the desert with John the Baptist to prepare the way of the Lord. Our own life needs more purification from the worldliness of the world, and our people also need this same purification; and we can help them with our preaching and our example.
Christ came so that we might have peace, so that we might be freed from sin and from the depression caused by guilt. If we take refuge in Christ in faith, especially in the sacrament of penance (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23), he will cleanse us ever anew, and restore us to his “peace which surpasses all understanding” (Phil 4:7).

There is nothing better in this world than living in peace with God, which Jesus Christ brings us through his death on the cross, where he suffered our penalty, and thus freed us from the suffering caused by our sins. This gift of peace, which only comes through Jesus Christ, changes our life, and will also change the world, transforming it into the Kingdom of God (Rev 11:15).

We, moreover, are to be the agents of this transformation by being transformed ourselves, and by going into the desert with John to prepare the way of the Lord. Our preaching of Christ and the example of our life will transform the world, so that it may live in the peace of Christ, of which the angels sang at his birth, saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Lk 2:14 KJV).

LET US BE BLAMELESS IN HOLINESS
BEFORE GOD OUR FATHER

January 3
1 Jn 2:29 – 3:6; Ps 97; Jn 1:29-34

“The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29).

Jesus Christ was born into the world for our transformation into a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), made adopted sons of God (1 Jn 3:1), with our sins taken away (Jn 1:29; 1 Jn 3:5). He came that we might become like him. This will ultimately take place “when he appears,” for then “we shall be like him” (1 Jn 3:2). For this reason we should now be in a process of purification, allowing him to purify us, and purifying ourselves, for he is pure, and we are to be like him. “…when he appears we shall be like him… And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 Jn 3:2-3).

St. John tells us today that we should arrive at the point that we no longer sin, for “No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him” (1 Jn 3:6). I believe that we will always have imperfections, and that we will always fall into imperfections, but St. John tells us that we should arrive at the point that we no longer sin! This is, therefore, a true purification and transformation which Christ is working in us!

Christ is the “Lamb of God” (Jn 1:29), who died in sacrifice, charged with our sins, suffering our death penalty for our sins in place of us, to free us from spiritual death, so that we might live for God, clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ as in a splendid robe (Is 61:10). St. John says today, “You know that he appeared to take away sins” (1 Jn 3:5). This he did on the cross, suffering our punishment for us, and in our place, to free us from punishment and guilt. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).
Christ is like the paschal lamb, whose blood saved the Israelites from the plague of the death of the first born (Ex 12:13). Through the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God, we are saved from the punishment of death for our sins. He died in our place, so that we would not have to die. “...you were ransomed...with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1:19). Christ is our paschal lamb, and “Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7).

Let us, therefore, put our whole heart into this transformation process, purifying ourselves, for he is pure (1 Jn 3:3), leaving behind sin and a worldly life, to live now a new kind of life in Christ, a risen life, for we have already been raised with him (Col 3:1). “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:1-2). And this is because “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil 3:20). Let us, therefore, purify ourselves, for he is pure (1 Jn 3:3).

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD WHICH SHINES IN OUR HEART

Epiphany
Is 60:1-6; Ps 71: Eph 3:2-3,5-6; Mt 2:1-12

“...and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh” (Mt 2:11).

The light of Christ has come into the world, and it shines from Bethlehem, from the stable, from the illuminated cave of his birth, from the manger in which was laid the Savior of the world. He is “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” and the glory of his people Israel (Lk 2:32).

Isaiah prophesied this day of glory which illumines the world. “…your light has come,” he says, “and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” (Is 60:1). He who was born in Bethlehem is the light of every heart which believes in him, the splendor which fills us and transforms us when we take refuge in him, the new illumination of the human race, the fulfillment of all our desires. The Magi came from the East to see this light, to prostrate themselves before it, and to offer him their gifts. They, indeed, fulfill the prophecy that “nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (Is 60:3).

This is the light that draws every heart that sincerely seeks the truth. It draws all the elect. Even pagan kings, or Magi from the East, are attracted to this splendor. “…kings,” shall come “to the brightness of your rising,” says Isaiah (Is 60:3). They want to come and prostrate themselves in this stable before the child in the manger, for they recognize in him the light and the splendor of God, which they need and seek. In this, they are our representatives.

In our darkness, we seek the light which God sent into the world in Jesus Christ. And when the Magi arrived they found what they were looking for, the light of the world. Thus they fulfilled the ancient prophecies: “Kings shall be your foster fathers… With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you” (Is 49:23). “Before him they that
dwell in the desert shall bow down... Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him” (Ps 71:9,11).

When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, they wanted to prostrate themselves before the new-born king and worship him. Upon arriving, they said, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him” (Mt 2:2). Even Herod the king realizes that what he himself ought to do is go and prostrate himself before him. Hence he spoke correctly—though not sincerely—when he said to the Magi, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and prostrate myself before him” (Mt 2:8). And, at last, following the star, the Magi arrived where the child was, “and falling down, they worshiped him” (Mt 2:11).

If we do the same, we will find what the Magi found, the glory of God shining in the heart, the splendor which illumines us, because this child is God and man, united in one single being, and he enters into us when we receive him with faith, and in the eucharist, which is the extension of his human body, which contains his divinity. He thus enters within us as our interior illumination.

Moreover, he died on the cross to remove from us the darkness, pain, and depression caused by our guilt, for having sinned. If only we have faith in him, he will bear for us the divine curse due to us because of our sins, being himself made a curse for us and in our place, suffering our punishment for us, for “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree—” (Gal 3:13). We receive this forgiveness, this relief from our sins, especially in the sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23).

This is why we offer to Christ the gift of ourselves, knowing that he is man’s salvation. Thus we fulfill what the Magi did in offering him their gifts, even as the prophets foretold, saying, “the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praises of the Lord” (Is 60:5-6). This was fulfilled in the visit of the Magi with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Mt 2:11). And the psalmist also prophesied, saying, “The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts...and to him shall be given of the gold of Sheba” (Ps 71:10,15 KJV).

Today we go with the Magi to prostrate ourselves before the Savior of the world, the light of the world, the glory of the Lord, for we recognize that only in him will we find what we most need, the forgiveness of our sins and the glory of God in the heart. If we prostrate ourselves before him in worship with faith and if we approach him through his sacraments, we will find what we are seeking.
“Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned” (Mt 4:12-16).

Jesus Christ fulfills this prophecy of Isaiah. He left Judea and Nazareth, and began his ministry in the region of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. And Isaiah says, “In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea…Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” (Is 9:1-2).

This light, says Isaiah, will shine in the region of Galilee. Although Jesus was born in Bethlehem and was baptized in Judea, his light began to shine in his ministry in Galilee. This is the people that saw a great light shining upon them, for they saw Jesus preaching the Kingdom of God, curing the sick, casting out evil spirits, and forgiving sins.

We are that people. We too have heard his preaching, and have experienced his power to cure our ills, to forgive our sins, and to fill us with his light, peace, and joy. It is he who shines in our hearts, illumining them (2 Cor 4:6), that we might walk with him in his light (Jn 8:12; 1 Peter 2:9). Those who do not believe in him know nothing of this. They do not experience this splendor. But those who do believe in him know that Christ has recreated them, making them new creatures (2 Cor 5:17). They know that he has forgiven their sins and filled them with his light, making them adopted sons of God.

In Christ, our light has come, and Isaiah tells us, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” (Is 60:1). If we obey him, we remain in his light, which is his will for us (Jn 15:9-10). St. John tells us today that “All who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them” (1 Jn 3:24). If we disobey him in something, we must repent, confess, and leave our sin; and experiencing his forgiveness and radiance within us, begin again to rejoice in his great light. This light is the joy of our heart. Christ wants us to remain in it. It is the love which he himself shares with his Father in the Holy Spirit (Jn 17:23,26; 15:9). It was for this reason that he was born into the world, namely, to bring us this great light, this love of the Trinity, so that his light might shine upon us and within us.
“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Lk 4:18-19; Is 61:1-2).

This is the scripture that St. Luke tells us Jesus read in the synagogue in Nazareth; and upon finishing the reading, he said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21).

Jesus Christ came from the Father, where he lived eternally with him in ineffable splendor, in an embrace of divine love, united to the Father by the Holy Spirit. He was sent into the world to bring us something of this splendor, to introduce us into his light. He became incarnate, clothing himself in our flesh, to illumine it from within with his divinity. His divine Person illumined his own flesh, divinizing it, and at the same time illumined and divinized all human flesh, if only we believe in him and imitate his life.

Jesus Christ came that we might walk with him in the light. He said, “I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (Jn 12:46). He does not want us to remain in darkness, but rather to walk in his light. For this he was anointed by the Spirit as our Messiah. He came to proclaim “recovery of sight to the blind” (Lk 4:18), that they might see his light. He came to announce freedom to those in captivity, that they might be freed from oppression. Hence he said, “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). He really wants us to walk in this light, for we are those who have seen a great light (Is 9:1). We are to be born anew in him (Jn 3:3) to live in his light, with his light shining in our heart (2 Cor 4:6). This is the good news he brings to the poor.

It is the poor in spirit who will see and live in this light. They are the ones, the poor of Yahweh, the anawim, who receive and accept with open hearts this good news. They are the ones who are illumined and divinized by Jesus Christ. This is because they are those who have lost everything else, and only remain with God as their only happiness and joy. Jesus invites us all to be those poor of the Lord, to leave all else to obtain the buried treasure and the pearl of great price, which can be obtained only by renouncing all else (Mt 13:44-46). His invitation to the rich young man is for all of us, so that we might live only for him, leaving behind the pleasures of this world (Mt 19:21).

Only in this way can we live in his light, purifying our heart of other lights, that it be illumined only by him. By leaving all for the love of God, we can enjoy this inner light which the Messiah came into the world to give us. He wants us to have an undivided heart in our love for him. He wants us to love him with all our heart (Mk 12:30). To be illumined and divinized, we are to sacrifice all else for love of him.
“He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life” (1 Jn 5:12).

Jesus Christ came into the world that we might live through him. He brings us the life of God, which shines in our hearts when we believe in the Son (2 Cor 4:6). St. John tells us that “God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him” (1 Jn 4:9). Divine life, which illumines and transforms us, comes to us from the Son when we believe in him; and we live through him when we draw from his fullness, for “from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (Jn 1:16).

Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, died on the cross for us, not only to give us an example of dedication and forgiveness, forgiving his murderers, and not only to tell us that God is loving and forgiving, but far more than that, he died to save us from sin and alienation from God through his blood poured out on the cross.

God so loved us that he sent his only Son (Rom 8:32) to suffer our just punishment for our sins in our place, so that we, by believing in him, might go free from this just punishment, for in the death of Christ it has already been paid up in full. Thus God can, in all justice, forgive our sins, and in a supremely merciful way at that, suffering himself, in the Person of his only Son, our just punishment.

Upon rising from the dead and ascending to the right hand of the Father, he poured forth from the Father the Holy Spirit upon all who believe in the Son. And this Spirit becomes “rivers of living water” flowing within our stomach (Jn 7:38), rejoicing us. It is a “spring of water” within us, “welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14), filling us with joy in the Lord. Moreover, Christ himself, now risen and glorified, shines within our hearts (2 Cor 4:6), illuminating us from within and rejoicing our spirit.

Thus do we have life through the Son if we believe in him. It is the Son himself who puts this new life into us. Our obedience to God’s will then helps us to grow in it, and keeps us from falling out of it. It is a life freed from sin and guilt, a life in which we rejoice in Christ, and draw from his fullness (Jn 1:16), seeing his glory (Jn 1:14; 2 Cor 3:18), with the Spirit rejoicing us, and the new light of the resurrection of Christ illuminating us.
“We know that anyone born of God does not sin, but he who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him” (1 Jn 5:18).

Jesus Christ renews and transforms us. Through faith in him, he justifies us, that is, he makes us righteous, full of the very righteousness of Jesus Christ himself, and this does not come from our merits or works, but only from the merits of Jesus Christ in his death for us on the cross (Gal 2:16). In Christ we are remade in the image of God (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18), made a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), and new men (Eph 4:22-24). We have been given a new life, a risen life in the risen Christ (Col 3:1-2). We have even ascended with Christ (Col 2:12; Eph 2:6) and now live in him not only a risen, but also an ascended life, seeking the things that are above, where Christ is seated in glory at the right hand of God, and no longer the things of earth (Col 3:1-2).

A Christian, therefore, is a new man, who has renounced sin; and St. John tells us today that he no longer sins. He says, “anyone born of God does not sin” (1 Jn 5:18), and “No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him” (1 Jn 3:6). In other words, Christians who voluntarily continue sinning gravely are not really Christians, or at least are not mature Christians. If someone voluntarily continues sinning gravely, he has neither seen nor known Christ (1 Jn 3:6). A true and mature Christian, on the other hand, “keeps his word” and “in him truly love for God has been perfected” (1 Jn 2:5). This implies that in those who do not keep his word, the love of God has not “been perfected” (1 Jn 2:5), and so they are not really Christians, or at least not mature ones.

St. John continues saying, “No one born of God commits sin; for God’s seed remains in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God” (1 Jn 3:9). That is, God’s seed in us protects us so that we do not do things that are seriously wrong, or commit grave sins. St. Paul too tells us, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11).

Although a true and mature Christian does not commit grave sins, for he is protected by God, it seems that he does continue committing and falling into imperfections, even daily, especially involuntary ones, through inadvertence. But even these he should try hard to avoid, confessing them when he becomes aware that he has once again fallen into a new imperfection. Thus will he grow in the life of perfection, to which Christ calls us (Mt 5:48; 19:21).

Christ came to save us from sin. In him we have seen a great light (Is 9:1), and have all received from his fullness (Jn 1:16). He shines in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6), and transforms us into his own image through the power of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29). And he wants us to be new men (Eph 4:22-24), walking with him in his light (Jn 8:12), having renounced sin (Rom 6:11).
I HAVE PUT MY SPIRIT UPON HIM,
AND HE WILL BRING FORTH RIGHTEOUSNESS TO THE NATIONS

The Baptism of the Lord
Is 42:1-4,6-7; Ps 28; Acts 10:34-38; Mk 1:7-11

“And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased” (Mk 1:10-11).

This is the baptism of the Lord, and the voice of his Father identifies him as his beloved Son and his servant in whom he is well pleased (Is 42:1). He is thus the fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah about the suffering servant of the Lord who would redeem his people from their sins (Is 53). Jesus is, therefore, the one who is anointed by the Holy Spirit to “bring forth righteousness to the nations” (Is 42:1). “…he will faithfully bring forth righteousness. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established righteousness in the earth” (Is 42:3-4). He will be given as “a light to the nations” (Is 42:6). He will come “to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Is 42:7). Jesus is the one sent to bring us joy and light.

Jesus acknowledged himself to be this servant when the messengers of John the Baptist asked him, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another? And Jesus answered them, Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them” (Mt 11:3-5).

Jesus again acknowledges himself to be this servant, anointed by the Spirit to free his people, when in the synagogue in Nazareth he said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). And the scripture was, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Lk 4:18; Is 61:1).

And now at his baptism we see this servant of the Lord, this beloved Son of God, upon whom the Holy Spirit descended “like a dove” (Mk 1:11). He brings righteousness to the earth. He justifies those who believe in him. Through the offering of himself on the cross, he frees us from our sins and clothes us in glory, as in a splendid robe of righteousness (Is 61:10). He came to free us from the burden of our sin and guilt, that we might live in the freedom and happiness of the children of God (Rom 8:21). He is our light, for he has been given as “a light to the nations” (Is 42:6), to bring us out of the dungeon of our alienation from God.

On the cross Christ suffered in our place and for our sake the suffering that we would have had to undergo for our sins had he not suffered it for us. He suffered our penalty for us in order that we would not have to suffer it, and so could thus be freed from the punishment which is guilt. He is, therefore, our light and our happiness, freeing us from the darkness of sin and guilt.

Jesus Christ is the suffering servant of the Lord, who “carried our sorrows” (Is 53:4) on the cross. In God’s justice, it was necessary that sinners suffer a just penalty for their
sins. And God so loved us that he sent his own Son to suffer this punishment for us in order to free us from it and to thereby be able to justly forgive our sins (Rom 8:32).

Hence Jesus is the suffering servant prophesied by Isaiah, who “has borne our griefs” (Is 53:4); and “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:6). “...he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people” (Is 53:8). “…he makes himself an offering for sin” (Is 53:10). “…he shall bear their iniquities” (Is 53:11). “…he poured out his soul to death...yet he bore the sin of many” (Is 53:12). “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed” (Is 53:5).

In Jesus Christ we have the forgiveness of our sins when we invoke in faith the merits of his death on the cross. “To him all the prophets bear witness,” said St. Peter, “that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). And Peter and John also said, “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31).

What better news is there than this? that in Jesus Christ, through faith in him, our sins are definitively expiated and forgiven, and that we are now free from the heavy, painful, and depressing burden of guilt. We are set free from this punishment to enjoy the freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:21). Christ has freed us. He has clothed us in his own righteousness, as in a splendid mantle (Is 61:10); and we have clothed ourselves in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:27; Rom 13:14).

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). In other words, God made Jesus Christ “to be sin” by laying upon him our sins, in order to expiate them through his death on the cross, so that we might be clothed in his righteousness as in a splendid mantle (Is 61:10).

So will Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the suffering servant of the Lord, “bring forth righteousness to the nations” (Is 42:1).

WE SHOULD WALK IN THE SPLENDOR OF JESUS CHRIST

Monday, 1st Week of the Year
Heb 1:1-6; Ps 96; Mk 1:14-20

“...in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...who being the brightness of his glory, and the stamp of his substance...” (Heb 1:2,3).

Jesus Christ is the splendor of his Father, come into the world to illumine us, to fill us with light, so that we might walk in his light, if we continue to do his will (Jn 8:12).

In him, those who walked in darkness have seen a great light (Is 9:1). In the coming of Christ into the world, we have seen this light, which shines upon us, and within us (2 Cor 4:4,6). In him, our light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon us, and is seen over us (Is 60:1-2), for he has been given “as a light to the nations,” that God’s salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Is 49:6).

The letter to the Hebrews today tells us that the Son is the splendor of the glory of God (Heb 1:3). God is light (1 Jn 1:5), and his only Son is the brightness of his glory, sent to illumine our hearts (2 Cor 4:6). He is “a pure emanation of the glory of the
Almighty...a reflection of eternal light” (Wisdom 7:25-26). “God is light and in him is no darkness at all” (1 Jn 1:5). And we, when we are reborn in Christ, “are all sons of light and sons of the day” (1 Thess 5:5). He is our “sun which shall no longer go down” (Is 60:20), for “The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light” (Is 60:19-20).

In being illumined by Jesus Christ by being born again in him to become a new creation (2 Cor 5:17) and new men (Eph 4:22-24), you should be “blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil 2:15). In contemplating Christ’s splendor, we are transformed “from glory to glory” in his image by the power of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18). Only unbelievers do not know and experience this illumination, says St. Paul, for “the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4). We should, therefore, live and walk in this light, receiving it through Christ, and obeying his will.

Christ saves us from the wrath of God due to our sins (Rom 1:18) by his death in sacrifice for us on the cross, whereby he suffered our just punishment in our place, thus satisfying divine justice and absorbing the wrath of God. God, in his love for us, sent his only Son to do this for us (Rom 8:32), so that through faith and the sacraments we might walk in his splendor.

WE HAVE VICTORY OVER THE FEAR OF DEATH

Wednesday, 1st Week of the Year
Heb 2:14-18; Ps 104; Mk 1:29-39

“Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17).

Jesus Christ came into the world to propitiate for our sins through his death on the cross, and thus by his death free us from death and from the devil, “who has the power of death” (Heb 2:14). In other words, Christ came “that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage” (Heb 2:15).

Death is the result of sin (Wisdom 1:13; 2:23-24), and so in expiating sin, Christ destroyed the power of death, the power of the devil. He propitiated for and expiated sin by means of his own death. St. John says, “if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn 2:12). And he also says that God “sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10).

Christ propitiated and placated the wrath of God against our sins by suffering this wrath and this abandonment by God on the cross, thus absorbing and propitiating all the
divine wrath against the sin of man. This is why Jesus “began to be troubled and deeply distressed” in Gethsemane, saying, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death” (Mk 14:33-34 NKJV). This was because he knew that he was going to suffer not only death, but also the wrath of God and separation from him. This is why he cried out his cry of dereliction from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me” (Mt 27:46).

It is more than death that he suffered. He also suffered separation from God, abandonment by him, and his wrath in suffering the just punishment for all the sins of the world. He suffered the curse of God on the cross, “having become a curse for us” (Gal 3:13), when “For our sake he [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). That is, God laid upon him all our sins, to expiate them and propitiate for them with his death, so that we might be made righteous with the righteousness of Christ himself.

Having propitiated for our sins, Christ saved us from the fear of death as a separation from God and as the punishment of eternal fire. Now, therefore, for those who believe in him, death has lost its power. “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death where is thy sting? The sting of death is sin” (1 Cor 15:54-56). With Christ’s death intervening, we are freed from the fear of death. We have victory over death and over the fear of death through the death of Jesus Christ our Lord.

**LET US BE TRULY NEW PEOPLE IN JESUS CHRIST**

Thursday, 1st Week of the Year

Heb 3:7-14; Ps 94; Mk 1:40-45

“Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion” (Heb 3:7-8 NKJV; Ps 94:7-8).

This verse is a warning for those who are weakening in their life of faith and are beginning to turn back and leave behind their new way of life that they now have in Jesus Christ. They are tempted to go back to their former way of living that they had before knowing Christ, and so once again be just like the rest of their Jewish neighbors. This new life in Christ had become very difficult for them, and so now they want to relax and just blend in, being like everyone else, living like the rest of the world, being no longer a separate and distinct people, special and different from the rest of their fellow citizens.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews, therefore, compares them to the generation of the Israelites in the desert, saying that they are like that generation that hardened their hearts after having seen the wonders of the Exodus and the splitting of the Red Sea. He quotes Psalm 94 against them, saying that they resemble that generation, who “always go astray in their hearts [and] have not known my ways” (Heb 3:10). The result was that God was “angry with that generation” (Heb 3:10 NKJV).

This warning has meaning for people of God in Jesus Christ in every generation. We are new people. We have been born again in Jesus Christ to be a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15), for the risen Christ makes “all things new” (Rev 21:5). He justifies us through our faith, suffering for us our punishment for our sins in his death on the cross,
so that we might be free from the punishment of guilt, in order that we might rejoice in the freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:21), clothed with the righteousness of Christ as in a splendid robe (Is 61:10), putting on Jesus Christ (Gal 3:27; Rom 13:14) to live a new and risen life in him (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12; 3:1-2), seeking now the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father, and no longer those of the earth (Col 3:1-2).

Having given us all these blessings, Christ wants us to serve but one Lord only (Mt 6:24), Christ alone, with all our heart (Mk 12:30), with an undivided heart, renouncing other lords and the pleasures of this world (Lk 21:34; 8:14; Mt 13:44-46; 19:21; 6:19-21; Lc 6:24), which divide our heart and make us sluggish, weighed down, and forgetful of God. He wants us rather to be a people distinct from the world around us with its styles and fashions.

But how often have you refused to do this, and have rather done as the Israelites who “mingled with the nations and learned to do as they did [and] served their idols, which became a snare to them” (Ps 105:35-36). If this is what you have done, now is the time to repent and be renewed, and “if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion” (Heb 3:7-8).

Let us therefore be truly new people, different from the world around us, and witnesses for the rest to our new life in Christ.

FREEDOM FROM SIN IS FREEDOM FROM SADNESS

Friday, 1st Week of the Year
Heb 4:1-5,11; Ps 77; Mk 2:1-12

“My son, your sins are forgiven... But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—he said to the paralytic—I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home” (Mk 2:5,10).

Our greatest problem is sin and the resultant guilt, which is a pain in our heart which diminishes or destroys our peace and joy of spirit. We can endure illness with happiness, but who can endure depression of spirit for having sinned? as Proverbs says, “A man’s spirit will endure sickness; but a broken spirit who can bear?” (Prov 18:14). And nothing breaks the spirit as much as guilt for having sinned. Even the saints, who had long since stopped sinning, still suffered this pain of spirit on account of their imperfections. The saints were very sensitive, and suffered anguish over the imperfections into which they continued to fall, as we see in the saintly desert fathers who wept over their sins.

For this purpose Jesus Christ was sent into the world, namely, to be our Savior from sin and guilt—and this includes imperfections—so that we might at last have a jubilant spirit before God. He forgives our sins by offering himself to God as a gift, giving “himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:2).

Jesus Christ is the means used by God to be able to forgive our sins, and at the same time uphold his holy law, which requires that sins be justly punished. St. Paul, after saying that “a man is justified by faith apart from works of law” (Rom 3:28), concludes by saying, “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary,
we uphold the law” (Rom 3:31). St. Paul’s teaching upholds the law in the sense that the law demands the death of the sinner, and our sins are laid upon Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13; Is 53:6), who died on the cross to fulfill the law of God for us and in our place. Christ’s death is then the death required by the law for our sins.

Thus the law is upheld and fulfilled in the death of Christ on the cross, and we are forgiven, without the law of God being violated. In this way Christ is the means used by God to justly forgive our sins according to the requirements of the law, upholding at the same time both his justice and his mercy. Yet even his justice is merciful, for it is God himself, in the Person of his Son, who suffers the just punishment required by the law for our sins. And we, through Jesus Christ, are assured that our sins, which depress our spirit, are forgiven, especially when we use the sacrament of reconciliation, which he gave us for this purpose (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23). Thus we are freed from sin, to rejoice in the freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:21).

LEAVING ALL TO FIND ALL

Memorial of St. Anthony, Abbot, January 17
Eph 6:10-13,18; Ps 15; Mt 19:16-26

“If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me” (Mt 19:21).

Today we celebrate the memorial of St. Anthony, Abbot, who in the third century left all his possessions and fled to the desert of Egypt, to live a solitary life of prayer and fasting, far from the pleasures and distractions of the world. He is the father of monks, who try to do the same, renouncing the world and its pleasures to live in the desert or within a monastic enclosure a life only for God, with all their heart, with an undivided heart, that is, not divided by the pleasures of the world and of the table. They even renounce secular dress, the dress of this age, as a sign of their renunciation of the false values of the world in its endless quest for pleasure.

In the best times of their history, as, for example, in the days of St. Bernard, monks ate simply, without meat or seasoning except salt, without fried food, and even without white bread and other delicacies, such as pies, cakes, etc., in order to derive all their pleasure only from God, to the degree that this is possible. And they lived within enclosures, not wandering about in the world, taking pleasure trips, and they clothed themselves in habits, expressive of their total dedication to God. They sought purity of heart, a heart more and more freed from the temptations, distractions, noise, and attractions of the world; and thus did they live a contemplative life, as the context for their contemplative praying.

And today Jesus invites the rich young man to leave all for the Kingdom of God, in order to dedicate himself completely to Jesus Christ and his Kingdom, leaving all else for the love of him. He says, “it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” and “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 19:23,24). And so it is, for a rich man is normally surrounded
by the pleasures of this world and the delicacies and seasonings of the table, which divide
the heart from a pure and undivided love of God.

Jesus says that those who leave all will receive “a hundred times more” (Mt 19:29),
for they live only for the Lord (Mt 6:24), and have but one treasure only, namely, Christ
who is in heaven (Mt 6:19-21). They are the blessed poor of the Lord, the anawim (Mt
5:3; Lk 6:20), those who only have God in this world, those who are hungry now, but
who will later be satisfied (Lk 6:21), while the rich are those who have already had their
consolation in this life (Lk 6:24). They are full now, but will hunger later (Lk 6:25). The
rich are like the rich glutton, “who feasted sumptuously every day” (Lk 16:19), and who
in hell heard the words, “Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good
things” (Lk 16:25).

The poor who have left all for Christ are those who lose their life for the sake of
Christ, and who will therefore find it, while the rich, in their self-indulgence, are those
who have tried to save their life in a worldly way, and have lost it (Mt 16:25). Jesus
invites us to leave all in order to find the buried treasure and the pearl of great price (Mt
13:44-46), for, as he said, “whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be
my disciple” (Lk 14:33).

THE LAMB OF GOD WHO TAKES AWAY THE SINS OF THE WORLD

2nd Sunday of the Year
1 Sam 3:3-10,19; Ps 39; 1 Cor 6:13-15,17-20; Jn 1:35-42

“The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples; and he looked at Jesus
as he walked, and said, Behold, the Lamb of God!” (Jn 1:35).

The previous day John the Baptist had said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes
away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). For this reason, Jesus Christ came into the world, to
take away our sins, so that we might be free from this sadness, which is the depression
and pain in the heart caused by guilt, so that we might walk free in the glorious freedom
of the children of God (Rom 8:21). The guilt which depresses us comes from the just
wrath of God against our sins (Rom 1:18). God is at the same time both just and loving.
In his justice he hates and punishes all sin.

We see the wrath of God everywhere in the Bible. It is right in Eden. God said to
Adam in Eden that on the day he eat from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good
and evil, he would die (Gen 2:17), that is, experience God’s wrath for his sin of
obedience. Death, separation from God, and alienation from him was the punishment
for Original Sin. We see the wrath of God in the flood in the days of Noah, and in the
destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Psalms speak of the wrath of God: “put away
thy indignation toward us! Wilt thou be angry with us forever? Wilt thou prolong thy
anger to all generations?” (Ps 84:4-5). Jesus speaks of the rich man who feasted sumptuously every day, who was now in hell (Lk 16:19-31), and of the final judgment
and of those who would go into eternal fire (Mt 25:41,46), and of the Son of Man who
would come in his glory “and then repay each one according to his works” (Mt 16:27).
St. Paul also speaks of “the wrath of God…against all ungodliness and wickedness”
Therefore when we sin, we feel this wrath of God burning our heart and our conscience.

But Jesus Christ is the redeemer whom God sent to us, without sparing him (He “did not spare his own Son” – Rom 8:32), to redeem and save us from his own righteous and holy wrath. God’s wrath is not like ours, a state of being out of control; but rather is an attribute of the just God, who hates all evil and sin, and who punishes all sin in his perfect justice. Christ was, therefore, sent from God to redeem us from this wrath by suffering it himself on the cross for us so that God could remain just. In the death of Christ on the cross, the righteous and just wrath of God spent itself completely, for Christ suffered it in our place, being made a curse for us in being hung from a tree (Gal 3:13). He bore our curse for us, for our sins, instead of us, and thus showed that God was indeed just, even though he forgives our sins (Rom 3:26).

St. Paul says that God passed over, in his patience, the sins committed in the Old Testament without punishing them adequately, and hence he seemed to be a loving and merciful God, but not a just one. But he did this, according to St. Paul, because he had his eye on the future expiation of Jesus Christ on the cross, in which he would pay the just debt and suffer the just penalty for all sin, both past and future. St. Paul says that God “put forward” Jesus Christ “as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s justice, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins” (Rom 3:25). In other words, the death of Christ on the cross publically shows the justice of God, that is, that God is himself just in that he does indeed justly punish all sin. God did this, says St. Paul, “to prove at the present time that himself is just” (Rom 3:26).

So we see in the cross that God is not only loving, but that he is also perfectly just, demanding a just punishment for all sin. In Christ’s death, God’s justice is maintained, shown, proven, and satisfied, in that God counts Christ’s death on the cross as just punishment for all sin. But at the same time, and by the very same act of Jesus Christ his only Son on the cross, God also shows that he is supremely loving and merciful, because he accepts the death of his own Son as adequate and sufficient punishment for all the sins of the world, for those past as well as future. All sins have been adequately and justly punished in the death of his Son on the cross.

The result is that we are definitively and justly forgiven if we believe in Christ and invoke his merits, particularly in the sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23). Thus this death of the Lamb of God in sacrifice does two things simultaneously, as St. Paul says. It manifests that God “himself is just, and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26). Thus Christ was “put to death for our trespasses, and raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25).

Christ therefore is the Lamb of sacrifice, “who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2:6). Hence God himself, in his love for us, saves us from his own righteous wrath against our sins by suffering himself, in the Person of his Son, our punishment, so that we might go free from punishment and from the suffering of guilt. Christ, therefore, was for us “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter” (Is 53:7). “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed…and the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:5-6).
We are now, therefore, new men, living in the light of his resurrection, made righteous with the very righteousness of Jesus Christ himself, “For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7).

FASTING

Monday, 2nd Week of the Year
Heb 5:1-10; Ps 109; Mk 2:18-22

“Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? And Jesus said to them, Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day” (Mk 2:18-20).

The time of the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ was a special and exceptional time in the history of salvation, and therefore his disciples did not fast during that time. But after his death and resurrection, his disciples did fast, as did those of John and those of the Pharisees. The Jews fasted twice a week (Lk 18:2), on Mondays and Thursdays, while Christians fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays (Didache 8:1).

The reason for fasting is to help us to have an undivided heart in our love of God. It is easy to divide our heart among the delights of this world and among the delicacies of the table, and so our interest, and love, and pleasure come from many sources, and not only from God, and so we do not love God with all our heart, with a heart without division, with a heart not divided between God on the one hand, and the delights of the world and of the table on the other hand.

Thus, for example, the desert fathers and monks during the best times of their history—as in the days of St. Bernard—fasted by always renouncing delicacies, seasoning except salt, and meat. Such abstinence is a form of fasting, and it does not harm one’s health. Thus, following this form, one can eat all, and as much quantity, as is necessary for health, but at the same time renounce the addition of delicacies and seasoning, which are only added for pleasure, and in this way one can focus himself better only on God with an undivided heart as one’s only source of pleasure, to the degree that this is possible. And so one’s pleasure in God normally increases.

Another form of fasting is to eliminate one or two meals daily, and thus, for example, eat only once a day, a practice which was common among the desert fathers and among monks. This too is a renunciation of pleasure, so that God alone be the only pleasure of our life. But this form of fasting also has the advantage of disposing us well physically for prayer, contemplation, and various spiritual exercises such as lectio divina and spiritual reading during the morning. This is so because if we eat only at midday, our digestion will be completed when we pray very early in the morning, and monks usually begin their morning prayer around 3:00 A.M. But if we eat in the evening (supper), we will still be weighed down with food at three in the morning; and if we eat again in the
morning (breakfast), we drop ourselves spiritually by eating just when we are at our best time for prayer, contemplation, and spiritual exercises.

YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER
ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK

Wednesday, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Week of the Year
Heb 7:1-3,15-17; Ps 109; Mk 3:1-6

“For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham…and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything” (Heb 7:1-2).

The letter to the Hebrews tells us that the priesthood of Melchizedek prefigured the priesthood of Jesus Christ in that it was not Levitical and in that it was superior to the Levitical priesthood. It was superior because Levi, in the loins of Abraham, gave tithes to Melchizedek and was blessed by Melchizedek, and “It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior” (Heb 7:7), and that the inferior gives tithes to the superior. The psalmist furthermore prophesies that the Messiah would not be a priest of the Levitical line, but “according to the order of Melchizedek” (Ps 109:4; Heb 7:17).

Hence we see that Jesus Christ is a priest, and an eternal priest, not like the Levitical priests that died. He is a priest of a line superior to that of Levi. And as a priest, his job is to offer sacrifice, and he offers but one single sacrifice for all time, the sacrifice of himself on the cross, to justify and sanctify us, “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb 10:14).

As a priest, Christ intercedes for us with the Father. St. Paul tells us that it is Jesus Christ “who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us” (Rom 8:34). And St. John says, “My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 Jn 2:1). And Hebrews says that Jesus Christ “is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25). Hebrews also says that “Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb 9:24). Christ, therefore, is our intercessor with the Father.

Christ intercedes for us with the Father by his once for all sacrifice of himself on the cross, whereby, taking our sins upon himself (2 Cor 5:21; Is 53:6), he propitiates and placates the righteous and holy wrath of God for our sins by himself suffering their just penalty as a substitute for us (Gal 3:13). Hence it is God himself in his great mercy, in the Person of his Son, who pays the penalty for our sins; and so both the divine justice and the divine mercy are maintained, and God is proved to be both just and merciful (Rom 3:26).

So we see the superiority of Christ’s priesthood compared to that of Levi. Rightly did the psalmist prophesy that the Messiah would have a new kind of priesthood and would be an eternal priest, when he said, “Thou art a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek” (Ps 109:4; Heb 7:17). Because of his once and for all sacrifice of himself, he ever makes intercession for us with the Father (Rom 8:34; 1 Jn 2:1; Heb 7:25; 9:24).
OUR PRIEST GIVES US TRUE FORGIVENESS

Thursday, 2nd Week of the Year
Heb 7:25 – 8:6; Ps 39; Mk 3:7-12

“...but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:24-25).

We now have this great high priest, Jesus Christ, “who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord” (Heb 8:1-2). He is now in heaven, the true sanctuary, where he is always interceding for us with the Father (Heb 7:25; 9:24; Rom 8:34; 1 Jn 2:1). He has a better priesthood than the Levitical priesthood, a better tabernacle (heaven), a better sacrifice (that of himself), offered once and forever, but a single time, and a better covenant, the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (Heb 8:8-12; Jer 31:31-34).

This priest’s sacrifice is truly effective, erasing our sins and guilt, and clothing us in his own righteousness, causing us to feel truly forgiven when the effects of his ministry are communicated to us through his sacrament (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23), through the hands of his earthly representatives, the priests of his Church.

This is of great importance, for as we grow spiritually we become ever more sensitive concerning the imperfections that we fall into without intending them. An indication of our spiritual growth is that smaller and smaller imperfections trouble us more and more, and wound our conscience, i.e. things which previously never bothered us. The solution is that in Christ, our high priest, we have a priest who offers sacrifice for the remission of our imperfections or sins, and his sacrifice is truly effective and gives us relief and great peace and happiness of spirit when its effects are channeled to us through the sacrament of reconciliation, which he established and left us for this purpose (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23).

Christ, our high priest, “has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb 9:26). Christ has “been offered once to bear the sins of many” (Heb 9:28). “…we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10). “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb 10:14).

Christ in his self-donation in love to his Father in sacrifice on the cross infinitely pleased the Father, gaining our redemption. At the same time he suffered for us our just punishment for our sins, thus freeing us from sin and guilt, for “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:6). He proved God to be just by suffering our just penalty for our sins (Rom 3:26). “…he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed” (Is 53:5). This is the great sacrifice of our high priest which brings us God's forgiveness for our sins.
“But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises” (Heb 8:6).

The author of the letter to the Hebrews is comparing the old covenant of the Jews with the new covenant of Jesus Christ, saying that the ministry of Jesus Christ is better, and that he has a better covenant, based on better promises. Jesus’ covenant is better because it is new, it is the new and better covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer 31:31-34). Hebrews says that “if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second” (Heb 8:7). And he adds, saying, “In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Heb 8:13).

The superiority of the new covenant consists in its interior form, as Jeremiah prophesied, quoted by Hebrews in these words: “I will establish a new covenant… I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach everyone his fellow or everyone his brother, saying, Know the Lord. For all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (Heb 8:8,10-11).

In the new covenant—our covenant—it will be clear that one is justified through faith in the Redeemer who has already come, and not through his own works; that is, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, who suffered our penalty for our sins, thus freeing us and forgiving us through our faith in him. Then by his resurrection we are illumined and rejoiced, and his Spirit is poured out into our hearts together with the love of God (Rom 5:5).

In the new covenant we are furthermore individually and personally guided by the plenitude of the Holy Spirit, and not only by general external laws, to know the will of God for each one of us. On that day—which is our day—Isaiah prophesied, “your eyes will see your Teacher. And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, This is the way. Walk in it, when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left” (Is 30:20-21).

This is the kind of interior, personal, and individual guidance that we now have in the new covenant. God manifests his will to each of us interiorly in our heart—not just by external laws—and each one of us has different gifts and is guided in a distinct and unique way, although there are general principles that apply to all. This is because “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:4-7). This is the guidance of the plenitude of the Spirit under the new covenant.

One can, for example, be guided to live in silence, solitude, and prayer, while another is guided to give a warm reception to all visitors; and both are blessed by God, and both are serving God. Both are following the individual, personal, interior guidance of the Spirit under the new covenant, in which the laws are in our minds and hearts.
THE BLOOD OF CHRIST CLEANSES OUR CONSCIENCE

Saturday, 2nd Week of the Year
Heb 9:2-3,6-7,11-14; Ps 46; Mk 3:20-21

“...how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb 9:14).

Christ is our sacrifice of the new covenant. The Jews in the Old Testament offered animal sacrifices and sprinkled the blood. Hence, in fulfillment of this, Christ “entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12). That is, Jesus Christ himself, in his ascension, entered into the heavenly tabernacle to complete his sacrifice of himself, and thus “appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb 9:24). By means of his sacrifice he is our intercessor before God (Rom 8:34; Heb 9:24; 7:25; 1 Jn 2:1). Thus “he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb 9:26). Hence Christ was “offered once to bear the sins of many” (Heb 9:28).

This is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, offered to his Father in love and self-gift in perfect obedience. After dying on the cross, he presented himself before the Father in heaven to complete his sacrifice in the heavenly tabernacle, where he is now interceding for us before God. This is the sacrifice which won our redemption. The blood of Christ redeems us from our sins, and reunites us with God.

The eucharist is this same unique sacrifice, made present for us, in which we unite ourselves with Christ in his offering of himself, thus offering ourselves with him to the Father in the Holy Spirit. This great offering is our perfect act of worship of the New Testament, and the only sacrifice of the New Testament, offered only once for all times, which we continue to offer (since it is made present for us) every time we celebrate the eucharist.

At the same time, Christ bears all our sins, and his death on the cross propitiates the divine wrath, which is the holy and righteous wrath of God against all sin (Ps 84:3-5; Rom 1:18; Mt 25:41,46). His death propitiates the divine wrath against us because he bore our curse, being made a curse for us by being hanged on a tree (Gal 3:13). He is our substitute because God put our sins on him (2 Cor 5:21; Is 53:5-6), and he suffered in our place the suffering due to us for our sins. Hence we are freed from the righteous and holy wrath of God against our sins, and we can rejoice in the freedom of the sons of God (Rom 8:21) in the Holy Spirit.

The blood of Christ, offered to the Father, is at the same time both his life offered in a sacrifice of love, and also a sign of his saving death on the cross, in which he paid to God the price of our redemption, God having “laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:6). Hence “upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed” (Is 53:5).
“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:14-15).

This is a call to repentance and conversion. In God’s plan, the time is now fulfilled for the manifestation of the Kingdom of God, for “when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman” (Gal 4:4). This is the divine “plan for the fullness of time” (Eph 1:10). The Kingdom of God will come in the fullness of time, that is, the glory of God will manifest itself here on earth, “and all flesh shall see it together” (Is 40:5). It is Jesus Christ who brings this fullness of time, and in him the splendor of God is manifested. The appropriate response of man is repentance and faith, to be able to enter into this Kingdom of God on earth.

We now live in this time of fulfillment. These are the Messianic times, the times of the nearness of God; and our response should be repentance and faith in Jesus Christ our Savior, who brings us God and his glory. But if you do not repent, if you continue living as before, that is, like everybody else, like unbelievers, you will not enjoy this salvation. You have to change your attitude, your whole way of being, your whole approach to life. This is the message of today’s scriptures. The first disciples left everything to follow Jesus. They left their business, their boats, their nets, and their families, and followed Jesus Christ—“And immediately they left their nets and followed him” (Mk 1:18).

At the preaching of Jonah, “the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them” (Jonah 3:5). They repented and everyone turned “from his evil way” (Jonah 3:8), and said, “Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger so that we perish not?” (Jonah 3:9). And God was placated, and his anger was propitiated by them, and he left off his righteous wrath against them (Jonah 3:10).

This is a type of what Jesus Christ does for us, in that he was sent by God (Rom 8:32) to propitiate and placate his own righteous wrath against us for our sins. He did this in that our sins were laid upon him (2 Cor 5:21; Is 53:6), and he suffered their penalty for us and instead of us on the cross (Gal 3:13), and thus in him the righteous and holy wrath of God was placated and propitiated for all who believe in the Son of God and in his saving work on the cross.

Today Jesus begins his Messianic ministry in Galilee, preaching repentance and faith in the Gospel of salvation.

This saving word is directed to us. He calls us to repent of our false ways. And St. Paul tells us today not to get ourselves entangled in the world, saying, “brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who...mourn (live) as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor 3:29-31). In other words, we are not to let ourselves become tangled up in this world which is passing away, in the sense that we forget God. We are not to be carried away by
the world. Use the world, but do so as though you were not using it, and keep your heart rooted in God and his Kingdom, not distracted by the pleasures of this world. “No soldier on service gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to satisfy the one who enlisted him” (2 Tim 2:4). This should be our model.

This then is how we should live, for Christ chose us out of the world. “…you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world” (Jn 15:19). Jesus’ disciples “are not of the world,” he says, “even as I am not of the world” (Jn 17:16). For this reason St. John tells us, “Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him” (1 Jn 2:15). We are not to entangle ourselves here below in the delights of this world, but rather repent and believe in the Gospel of our salvation, which is in Jesus Christ. “Ye adulterers and adulteresses,” says St. James, “know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God” (James 4:4 KJV). We have rather been raised up with Christ to seek the things that are above (Col 3:1-2), for there is where our citizenship lies (Phil 3:20).

We must therefore repent. You have to change your life, and believe in the Savior who unites us to God by placating and propitiating his righteous and holy wrath against us for our sins. In him we are freed from sin, to live in the Kingdom of God, in the presence and glory of God, and remain in his splendor (Jn 15:9-10). You must, therefore, abandon worldliness and a life-style that is not appropriate for a Christian. You should love God with all your heart, with an undivided heart, and abandon the superficial fashions of this world.

The time is now short, and the form of this world is passing away (1 Cor 7:31). Be a good soldier and do not get entangled in the business and pleasures of this life (2 Tim 2:4), do not be carried away by the world. Leave your false way, pray, fast (Jonah 3:8), and know the time, “how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed” (Rom 13:11). And “do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:2). Repent, and find new life in the Gospel. Leave off your former ways and become a new creature in Christ. Live for him alone with all your heart. This is the meaning of repentance.

PRAY THE LORD OF THE HARVEST
TO SEND OUT LABORERS INTO HIS HARVEST

Memorial of Saints Timothy and Titus, January 26
2 Tim 1:1-8; Ps 95; Lk 10:1-9

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Lk 10:2).

Today we celebrate the memorial of Saints Timothy and Titus, two of St. Paul’s companions, who accompanied him on many of his missionary journeys. We therefore read this Gospel today about the mission of Jesus’ disciples.

These missionaries are sent out, says Jesus, “as lambs in the midst of wolves” (Lk 10:3), that is, their work will be difficult because many will reject them, but in the midst
of this suffering they will be witnesses of Messianic peace, when lambs and wolves shall live together in peace (Is 11:6). Their ministry is a ministry of peace, of the peace of Jesus Christ, of Messianic peace, and they are witnesses to that peace, going “two by two” (Lk 10:1), living themselves in the peace they are going to preach to others. And they are to preach, saying, “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Lk 10:9). They are, therefore, witnesses of the Kingdom of God on earth, announcing its arrival. And in every house they enter, they are to say, “Peace be to this house” (Lk 10:5). Indeed the missioner has a ministry of peace, the peace of God, the peace of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus Christ came to bring us this peace with God, and he needs witnesses today too of this peace, which comes to us through our faith in Christ as the Messiah and only Son of God. He will give us this gift of peace if we believe in him and do his will. Through him we receive the forgiveness of our sins, which separate us from God and cause us sadness. In his death on the cross, Jesus Christ suffered this separation from God for us (Gal 3:13) so that we could be freed from this suffering by our faith in him (2 Cor 5:21). When we confess our sins, his merits on the cross free us from our sins and give us the gift of this peace, Messianic peace, heavenly peace on earth.

But Jesus needs missionaries and witnesses today as well who preach and make known this good news of salvation in him. He says today, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Lk 10:2). They are few who preach this good news of salvation in Jesus Christ by means of his death on the cross. “…pray therefore the Lord of the harvest” he says, “to send out laborers into his harvest” (Lk 10:2).

These laborers are to travel light. “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals,” he says (Lk 10:4). That is, we are also to be witnesses of evangelical poverty, witnesses that we are the anawim of Yahweh, the poor of the Lord, those who live only for him, those who serve but one Lord only (Mt 6:24), those who have no other pleasure in their life outside of God, those who have but one treasure only, Christ (Mt 6:19-21), those who have left all to find Christ, the buried treasure and the pearl of great price (Mt 13:44-46). Those who live in this way are to be provided for by the people they minister to, “eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wage” (Lk 10:7).

Christ needs more laborers of this kind for his harvest, more people completely dedicated to him, people who will clearly preach Christ and God’s salvation in him.

HOW MUCH WE NEED THE BLOOD OF CHRIST!

Wednesday, 3rd Week of the year
Heb 10:11-18; Ps 109; Mk 4:1-20

“But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God… For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb 10:12,14).

How much we need this! We have a practically continual need for this salvation which only Jesus Christ can give us. We have so many imperfections, and we fail in so many things to reach the degree of perfection that we wish, and that God wishes for us, that we often cry out with St. Paul, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from
this body of death?” (Rom 7:24). And our answer is the same as St. Paul’s: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom 7:25). We cry out like this because, with St. Paul, we see how many times we fail to reach perfection in our actions, and because we see how we do not do the perfect will of God as we wish to do it, and so we say in St. Paul’s words, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom 7:15).

We are not to conclude from these words that St. Paul was a great sinner, but rather that, as other saints, he was very aware of his imperfections, and very sensitive concerning his defects and faults. And is it not the same with us, to the degree that we are growing spiritually? We become ever more aware of how we fail to reach the perfection that God wants to see in us, and so we suffer from guilt, and we weep interiorly for our sins, as did the saintly desert fathers.

This is why Christ came. By his sacrifice he cleanses our conscience from this guilt, from this interior suffering. Hebrews says, “how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb 9:14). The blood of Christ cleanses our conscience from guilt because he suffered in our place this same kind of suffering of alienation from God, of the punishment of God, of the wrath of God, of the discipline of God (Heb 12:5-11), being made a curse for us by being hanged on a tree (Gal 3:13; Dt 21:23) so that we could be redeemed from all this (2 Cor 5:21). By his suffering we are freed from this kind of suffering; that is, until we fall into another sin, when he will free us again, and will wash us anew in his blood, if we invoke him.

Jesus Christ is the one “who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev 1:5). St. Paul says, “Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God” (Rom 5:9). “The wrath of God” (Rom 1:18) is his punishment, his discipline (Heb 12:5-11), which shows us his will and dissuades us from offending him. St. John also tells us, “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:7). And St. Peter says the same, saying, “You know that you were ransomed…with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

THROUGH THE FLESH AND BLOOD OF JESUS
WE HAVE ACCESS INTO THE HEAVENLY SANCTUARY

Thursday, 3rd Week of the year
Heb 10:19-25; Ps 23; Mk 4:21-25

“Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:19-22).

This is what we now have in Jesus Christ, that is, new access into the heavenly sanctuary through the flesh of Christ, which is like a veil through which we can now pass, and thus enter into this sanctuary and be in the presence of God. We have this new
access through the blood of Jesus Christ, poured out in sacrifice for us, to wash our conscience and our heart, that they might be purified from sin and from every spot. And so it is, for a death has intervened for the remission of our sins (Heb 9:15). His death frees us from the death of separation from God, in that he suffered for us our punishment for our sins, so that we might go free now from this punishment of guilt, having this new access to the Father, not just once a year, and not just for the high priest entering into the earthly sanctuary, but all the time, and for every believer.

This then is the Christian life, the new life which we now have in Christ through our faith. Through him we can live with our hearts freed from the pain of guilt, and rejoiced by the Holy Spirit. We should, therefore, now approach God through Jesus Christ “in full assurance of faith, with hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience” (Heb 10:22). “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace” (Heb 4:16), for, as Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; [and] no one comes to the Father but by me” (Jn 14:6). He is the veil of access, through whom we must now pass. We eat his flesh, and so enter, by means of him, into the presence of God; and his sacrificed blood cleanses us, absorbing the divine wrath against our sins. It is “through him” that we “have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph 2:18). In him “we have boldness and confidence of access through our faith in him” (Eph 3:12). At the death of Jesus “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (Mk 15:38), indicating that access to God is now available through the intervening death of the Son of God.

Truly “shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb 9:14). This is because “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Eph 1:7). He comes to us through faith and through his sacraments, to cleanse our heart and our conscience through the merits of his death on the cross, so that we might be alive to God.

WE ARE STRANGERS AND PILGRIMS ON THE EARTH

Friday, 3rd Week of the year
Heb 10:32-39; Ps 36; Mk 4:26-34

“But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations…and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven” (Heb 10:32-34 NKJV).

The author here reminds the Hebrews of their first days after their baptism, called here their illumination, that is, when they “were illuminated” (Heb 10:32). In those days they were happy to be “strangers and exiles on the earth” (Heb 11:13). In those days, he says, they were despoiled of their goods in this world (Heb 10:34), but they accepted it “joyfully,” hoping for better things in heaven (Heb 10:34). They also suffered “reproaches” and “were made a spectacle” (Heb 10:34).

This is the condition of a true Christian in every age. For his faith and word of preaching, he will suffer in this world, which will neither understand nor accept him. We
are to live, therefore, as “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Heb 11:13 NKJV). St. Peter says, “Beloved, I beseech you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:11), and “conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile,” for “You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers…with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:17-19).

We are redeemed, washed, and made clean and new by the blood of Christ. We should, therefore, express our gratitude to God for the blood of his Son, poured out in sacrifice on the cross for us to absorb the divine wrath against our sins, thus giving us a new and illumined life in Christ, a life now different from that of the world. Thus the blood of Christ washes us and makes us “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Heb 11:13 NKJV), renouncing the worldly desires of our former way of life when we lived in the pleasures of this life. And we live now like the anawim, the poor of the Lord, who have lost everything, and remain only with God.

And so we will become a spectacle to the world, as were the apostles, “For I think,” says St. Paul, “that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like those sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men” (1 Cor 4:9).

Thus, like the poor of Yahweh, we will have only God in this world for our happiness, having lost or renounced the other pleasures of life, to live only for him with all the love of our heart, with an undivided heart in our love of him. But in this state—washed and cleansed in the blood of Christ—we are happier than all the rest. This then is the life of a stranger and exile on the earth for the love of God.

WE ARE A PEOPLE OF HOPE

Saturday, 3rd Week of the Year
Heb 11:1-2,8-19; Lk 1; Mk 4:35-41

“By faith he [Abraham] sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb 11:9-10).

Abraham was a man of faith, and faith according to Hebrews “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). He lived in hope, and had conviction through his faith of the things he hoped in, for his conviction was based on the promise which he had received from God. Thus he was able to live for things which are not seen. He lived for the promise that he would be the father of many nations, and that all the families of the earth would be blessed in him (Gen 12:3). He also lived for the promise that he would inherit this land of promise in which he now sojourned “as in a foreign land, living in tents” (Heb 11:9).

Abraham is, therefore, a model for us, “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come” (Heb 13:14). Abraham and the other patriarchs “all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on earth” (Heb 11:13).
They lived and died in faith and hope (Heb 11:13). They were seeking a new homeland (Heb 11:14), “a heavenly one,” says Hebrews (Heb 11:16). “…they are seeking a homeland…a better country, that is, a heavenly one” and God “has prepared for them a city” (Heb 11:14,16).

We also are “strangers and exiles on earth” (Heb 11:13), seeking a homeland not here below. Abraham as a sojourner here on earth is therefore a model for us. We have renounced the world (Mk 10:29-30), our earthly homeland, and live now by faith and hope for a heavenly homeland, a better homeland, “whose builder and maker is God” (Heb 11:10). We sojourn, therefore, as in tents without a permanent dwelling or a “lasting city” (Heb 13:14), for we were made for something better, and therefore we long for a better homeland, “a heavenly one” (Heb 11:16), and God has prepared for us a city (Heb 11:16).

We are, therefore, to be a people of hope, a people of the divine promise in the midst of the darkness of this world, lights in the darkness, showing the way to the rest (Phil 2:15). We live for the second coming of Jesus Christ with great power and glory on the clouds of heaven (Mt 24:30). And we prepare ourselves now with joy in order to be ready to receive him well. So we purify ourselves now, washing ourselves in the blood of Christ’s sacrifice, which makes us pure and clean in his sight; and “as aliens and exiles” we “abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against” the soul (1 Peter 2:11), and we “conduct” ourselves “with fear throughout the time of” our “exile” (1 Peter 1:17). We are to live here, then, as exiles, seeking our joy not in the things of earth or in the pleasures of life, but in the things of our true homeland (Col 3:1-2), toward which we are now traveling, living as in tents here below.

CELIBACY AND THE CONSECRATED LIFE

4th Sunday of the year
Dt 18:15-20; Ps 94; 1 Cor 7:32-35; Mk 1:21-28

“I want you to be free from care. The unmarried man cares about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man cares about the things of the world, how to please his wife, and he is divided. And the unmarried woman or virgin cares about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman cares about the things of the world, how to please her husband” (1 Cor 7:32-34).

Tomorrow is February 2, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, and it is the day dedicated to the consecrated life. The consecrated life is the religious life, the life which has renounced the world to live for God alone with all the love of one’s heart, without any division whatsoever, not even the division of having a human spouse in Christian matrimony. Religious are therefore celibate, that is, married to Christ (2 Cor 11:2) in a way that is so exclusive that it even excludes a human spouse, so that all the love of one’s heart goes only to the Lord, and is not divided among other things, interests, or persons of this world, not even with a human spouse in the sacrament of matrimony. Priests also, in the Western Church, live this mystery of celibacy, which St. Paul speaks about today in the second reading.
The religious and consecrated life, together with the celibate priesthood, has suffered much in our times in certain countries, and there has been a drastic fall off in vocations to this form of life in these countries over the past forty years. The consecrated life is, therefore, something that deserves our reflection, particularly today, so close to the feast tomorrow of the consecrated life, and moreover when the liturgy itself today presents us with the key Scripture text for the consecrated, religious and celibate life (1 Cor 7:32-35).

How beautiful is this form of life, in which all our time is dedicated to God alone, and is free from cares for a wife and children, and from cares about maintaining a home and supporting and educating a family! One lives in solitude and silence with God, focused on his work. One is concerned about one’s ministry, which God has given him, exercised out of love for God, a ministry of preaching the Gospel or of ministering to the needs of the poor.

A religious normally lives in community with other consecrated persons who confirm and support him in his vocation and dedication; or one lives alone, a solitary life with God in silence, prayer, and fasting, renouncing the pleasures of this life and of the table in order to live a holy life without division of heart, with an undivided heart, in his love and service of God. The consecrated, religious, and celibate life is in many ways, as St. Paul says today, a life “free from care” (1 Cor 7:32), a life supremely concentrated and focused on the Lord in love and dedication. All our psychic, physical, affective, and spiritual energy is focused and concentrated on the Lord and on his ministry, which he has given us of preaching the Gospel or serving with love the needs of the poor.

The consecrated life is, moreover, lived in personal solitude, even if one lives in community, and in this solitude one finds the best opportunity for silent contemplative prayer, daily meditation on the scriptures, and time without interruption or distraction for spiritual reading of good books which edify and truly nourish the spirit.

Hence St. Paul says today, “I want you to be free from care” (1 Cor 7:32). And he goes on to say, “The unmarried man cares about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord” (1 Cor 7:32). He is free from care in general about the world and from care concerning a wife and family. And so, as St. Paul says, he is not divided. On the other hand, “the married man cares about the things of the world, how to please his wife, and he is divided” (1 Cor 7:33-34). St. Paul wants to free us from this division, so that our hearts be without any division whatsoever, that is, if we have a vocation to the consecrated, religious, or celibate life.

We see in the Bible that the life of a widow is similar to the religious life, if one lives it faithfully. In other words, true widows also live solitary lives, dedicated to God alone in every aspect of their life. St. Paul says that “She who is a real widow, and is left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day; whereas she who lives in pleasures is dead even while she lives” (1 Tim 5:5-6). The true widow, according to St. Paul, lives for God alone, renouncing the pleasures of this world. She is like the widowed prophetess Ana, who was present at the Presentation of Jesus, who “did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day” (Lk 2:37). Judith is another good example of a true widow. “Judith had lived at home as a widow for three years and four months” and she “girded sackcloth about her loins and wore the garments of her widowhood. She fasted all the days of her widowhood” (Judith 8:4-6).
We see then that the life of a true widow, like that of a true religious, consecrated person, or celibate is a life of prayer, fasting, and the renunciation of the pleasures of life and of the table, in order to have a truly undivided heart in one’s devotion and dedication to the Lord alone—a life and a heart not divided by other pleasures. It is for this reason that the Church has always considered the consecrated, religious, and celibate life to be superior to matrimony. It is because it enables one to live with more facility with an undivided heart in his love of God.

THE LAMB THAT SAVED THE FIRST-BORN, AND CHRIST THE LAMB OF GOD

Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, February 2
Mal 3:1-4; Ps 23; Lk 2:22-40

“…mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel” (Lk 2:30-32).

Today is a day of glory, when the child Jesus is presented in the temple. The Savior of the world comes to his temple, the light of the nations shines in the house of God, and the temple is filled with glory. On this day “The Lord has made his salvation known, he has revealed his justice in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel… All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (Ps 97:2-3). “We have thought on thy steadfast love, O God, in the midst of thy temple. As thy name, O God, so also thy praise reaches to the ends of the earth” (Ps 47:9-10). We see his salvation today, and we receive it. “Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient portals! that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory!” (Ps 23:9-10). We receive the light today in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6). So “Arise, shine forth; for thy light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon thee” (Is 60:1). Christ came to illumine us, so that we might live and walk in his glory. Today we receive him with honor in his temple. “…and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts” (Mal 3:1 KJV).

Jesus Christ is presented in the temple because he is the first-born, and the Israelites presented every first-born in memory of the blood of the paschal lamb sprinkled on their door posts, which saved them from the plague of the death of the first-born, (Ex 12:12-13; 13:15). Thus the paschal lamb was a substitute for their first-born, and the lamb was sacrificed instead of their first-born when the holy and just wrath of God struck down the first-born of the Egyptians.

Today Jesus Christ, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29), is presented as the first-born in the temple. He is the true paschal Lamb, who will die instead of us, as a substitute for us, thus absorbing the just and holy wrath of God against our sins, so that we might not die. Like the paschal lamb in Egypt, he died so that we might live. He suffered the plague of death instead of and in place of us. In him is
our salvation, life, and light. In him is the forgiveness for our sins, and our justification. His death saves us and is the beginning of our sanctification and new life in the light of his resurrection.

WHO CAN ENDURE AN ANGUISHED SPIRIT?

Tuesday, 4th Week of the Year
Heb 12:1-4; Ps 21; Mk 5:21-43

“Taking her by the hand he said to her, Talitha cumi; which means, Little girl, I say to you, arise. And immediately the girl got up and walked” (Mk 5:41-42).

Jesus Christ cured many people during his life on earth, and even raised the dead, as he did to this twelve year old girl, to Lazarus (Jn 11:43), and to the son of the widow of Nain (Lk 7:14). We continue to read the Gospels with faith because this same Jesus Christ, who did these things during his earthly life, is the one who is now seated in glory at the right hand of his Father in heaven, interceding with him for us (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25; 9:24). As Jairus begged his help for his daughter, so do we beg his help to save us and raise us out of the death of sin.

Sin causes us more interior suffering and pain of heart than anything else. The suffering caused by our sins, which is the suffering of guilt, is worse than the sufferings of the body, worse than the sufferings of sickness, and worse than the suffering caused by the attacks of our enemies. This is because it is our own conscience which is attacking us interiorly. We are attacking ourselves, and in such a situation, there is no peace, and we feel bad and unhappy.

Guilt is a sickness of the heart, which no earthly medicine can cure. We can endure bodily illnesses and even the attacks and damage done to us by our enemies, with a joyful spirit that comes to us from God, and with inner peace and happiness. We can even endure being humiliated by our enemies, and put up with it with inner happiness if we are at peace with God. But no one can endure well the suffering and pain of heart that comes from ourselves attacking ourselves for having sinned. This is the worst suffering of all. “A man’s spirit will endure sickness,” says Proverbs; “but a broken spirit who can bear?” (Prov 18:14).

It is to cure this sickness of the soul that Christ came into the world. He can raise us from the death of our spirit. For this he died on the cross, weighed down with our sins (2 Cor 5:21; Is 53:5-6), to raise us from spiritual death. He suffered so that we would suffer no more from guilt. Our punishment of guilt was put upon him, and he suffered this alienation from God, this just wrath of God, this being cursed by God (Gal 3:13; Dt 21:23), for the sake of our sins, for us and instead of us, to free us from this most terrible of all suffering, when we believe in him and invoke the merits of his death for us on the cross, particularly when we invoke them through the sacraments, which he himself left us in order to channel these merits to us (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23).
“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels in festal array, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of the just made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks better than that of Abel” (Heb 12:22-24).

This is the New Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem, the goal of our journey through this world. This is the light that shines for us through the murk and gloom of this world. We live already in spirit in this city of splendor and light if we are reborn in Christ. It is the city of our contemplation, to which we are transported when we contemplate, and in which we see the glory of the Lord, which transforms us “from glory to glory” into the very image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18).

It is the city whose “radiance is like a most rare jewel…clear as crystal” (Rev 21:11). It is made of “pure gold, clear as glass” (Rev 21:18). It is the New Jerusalem which “has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev 21:23).

“…our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil 3:20), “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come” (Heb 13:14). This is the heavenly city of gold and light which we seek, in which is our true citizenship. Here below we are only “strangers and exiles on earth” (Heb 11:13).

We approach this heavenly city by means of the blood of Christ, “the sprinkled blood that speaks better than that of Abel” (Heb 12:24), where our spirit dwells ahead of time amid “myriads of angels in festal array” (Heb 12:22). We are sprinkled by the blood which cleanses our conscience of all guilt (Heb 9:14), and gives us access into the heavenly sanctuary. Christ paid our debt of sin for us with his blood poured out in sacrifice on the cross, suffering our just punishment instead of us, thus giving us access into the heavenly Jerusalem, even now in our contemplation, and in our risen bodies on the last day.

We are, therefore, a people of hope, no longer seeking our joy in the things of earth (Col 3:1-2), for we have already risen and even ascended with Christ (Col 3:1-2; Eph 2:6), and are now sitting with him “in the heavenly places” (Eph 2:6), seeking the things that are above, and no longer those of the earth (Col 3:1-2). We are, therefore, lights in the darkness for others (Phil 2:15), witnesses here on earth to our true homeland, the New Jerusalem, the city of our spirit.
“And the king was exceedingly sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her” (Mk 6:26).

Today we hear the account of the death of St. John the Baptist, and at the same time we see the weakness of King Herod. It is a contrast between St. John the Baptist, on the one hand, who had the courage to tell the truth and warn the king, saying to him that it was not lawful for him to marry the wife of his brother; and the cowardice of the king, on the other hand, in that he, not wanting to break his word and promise to give to the daughter of Herodias what she requested, and not wanting to appear foolish before his guests, ordered John to be beheaded in prison and his head given to the girl. Herod knew that he was doing wrong, for he “feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly” (Mk 6:20). And because he knew that he was doing wrong, St. Mark tells us that “the king was exceedingly sorry” when he heard the girl’s request (Mk 6:26).

Thus we see Herod acting out of human respect, rather than doing what was right. Herod had publicly said to the girl after her dance, which “pleased Herod and his guests” (Mk 6:22), “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will grant it… Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom” (Mk 6:22-23). So now after having said all this, he was ashamed to refuse the girl and break his oath and thus appear foolish before his guests. So he decided to do evil rather than good, for in that way he could avoid appearing foolish.

How often do we do the very same thing? How often do we do what is wrong in order to avoid appearing foolish in doing what is right. We are so often ashamed to do what is right. We fear the thoughts and words of others. We fear their judgments of us if we do what is right, and therefore we do not do it. But what is the result of acting like this? It is that we feel bad and guilty, far from God, depressed, and sad. We should learn something from this experience, and in the future avoid acting out of human respect. But how often, in a new situation, do we forget our former guilt, and once again do the very same thing, avoiding doing what would cause us embarrassment, even though it was the right thing to do. We should learn from the pain in our heart when we act this way, and so be prepared in the future to act as John did, and not out of human respect and cowardice as Herod did.
SILENT, CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Saturday, 4th Week of the Year
Heb 13:15-17,20-21; Ps 22; Mk 6:30-34

“Come away by yourselves to a desert place, and rest a while. For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desert place by themselves” (Mk 6:31-32).

We see in the Gospels that Jesus frequently withdrew alone to the desert or to a mountain to pray (Mk 6:46; Lk 6:12). Before calling the twelve apostles, “he went out into the mountain to pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve” (Lk 6:12-13). Before doing something as important as this, he withdrew alone to pray, and we see that “all night he continued in prayer to God” (Lk 6:12). This is important. We can learn something important from this. It is the need which Jesus had for prayer and for spending time in prayer, especially at night, or “in the morning, a great while before day” (Mk 1:35), in “a desert place” (Mk 1:35) or on a mountain (Lk 6:12).

And we see today that he taught his apostles to do the same, saying to them, “Come away by yourself to a desert place, and rest a while… And they went away in the boat to a desert place by themselves” (Mk 6:31,32). We thus learn that we also have the same need to withdraw alone to a desert place or to a mountain to pass the night, or part of the night, in silent, contemplative prayer.

Rising, therefore, “in the morning, a great while before day” (Mk 1:35) and going to “a desert place” to pray, our relationship with God is restored and grows. We enter into communion with him in love and light. At this time, we rest in Jesus Christ, who justifies us, and clothes us with his own righteousness as with a splendid robe of light (Is 61:10). It is in Jesus Christ that we have the forgiveness of our sins and imperfections, the removal of our guilt and depression, and the restoration of God’s peace in our hearts. In him we find a peace which the world cannot give (Jn 14:27), and which only comes to us when we believe in him, invoke the merits of his death for us on the cross, and then walk in the new light of his resurrection which will shine within us. We benefit from all this in silent, contemplative prayer, especially “in the morning, a great while before day” (Mk 1:35).

In this prayer, Christ will often fill us with his light, shining in our heart (2 Cor 4:6), and we will be able to contemplate his glory and be transformed “from glory to glory” in his image (2 Cor 3:18). Thus we will know his peace, which is not of this world (Jn 14:27), and will deepen our relationship of love with Christ; and from this relationship, we will draw new strength to preach Christ with power and conviction, and attract many, as Jesus did today, to the point that “many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat” (Mk 6:31).
THE INTEGRATION OF CONTEMPLATION WITH MINISTRY

5th Sunday of the Year
Job 7:1-4,6-7; Ps 146; 1 Cor 9:16-19,22-23; Mk 1:29-39

“And in the morning a great while before day, he rose and went out to a desert place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him followed him, and they found him and said to him, Everyone is searching for you. And he said to them, Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out. And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons” (Mk 1:35-39).

We see here how Jesus integrates his preaching with silent, contemplative prayer. First he was preaching, casting out demons, and curing the sick. Then, “in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a desert place, and there he prayed” (Mk 1:35). Then immediately after praying alone “in a desert place,” he said that he wanted to extend and expand his ministry and begin preaching in many other places as well. And he ended up preaching in the synagogues “throughout all Galilee” (Mk 1:39). We see also that his was a ministry that had power to cure the sick and cast out demons.

There are various things that we can learn from this Gospel passage. First of all, we see the connection between Jesus’ ministry and his contemplative prayer. Then we see his zeal to broaden and expand his preaching ministry to reach more people. And finally, we see that he preached and ministered with power, and was even able to cure the sick and cast out demons.

Christ has also given us a ministry to preach the good news to the sick and to those who are troubled by demons, and he has also called us to silent, contemplative prayer “in a desert place,” to which we are to withdraw very early in the morning, “a great while before day” (Mk 1:35). His prayer was, furthermore, the source of his power in his ministry and in his preaching; and it will be the same for us.

It is in silent, contemplative communion with God that we receive the power to preach Christ, to preach God’s salvation in him. In order to preach well, we have to withdraw from other people and activities, and go to a solitary, “desert place,” and be alone there with God, seated in silence and peace, praying in our heart, even without words or thoughts, and thus be refreshed by the love and presence of God as a light in our heart. After this, it is logical that we will want to do what Jesus wanted to do and did, namely, expand and broaden our preaching ministry to reach more and more people with the message of salvation.

We are new men in Jesus Christ through our faith in him (Eph 4:22-24). We are made a new creation, new creatures in him for the renewal and regeneration of the human race through our preaching. We are justified and made resplendent before God through our faith in Jesus Christ when we invoke the merits of his sacrificial and propitiatory death on the cross for us. And we walk in the new light of his resurrection when we believe in him, for his resurrection is his victory over our death and sin. Victorious in his death, his sacrifice for our sake having been accepted by God and our debt having been paid, God raised him glorious from the dead, thus demonstrating his victory, so that he might shine upon all who have been reborn in him through faith.
It is by faith, and in silent, contemplative prayer that we realize and experience this new creation and interior light that streams from the risen Christ. From this comes our zeal to preach Christ to others for their forgiveness, transformation, and illumination, that they too might be saved through Jesus Christ. Contemplative prayer gives us the power and the zeal to preach Christ and minister this salvation; and this ministry is one which has power to cure those who are sick in their hearts and depressed, and those troubled by demons. It can even cast out demons.

But we need to withdraw from the world and its entertainments in order to have an undivided heart in our love for Jesus Christ. He wants all of us, not just part of us. He wants all of our love, and wants us to seek only him in this world, that he be our only source of joy, sacrificing the delicacies and delights which the world offers, for only in this way will we be properly disposed for contemplative prayer with an undivided heart. Only in this way will we serve but one Lord only (Mt 6:24), and will we have but one treasure only (Mt 6:19-21). This is the way in which we leave all to obtain the buried treasure and the pearl of great price (Mt 13:44-46), and in this way we will respond positively to the call to perfection, given to the rich young man, to leave all to follow Christ (Mt 19:21). Only in this way will we be able to preach Christ with power, cast out demons, and cure the sick and those lying in sadness, depression, and sunk in their sin and guilt.

So we see that contemplation and the renunciation of the world and its delights have to be integrated with each other and with our preaching and ministry for them to have power.

BELIEVE IN THE LORD JESUS, AND YOU WILL BE SAVED

Monday, 5th Week of the Year
Gen 1:1-19; Ps 103; Mk 6:53-56

“And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or country, they laid the sick in the market places, and besought him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment; and as many as touched it were saved” (Mk 6:56).

We see here that Jesus has the power to save. All those who touched “the fringe of his garment…were saved” (Mk 6:56). The word “saved” means here “were made well,” but it is the same word which Christians in the New Testament used to indicate that in Jesus Christ there is salvation, and that all who believe in him will be saved. The Philippian jailer, for example, asked St. Paul and Silas, “Men, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:30-31). And Cornelius had a vision of a man named Peter who “will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household” (Acts 11:14). It is the same word “saved” that is used in all three of these passages.

Jesus Christ came into the world for our salvation, and he performed miracles as signs that he had the power to save us. His cures were signs of something more profound and more important, namely, our salvation. In him we have the salvation that we need and
seek. If the Philippian jailer believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, he will be saved; and if the friends of Cornelius believe in Jesus Christ, they will be saved.

Jesus Christ, through faith in him, saves us from our sins and from the depression caused by our guilt. Jesus Christ saves us from eternal punishment in everlasting flames (Mt 25:41) for our sins because Christ suffered for us, freeing us from our sins and their punishment, and cleansing our conscience from the pain of guilt.

Christ, through our faith in him, thus gives us a new and justified life, in which we can live happily before God, clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself, and sanctified by him. We walk in the splendor of his resurrection as new creatures, in a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Rev 21:5; Gal 6:15), as new men (Eph 4:22-24) in Jesus Christ. He furthermore gives us from the Father the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we might henceforth walk according to the Spirit, and no longer according to the flesh. This is the meaning of being saved in Jesus Christ already in this present life.

Being saved is having a life which is truly new and illumined by Jesus Christ. It is to live for him alone who saved us, and doing so with all the love of our heart (Mk 12:30), with an undivided heart in our love for him, with a heart not divided by the delights of this world, because we have risen with him and even ascended to sit with him in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6), seeking no longer the things of this world, but rather those of above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (Col 3:1-2). This is the meaning of being saved through our faith in Jesus Christ.

ORIGINAL SIN AND REDEMPTION

Wednesday, 5th Week of the Year
Gen 2:4-9,15-17; Ps 103; Mk 7:14-23

“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:16-17).

In the beginning God created man in a state of perfection, righteousness, and intimacy with God, and he created him immortal, “for God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it” (Wisdom 2:23-24). God gave Adam a clear commandment not to eat of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:17). For having disobeyed this commandment, he would die, that is, he became mortal. He also lost his state of righteousness and intimacy with God because of his sin, and was cast out of the garden of Eden (Gen 3:22-24).

Christ was sent into the world to restore man to a state of righteousness before God, and to conquer death. The death of Christ on the cross destroyed our spiritual death, that is, our separation and alienation from God; and his resurrection is the first fruits of the resurrection of our body on the last day, “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor 15:22). In this way Christ destroyed our death.

Because of his sin, Adam lost his state of righteousness and intimacy with God; and his descendents would inherit only what Adam had to bequeath to them. God would send
Jesus Christ so that through faith in him, man might recover his state of righteousness and intimacy with God, being forgiven for his sins and clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself, “For by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous” (Rom 5:19).

The disobedience of Adam, together with its negative consequences for us, is canceled out by the obedience of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ obeyed by dying on the cross in place of us, thus accepting into himself our just punishment for our sins; and so by this just act of one single man, Christ, all those who believe in him are constituted righteous; just as by the unjust act of one single man, Adam, all are constituted sinners. “Then as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men” (Rom 5:18).

WE ARE TO BE PEOPLE OF FAITH, HOPE, AND HUMILITY

Thursday, 5th Week of the Year
Gen 2:18-25; Ps 127; Mk 7:24-30

“And he said to her, Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs. But she answered him, Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (Mk 7:27-28).

Today a pagan woman asks Jesus to cast a demon out of her daughter. At first Jesus refuses, saying in effect that his mission is only to the children of Israel (Mt 15:24). But this woman’s humility won him over; and in the end he consented, saying, “For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter” (Mk 7:29). Her saying was that she admitted that she was like a dog under the table begging for scraps. This is the kind of humility that gained her her petition.

Does not God at times treat us like this, seemingly putting us off, at least for a while, seemingly refusing our petition, testing us? He can call us to live in a certain way, for example, and yet for a time we can see only obstacles in our way, and we do not see how we will be able to live as he is calling us to live. Other people do not understand us, or do not agree with us, or superiors do not permit us to do what we believe God to be calling us to do. And when we pray about it, even God seems to remain silent.

What then should we do? This woman’s example, I think, can help us here. She had both perseverance and humility. We should continue to believe in God’s call, and continue to be faithful in trying to live as he is calling us to live. We need the perseverance of this woman, and we need to imitate her humility and the depth of her faith in our prayer. For having compared herself to a dog under the table, Jesus at last grants her request.

If our call is truly from God, he will give us all that he knows we need to be able to realize the call which he himself has given us. He will not give us a call without also giving us a way of realizing it. We need to believe this. We are not to lose hope; but rather to remain faithful to our call, as well as humble in our prayers for help, always persevering in living according to our call—as best we can—and always believing in the promise God has given us, as Abraham did. Abraham believed that he would have a son.
by his wife Sarah, and that through him he would become the father of many nations. He lived by this promise. He was a man of the promise, a man of hope and of faith. And God guided and protected him throughout his life; and the promise was fulfilled.

So ought we also to live, faithful to God’s promise and call, especially when we do not see how it can be realized, and when it seems that even God is not listening to our prayers. Yet if we keep our faith alive and persevere in our petitions in all humility, like this woman, and if we continue living as God is calling us to live, at the proper time he will give us all that we need to realize the call which he himself has given us. He simply tests our perseverance, as he tested Abraham, and as he tested this woman.

THE LIFE ACCORDING TO THE SPIRIT IS OPPOSED TO THE LIFE ACCORDING TO THE FLESH

Friday, 5th Week of the Year
Gen 3:1-8; Ps 31; Mk 7:31-37

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons” (Gen 3:6-7).

How deceitful sin is! It presents itself as something good, “a delight to the eyes,” something “to be desired,” something which will make us happy and give us pleasure. It presents itself as something sweet, pleasant, and beautiful. But after sinning, we see the reality. Our eyes are opened, and we feel guilt and depression. After the immediate pleasure, we see that we were deceived by an external appearance which presented itself as sweet, good, and desirable; but now we realize that we have fallen into sin and are wounded and distant from God, the only source of true happiness. And we are now suffering from the pain of guilt and depression. We now see ourselves as we really are, namely, sinners deceived by the pleasures of the world. We have lost our righteousness before God. We are now naked, no longer clothed with the righteousness of the Lord, or at least that righteousness has been diminished. We see that instead of living according to the Spirit, we are now living according to the flesh and in a worldly way. All this is as true of relatively small sins, as it is of large ones.

Jesus Christ came into the world to save us from sin (1 Cor 15:3; 1 Peter 3:18; 2:21-24), both from the original sin of Adam, with its negative consequences, as well as from our own sins and from the suffering of guilt that they cause us. He did this by his death on the cross, in which he accepted into himself our sin and guilt (2 Cor 5:21), and suffered their punishment for us, thus freeing us from sin and the pain of depression caused by guilt. When we believe in him, invoking the merits of his suffering on the cross—especially in the sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23)—we are justified and renewed, not by our works, but by our faith (Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16); and are made righteous, new men, a new creation, new creatures, people born again in Jesus
Christ, who are now clothed with Jesus Christ (Gal 3:27; Rom 13:14), and who walk now according to the Spirit, and no longer according to the flesh.

We are made righteous and resplendent before God, with the risen Christ shining in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6), illumining and transforming us, and calling us to abandon sin in the future, together with worldly fashions and styles, in order to truly live now in the Spirit, and no longer mix together the ways of the Spirit with those of the flesh, no longer giving mixed signals and an ineffective witness by living in worldly ways, living according to the flesh. We are rather to behave now as persons who have been completely renewed in Jesus Christ. We are even to renounce worldly pleasures, to serve but one Lord only (Mt 6:24) with all our heart (Mk 12:30), with an undivided heart. In this way we will grow in the grace and love of Jesus Christ, and be transformed “from glory to glory” in him (2 Cor 3:18), and thus be lights in the darkness of this world for others (Phil 2:15), giving a clear witness that will help them.

THE PROTO-EVANGELIUM

Saturday, 5th Week of the Year
Gen 3:9-24; Ps 89; Mk 8:1-10

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen 3:15).

This text is known as the proto-evangelium, or the beginning of the Gospel, the good news of salvation. It says that the seed or descendent of Eve will wound the head of the serpent; and that the serpent will wound the heel of the seed of Eve. We see here the victory of the seed of Eve is indicated and promised, in that he will wound the serpent’s head, something more serious than the serpent wounding Eve’s seed’s heel.

This was fulfilled in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Jesus is Eve’s seed, and on the cross he wounds the serpent’s head and destroys the results of the sin of Adam and Eve. Jesus destroys the serpent’s work in tempting them to sin.

During the Old Testament, the Israelites awaited the coming of the seed of Eve, and were justified in advance by their faith in him (Rom 4:3). Abraham saw him and rejoiced (Jn 8:56), and was justified by his faith (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3), even though this seed had not yet come. It was Jesus Christ who justified Abraham by his death on the cross, through the faith of Abraham (Rom 4:3). God justified Abraham ahead of time through the future death of his Son on the cross. In other words, God forgave and justified Abraham, counting his faith for righteousness: “And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3). God did this because he knew that Abraham’s sin would be fully and definitively propitiated and expiated in the death of Jesus Christ. Everything, therefore, is centered on Jesus Christ and his expiatory and propitiatory death on the cross.

Jesus said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad” (Jn 8:56). In this way all the Old Testament saints saw Jesus Christ ahead of time, and hoped in him as their future Messiah, who would definitively save them; and through their faith, they were justified.
We, on the other hand, look back to our Redeemer, just as the Old Testament saints looked forward to the Messiah who was still to come. We put the same faith in him as they did, and are in the same way justified through our faith in him who suffered for us, expiating our sins by assuming into himself the just punishment for them (2 Cor 5:21), so that his righteousness might become ours. Our sins are made his (Is 53:5-6) so that, in dying for them, his righteousness might become ours: “For our sake he [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

A MINISTRY OF LIFE AND COMMUNION

6th Sunday of the Year
Leviticus 13:1-2,44-46; Ps 31; 1 Cor 10:31 – 11:1; Mk 1:40-45

“And a leper came to him beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, If you will you can make me clean. Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, I will; be clean. And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean” (Mk 1:40-42).

We see here Jesus’ compassion and mercy in touching and curing a leper of his leprosy. We also see the result of this cure, namely, that the man who was cured “went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desert places; and people came to him from every quarter” (Mk 1:45). His very ministry forced him to seek out solitude and “desert places.” St. Luke’s version is even more striking. He says, “But he was withdrawing into the deserts and praying” (Lk 5:16). St. Luke says that he was withdrawing into “the deserts,” not just to “desert places,” as Mark says, and adds that he was praying there.

So here we see Jesus’ power to cure and save, as well as his need for solitude. We see his love for “the deserts,” not only to escape from the press of the crowds, but positively, to pray in solitude. On the one hand he attracted great crowds by his preaching and his power to heal, but on the other hand he was always withdrawing to the deserts to pray and be alone with God. What can we learn from this? I think we can learn that we are to imitate him.

We ourselves do not have the power to heal, but Christ gave us a ministry to preach him and to cure in his name and with his power. This is the ministry of his apostles and disciples and their successors. At the end of St. Mark’s Gospel, the risen Christ says to his apostles, “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mk 16:15-16). And he continues saying that those who believe in him “will cast out demons… [and] they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover” (Mk 16:17,18). So we see that we do have this ministry of preaching God’s salvation in Christ, and of healing in his name.

We also have the same need to retire to the deserts to pray and be alone with God. Just as Jesus “went up into the mountain to pray; and all night continued in prayer to God” (Lk 6:12), and just as he, “after he had dismissed the crowds…went up into the mountain by himself to pray” (Mt 14:23), and just as “in the morning, a great while
before day, he rose and went out to a desert place, and there he prayed” (Mk 1:35), and just as “he was withdrawing into the deserts and praying” (Lk 5:16), so in the same way he also invited his apostles to accompany him in his solitary places so that they too might pray with him. We see this when “he took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray” (Lk 9:28), and again when he said to his apostles, “Come away by yourselves to a desert place, and rest a while... And they went away in the boat to a desert place by themselves” (Mk 6:31,32).

This, then, is our new life in Christ. It is a life of ministry, but also of retiring from ministry to spend time with Jesus alone in the desert in prayer.

We will soon begin Lent, a time of prayer and fasting, a time to withdraw from the world and go into the desert, to be alone with God in prayer. Lent is a time of simplicity and austerity, a time to renounce the delights and entertainments of the world, a time to purify and sanctify our spirit, making room for Jesus Christ in our heart. Lent is a time for detaching ourselves from the attachments and dependencies of this life in order to grow in Jesus Christ and be transformed and sanctified in him. And for all this we need the desert as much as Jesus needed it.

We need simplicity, austerity, fasting, the renunciation of the delicacies of the table, and evangelical poverty. We need to be the poor in spirit, the poor of the Lord, the anawim of Yahweh, who are blessed because they have lost, left, and renounced everything else to remain alone with God, with all their heart, and so be filled with his goodness and love. These poor of Yahweh are the ones who are truly happy. They are the ones who are blessed by God.

Living in this way, then, as lovers of the desert way of life, we will be more purified and more transformed, and our ministry of preaching Christ will have all the more power to attract and feed many with the words of life, for “The tongue of the righteous is choice silver... [and] The lips of the righteous feed many” (Prov 10:20,21). As we grow in Christ in the desert, in solitude, austerity, fasting, and prayer, we will preach a new life (2 Cor 5:17). We will preach God’s salvation, which is in his only Son, who died for us, not to cure us from leprosy, but to forgive us from the leprosy of our sins, which distance us from God and sadden us. We will preach this salvation with power; and many will be saved. They will accept Christ, who suffered our punishment for our sins to make us a new creation, justified and sanctified in him, and clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself.

This ministry and this withdrawal will rejuvenate the human race and renew the face of the earth in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

DEPART FROM EVIL, AND DO GOOD

Monday, 6th Week of the Year
Gen 4:1-15,25; Ps 49; Mk 8:11-13

“The Lord said to Cain, Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Gen 4:6-7).
Here we see good and evil. The Lord accepted Abel and his offering; “but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell” (Gen 4:5). The Lord then explains to Cain that if he does good, he will be accepted and exalted, and that in order to do good, he has to master sin. But Cain did not listen to the Lord, and instead slew his brother. And because he did not repent, he received a great punishment for his sin. He was told that he would be “a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” (Gen 4:12).

If we are Christians, we have been forgiven and made righteous through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, by means of our faith in him. But then we have to sanctify ourselves by avoiding sin in the future and mastering it, although sin will always be crouching at our door, trying to trip us up. Then if we do good, we will be exalted (Gen 4:7); but if we do evil, we will be like Cain, driven from the presence of the Lord, to one degree or another. The life of faith, then, is a constant warfare against sin and imperfections. If we do good, that is, if we live according to the will of God, we will be exalted; but if we do not live in accordance with his will, we will not be accepted, and God will punish us so that we might repent and return to him with all our heart.

The Lord’s punishments are meant to help us to renounce our false ways, and to learn to obey him and to do his will in the future. Hence the Lord disciplines us for our good, as a loving Father, when we do not please him, so that we might turn back to him. Therefore, “do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him. For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb 12:5-6; Prov 3:11-12).

It is not easy always to be disciplined by the Lord; but this is how he treats those whom he loves—“For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves” (Heb 12:6). Sometimes those who are more loved are more disciplined; and as we grow in holiness, we are disciplined for smaller and smaller imperfections. But Cain did not accept this. He did not repent, and so he lost everything.

But if we accept the warning that God gave to Cain, it will be well with us. Therefore, “Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will dwell in the land, and enjoy security” (Ps 36:3). If we make the effort to do good, to do what God shows us is according to his will, we will be blessed. God shows us his will in small details by interiorly punishing us with sadness and depression when we go astray from his will. Therefore make an effort to do his will with exactitude, for “Thou dost rebuke the insolent, accursed ones, who wander from thy commandments” (Ps 118:21). And “Depart from evil, and do good; so you shall abide forever” (Ps 36:27). “Wait for the Lord, and keep to his way, and he will exalt you to possess the land; you will look on the destruction of the wicked” (Ps 36:34).
“And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mk 8:31).

It is for this that Jesus Christ came into the world, to redeem us by his death on the cross. His death on the cross was his great sacrifice to the Father, his great act of worship, the pouring out of his life in love and self-gift to his Father, a perfect act of adoration that perfectly pleased the Father and won for us our redemption, the forgiveness of all our sins. Christ died as a man, for men. The Father then sent the Holy Spirit upon him, raising him from the dead, and he poured out this same Spirit upon all who believe in his Son, justifying and sanctifying them.

At the same time, his death on the cross satisfied divine justice by paying the price due for our sins, that is, suffering their just penalty. Thus he freed us from the death due to us in justice for our sins, his death substituting for our death, thus saving us from eternal death for our sins, from the death of separation from God, and from the death of the suffering of guilt. In him, therefore, is our freedom and new life. His death justifies us from our sins, washing us in his blood poured out for us, that we may walk in the newness of life as his new creation.

In the cross is our salvation, and in his resurrection is our illumination, for now we can walk in its light, with the risen Christ illuminating us from within (2 Cor 4:6). He is our illumination in his resurrection; and his gift of the Holy Spirit, which he gives us from the Father, where he is seated in glory, rejoices us like rivers of living water running through our stomach (Jn 7:37-39).

This is the new life which we proclaim in Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection. This is our proclamation, our message, which renews the human heart. This is the good news which we are sent to proclaim to every creature (Mk 16:15). We are sent to renew the human race through our proclamation of the good news of the salvation of God in Jesus Christ. We proclaim the liberation from sin and guilt, our two greatest enemies. We preach a new and illumined life in Jesus Christ.

Christ wants to live in us to transform us into new creatures (2 Cor 5:17); and he wants to praise and worship his Father with us in the offering of himself, made present for us in the eucharist. Thus does he renew us through his death and resurrection.

“And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mk 8:34).
First of all, we see that this difficult teaching is for all; not only for a special group. Jesus preached it to “the multitude” (Mk 8:34). In it, he tells us what we must do to be his followers. The first thing he says is that we are to deny ourselves. This is the same Greek word that is used when Jesus tells Peter that he will deny him three times (Mk 14:30). It is a strong expression, and here it means to disregard our natural desires and likings for pleasure so that we can take up our cross and sacrifice ourselves for the love of Christ. We are to make our life a sacrifice of praise to God, a hymn of praise, poured out in love and self-gift, in union with Christ’s own sacrifice of himself in love to his Father. We are to do what Christ did, and to do it with him.

We are to lose our life in this world for Christ and for the Gospel. He who does this will save his life; and he who does not do this will lose his life in God (Mk 8:35). In other words, we are to live a sacrificial life in this world; not a life of luxury and pleasure, not a life of self-seeking. Our life should be an offering poured out in love to God.

We are to live only for God; not for ourselves. In this we are to follow the example of Christ’s life and of his death on the cross, for “he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor 5:15). We will follow this example if we live no longer for ourselves and for our pleasures, but for him who died for us.

We are to deny ourselves. We are to live not for ourselves, but only for him, not serving ourselves and our own pleasures but serving him alone as our only Lord (Mt 6:24), and doing so with all our heart (Mk 12:30), not with a heart divided among the pleasures of this world, but with an undivided heart, for “None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord” (Rom 14:7-8).

In this way we lose our life for him (Mk 8:35), we hate our life in this world for love of him (Jn 12:25). We deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him (Mk 8:34). The cross both saves us and teaches us how to live. It is the mystery we are to live. We are to pour out our life in love for God, rather than live for our own pleasures. We are to live a life of sacrifice out of love for God. We do so by living in accordance with his will, without being ashamed of it (Mk 8:38), for his will will cause us to suffer in this world. It will direct us to live for God alone and deny ourselves for the love of him, pouring ourselves out in sacrifice, as a hymn of praise to God.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER IS THE PRAYER OF LIGHT

Saturday, 6th Week of the Year
Heb 11:1-7; Ps 144; Mk 9:2-13

“And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white” (Mk 9:2-3).

St. Matthew tells us that on this occasion “his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light” (Mt 17:2), and that “a bright cloud overshadowed them” (Mt 17:5).
This was an experience of light. It took place on “a high mountain” where Jesus led his three disciples “apart by themselves” (Mk 9:2) “to pray” (Lk 9:28). His form changed and became luminous, and he shone before them like the sun, and his clothing became like light; and while they looked on, they were covered by a cloud of light.

This was an experience of light, an anticipation of the coming of the Kingdom of God with power, as Jesus predicted, saying, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power” (Mk 9:1). On that final day, “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43), and “In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble” (Wisdom 3:7), “And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament” (Dan 12:3).

Jesus, who gave these three disciples a foretaste of the glory of the last day, gives us the same kind of foretaste in contemplative prayer, in the prayer of union. It is then that he shines like the sun in our heart, filling us with light. He shows us his splendor and glory; and this experience changes us forever. From then on, we no longer want to live for the lights of this world, nor for its delights, but only for the light of God in Jesus Christ, shining in our heart, filling us with light, and transforming our life.

We see that this light transforms us into the image of Christ and gives us knowledge of God, something which rejoices us more than all the delights of this world, which only divide our heart, making it incapable of perceiving the light of God in our heart. About this experience, St. Paul says, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory into another, as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor 3:18). While contemplating this glory, we are being changed into it, in Christ’s image, “For it is the God who said, Let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). This happens to us in contemplative prayer, in the prayer of union, the prayer of light, when Christ shines in our hearts, illumining us from within. All who seek to live for this light will renounce the lights of this world which only blind us to this one true light. It requires the renunciation of all else (Mt 13:44-46), for it is the buried treasure and the pearl of great price which can only be had at the price of renouncing all else.

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

7th Sunday of the Year
Is 43:18-19,21-22,24-25; Ps 40; 2 Cor 1:18-22; Mk 2:1-12

“And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, My son, your sins are forgiven… But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—he said to the paralytic—I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home” (Mk 2:5,10-11).

Everyone was astounded to hear these words of Jesus Christ, telling the paralytic that his sins are forgiven. The scribes said, “Why does this man speak thus? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mk 2:7). This was indeed something new,
something truly extraordinary. It is an indirect indication of Jesus’ divinity, for only God can forgive sins, as the scribes correctly point out. Even though Jesus did not say, “I absolve you from your sins,” but only, “your sins are forgiven” (Mk 2:5), even so it is still an indication of his divinity, for who—except God alone—knows that this man’s sins have been forgiven? and who—but God alone—has the authority to assure him that his sins have been forgiven? And this is precisely the great novelty that we see here, namely, that Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, has power on earth even to forgive sins. He also forgave the sins of the woman who washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair (Lk 7:48). Then to prove that he really does have this power and that this man’s sins really have been forgiven, he cured him of his paralysis.

What could be worse than sin? We can endure even with joy any other problem or sickness, even martyrdom, if the risen Christ is shining in our heart (2 Cor 4:6), filling us with light and with the Holy Spirit as rivers of living water running through our stomach (Jn 7:37-39), rejoicing us interiorly. But sin is different. Sin darkens and saddens the spirit, causing depression and an anguished spirit. The saints, who are very sensitive, were in anguish even over very small imperfections. What joy, then, to hear that there is a remedy here on earth for this worst of all sicknesses, for this sickness of the soul, for this great sadness and depression, which sin or imperfections cause in the soul. “A man’s spirit will endure sickness,” says Proverbs; “but a broken spirit who can bear?” (Prov 18:14).

But the good news is that since the days of Jesus Christ there is a remedy on earth for the anguished spirit. There is a remedy for guilt. The Son of Man does indeed have “authority on earth to forgive sins” (Mk 2:10). And not only this, but he gave this power to his apostles, so that his Church might always have this power on earth.

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his apostles on Easter evening and said to them, “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:21-23). This is the great wonder that Jesus gave to his Church, namely, the same power on earth that he himself had to forgive sins and give us relief from this great sickness and sadness of soul. And we see that he sends out his ministers to do this, just as he himself was sent out to forgive sins on earth: “As the Father has sent me,” he says, “even so I send you” (Jn 20:21).

We especially experience this wonder, this great relief for the worst of our sufferings on earth, in the sacrament of reconciliation. In this sacrament we receive the same relief and the same healing of our anguished spirit that this paralytic received when the Son of Man pronounced him forgiven for all his sins, and relieved of all the anguish and depression of his spirit.

How often do we ask God in our heart for forgiveness for a certain sin or imperfection which agonizes our spirit, but we still continue to be in anguish? And how often have we confessed our sin or imperfection in the sacrament of reconciliation, and went out feeling completely forgiven and happy, at peace with God? This is the wonder of this sacrament, that there is now on earth the power to forgive us our sins, that Jesus has sent out his ministers to perform this ministry.

Only God has the power to forgive sins—as the scribes correctly noted—and Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, equal to the Father in divinity, exercised this power on earth;
and after his resurrection, he gave it to his Church, to his apostles, so that this ministry would always remain with his Church for the salvation and relief of those who believe in him. Such power has God given to his elect! including even the power to cure the most anguishing sickness of all, the depression of spirit caused by sin or by imperfections. God has so loved us that he has given us this power! Jesus Christ promised to give this power to Peter when he said, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19). Here is the power to loose us from our sins; and as it is ministered to us on earth, so will it be accomplished for us in heaven. In this way Jesus Christ wanted this power to remain on earth after his ascension, to help us and give us relief for the anguish of our spirit. And later he gave this power to all his apostles (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23).

This is truly a new thing on earth, a great wonder indeed!

A FORETASTE OF LENT AND EASTER

Monday, 7th Week of the Year
Sirach 1:1-10; Ps 92; Mk 9:14-29

“But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could we not cast it out? And he said to them, This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting” (Mk 9: 27-29).

Today Jesus cures a boy possessed by an unclean spirit. His disciples could not cure him, although on other occasions they cast out demons (Mk 6:13). This type of demon, Jesus says, is more difficult to cast out, and can only be driven out by “prayer and fasting” (RSV, KJV, NKJV). Jesus was, therefore, the only one who could cast it out at this time. We see also that the Greek vocabulary used here for raising the boy up is the same that is used for Jesus’ resurrection from the dead: he “raised him up (egeireν), and he arose (ανεστε)” (Mk 9:27).

We begin Lent this week, a time of “prayer and fasting” (Mk 9:29) in preparation for the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have for this reason noted the references to “prayer and fasting” and to the resurrection of Christ that occur in this passage.

Christ came to give us a participation in his resurrection, so that we could begin, even now, to live a risen life in him (Col 3:1-2; 2:12; Eph 2:6). This new and risen life, which we have in Jesus Christ, is also a life of “prayer and fasting,” in which we renounce the delights and pleasures of this world to be better able to enjoy with an undivided heart those of the Kingdom of God and of the new creation. It is also a life of communion with the risen Christ, lived in prayer and contemplation, in which we see his light shining in our heart (2 Cor 4:6), and contemplate his glory, which contemplation transforms us into his image through the working of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).

Such is the new life that we have in Jesus Christ. He justifies us through our faith by his death, for his death paid our debt of punishment for our sins, having substituted for
our death, so that thus forgiven, justified, and released from this penalty, we might rise with him now to live a new and risen life in him. It is a life of communion with him, in which we are transformed in his image. It is a life of renunciation of this world to live ahead of time in the light and splendor of his resurrection, an illumined life of contemplation and of fasting from the delights of this world.

After his resurrection, his disciples would have more power to cast out demons of this kind, for they would be risen with Christ (Col 3:1-2), living a new life of prayer and fasting, seeking no longer the things of earth, but rather those of heaven (Col 3:1-2).

WHOEVER WOULD SAVE HIS LIFE, WILL LOSE IT

Thursday after Ash Wednesday
Dt 30:15-20; Ps 1; Lk 9:22-25

“…whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it” (Lk 9:24).

Here we have displayed before us the two ways, the way of life, and the way of death. If we choose the way of losing our life in this world for the love of Christ, we will have chosen the way of life, and we will save our life with God. But if we choose the way of saving our life in this world, which is the way of filling our life with the unnecessary pleasures of this world, we will have chosen the way of death, and we will lose our life with God. God has set before us “life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you…may live” (Dt 30:19). “For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it” (Lk 9:24).

The way of life is the way of renouncing the unnecessary delights of this world, for these are idols and false gods that attract and distract us from the true way of life, which is the way of loving only the Lord with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength (Mk 12:30). This is the first commandment. We are not to allow ourselves to be distracted from this true way of life. We are to serve only one Lord, only one Master. We cannot serve two masters (Mt 6:24). And we are to serve him with an undivided heart, with all our heart.

To also serve the unnecessary pleasures of this life is to serve another master, is to adore an idol; it is to divide our heart; it is to choose the way of death, for we are trying to save our life in a worldly way. He who tries to save his life in this way, will lose it. “…whoever will save his life will lose it,” says Jesus (Lk 9:24). We must rather hate our life in this world, and not love it in this false and worldly way, for “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for everlasting life,” says Jesus (Jn 12:25).

How many love their lives in this world in this way? Many! The great majority! We are not to follow their example. We are rather to choose the way of life, not the way of spiritual death. We are to choose the way of blessings, and not the way of the curse. We are to choose the narrow and difficult way of life, not the broad and easy way of destruction (Mt 7:13-14). We are to choose the more difficult way of life, of obedience to the will of God, the way of loving God with an undivided heart. And this way of life is
the way of losing our life for the love of Christ, the way of renouncing idols and false and strange gods, it is the way of the renunciation of the unnecessary delights of this world and of this creation, for the sake of those of the Kingdom of God and of the new creation. So “choose life, that you...may live” (Dt 30:19).

FASTING AND THE POOR OF YAHWEH

Friday after Ash Wednesday
Is 58:1-9; Ps 50; Mt 9:14-15

“And Jesus said to them, Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Mt 9:15).

We are in those days now, when Jesus is no longer physically present among us, and, as he says, this is the time of fasting, especially now during Lent, which is forty days of prayer and fasting in the desert.

Why do we fast? We fast to have an undivided heart in our love of God, that is, a heart not divided among the unnecessary pleasures of the world and of the table. Even austere eating of only essential things gives pleasure, but this is necessary for life and health, and is unavoidable; but fasting (or one form of fasting) is not to add more—only to give pleasure—to what is necessary; that is, not to add delicacies, things made of white flour and sugar, for example, which have nothing to do with health, but are only added to give pleasure.

We therefore fast from such things to serve only one Lord (Mt 6:24), not two masters, to have but one treasure only, the Lord (Mt 6:19-21), and so that he be our only joy in life, to the degree that this is possible, so that we might live for him alone, loving him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mk 12:30). We fast in order to renounce all to find all in him, who is the buried treasure and the pearl of great price, which are only obtainable at the price of sacrificing everything else (Mt 13:44-46). We fast in order to sacrifice all else to obtain them—to obtain him.

This kind of fasting is to live a simple and austere life. It is very difficult for a rich person, on the other hand, surrounded by pleasures and delicacies, to enter the Kingdom of God (Mt 19:21). Jesus severely warned them, saying that they have already had their consolation in the delights of this world. “But woe to you that are rich,” he says, “for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6:24). And the rich glutton, “who feasted sumptuously every day” (Lk 16:19), was told in hell, where he went after death, “Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things” (Lk 16:25).

Blessed, on the other hand, are those who leave all for Christ, for they will receive a hundred times more (Mt 19:29). They will be the last in this world, who will be the first in the Kingdom of God (Mt 19:30). They are those who have followed the way of perfection in leaving all (Mt 19:21). Happy and blessed, then, are the poor (Lk 6:20) and the poor in spirit (Mt 5:3), for they are the anawim, the poor of Yahweh, who have lost and renounced everything of this world, and remain only with God, with all their heart,
with an undivided heart; and he is all their joy. We fast from the delights of this world to be like them, the blessed of the Lord.

A RETREAT OF FORTY DAYS IN THE DESERT

1st Sunday of Lent
Gen 9:8-15; Ps 24; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mk 1:12-15

“The Spirit immediately drove him out into the desert. And he was in the desert forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him” (Mk 1:12-13).

Today is the First Sunday of Lent, a time of more intense prayer and fasting in imitation of Jesus’ forty days of prayer and fasting in the desert. St. Matthew says, “And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry” (Mt 4:2). And St. Luke says that he was “forty days in the desert… And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry” (Lk 4:2).

For the next forty days, until Easter, we will imitate Jesus during his forty day retreat in the desert. Although he ate nothing during those days—and few will imitate him in this—nonetheless, we will do something along this line in order to imitate his retreat of more intense prayer and fasting in the desert, far from the world with its entertainments and distractions.

We will do this in order to cleanse our heart to be able to love God with all our heart. To love God with all our heart means not putting other things in our heart in place of him, or in competition with him, so that our heart be not divided between God on the one hand, and these other unnecessary things on the other hand, for if we divide our heart in this way amid the various unnecessary pleasures of the world, we will not have as much affective energy left for God. Our affective energy will be divided and dispersed in many directions, and our love for God will be weakened.

It is in order to have a love for God that is not weakened, not divided, but rather strong, that we go on our annual retreat with Jesus Christ to the desert, seeking silence and solitude, and spending time with him in prayer and contemplation, renouncing worldly entertainments and pleasures, and reducing or food to the essentials, giving up delicacies and things designed only for pleasure.

For monks, their whole life is a continual lent, and so in the days of St. Bernard, for example, they did not even use seasoning on their food, other than salt; and they did this so that the Lord alone would be their only pleasure, to the degree that this is possible. We can follow their example if we want to live a contemplative life, dedicating ourselves to contemplation. But during Lent at least, all Christians will do something along this line.

The preface for the First Sunday of Lent says, Christ’s “fast of forty days makes this a holy season of self-denial.” And the fourth preface of Lent says, “with bodily fasting you restrain our passions, elevate our spirit, and strengthen and reward us.”

Fasting can take many forms. Cistercian and Carthusian monks and most Orthodox monks, for example, seldom or never eat meat. Some eat nothing but whole wheat bread,
salt, and water on certain days; others, such as St. Bernard’s monks, give up seasoning, except salt. One can renounce delicacies and things made of white flour and sugar, things which have nothing to do with health, but only with pleasure, a pleasure which divides the heart from an undivided love of God alone. Others eat only twice a day; and still others eat but once a day, at midday, to be light in the early morning and ready for prayer, contemplation, lectio divina, spiritual reading, and the silent, meditative work of the morning.

If one eats only at noon, his digestion will be completed when he begins his prayer in the very early morning. But it is difficult to complete the digestion of a big supper before rising early for prayer—and monks rise about 3:00 A.M.! Breakfast, furthermore, drops one spiritually right in the middle of the optimal time for contemplation and the silent, meditative work of the morning. This is why we find eating but once a day at noon to be a common practice in the monastic tradition.

Fasting is therefore an essential element of the contemplative life, which is a life exclusively dedicated to God as our only love and only pleasure.

Moses and Elijah will be our models from the Old Testament during our Lenten fast. When Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the law, “he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water” (Ex 34:28), and Elijah, in the same Sinai desert, “arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God” (1 Kings 19:8). And from the New Testament, Jesus Christ himself will be our model for our fasting and prayer during these forty days when we purify our heart for Easter, so that we might walk illumined by the light of his resurrection, renewed in body, mind, and spirit. Christ sanctifies us, and our part now is to go with him to the desert, to pass these forty days there with him in prayer and fasting, silence and solitude.

THE GOOD FRUIT OF OUR JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Monday, 1st Week of Lent
Lev 19:1-2,11-18; Ps 18 Mt 25:31-46

“And the King will answer them, Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40).

Here Jesus teaches us that when we help a needy person, we help Jesus Christ himself: “as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). This is a great revelation. How much we desire to concretely express our love for Jesus Christ! And here he shows us a way of doing it. We can no longer see Jesus Christ since his ascension, but if we love him in our brother—who is any person, especially those in need—then, Jesus says, we are loving Jesus Christ himself! Jesus said, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” (Mt 18:5). In receiving and loving anyone in need, we receive and love Jesus Christ. Here, then, we see the foundation for all charitable works and Christian ministry. Whom are we serving and loving in our works of charity and in our ministry of the word? We are helping and
loving Jesus Christ himself; and this is how he receives our ministry and charitable works.

We should make a greater effort, therefore, to help others with our gifts, everyday trying to help a new person, if we can, every day trying to preach a word of life, salvation, and faith to someone new. We are to jeopardize ourselves and risk being rejected in doing this, in trying to preach to more and more people, in trying to do good to ever new people.

In this Gospel reading we see the importance of good works as the fruit of our faith. Jesus is teaching those who believe in him, and is teaching us the fruit that our faith in him should bear if it is genuine and living faith. If our faith does not bear this kind of fruit, it is not genuine and living faith, and it will not save us. Our faith will be known by its fruit. “You will know them by their fruits,” Jesus said (Mt 7:16). “So, every sound tree bears good fruit” (Mt 7:17). If it does not bear good fruit, it is not a good tree.

We do not justify ourselves, nor do we justify ourselves through our works, for “a man is justified by faith apart from works of law” (Rom 3:28). It is only the death of Jesus Christ on the cross which justifies us when we believe in him, for he bore in himself our sins, and suffered their punishment on the cross, thus freeing us from this punishment and guilt, and clothing us with his righteousness. Thus God both pronounces and makes us righteous, not through our works, but through our faith in Jesus Christ, and thus are we born again and made a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). And to the degree that we bear good fruit in good works of charity for our needy brethren, we will grow in sanctification, which God continues to work in us. We rejoice, therefore, in our justification by faith by bearing good fruit in our works of charity for our brethren—and our brother is any person who is in need.

THE PRAYER OF PETITION

Thursday, 1st Week of Lent
Ester 14:1,3-5,12-14; Ps 137; Mt 7:7-12

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Mt 7:7-8).

The three works of Lent are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Today we focus on prayer, especially the prayer of petition. We are to pray for what we need, ask for it in faith (Mt 21:22), not doubting that we will receive it (James 1:5-8), and ask for it in the name of Jesus (Jn 14:13-14).

We are to also frequently pray with another person for what we need; and if we do this, we can be assured that our prayer will be heard (Mt 18:19), for Jesus said, “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:19-20). The best example of this is what happens in the sacrament of reconciliation, where one asks God for the forgiveness of his sins in the presence of his confessor, who then prays with him and for him, and then gives him
sacramental absolution (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23). In fact, the verse immediately preceding this one refers to this prayer for absolution, saying, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you lose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt 18:18).

For what better thing could we ask in our prayer than for the forgiveness of our sins or imperfections, and the removal of the pain of guilt from our conscience, which depresses us? We know for certain that God wants to give us this, and we know how much we need it. But he does not normally give it to us immediately, for he wants us to continue asking him for it for a while. And during this time, we are to ask for this forgiveness in the name of Jesus (Jn 14:13-14), and believe—without doubting (James 1:5-8)—that we will receive it (Mt 21:22), and if in addition we confess our sins in the sacrament of reconciliation with another person—a priest—we will receive this forgiveness rapidly and with complete assurance, feeling truly forgiven. This is why Christ gave us this sacrament (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23), so that we could receive sacramental absolution by praying for it with another person (Mt 18:19), and feel genuinely forgiven, with complete inner assurance that we have indeed been forgiven.

Let us, therefore, ask forgiveness for our sins or imperfections, putting ourselves into agreement about this with another person in the sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:19), believing—without doubting (James 1:5-8)—that we will receive it (Mt 21:22), and requesting it in the name of Jesus (Jn 14:13 14), for “whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Mt 21:22 NKJV), and “Whatever you ask in my name,” said Jesus, “I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it” (Jn 14:13-14).

TURN TO THE LORD, AND LIVE

Friday, 1st Week of Lent
Ez 18:21-28; Ps 129; Mt 5:20-26

“But if a wicked man turns away from all his sins which he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness which he has done he shall live” (Ez 18:21-22).

We are justified through our faith in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to suffer our punishment of death for our sins for us, to justify us, making us righteous and holy. But if, after being justified, we sin or disobey the will of God in something, God will punish us. He will discipline us (Heb 12:5-11) for our good in order to better teach us his will, and dissuade us for the future not to fall again into this sin or imperfection. He will discipline us as his beloved sons to help us, to purify us, and to sanctify us more. The psalmist says that if the descendents of David “violate my statutes and do not keep my commandments, then I will punish their transgressions with the rod and their iniquity with scourges; but I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness” (Ps 88:31-33). In his disciplining of us, he still loves and cares for us as his dear sons.
If we faithfully follow the will of God, our life will be happy and full of grace, even in the midst of problems around us. But when we depart from God’s will, we will be filled with guilt, our conscience will attack us and rob us of our peace, and we will live with an anguished spirit. This is the discipline of the Lord (Heb 12:5-11) to help us to better discern his will for us, and to abandon the false ways that cause us such anguish of spirit. And the more we grow spiritually, the smaller are the imperfections which the Lord punishes and disciplines for our good.

But having better learned his will through this discipline (Heb 12:5-11), if we completely repent of our false ways and change our conduct, living according to his will with exactitude, we will live in happiness and be filled with light (Jn 8:12). Then none of the transgressions which we have committed shall be remembered against us; but for the righteousness we have done we shall live (Ez 18:22).

This is how a Christian grows. He grows by means of the discipline of the Lord (Heb 12:5-11); and to the degree that he lives according to the will of God, he shall live in the light (Jn 8:12). His spirit will rejoice in the Lord, and the Holy Spirit will run through his interior, rejoicing him like rivers of living water (Jn 7:37-39). He shall live by means of his faith in Jesus Christ, shall be justified and made righteous and holy through him, and shall walk in his light (Jn 8:12). Truly, “All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies” (Ps 24:10).

THE CALL TO PERFECTION

Saturday, 1st Week of Lent
Dt 26:16-19; Ps 118; Mt 5:43-48

“You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48).

We are all called to perfection, to a life of perfection. “You, therefore, must be perfect,” Jesus tells us, “as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48).

Adam and Eve were created perfect in the garden of Eden. They loved God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength. They loved him with an undivided heart, and they loved one another. But they fell from their state of perfection by disobeying God in putting something else in the place of God in their heart, the forbidden fruit.

Christ was sent into the world to restore us to this state of perfection by justifying us through our faith in him, and by putting us into a process of sanctification, which requires our cooperation with God’s grace, to arrive at an advanced state of love, namely, love of God with all our heart, with an undivided heart, and love of our neighbor, even to the point of loving our enemies and persecutors, as Jesus tells us today, saying, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44). That is, we must do more than merely love those who love us, and greet those who greet us (Mt 5:46-47). We are to love even our enemies, “so that you may be sons of your Father who…makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Mt 5:45). We are to imitate God in loving our enemies.

This is difficult, but it should be the program and project of our life, what we are trying to do, namely, to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.
To be perfect, we must renounce all else, not dividing our heart among the delights and pleasures of this world. Only in this way will we have an undivided heart in our love of God. Only in this way will we be able to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mk 12:30). We see this in the call to perfection given to the rich young man, when Jesus said, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mt 19:21).

This, then, is the call to perfection, a call we have all received. We are all called to serve but one Lord only (Mt 6:24), and to love him with all our heart (Mk 12:30), with an undivided heart. This is how Jesus spoke to the multitudes, not just to his apostles. “Now great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them, If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple… So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:25-26,33).

What would you have to do to respond to this call to perfection?

THE FATHER GAVE HIS ONLY BELOVED SON FOR US

2nd Sunday of Lent
Gen 22:1-2,9-13,15-18; Ps 115; Rom 8:31-34; Mk 9:2-10

“And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, This is my beloved Son; listen to him” (Mk 9:7).

Here the voice of the Father, coming out of the cloud on the mount of Transfiguration identifies Jesus as his “beloved Son” (Mk 9:7). Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James, and John; and Moses and Elijah appeared to them, speaking with Jesus (Mk 9:4). St. Luke says, “And behold, two men talked with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure (exodon), which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Lk 9:30-31). So we see here that Jesus is the beloved Son of the Father, who is about to suffer death—“his departure” (Lk 9:31). The Father “did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32), as St. Paul tells us today. Abraham’s sacrifice of his only beloved son Isaac, in our first reading, is a type of this. God did in actuality what he commanded Abraham to do. He offered up for us his only beloved Son. This is the mystery which we are now commemorating and celebrating during Lent, the sacrifice of his only beloved Son, which the Father offered on Calvary.

How are we to understand this mystery? So much did the Father love us that he “did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32). “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

We are to live and draw life from the Son, whom the Father gave up to death on the cross for us. “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him” (1 Jn 4:9). We draw life from him. “And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (Jn 1:16). “Yet a little while,” Jesus said, “and the world will see me no more, but you will see me;
because I live, you will live also” (Jn 14:19). The very life of Jesus now, after his death and resurrection, is the source of our new life in him. He now lives in glory, and from him we draw life. He said, “As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me” (Jn 6:57). As Jesus draws life from his Father, so we draw life from Jesus Christ glorified. It is he who shines in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6), vivifying us and illumining us, forgiving us and clothing us in his own righteousness as in a splendid robe (Is 61:10).

Jesus Christ is the Savior whom the Father sent because we were lost in sin, alienated from God, and living under his wrath (Rom 1:18). God is perfectly merciful and loving, but also, at the same time, perfectly just and righteous. He will not offend against his own perfect justice in showing us his perfect love and mercy. He wanted to forgive our sins and justify us, that is, declare us henceforth forgiven and righteous, and in fact make us truly righteous and holy, but he wanted to do this justly, without jeopardizing his perfect justice.

Man could not help himself. He was alienated from God, sunk in sin and guilt, unable to lift himself out of it, and unable to forgive himself and be or feel forgiven by God. So God in his perfect justice and infinite love and mercy offered up for us in sacrifice on the cross his own beloved Son to suffer for us, and instead of us, the just penalty due to us for our sins, so that we could be justly forgiven and justified, that is, declared and really made just, righteous, and holy before God, illumined and resplendent in his sight, and in actuality. And through the suffering of his Son for us, in place of us, and instead of us, this forgiveness which the Father grants us is as just as it is merciful. And God through it all remains as much a just and righteous God as a loving and merciful one.

On the cross God supremely manifests his justice as much as his love. The one act on the cross is his supremely merciful as well as his supremely just act. We see on the cross how he remains just in forgiving and justifying us, canceling our punishment and clothing us in the glorious righteousness of his own Son. His infinite justice and righteousness is not jeopardized when he freely declares us righteous without exacting any punishment from us, because the price of the just penalty, which we owe because of our sins, has been paid for us by his own beloved Son, sacrificed for us by the Father on the cross. God himself, in his supreme justice and love, in the person of his only beloved Son, paid for us our just debt of punishment due for our sins. Otherwise, his justification of us would not have been just. What greater love could there be than this; and what greater justice! God himself paid our debt. God thus propitiates his own righteous wrath against our sins (Rom 3:25), by himself bearing and absorbing that wrath (Rom 3:25), in the person of his Son, in his death on the cross (Gal 3:13).

Through our faith in the death of the only beloved Son of God on the cross, we are saved and justified, that is, made just and righteous, made a new creation, and born again for a new life in the risen Christ. We are even raised up with him now to live a new and risen life in him on this earth, henceforth seeking him and the things that are above, and no longer the things that are below (Col 3:1-2).

Thus we live because he lives (Jn 14:19), and we live through him, as he lives through the Father (Jn 6:57). It is he who shines within us, illumining us (2 Cor 4:6). We contemplate Christ now in his glory as the transfigured one, for that is how he now is;
and through our contemplation of him in glory we are transformed more and more in his image through the working of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).

THE RICH GLUTTON IN HELL

Thursday, 2nd Week of Lent
Jer 17:5-10; Ps 1; Lk 16:19-31

“But Abraham said, Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish” (Lk 16:25).

These are the words that Dives, the rich glutton, heard in hell, where he went after his death. During his lifetime he “was clothed in purple and fine linen and...feasted sumptuously every day” (Lk 16:19). Now in hell, Abraham explains to him why he is there. It is because he lived a life of luxury and pleasure, and “feasted sumptuously every day,” Abraham tells him (Lk 16:19). He should remember that he has already received his good things and his consolation in his lifetime, so that now, after his death, there is no more consolation for him, but only the flames of hell. “…remember,” said Abraham to him, “that you in your lifetime received your good things” (Lk 6:25). The poor Lazarus, on the other hand, lived in poverty during his lifetime, but now, after his death, he is consoled.

Blessed indeed are the poor (Lk 6:20), for they will receive their consolation after their death, in heaven. But “Woe to you that are rich,” said Jesus, “for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6:24). And he also said that “it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19:23) because he already has his consolation in the pleasures of this world—particularly those who have “feasted sumptuously every day” (Lk 16:19). And Jesus adds that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 19:24).

It is difficult for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God because he is surrounded by pleasures and delights, and if he is indulgent, he will divide his heart among these pleasures, and will not love God with all his heart, with an undivided heart. He will rather have idols, which he puts in his heart and serves in place of God. St. James says to the rich, “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you... You have lived on the earth in luxury and pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter” (James 5:1,5).

And you, how do you live? Do you live in the unnecessary delights of the table like this rich glutton, feasting “sumptuously every day” (Lk 16:19)? Are you dividing your heart between God and the unnecessary delights of the table? Are you living for the flesh? Do you have your consolation in this life? Or are you living the life of the anawim, the poor of the Lord, renouncing the delights and pleasures of this world in order to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mk 12:30)? If you live like the anawim, you will receive your consolation after your death in the kingdom of heaven.
Are you living according to the flesh and its delights, or according to the Spirit? Indeed “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace...for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body your will live” (Rom 8:6,13).

It is only by leaving all—especially unnecessary pleasures—that we will obtain the buried treasure and the pearl of great price (Mt 13:44-46), which is the Kingdom of God.

THE CORNERSTONE

Friday, 2nd Week of Lent
Gen 37:3-4,12-13,17-28; Ps 104; Mt 21:33-43,45-46

“Afterward he sent his son to them, saying, They will respect my son. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, This is the heir; come let us kill him and have his inheritance. And they took him and cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him” (Mt 21:37-39).

As we approach Holy Week, we have today a parable of Jesus that speaks of his death. In this parable, Jesus is the son of the owner of the vineyard, sent to the workers after many servants had already been sent, and “they took him and cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him” (Mt 21:39). Thus did God act with Israel, sending them his servants such as Moses, David, and the prophets, and last of all his only Son, whom Israel killed outside the city, that is, outside the vineyard (Mt 21:39).

This Son of God was, as Jesus says here, “The very stone which the builders rejected [which] has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Mt 21:42; Ps 117:22-23). The marvel is that this only Son of God the Father, in being killed by Israel, has become the cornerstone, the Savior of his people; and it is precisely in being killed that he achieved this. His death on the cross, after being rejected, was his great work of salvation for his people. In being killed outside the vineyard—that is, outside the city—he became the cornerstone. And this is marvelous.

All the sins of Israel in rejecting those sent to them and all the sins of the world are expiated by the death on the cross of the only Son of God. The death on the cross of the Son is the just punishment assumed by the Son, and administered by the Father, for all the sins of the world. God is perfectly righteous, just, and holy, and in his righteousness he punishes all sin. But we see the mercy of God in that God himself, in the person of his only Son, suffered this punishment for us, so that we would not have to suffer it.

The only Son suffered separation from God, and drank the cup of the wrath of God (Rev 16:1; Mt 26:39; 20:22) and of alienation from him, being made a curse for us and instead of us in being hanged from a tree (Gal 3:13; Dt 21:22-23), so that we would not suffer God’s curse for our sins. He suffered this curse for us, and in place of us, to free us from it. And from the cross, having experienced being abandoned by God, he cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46).

He suffered so much and had such fear and dread in the Garden of Gethsemane because he was suffering the wrath of God against the sins of the world. He suffered the
rejection and curse of God which we should have suffered for our sins. And so our sins were justly and mercifully punished in him; and we are forgiven.

The death on the cross of the only Son of God is the center of our faith. It is our redemption and salvation, our happiness and freedom; it is the forgiveness of our sins, and the beginning of a new life in the light for us. The resurrection then shows that the Father accepted his sacrifice, and that we are truly forgiven and made righteous and new in Jesus Christ.

THE MERCY OF THE FATHER

Saturday, 2nd Week of Lent
Micah 7:14-15,18-20; Ps 102; Lk 15:1-3,11-32

“And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Lk 15:20).

This important parable of the prodigal son teaches us the love and great mercy that God the Father has toward sinners. There are some who think that the Father is just and strict, but not merciful. They believe that it was the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that made him change and become merciful. But this is not true. Jesus teaches us today in this parable that the Father himself is merciful and full of love for sinners, and wants to save them and forgive their sins. The father of the prodigal son symbolizes God the Father. He “had compassion” when he saw his prodigal son returning, “and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Lk 15:20). And not only that, but he also fully restored him as his son, and gave a party for him to welcome him home. “…the father said to his servants, Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry” (Lk 15:22-23).

This is God the Father! Thus does he do to us when we have sinned and then come to him in repentance. And how does he do it? He does it by sending his own only Son, who is one being with him in essence, will, and mind, so that he might make satisfaction on the cross for our sins, so that the Father might justly forgive us. That is, God himself has such love for us that, in the person of his only Son, he satisfies himself that justice has been done in his Son’s death on the cross for our sins. Thus God satisfied his own wrath against sin to be able to justly justify us and forgive our sins. The price had to be paid; and he paid it himself! This is mercy and love in the extreme! God himself suffered our punishment for our sins for us and instead of us, in order to justly forgive us. This is how God acts. The initiative comes from God the Father.

The sinner should, therefore, not be afraid of God the Father. God comes to us in the person of his Son to die on the cross for the remission of our sins. All we need to do is to return to God through Jesus Christ in repentance, and he will absolve us through the merits of his death on the cross. Let us then return to him who says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven” (Jn 20:23). Christ gave to his apostles, and to their successors, the power to forgive sins, that is, the power to sacramentally channel the
merits of his death on the cross, and to apply them individually and personally to sinners when they confess their sins.

LIVING WATER IN THE DESERT OF THE JOURNEY OF LIFE

3rd Sunday of Lent
Ex 17:3-7; Ps 94; Rom 5:1-2,5-8; Jn 4:5-42

“Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:13-14).

Jesus Christ himself is the source of this living water. It flows from his death, in which our sins are forgiven; and we are then illuminated from within by the light of his resurrection, which rejoices our heart, and exalts our spirit. This living water fills us with joy, even in the midst of the problems and disgraces of life. To get this water, we have to believe in Jesus and invoke the merits of his death on the cross. It is to give us this living water that Jesus came into the world. It is a water that vivifies the spirit.

Jesus, who is speaking with the Samaritan woman, uses the figure of living water because they were speaking about the water which she came to draw from the well. He was asking her for a drink, when she refused, saying that Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. He then offered her living water, if only she would request it.

At this point, he began speaking on a deeper level, but continued using the figure of living water. He now spoke to her of this gift of God which he came into the world to give to all who believe in him, namely, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the love of God in the heart, which he tells her will become in the heart “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). It is something which will become a spring in the heart of the believer, ever producing living water which rejoices the spirit with the love of God. It becomes in him a permanent source of his new life in God.

Who would not want this living water, which he says we simply have to request from him with faith to receive? If “you would have asked him…he would have given you living water,” he tells her (Jn 4:10). It is the life of God in the soul that rejoices the heart and exalts the spirit.

How sad and empty we are without this water. When one sins, he loses God’s favor; and experiences instead his wrath, punishment, and discipline (Heb 12:5-11; Rev 3:19). How careful we must then be always to obey God in everything, and always do his will. By disciplining us, God teaches us his will with greater exactitude, and dissuades us from falling again into the same type of disobedience.

When the Lord disciplines us, we experience thirst for this living water of his love, rejoicing our hearts and illumining us from within. How important it then is to know his will for us, and observe it with care. The way, then, to get this living water is to believe in Jesus and invoke the merits of his death on the cross, confessing our sins and repenting of them, especially in the sacrament which he left us for this purpose (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23). He will then pour this living water into our hearts, filling us with his love and
joy. He will fill us with his Holy Spirit, which pours his love into our hearts, as St. Paul tells us today (Rom 5:5).

To experience this living water, with Christ illumining our hearts (2 Cor 4:6), we must renounce all sin and disobedience to God’s will, which causes us rather to experience his disciplining wrath. We must live completely for God, and for him alone. Then we will rejoice in the Lord, and in his great love for us. Then is truly fulfilled in us, in an experiential way, the word which Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman: “the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). Jesus also spoke of this when he said, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water” (Jn 7:37-38), and St. John adds that “this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive” (Jn 7:39).

If we believe in Christ and commit our whole lives to him in repentance, we will experience these rivers of living water flowing within us, rejoicing us. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit, whom Christ gives to those who believe in him; and it pours out into our hearts the love of God (Rom 5:5).

But we must also be disciplined by the Lord (Heb 12:5-11; Rev 3:19) to learn more about this new life, and to learn his will for us more exactly; and this is an experience of God’s righteous wrath—in his love for us—against our sins or imperfections. God lets us experience this for our good, out of his love for us. But then once again he illumines our hearts and rejoices them with his gift of living water.

The Israelites, after their exodus from Egypt, knew difficult times when they lacked water and food in the desert, but we see today how, in the midst of all this, God gave them living water from a rock (Ex 17:6). Such is the life of faith. It is a journey through the desert from the slavery of sin to the promised land when all things will be consummated in glory. It is a journey which passes through the desert of tribulation, but it is a journey in the midst of which God gives us living water, which rejoices the heart with the happiness of God himself.

THE REJECTED PROPHET

Monday, 3rd Week of Lent
2 Kings 5:1-15; Ps 41-42; Lk 4:24-30

“Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country... When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong. But passing through the midst of them he went away” (Lk 4:24,28-30).

Jesus came into the world to die for our sins. Death entered the world because of sin (Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23; Wisdom 2:24). And Jesus, who had no sin, died for our sins (Gal 1:4; 1 Tim 2:6; 1 Cor 15:3). He suffered the punishment of death for sins which he himself did not commit. He suffered for our sins, not for his own. In doing this, he bore our curse for our sins for us, becoming a curse for us (Gal 3:13; Dt 21:23), so that we
might not be cursed for our sins, being himself made sin for us (2 Cor 5:21). Thus he freed us from the wrath of God, bearing it himself. God satisfied his own wrath against our sins by suffering himself, in the person of his Son, our just punishment, to free us from this punishment, and justify us through our faith in Jesus Christ.

In today’s Gospel we see the beginning of Jesus’ suffering. He was a prophet who was not accepted by his own people, who tried to throw him headlong off a cliff in Nazareth. This was his mission. He was sent to teach his people the truth. He was rejected and killed by them—and all for our salvation. In this way is the love of God revealed to us!

Christ taught us that we are to follow this same pattern, to testify to the truth, and be rejected for our testimony. But blessed are we, he tells us, when this happens (Lk 6:22-23). This is our vocation. We are to bear our cross every day, and follow him (Lk 9:23). The prophets were persecuted and killed by their own people (Lk 11:49; Jer 7:25-28; Lk 13:34; Acts 7:52; Neh 9:26), and so will it be with us if we follow Jesus Christ and proclaim the truth. “If they persecuted me,” he said, “they will persecute you” (Jn 15:20). But blessed are we when people hate us for our witness and way of life. So did they treat the prophets (Lk 6:22-23).

In the death of Jesus Christ on the cross is our salvation and justification, as well as our example of how to live as his followers. In obeying his will, we will be persecuted, but blessed.

I WILL ESTABLISH THE THRONE OF HIS KINGDOM FOREVER

Solemnity of St. Joseph, husband of Mary, March 19
2 Sam 7:4-5,12-14,16; Ps 88; Rom 4:13,16-18,22; Mt 1:16,18-21,24

“…behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:20-21).

Today we celebrate St. Joseph, the foster father of Jesus Christ. It is through Joseph, even though he is only Jesus’ foster father, that Jesus Christ was legally of the house and lineage of David, and thus heir to the Davidic promises. To David were promised an eternal kingdom and throne, established forever by God. Through the prophet Nathan, God promised to David, saying, “I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom” (2 Sam 7:12). Jesus Christ fulfilled this prophecy. He occupies the throne of David, and reigns forever as King. God said, “I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam 7:13). Jesus Christ reigns personally forever. It is not only that David would have an everlasting dynasty, but that he would have a descendent who would personally reign forever, and would be accepted and acknowledged as King in all parts of the world. In this descendent of David, the throne of David is truly established forever. This is what God promised David, saying, “your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever” (2 Sam 7:16).
What more splendid king is there than Jesus Christ? About this son of Mary, the angel Gabriel said to Mary, “the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:32-33).

We live in this Kingdom if we believe in Jesus Christ and love him with all our heart, with an undivided heart. It is a Kingdom of heavenly peace, not a peace of this world (Lk 2:14; Jn 14:27). It is a Kingdom of intimacy with God, in which the love of God is poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). It is a Kingdom in which our sins are forgiven, and our guilt is removed through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, by means of our faith in him. It is a Kingdom in which we live illumined by the new light that streams from the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It is a Kingdom in which we offer ourselves to God, together with Jesus Christ—especially in the eucharistic sacrifice—in love and self-donation as a sacrifice of praise. It is a Kingdom in which we live a life of prayer, fasting, and service to others. And finally, it is a Kingdom of hope, in which we hope for and prepare ourselves for the second and glorious coming of Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven as King of the universe and judge of the living and the dead.

THE EUCHARISTIC LIFE

Friday, 3rd Week of Lent
Hosea 14:2-10; Ps 80; Mk 12:28-34

“Which commandment is the first of all? Jesus answered, The first is, Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mk 12:28-30).

Our lives are to be free of idols, and focused only on God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Our life and our heart are not to be divided, but rather undivided in our love, devotion, and complete offering of ourselves to God. Only thus will we enjoy the delights of the Lord, and only thus will our life be an offering to the Father, offered up together with Jesus Christ’s great offering of himself on the cross. We offer ourselves to the Father with Jesus Christ on the cross in the eucharistic sacrifice, the sacrifice of the altar, when we offer the eucharist, the sacrifice of the New Testament.

The eucharist, when it is offered, is the one and only sacrifice of Calvary, made sacramentally present for us, so that we can offer it with Jesus Christ to the Father, as our cult, sacrifice, and worship of the New Testament, a fragrant offering, acceptable to God. When we offer, together with Jesus Christ, his great sacrifice of himself to the Father, we also offer ourselves along with him in love and devotion, dedicating our lives completely to God.

We do this by living ascetically, especially during Lent, that is, by living only for God, sacrificing all else for the love of him, that he might be the only delight of our heart, to the degree that that is possible. Hence we renounce worldly pleasures to live for God alone with all our heart, with an undivided heart, in our love for him.
It is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross which infinitely pleased the Father in our favor, and thus won our redemption. This same one and only sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Calvary is made present for us in the eucharist, that is, in the eucharistic sacrifice, so that we might offer it together with Christ to the Father as our sacrifice of the New Testament, while also offering ourselves along with it.

Hence, we are not to have idols, that is, worldly pleasures, which divide our heart and life between God and themselves. And then the Lord will say to us on that day, “O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols?” (Hosea 14:8). “…and we shall say no more, Our God to the work of our hands” (Hosea 14:3). We shall rather say, “I say to the Lord, Thou art my Lord; I have no good apart from thee” (Ps 15:2), and it is the Lord who is “my chosen portion and my cup” (Ps 15:5). On the other hand, “Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows” (Ps 15:4), that is, those who choose worldly pleasures as their god.

If we live focused only on God, then the Lord will say to us, “I will be as the dew to Israel; he shall blossom as the lily, he shall strike roots as the poplar, his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon” (Hosea 14:5-6).

TRUE JUSTIFICATION

Saturday, 3rd Week of Lent
Hosea 6:1-6; Ps 50; Lk 18:9-14

“But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner! I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other” (Lk 18:13-14).

We cannot justify ourselves. It is too difficult always to keep all the precepts of the law of God and always to obey his most perfect will for us. There has never been even a single person who has ever succeeded in justifying himself by his own rectitude and observance of the law and the will of God (Rom 3:10,20). He who exalts himself, boasting of his own righteousness, not only has not made himself righteous by his own merits and works, but has actually compromised himself still further before God by his empty and false pride, “for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk 18:14).

St. Paul teaches us that only God justifies man, and that he does so through our faith, not through our good works, because everyone has an unpaid debt of sin, beginning with the hereditary sin of Adam. Everyone therefore needs the Savior whom God has sent into the world to pay our debt of sin; and this he did by suffering instead of us the just punishment for the sin of Adam, which we inherit, as well as suffering instead of us the just punishment for our own personal sins, thereby canceling them, thus forgiving us and freeing us from sin and imperfection, making us righteous and holy before God. If we, therefore, present ourselves before God in humility, with repentance and faith, invoking the merits of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, we will be justified; but if we boast of
our own holiness and good works, thinking that they justify us, we will be neither justified nor acceptable before God.

The Pharisee in today’s parable, who boasts about being righteous through his own works, saying that he fasts twice a week and gives tithes of all that he gets (Lk 18:12), is like the Jews who, as St. Paul says, “have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness” (Rom 10:2-3). We are, rather, to humble ourselves and invoke the merits of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, in order to be forgiven and clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself, which is a resplendent righteousness, far more glorious than any human righteousness, earned by our own works. This is why St. Paul wanted to be found in Christ, “not having a righteousness of my own, based on law,” as he says, “but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil 3:9).

This is why Christ came into the world, to pay our debt of sin in his death on the cross, and to make us righteous and resplendent before him. Our part is to humble ourselves, to invoke the merits of his death on the cross, and to bear good fruit in a righteous and holy life, full of good and righteous works, trying to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48). In this way we will grow ever more in holiness.

WE ARE MADE NEW BY OUR FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST

4th Sunday of Lent
1 Sam 16:1,6-7,10-13; Ps 22; Eph 5:8-14; Jn 9:1-41

“As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. As he said this, he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man’s eyes with the clay, saying to him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing” (Jn 9:5-7).

One of the themes of Lent is baptism because during Lent the catechumens are instructed and examined for their baptism during the Paschal Vigil, on the night of Holy Saturday. For us the baptized, Lent is a time to renew and actualize our baptism, that is, our new life in Jesus Christ. The readings today speak to us of this new life which we have when we believe in Jesus Christ, are baptized, and become Christians, that is, persons who are born again of water and the Spirit, to walk in the light and see, as a blind person who has been cured of his blindness by Jesus Christ.

Baptism was once called “illumination” because in believing in Jesus Christ we are illumined, our eyes are opened, and we can now live and walk in the light of Christ. If we were baptized as infants, we need to actualize our baptism now with living and mature faith to experience these effects. We should particularly do so during Lent.

In Jesus Christ, for those who believe in him with living faith, their sins are forgiven and their guilt is removed. They are illumined by a new light that streams from the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and can live and walk in this light which shines in their spirit. St. Paul speaks of this today, saying, “once you were darkness, but
now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light… Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light” (Eph 5:8,14).

Christ died for our sins, freeing us from death and the punishment for our sins, so that we might now walk in his light, in the new light of his resurrection. He paid our debt for our sins by his death, and shines now with the new light streaming from his resurrection from the dead on those who believe in him. He is the first to rise; and in him, even now, we can also rise with him through faith to live a new and illumined life, with him shining in our hearts (Col 3:1-2; 2 Cor 4:6). To do this, we have to believe in him and bathe ourselves in him. To wash oneself in the pool of Siloam (which means Sent) means to wash ourselves in him, who was sent into the world by the Father.

This washing is baptism, which we renew now with living and mature faith. The result is that we radically change from being blind, into being cured and able to see. Our new life in Christ makes us new people, born again, new men, a new creation. We were blind, but now we see. We were sinners, but now we are made righteous, clothed with the splendid righteousness of Jesus Christ himself. We are now righteous because Jesus Christ paid our debt of sin and guilt, of punishment and depression, in his death on the cross, experiencing the abandonment of God (Gal 3:13; Mk 15:34) for us and instead of us. Thus God himself satisfied his own wrath against our sins and imperfections in suffering himself, in the person of his Son, who is one being with him, the just punishment on the cross for our sins. Freed then by Jesus Christ, we are illumined by him when we believe in him and are washed in him in baptism.

Hence we can truly live a new and risen life (Col 3:1-2), a new kind of life, in which we are now light and sons of light (Eph 5:8; 1 Thess 5:5). We are, therefore, justified, that is, made truly righteous by God through the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is something that is done to us by Jesus Christ through our faith. We receive it. We do not do it to ourselves. It is not through our works. But then we bear fruit and grow in holiness by our works. So now, being justified, we see, although we were blind. We have now awakened and been raised from the dead, and Christ illumines us.

We now live a new kind of life in him, a life of prayer, fasting, and works of service for others.

Such is our new life in Christ, a life of communion with God in prayer, particularly the silent prayer of the heart, nourished by the meditative reading of Scripture and the preaching of the Church.

We also live a life of fasting, especially during Lent, by which we focus our life on God alone, sacrificing the unnecessary pleasures of the world, so that God be our only pleasure, to the degree that this is possible. We do this by loving him with all our heart, without dividing our heart among the pleasures of this world. We therefore eat simply and austerely, avoiding delicacies, so that our life may be a sacrifice of love, offered to the Father, together with the great sacrifice of his Son on the cross. Our life thus becomes eucharistic, a sacrifice of love, offered in the eucharist, and during the whole day, to the Father in love and self-donation together with Christ’s sacrifice of himself on the cross.

And finally, we help others in good works of service and charity, which we do in love, each one using his own gifts, talents, and inspirations for this.
Such, then, is the new man in Jesus Christ, a truly new person, with new life in his heart, walking in a new light, with his eyes newly opened, and living a new kind of life, namely, a life of prayer, fasting, and loving service.

THE MYSTERY OF THE INCARNATION AND THE ATONEMENT

Solemnity of the Annunciation, March 25
Is 7:10-14; Ps 39; Heb 10:4-10; Lk 1:26-38

“…we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10).

Today we celebrate the annunciation of the Lord, when the eternal Word, the only Son of the Father, begotten and born before all time, from all eternity, became flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary to save us from our sins. He became incarnate as Emmanuel, God-with-us, to be with us in human flesh, extended in the eucharist. In him, God is in our midst, loving and illumining us.

Christ was sent into the world by the Father to suffer and die in order that God might forgive us our sins, assuming himself their just penalty, so that we would not have to suffer it. Thus did God free us from our guilt, giving us new life and clothing us with the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself, so that we might be resplendent before God, made new, a new creation, born again in Jesus Christ. And Christ promised us that if we believe in him, we would live forever with him (Jn 6:54).

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God. It is God, therefore, who suffered our punishment for our sins on the cross; and he did so in the person of the eternal Son made man so that he could suffer as a man, and as our representative, suffering before God as a man on behalf of all men their just punishment for their sins. But being also God, his suffering had infinite value, and satisfied God.

In the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, God satisfied his own wrath against our sins because our debt of punishment was paid by the Son. Christ suffered the wrath of God for our sins, and satisfied it, thus freeing us from this wrath. Thus freed from the wrath of God by Christ's sacrifice, we are justified and transformed, made new, and sanctified. “…we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10). Thus “by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb 10:14).

In the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross we have new life. The sins, which God formerly in his patience passed over, are now definitively propitiated and expiated (Rom 3:25). This sacrifice is, therefore, the fountain to which we go for forgiveness and relief from our guilt when we sin or fall into an imperfection. The cross is, therefore, a fountain of happiness and spiritual liberty. We draw from it the waters of salvation with a jubilant spirit (Is 12:3).

Being made new by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, we offer the sacrifice of ourselves to the Father with him in his sacrifice on the cross. We do this in the eucharist, offering ourselves to the Father with Jesus Christ in his great offering of himself in love to the Father on the cross. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was his own perfect donation of
himself to the Father in love, the perfect act of worship, and the perfect sacrifice of adoration. We make it our own sacrifice of self-gift in love to the Father, offering ourselves with the Son to the Father.

We do this in the eucharistic sacrifice, which is the one and only sacrifice of Calvary made present for us. It is our atonement and our perfect act of worship. It is the sacrifice of the New Testament by which we are saved, and worship the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit.

The eucharist is also Emmanuel, God-with-us. It is the extension of the incarnation, whereby God remains in our midst in his eucharistic body. We adore him as Emmanuel, God-with-us, incarnate and sacramentalized in the eucharist for our sanctification.

In the incarnation God has come very close to us to illumine and sanctify us, to divinize us by his proximity. His divinity is resplendent in our midst in the incarnation in order that we might be inflamed by its luminosity. In coming so near to us, God illumines us with his splendor. And he remains with us always incarnate and sacramentalized in the eucharist.

Having completed his sacrifice for our salvation, God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, showing that he accepted his sacrifice, and that our sins are now definitively expiated and propitiated, and that he, in his sacrifice, is the victor over death, and the giver of life. In his resurrection we are victorious over death, and walk illumined by the light which streams from the risen Christ. We walk, therefore, in the light of his resurrection. If we do his will, we remain in his light (Jn 8:12).

JESUS CHRIST, OUR INTERCESSOR WITH THE FATHER

Thursday, 4th Week of Lent
Ex 32:7-14; Ps 105; Jn 5:31-47

“But Moses besought the Lord his God, and said, O Lord, why does thy wrath burn hot against thy people, whom thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?... Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people... And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people” (Ex 32:11,12,14).

Here we see the wrath of God against Israel for having made and adored the golden calf. But Moses interceded with God on their behalf; and the Lord “repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people” (Ex 32:14).

Christ fulfills this role of intercessor for us. St. Paul tells us, “who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us?” (Rom 8:34).

God heard the intercession of Moses. How much more will he hear the intercession of his own Son, Jesus Christ, who always intercedes for us at the right hand of the Father (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25; 9:24)! Christ is our intercessor with the Father for the forgiveness of our sins. The Father himself sent him into the world for this purpose (Rom 8:32). Being man, he can intercede on behalf of his fellow men; but being God, his intercession has infinite value.
Christ, in addition to interceding with words, as Moses did, made himself a victim to absorb the just wrath of God against our sins. And we see, furthermore, that God is not inflicting our penalty on his Son as on a being distinct from himself, but rather is inflicting it on his Son, with whom he is but one single being, one single God, possessing the same divine mind and divine will as himself. In other words, God is inflicting this punishment on himself, in the person of his Son, whom he sent into the world to absorb and satisfy his own just wrath against our sins.

Hence, when we fall into an imperfection or sin, and feel guilty, with our conscience accusing and attacking us, causing us pain in our heart and sadness, we should go with faith to the intercessor provided for us by the Father himself (Rom 8:32), and through his intercession we will find relief from the pain of our guilt, especially when we confess our sins and receive sacramental absolution in the sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23), which personally and individually applies the merits of Christ’s death to us.

Thus does God cure our worst sickness—guilt, and give us freedom of spirit, the glorious freedom of the sons of God (Rom 8:21). Hence Christ is our intercessor with the Father who “is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25).

THE PERSECUTION OF THE RIGHTEOUS MAN

Friday, 4th Week of Lent
Wisdom 2:1,12-22; Ps 33; Jn 7:1-2,10,25-30

“All let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training” (Wisdom 2:12).

Today we see the suffering of the righteous man. He is hated by the wicked, who live a completely hedonistic life, because his way of life is a constant reproach to theirs. They say that “He became to us a reproof of our thoughts” (Wis 2:14).

The wicked describe their own hedonistic way of life, saying, “Come, therefore, let us enjoy the good things that exist, and make use of the creation to the full as in youth. Let us take our fill of costly wine and perfumes, and let no flower of spring pass by” (Wis 2:6-7). They are materialists, and their life is an endless quest for pleasure. Such a life makes them forget and deny God. They cannot, therefore, endure even the sight of the righteous man, for he lives in a way that is completely different from theirs. “…the very sight of him is a burden to us,” they say, “because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange” (Wis 2:15). Therefore they persecute him.

It is the same today. The righteous are persecuted by hedonists today as well. Those who live only for the Lord are not understood by those who live a worldly life, and life which is an endless quest for pleasure, a life which is a constant division of heart between God and the unnecessary pleasures of this world. The righteous, on the other hand, who live only for God, renouncing all else for love of him, have a life that is completely “unlike that of others” (Wis 2:15). The righteous man’s “ways are strange” to the wicked (Wis 2:15). He has left and renounced the quest for pleasure of the hedonists and
materialists because he wants to love and serve God, and only God, with all his heart, with a heart undivided in its love for him. He renounces the unnecessary pleasures of the world in order to serve but one Lord only, not two lords—not God plus the pleasures of this world (Mt 6:24). He has sold all else, that is, the hedonistic life, to obtain the buried treasure and the pearl of great price (Mt 13:44-46). He accepts the call to a life of perfection, which the rich young man rejected (Mt 19:21).

The righteous man is, therefore, hated and rejected by the worldly, who say that he “opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training” (Wis 2:12). But in being so persecuted by the worldly, we are following after Christ, and will be blessed and sanctified by this suffering. God will bless us more if we suffer with Christ for the truth and for responding positively to his call to a life of perfection (Mt 19:21; 5:48). “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” says Jesus, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:10).

THE FATE OF THE PROPHETS

Saturday, 4th Week of Lent
Jer 11:18-20; Ps 7; Jn 7:40-53

“I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying, Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more” (Jer 11:19).

As we approach Holy Week, we read more and more types of the suffering of Christ from the Old Testament, such as this attack on Jeremiah, in which he compares himself to “a gentle lamb led to the slaughter” (Jer 11:19). So indeed was Christ “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb” (Is 53:7).

The men of Anathoth, the village of Jeremiah, said to Jeremiah, “Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord, or you will die by our hand” (Jer 11:21). They did not want to hear any more the word of the Lord, the truth that their prophet was sent to preach to them. They did not want to be challenged any more by their prophet. Jeremiah’s words were strong, pointing out their errors, and clearly indicating God’s will for them; but they refused to accept them, and they threatened him with death if he did not stop preaching.

Such is the life of a prophet in every age, and such was the life of Jesus Christ. They crucified him for the truth from God that he preached. Isaiah suffered the same thing, and said, “they are a rebellious people, lying sons, sons who will not hear the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more of the Holy One of Israel” (Is 30:9-11).

The prophet Amos also had this same experience. This is what the Lord said through his mouth: “I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and some of your young men for Nazirites... But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, You shall not prophesy” (Amos 2:11-12). And after he prophesied in Bethel, the priest of Bethel said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread
there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom” (Amos 7:12-13).

So also will we be rejected if we preach and bear witness to the truth. We should be strengthened to bear this rejection by these examples from the scriptures. The people only wanted to hear “smooth things” (Is 30:10). They did not want to hear or be challenged by the truth that the prophets were sent to preach to them. They did not want to repent and turn from their idols. And they do not wish to turn from their idols today either. Rather than turn from their idols, they will turn on their prophets, and tell them to preach only “smooth things” (Is 30:10). So did they treat Jesus Christ, crucifying him for the truth he preached to them. And he told his followers to take up their cross of persecution—expecting to suffer the same—and follow after him (Lk 9:23), and in this way promote the Kingdom of God in the world.

A NEW AND RISEN LIFE IN JESUS CHRIST

5th Sunday of Lent
Ez 37:12-14; Ps 129; Rom 8:8-11; Jn 11:1-45

“Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (Jn 11:25-26).

Jesus raised Lazarus, after he was four days in the sepulcher, to reveal his glory, and to demonstrate that he has the power to give to us, who believe in him, eternal life. In the resurrection of Lazarus, we see that Jesus Christ has power over death, and his word to Martha explains this power, showing its importance for all who believe in him.

If we believe in Jesus Christ, although we all die in the body, we will live with him in the spirit, that is, we will continue to live, and on the last day we will rise in our bodies and live with him in his Kingdom forever. Eternal death will not touch those who believe in him. They are destined for life, not for death. He will give those who believe in him the gift of final perseverance. He has the power to assure the final perseverance of the saints who believe in him, and he also has the power to assure them that they will persevere to the end. Not everyone knows this assurance, and it is not necessary for salvation, but many of the saints do enjoy this special gift of assurance of final perseverance, the assurance that they are among the elect predestined for eternal life.

It is Christ who justifies and sanctifies his elect. But they must do their part to be sanctified, and this is the fruit of their justification. They must live a new life in Christ, a life in the Spirit and according to the Spirit, not according to the flesh, a life which is an offering offered to the Father with and through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross (Lk 9:23; Col 1:24). We are then united to Christ in his one and only sacrifice of himself, offered to the Father in love, and we make of our life also a living sacrifice, offered with Christ to the Father. Our sanctified life is, therefore, a new and sacrificial life, a eucharistic life, an offering of love, a hymn of praise, offered in the eucharistic sacrifice, the one and only sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Calvary for the salvation of the world.

So Christ assures us of final perseverance, promising eternal life and victory over death to those who believe in him and live according to the Spirit, and not according to
the flesh, for “those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom 8:8). To walk according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh is the fruit that shows that we really believe, and those who really believe will never die. In other words, they are promised the gift of final perseverance—“whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (Jn 11:26). Thus has God predestined us for life. We will never die, for we have already passed over from death to life, and we will not come to the judgment of condemnation (Jn 5:24).

The resurrection of Lazarus points to this, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ proves it definitively. Jesus said to Lazarus in the tomb, crying out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth. The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, Unbind him, and let him go” (Jn 11:43-44). So also does he do to us. He resurrects us now in the midst of this present old life and old world, to be the first fruits of the new world of the resurrection, just as Jesus, in rising on the third day, became the first fruits of the resurrection on the last day.

We rise ahead of time, in this present life, through the power of Jesus Christ when we believe in him. He gives us a new and risen life, renewing us interiorly, recreating us, making us a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), new creatures, new men, dead to sin and alive in the Spirit to walk no longer according to the disordered desires of the flesh and of the body (Rom 8:13), but according to the desires of the Spirit.

What is this new life like? It is a life already risen ahead of time from the sepulcher, a life forgiven through our faith in Jesus Christ, justified by him, clothed in his splendor, and righteous and holy before God. It is a splendid life which shines with the light of Christ, with whom we walk in the light (Jn 8:12). It is a life dead to sin, buried to sin (Rom 6:11), which lives now only for God, renouncing worldly pleasures so as not to dissipate the sweetness of God which it has in Jesus Christ. Hence we renounce the life according to the flesh, the life dedicated to the entertainments and diversions of the world, for “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace…for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live” (Rom 8:6,13).

Life in the Spirit is the life which offers itself to God as a sacrifice of praise, completing in the flesh “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Col 1:24), taking up our cross “daily” and following Christ (Lk 9:23). We no longer seek the delights of this world, for we have risen with Christ and “set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:2). This is our new risen life, for “you have been raised with Christ” (Col 3:1) to be a new creation (Gal 6:15), for Christ makes all things new (Rev 21:5).

The resurrection of Jesus Christ (of which the resurrection of Lazarus is a sign) illumines and justifies us, for we walk now by faith in him who rose and will protect us from death so that we shall never die. We therefore live a new life in the light of his resurrection, and he shines in our heart (2 Cor 4:6), illumining us with his new light and giving us a participation in his life. We should therefore live a new and risen life in him, dead to all sin. So “consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11). If we really believe in him, we will live like this, and never die.
THE CROSS IS THE WAY OF SANCTIFICATION

Monday, 5th Week of Lent
Dan 13:1-9,15-17,19-30,33-62; Ps 22; Jn 8:1-11

“Susanna sighed deeply, and said, I am hemmed in on every side. For if I do this thing, it is death for me; and if I do not, I shall not escape your hands. I choose not to do it and to fall into your hands, rather than to sin in the sight of the Lord” (Dan 13:22-23).

This is the predicament of Susanna. The two elders want her to lie with them. If she consents, it will be the death of her soul before God; but if she refuses these two elders, they will falsely accuse her, and she will be stoned. Should she, therefore, consent to sin with them in order to save her life in this world, but lose it with God; or should she refuse to sin with them in order to save her life with God, but lose it in this world, in being falsely accused and stoned to death? Should she save her life in this world by losing it with God; or should she lose her life in this world to save it with God? Christ says, “whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mk 8:35). She chose to lose her life in this world to save it with God, and refused to try to save it by sinning, knowing that she would in this way lose it with God. But at the last moment, God intervened to save even her life in this world by arousing “the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel” (Dan 13:45). And in the end, “all the assembly…blessed God who saves those who hope in him” (Dan 13:60).

How often do we find ourselves in this same basic predicament! If we obey God, we will be criticized, mocked, persecuted, rejected, and even expelled by men. But if we disobey God, we can save our life in this world and escape persecution. What we should do is clear. We should lose our life in this world to save it with God. We are to sacrifice our life in this world rather than disobey God. Thus we will hate our life in this world to truly save it. “He who loves his life loses it,” says Jesus, “and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:25).

This is the life of the cross. We will be crucified in this world if we obey God and deny the will of men when it is contrary to the will of God for us. But, difficult as it is, this way of the cross is the way of our sanctification in this world. We have to bear the persecution of men for obeying God if we wish to be sanctified. This was the pattern of the life of Jesus Christ, persecuted unto death on a cross for obeying his Father and preaching the truth. He is our model if we wish to be sanctified.

We must be faithful to the way God is calling us. We must be faithful to his will for us, even though it may be difficult and will bring upon us the mockery and laughter of the worldly who do not understand the ways of God. How many fear to do what they themselves know is right, simply because they cannot bear the thought of being judged and thought ill of by others? These are the fears we must conquer if we wish to walk the way of holiness which God wants to lead us by.
“Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad” (Jn 8:56).

This verse (Jn 8:56) is very important because it helps us understand how God justifies man in every age, that is, in the Old Testament as well as in the New. St. Paul teaches us that God always, and in every age, justifies man through his faith in Jesus Christ, and not through his own works. This, he says, was as true for Abraham as it is for us. “For if Abraham was justified by works,” says St. Paul, “he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Rom 4:2-3; Gen 15:6).

Today Jesus tells us that “Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad” (Jn 8:56). Upon seeing Jesus, Abraham believed, “and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Rom 4:3; Gen 15:6). Man does not justify himself. He does not justify himself through his own works, but is only justified through his faith in Jesus Christ. We are justified through our faith in the merits of the death of Jesus Christ, who has already come; while Abraham and the saints of the Old Testament were justified through their faith in the Messiah, who was still to come. Even their general faith in God was reckoned to them as righteousness through the merits of the future death of Jesus Christ on the cross. In any case, the method of justification is the same for all. All who are justified are justified through their faith, and not through their works. The Old Testament saints were just as much justified only by their faith as are those of the New Testament.

Jesus Christ always existed as a divine Person, as the eternal Son of the Father. The Person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the same eternal Person who is the eternal Word and the eternal Son of the Father; and the Father always had a Son. Hence Jesus could say today, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am” (Jn 8:58). He always was.

If we need to be justified and forgiven anew for our new sins or imperfections, we have to do what man has always had to do in every age, namely, go to God, and to the Savior, with faith, believing that he will forgive us, justify us, and clothe us anew in the splendid robe of the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself. And we of the New Testament know that God will justify us through the merits of the death of his only Son, who substituted himself for us on the cross, suffering the punishment of our sins for us, to free us from this suffering and this guilt, which so debilitates us. And he will justify us for our faith, just as he did to Abraham and to the Old Testament saints. And it will be the merits of Jesus’ death on the cross that justifies us, as well as the Old Testament saints.
THE SUFFERING OF THE PROPHETIC MINISTRY

Friday, 5th Week of Lent
Jer 20:10-13; Ps 17; Jn 10:31-42

“I hear many whispering. Terror is on every side! Denounce him! Let us denounce him! say all my familiar friends, watching for my fall. Perhaps he will be deceived, then we can overcome him, and take our revenge on him” (Jer 20:10).

Jeremiah is a Christ figure in his suffering and persecution. As they would kill Jesus for his preaching of the truth of God, so did they threaten Jeremiah for his preaching. Jeremiah’s mission was “to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer 1:10). In giving him this prophetic mission, the Lord told him, “And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you” (Jer 1:18-19).

Such is the life of a prophet in every age. Jesus Christ also had this mission, and was opposed for his preaching, as we see today when “The Jews took up stones again to stone him” (Jn 10:31) for having said, “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30).

All this, Jesus Christ suffered for us, making himself “a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:2) to make atonement for us for our sins. He offered himself to the Father for us by being killed by men as a blasphemer. He suffered our just punishment for us, for our sins, to free us from them, their price having been fully paid by his suffering. Thus did he pay our debt and free us from the pain and depression of our guilt that we might live in the joyful freedom of the sons of God (Rom 8:21). We receive these happy results of his sacrifice through the sacraments and through our faith. In his suffering is our liberation from this suffering. He is our only hope in this world. Only his sacrifice frees us from our guilt, which debilitates and depresses us.

Then, as his followers, we will also be given a prophetic mission in this world to preach the truth about the justification and salvation of God in Jesus Christ. God will give us a message and a way of life which will be our witness, with which we are to bless the world. If we preach and bear witness with courage, then, like Jeremiah and Jesus, we too will be threatened and persecuted, mocked and derided. But God will be our strength, our refuge, and our reward. And we will say with Jeremiah, “the Lord is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten” (Jer 20:11).
A NEW COVENANT OF PEACE WITH GOD

Saturday, 5th Week of Lent
Ez 37:21-28; Jer 31; Jn 11:45-56

“My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes” (Ez 37:24).

Ezekiel prophesies a different kind of future, a time of great peace and unity with God, in which the Messiah, the son of David, the new David, will be king over his people, and his people will walk according to the precepts of the Lord, no longer disobeying them, but keeping them and putting them into practice, for “They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes,” says the Lord (Ez 37:24). And God will put his sanctuary in the midst of them and will live in peace with his obedient people. “I will make a covenant of peace with them,” says the Lord; “it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore” (Ez 37:26).

This is the Lord’s prophecy for his people; and Jesus Christ died for the people to fulfill this prophecy. He is the new David who now reigns over his people, and makes with them an everlasting covenant of peace. His death establishes this covenant and forgives us all our sins and rebellion against God, putting us at peace with him, and removing our alienation from him, caused by our sins. If we, therefore, believe in Jesus Christ and receive his forgiveness and justification, which come to us through the sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23) and through our faith in the merits of his sacrifice, we will live in this great peace and happiness with God.

But we have to take great care to remain in this beautiful peace with God by doing his will, and avoiding being deceived by the temptations and suggestions of the Devil, who is always trying to trick us into disobeying the precepts and will of God. If we disobey God, we will fall out of this great peace which we now have with him, and will once again need to apply the blood of Christ to our heart, saddened by our disobedience.

Caiaphas, the high priest, prophesies today, saying that “it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish” (Jn 11:50). And St. John adds that “he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (Jn 11:51-52). This is the sacrifice, the suffering, which brings us this peace, this new and everlasting covenant of peace with God. The death on the cross of the only Son of God made man redeems us from our sins, rebellion, and disobedience, which alienate us from God, for he suffered the just punishment for them so that the just God could justly forgive us and still remain a just God. Through his death, then, we have this peace, and we remain in it if we continue to obey him.
“And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (Mk 15:37-38).

Today is Palm Sunday, and we meditate on the passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ and its meaning for us. At the moment of his death, the evangelists tell us that “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (Mk 15:38). This curtain separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. Now, in Jesus’ death on the cross, the veil closing off our access into the Holy of Holies is rent asunder, from top to bottom, and we now have new access, which we did not have before, to enter into the Most Holy place and come into the presence of God. “Therefore, brethren,” says the Letter to the Hebrews, “since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (Heb 10:19-20,22). We can now enter into the sanctuary of God, the celestial sanctuary, because Jesus Christ “entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12). He sacrificed himself to the Father, and thus entered with his own blood into the heavenly sanctuary, “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb 10:14).

In the death of Jesus Christ on the cross is our liberation from the wrath of God for our sins (Rom 1:18). In his death is our reconciliation with God and the reparation of the sin of Adam, which separated us from God. Christ is the propitiation sent by the Father for our sins (Rom 8:32), who shows that God is always just, even though he passed over the sins of the Old Testament in his patience, because in his death on the cross the just penalty for these past sins was finally paid. Hence Jesus Christ is, as St. Paul says, the one “whom God set forth as a propitiation by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed” (Rom 3:25 NKJV). But now those former sins are no longer just passed over in patience or forbearance, but are fully and properly expiated and propitiated by the death on the cross of the only Son of God. He suffered their punishment. This is the meaning of the passion and death on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, which we celebrate this week.

Truly, “he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities” (Is 53:5). He suffered instead of us and for us. God sent him into the world for this (Rom 8:32), to suffer in our place what we should have suffered for our sins, so that we could go free from punishment and from the guilt which debilitates us. “...upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed” (Is 53:5). Through his punishment we are saved and have access into the heavenly sanctuary. He reconciles us with God through his death. “...the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:6). This reconciliation with God is the meaning of the rending of the temple veil at the moment of Jesus’ death. By the merits of his death on the cross—channeled to us through the sacraments, and through our faith—we have a new access to God through the veil to enter into the Holy of Holies, symbol of the heavenly sanctuary.
Jesus Christ drank the cup of God’s wrath for our sins (Rom 1:18), and this is why he was so “greatly distressed and troubled” in the garden of Gethsemane (Mk 14:33). He suffered the abandonment of God on the cross, and therefore cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34). This was not a death like that of the martyrs, who could suffer in peace and joy. In his death, the Son suffered the abandonment of the Father. He was suffering our punishment, substituting for us. “…upon him was the chastisement that made us whole” (Is 53:5).

Christ was cursed by the Father in being hung from a tree, for the word of God says, “if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God” (Dt 21:22-23). Christ was made a curse for us, cursed for us and instead of us. Our curse, due to our sins, was put on him instead of on us, so that in believing this and invoking this, we might be freed from God’s curse for our sins. He bears it instead of us to free us from it. When we invoke his merits, especially through the sacraments, we are freed from this curse. Thus “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law,” says St. Paul, “having become a curse for us—for it is written, cursed be everyone who hangs from a tree” (Gal 3:13). By being cursed, he freed us from the curse of God for our sins. He suffered it for us and instead of us.

Jesus Christ bore our sins on the cross to make us righteous through our faith in him. “For our sake,” says St. Paul, “he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

Jesus Christ is our paschal lamb (Jn 1:29; 1 Cor 5:7), who, in being put to death, saved us from the plague of death by his blood. As the paschal lamb died instead of the first-born, so Christ died instead of us. By his blood poured out on the cross, he saved us from eternal death.

I HAVE GIVEN YOU AS A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS

Monday, Holy Week
Is 42:1-7; Ps 26; Jn 12:1-11

“I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Is 42:6-7).

This is the first of the four Suffering Servant songs. This Servant will save his people, and the nations, through his suffering. “The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:6). Although himself innocent, he will suffer our just punishment for our sins or imperfections to free us from this suffering. God struck and smote him instead of us to bring us out of the dungeon and prison in which we dwell in darkness (Is 42:7). God smote him in order to be able to forgive us. This is the way in which God can forgive us, and at the same time punish sin, and remain a just God. This is the means by which God decided to give us relief from the accusations of our conscience, which depress us with guilt for our sins or imperfections.
Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of these songs of the Suffering Servant. In punishing his innocent Son, God remains a just God, and can in this way open our eyes and bring us out of darkness. He, by this means, gives us freedom from our guilt, and new life. By smiting his Son, he renews our nature, gives us a new birth, and makes us new creatures, a new creation, new men, and directs us with his Spirit so that we might know how to live now as new men. This is because in smiting his Son, his wrath against our sins is satisfied, and his relationship with us restored. God also now gives us new courage to be able to live according to the guidance of the Spirit, even when this is difficult, even when we are persecuted for our new way of living.

Jesus Christ is the only Son of God, smitten by the Father for our sins. “…we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God… But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed” (Is 53:4-5).

How good it is to be saved by his wounds, and to be freed from guilt and from the accusations of our conscience! How good it is to be freed from the sadness and depression caused by our sins or imperfections! How good it is to rejoice in the freedom of the sons of God (Rom 8:21)! It is truly a new life, in which we live happy to the very bottom of our heart, feeling ourselves truly forgiven and renewed, and rejoicing with the very happiness of God himself, which fills our heart. The sufferings of Christ, applied to our heart by the sacrament of reconciliation, received in faith, put us at peace with God. It is a heavenly peace—not of this world—which renews us, giving us a new life and a new mission to preach this salvation in Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

THE EUCHARIST, THE SACRIFICE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Holy Thursday, Evening Mass of the Lord’s Super
Ex 12:1-8,11-14; Ps 115; 1 Cor 11:23-26; Jn 13:1-15

“Then they shall take some of the blood, and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat them… The blood shall be a sign for you upon the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall fall upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt” (Ex 12:7,13).

Today is Holy Thursday, and we celebrate the institution of the eucharist and of the New Testament priesthood. Jesus Christ is the paschal lamb of the New Testament. As the passover lamb was slain by the Israelites in Egypt to free them from the plague of the death of the first-born, so Christ was sacrificed for us to free us from eternal death for our sins. The paschal lamb was slain instead of the first-born of the Israelites. It was substituted for them. Instead of them, the lamb suffered the plague of death. Therefore none of the first-born of the Jews died, while all the first-born of the Egyptians died. Wherever the blood of the paschal lamb was smeared, that family was saved from the plague of death. In the same way Christ was slain instead of us sinners, who should have died for our sins. He substituted for us, dying instead of us. The Father smote him instead of us, and his blood poured out saved us from death. Thus he reconciled God to us, absorbing his wrath against our sins in sacrificing himself.
As the Jewish passover supper is the annual memorial of their being saved from Egypt, so the eucharist is our memorial of the sacrifice of Christ, who saved us from death. Christ said, “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). In the eucharist, the bread becomes the immolated body of Jesus Christ, and the wine becomes his blood poured out in sacrifice. The Lord’s supper, which we continue to celebrate, makes present for us the one and only sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross for our salvation. It is Jesus Christ offered in sacrifice on the cross to the Father. The eucharist puts us on Calvary at the moment of Christ’s sacrifice, and makes this one and only sacrifice present for us. The eucharist does not repeat the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross for our salvation, but rather makes this one sacrifice of the New Testament present for us, so that we might participate in it, and offer it with Christ to the Father for the glory of God and the salvation of the world.

We also are to offer ourselves in this one sacrifice together with Christ to the Father in the Holy Spirit. Then our whole life should become a sacrifice of love, offered with Christ to the Father in the Holy Spirit. We are to pour out our life for our brethren, and so walk as Christ walked, for “he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 Jn 2:6). This is because “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 Jn 3:16), and in doing this, offer ourselves to the Father with Christ in the eucharistic sacrifice.

This evening Jesus gives us an example of this by washing his disciples’ feet, saying, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13:14-15).

We then offer our life of love and service of our brethren in the eucharist, pouring out our life in love with Christ to the Father in the Holy Spirit.

CHRIST SUBSTITUTED FOR US

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

“Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise him; he has put him to grief; when he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring” (Is 53:10).

Today is Good Friday, the day on which we especially commemorate the passion and death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for our salvation from sin and from the just wrath of God against the sin of Adam and against our own sins (Rom 1:18). This is the great message of the Gospel, namely, justification by faith. This is the joyful good news that we are saved from the wrath and punishment of God, due to our sins, through the suffering on the cross of the only Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the joyful proclamation of the Gospel, that God sent his only Son to substitute for us and to suffer instead of us and for us the punishment due to us for our sins, and thus bring to an end his just wrath against us, and in this way reconcile himself to us. We receive this freedom from punishment and from our guilt for having sinned, by means of our faith, and through the sacraments, especially baptism and the sacrament of reconciliation (Mt
18:18; Jn 20:23), which make us clean and resplendent before God, and clothe us in the splendor of the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself.

Hence “it was the will of the Lord to bruise him; he put him to grief” (Is 53:10). It was God himself who struck and smote his own Son, inflicting on him the punishment due to us for our sins, in order to free us from this punishment and guilt. The debt of our punishment, once paid, is then removed from us. This is the Gospel of salvation which God has sent into the world in his Son. Christ justifies us through our faith in him when we invoke the merits of his death for us on the cross. He took our place. He substituted for us. God smote him instead of us. “…it was the will of the Lord to bruise him; he has put him to grief” (Is 53:10), “and with his stripes we are healed” (Is 53:5), made new, a new creation, new creatures, new men.

God then raised him from the dead to manifest that his sacrifice of substitution for us was accepted. Thus the resurrection manifests that we are truly justified, and illumines us with new light. St. Paul, therefore, says that Jesus Christ “was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25). That is, the resurrection manifests the justification achieved by his death.

“…the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:6). “…he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed” (Is 53:5). In his justice, God bruised him and put him to grief (Is 53:10), thus punishing all sin. But he did so with great mercy, for it was God himself, in the Person of his Son, who suffered this punishment for us, to free us from it, and thus forgive us for our sins, that we might rejoice in the freedom of the sons of God (Rom 8:21).

DEATH TO SIN, AND NEW LIFE FOR GOD

Easter Vigil
Gen 22:1-18; Ex 14:15 – 15:1; Rom 6:3-11; Mk 16:1-7

“We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

This is the Easter Vigil, the night when Jesus Christ passed from death to new life in God by his resurrection from among the dead. On this night he rose victorious over death, sin, and the devil. In his death he satisfied the just requirements of the law of God, which demanded the punishment of sin, and by his resurrection he showed that his sacrifice was accepted by the Father, and that we are really justified and made new. He died to sin, so that God could justly forgive our sins, having himself paid the price of sin in his death on the cross. In the words of the Easter Proclamation, “Christ has ransomed us with his blood, and paid for us the price of Adam’s sin to our eternal Father.”

In his death, then, we have died to sin; and in his resurrection we have risen to a new life, to live free from sin in the future, living a new life in the risen Christ, a risen life in him and with him. And so “as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). This “newness of life” is a life that is
truly new and without sin. In the risen Christ we are not only freed from our past sins and from the pain of guilt for them, but we also rise to a new and risen life in Christ, a life which now has the new power of the risen Christ to be a life without sin.

For “The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God” (Rom 6:10). His death was a death to sin, to destroy sin and guilt, suffering its punishment, substituting for us on the cross; and his resurrection is a resurrection to a new life with God, so that we also might live with him, risen ahead of time with him (Col 2:12; 3:1-2) to a new life with God without sin. This is now possible for those who have risen with Christ. The conclusion is: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11). We cannot live without imperfections, which we nonetheless try to overcome; but yes, it is possible in the risen Christ to overcome sin and live a new and risen life without sin.

The death of Christ destroyed our sin, and in his rising from the dead, we rise with him to a new life without sin.

**THIS IS THE DAY THAT THE LORD HAS MADE**

Easter Sunday, Mass during the Day
Acts 10:34,37-43; Ps 117; Col 3:1-4; Jn 20:1-9

“To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

Today is the day of the resurrection, Easter Sunday, the beginning of a new world and a new creation in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. In his resurrection begins the end of the world with the creation of a new earth and a new heavens (Is 65:17). This hope for the renewal of the world, which for the Jews was always something of the last day and of the end of the world, now happens ahead of time with Christ rising and being glorified in the midst of history. The resurrection of Christ is the renewal of the world put into the midst of history, so that those who rise with him in faith and baptism might live now ahead of time in the glory of the new creation as new creatures (2 Cor 5:17) and new men (Eph 4:22-24), for in Jesus Christ there is a new creation. In him “neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (Gal 6:14).

The new world begins in the midst of the old world, and we who are in Jesus Christ are the first fruits of the new creation. This is because we have already risen with Christ (Col 3:1; 2:12) and now “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1). We therefore set our “minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:2). We have been renewed, and live now totally for God in Jesus Christ, renouncing all else for him. We want to love him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mk 12:30), with an undivided heart, not with a heart divided between him and the pleasures of this world. We want to live totally for him, and for him alone, and love our neighbor for the love of him.

In Jesus Christ we have forgiveness for the sins and imperfections that depress us. His death frees us from them. God satisfied his wrath against us and against our sins by
striking and smiting his own Son in substitution for us, to free us from his wrath, so that we might once again live in his love. Thus through Christ’s death, God made us just, he justified us; and through his resurrection, God shows that Christ’s sacrifice was accepted, and that we are now indeed freed from our sins and guilt. This happens when we believe in his Son and invoke the merits of his death for us on the cross, especially in the sacraments.

Hence, as St. Peter tells us today, “every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). And St. Paul says “that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins. And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39 KJV). We have not been able to perfectly fulfill the law and will of God, and therefore the wrath of God with its punishment was upon us. But now Jesus suffered our punishment for us on the cross and satisfied the wrath of God for our sins. And now Jesus rises to begin a new and glorified life at the right hand of God; and we, now forgiven through our faith in him, rise with him to a new and risen life as new creatures and new men.

Hence, as St. Paul says, “what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Rom 8:3-4 KJV). That is, Christ in his death “condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom 8:3), in his own flesh. In his own flesh Christ suffered the punishment for all sin, thus fulfilling the demands of the law for the punishment of sin, and hence canceling out sin. The result is that all the just demands of the law concerning us have been fulfilled by Christ for us, and so we are indeed justified by his death, that is, made just and righteous.

The resurrection manifests our justification, that is, it manifests that the justice of the law was fulfilled in Christ’s death, and that we are now indeed justified in God’s eyes, and that we walk with him in a new and risen life in the light of the resurrection. Therefore our justification is made manifest in his resurrection. Hence St. Paul says that our Lord Jesus Christ is he “who was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification” (Rom 4:25)

We therefore rejoice today because of the illumination of the resurrection, for we rise with him to a life that is new and risen, forgiven and illumined. We walk in the light that streams from the risen Christ. Today, therefore, “The voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tabernacles of the righteous: the right hand of the Lord doeth valiantly… I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord” (Ps 117:15,17 KJV). Jesus Christ, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps 117:22-24).
“So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples” (Mt 28:8).

This is the day of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The women had discovered his tomb empty toward dawn of the first day of the week, and they saw an angel who said to them, “Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said” (Mt 28:5-6). And afterward they saw the risen Christ, who said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me” (Mt 28:10).

Christ rose so that we might rise with him to a new, risen, and transformed life. As he died for the forgiveness of our sins, suffering their punishment for us, thus freeing us from punishment and guilt, so did he rise to give us a new life which could be victorious over sin. This is because he rose so that we might rise with him to a life without sin, to a renewed life, seeking “the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1). St. Paul says that “you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col 2:12). Truly God “raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6).

We have risen with Christ through our faith in him. We are forgiven for all our sins through his death on the cross, and now we are clean and new before God to live a new and risen life with him, a life in his light, a life free from sin. This is our new calling, and in the risen Christ, God has given us the power to live this new life. “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,” says St. Paul. Why? Because “you have been raised with Christ” (Col 3:1).

What kind of a life shall we then live? It will be a life which follows the first commandment, “and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mk 12:30). This then, is our calling, and in the risen Christ we have been given the power we need to live in this new way, seeking the things that are above, and not those of the earth, not dividing our heart among the attractions of the earth, but living only for God with all our heart, with a pure and completely undivided heart in our love for him. We therefore renounce the pleasures of the earth to seek only those that are above without any division of heart. Thus shall we live in his new light, risen with him.

The resurrection of Christ renews us and gives us a new life in him, a life filled with his spirit and free from sin because Christ died to destroy sin, and rose to give us a new life with him without sin. “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11). Thus we shall be like Christ, “For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God” (Rom 6:10 KJV).
“…and he said to them, Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Lk 24:46-48).

In Jesus Christ there is repentance and new life. In him is the definitive forgiveness of our sins. He is the propitiation sent by the Father to satisfy the divine wrath against the sins of the world. He placated, propitiated, and satisfied the righteous wrath of God against all sin by his death on the cross. This is why Jesus and the apostles said so many times that it was necessary that the Christ should suffer.

Yet he not only died, but also rose to a new life of glory with the Father, so that we too might enter with him into this glory, experiencing in this way an anticipation of the glory of the last day even now in the midst of this present life. Thus he makes us a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:14; Rev 21:5) even now ahead of time. We are, therefore, in his resurrection, the first fruits of the new heavens and the new earth of the last day (Is 65:17). We are a new strain, in the midst of the old strain, for the renovation of the human race. And moreover Jesus Christ has given us a mission to preach this repentance and forgiveness of sins “to all nations” (Lk 24:47).

Only in Jesus Christ, through our faith in him, do we have this forgiveness and renewal of our nature, to be from now on new creatures and new men (Eph 4:22-24). It is through his death on the cross that the wrath of God has been removed from us. His death on the cross destroyed our alienation from God, which we suffered, destroyed our spiritual death; and his resurrection restores our life. By his resurrection we are illumined by a new light, to rise new with him, to walk with him in “newness of life” (Rom 6:4). Our sins having been destroyed and our death overcome by his death, we have risen with Christ now to live a radically different kind of life, seeking no longer the things and pleasures of this earth, but rather “the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1).

Our new way of life shows itself in that we now set our minds “on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:2). We sell all else—that is, we renounce the pleasures of the world—to now obtain the buried treasure and the pearl of great price (Mt 13:44-46), which are obtained only at the price of all else. The pearl and the treasure are Christ shining in our heart (2 Cor 4:6), making us new. But we cannot have this treasure without renouncing the world with its delights, in order to have a heart totally dedicated only to him. Otherwise, we are too divided and too distracted to perceive this new light. This, then, is the new life, to which we are now invited, having risen with Christ no longer to set our mind on the things and pleasures of the earth, but rather to seek now only the things that are above.
HAVING BREAKFAST ON THE BEACH WITH THE RISEN CHRIST

Easter Friday
Acts 4:1-12; Ps 117; Jn 21:1-14

“Jesus said to them, Come and have breakfast. Now none of the disciples dared ask him, Who are you? They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish” (Jn 21:12-13).

On these beautiful days of Easter, we see the disciples today having breakfast with the risen Christ on the beach, eating fish roasted over a charcoal fire, and bread. He “took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish” (Jn 21:13). When he did this, they all recognized him, “They knew it was the Lord” (Jn 21:12). They recognized him in breakfasting with him on the beach, while they ate the bread and the fish which he gave them.

The same thing happened to the two disciples in Emmaus. The risen Christ was with them, but without their recognizing him until they ate with him. “When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight (Lk 24:30-31).

This action of the risen Christ in taking and blessing bread and giving it to his disciples reminded them of what he did at the last supper, when they communed with him, eating his body and drinking his blood, after he had transformed the bread and wine into his body and blood for their salvation, so that his life might be in them, and he might be in them.

We now live in the time of Easter. Although the risen Christ has already ascended into heaven, he is nonetheless still with us through our faith in him; and he is within us. We can, moreover, breakfast every morning with the risen Christ on the beach by celebrating the eucharist, in which he is truly present with his body and blood in a sacramental way, in his sacramentalized humanity. He is present with us in the Mass in his sacramentalized body and blood, which we eat. Then he becomes sacramentally present within us, shining in our heart (2 Cor 4:6), illumining us from within with the new light of his resurrection.

The Mass is our daily breakfast on the beach with the risen Christ, in which we eat the eucharistic bread, which is his sacramentalized body, given to us to nourish our new life in him. We died with him to sin in his death, and now we have risen with him to live a new and risen life. The eucharist nourishes this new life which we now have in him.

Moreover, we must now live in a radically new way, obeying the first commandment to love God with all our heart (Mk 12:30). This means renouncing all else, to live only for him, and to pour out our life for the salvation of our neighbor (Mk 12:31). It is a life of renunciation of the world, of being crucified to the world (Gal 6:14), to be completely united to Christ without any division of heart. The eucharist then nourishes this new risen life which we now have in the risen Christ.
“Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat... And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:14-15 KJV).

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a message for all mankind. It is not only for Jews, or for the inhabitants of the Roman Empire, or for Europeans, but for every race and tribe, culture and religion. It is as much for Buddhists as for Muslims. This is because it is the Gospel or good news about the only Son of God, begotten by the Father from all eternity, who in the fullness of time became flesh and was born as a man in this world to reveal the truth of God and to die in sacrifice to the Father to justify and save all who believe in him. His sacrifice of himself on the cross was for the elect of all nations, languages, races, and religions of the earth. God had but one Son, who became man but once, for all people. It is not as though each nation has its own incarnation. There was but one incarnation for all nations, and this is why Jesus instructed his apostles to go “into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15).

As Christians, therefore, we should try to reach more and more people with the Gospel of salvation, so that they might hear and know that there is a Savior who suffered himself on the cross the punishment for all the sins of the world, to satisfy the wrath of God against them, and so to reconcile God to man. To know and believe this completely changes the life of a person. It justifies him. It makes him righteous and holy before God. It gives him a new life. It removes guilt from his soul. It gives him liberty and jubilation of spirit. It illumines him, and it transforms him into a new man, a new creature, who is born again. This is the Gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, which should be preached unto the ends of the earth (Mt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8).

Every nation should know this, and not only this, but that Christ has furthermore risen from the dead on the third day in his human body and has entered into the glory of the Father to manifest that his sacrifice was accepted, and that those who believe in him are now truly justified and made righteous and resplendent before God. All should also know that if they believe in him, they too will rise with him now in the midst of this old world to live a new and risen life with God. The risen Christ therefore said to his apostles, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19), “and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Therefore “Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15 KJV).

We need to have a missionary spirit, a burning desire to share this good news with as many as we can reach. If we truly live only for God with all our heart, with an undivided heart (Mk 12:30), we should also be totally dedicated to work for the salvation and renewal of our neighbor (Mk 12:31). We need to share this good news with him, news which will renew his spirit and give him a new and risen life with the risen Christ.
“Jesus said to them again, Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:21-23).

Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, came into the world to save us from sin and give us a new and risen life in him. He did this because since the sin of Adam we have been alienated from God because of his sin, together with our own sins. We have experienced his wrath against our sins (Rom 1:18) and suffered guilt. God wanted to forgive us, yet being just by nature, he nonetheless had to punish our sin.

It is true that he forgave the saints of the Old Testament through their sacrifices for sin, which he himself gave and taught them in his law. Yet it was not that their sins were forgiven by the power of these animal sacrifices, but rather that God forgave them through these sacrifices because they were types of the one adequate sacrifice of his own Son, which he was to offer in the future on the cross. In other words, God, in his forbearance and patience, forgave the Old Testament saints, overlooking their sins with an eye to their definitive expiation and propitiation in the future when his own Son would die in sacrifice on the cross for our sins (Rom 3:25-26).

When at last the only Son of God became man, he offered himself in sacrifice on the cross, and the Father laid on him the sins of all humanity (Is 53:5-6; 2 Cor 5:21), accepting his sacrifice as payment in full of the just punishment due for all our sins. This is God’s plan for our salvation. In this way God could save us from his own righteous wrath against our sins, suffering himself their punishment on the cross, in the Person of his Son, and thus remain faithful to his nature as a just God. At the same time, his suffering on the cross demonstrates in an astonishing way his love and mercy. God himself, in his infinite mercy and love, decided from all eternity to suffer himself the just punishment for our sins, and thus remain an infinitely just God, while at the same time showing himself to be an infinitely loving and merciful God.

Already dead on the cross, on the third day the Son of God made man rose from among the dead and entered into the glory of God, the first fruit of the resurrection of the dead on the last day. In his resurrection into the glory of the last day, we see that his great sacrifice of himself for the forgiveness of our sins was accepted by the Father. We who believe in him and receive baptism, invoking the merits of his death for us on the cross, are saved from our sins and from the pain of guilt, to rise now with him to live a new life in his light. His resurrection has become our illumination. Redeemed through our faith in him by his blood, poured out for us on the cross in propitiation for our sins, we are now illumined by the splendor of his resurrection. He now shines in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6), illumining us from within by a light not of this world.

God now wants us to obey his will in order to remain and grow in this heavenly light and peace, and his first commandment is that we love him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mk 12:30). This means that we are to live for him alone, and that he be the only pleasure of our life, to the degree that this is possible, so that we do not divide our
heart, trying also to love unnecessary worldly pleasures. He who wants to walk in the
light of Christ must obey him (Jn 8:12), and more than anything else this means obeying
him by keeping the first commandment. If we therefore want to sanctify ourselves and
grow in God’s love, we will live an austere life, renouncing the unnecessary pleasures of
the world and of the table for the love of God, in order to have a heart undivided in its
love for him, not a heart divided between him and the unnecessary pleasures of this world.

In the second place, if we want to sanctify ourselves, we will keep the second
commandment, which is to love our neighbor (Mk 12:31), pouring out our life to help,
renew, and save our brothers, using the gifts and inspirations that God has given us.

Thus will we rise with Christ to a new and transformed life, to be a new creation, new
creatures, new men. But if we fall into an imperfection or sin and again experience the
wrath (Rom 1:18) and discipline of God (Heb 12:5-11), we will need to repent once
again, and again invoke the merits of Christ’s death on the cross; and we do this
especially in the sacrament which Christ has left us for this purpose, namely, the
sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23). Today Christ gave to his apostles and
their successors the power to forgive our sins when he said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If
you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven” (Jn 20:23). Through this sacrament of
reconciliation we can know without any doubt whatsoever that we have been forgiven,
and we can feel that we have truly been forgiven. This sacrament is one of the most
important gifts which Christ has left us, by which we might be saved from our sins and
guilt, and rise with him to a new and illumined life.

REGENERATION IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

Monday, 2nd Week of Easter
Acts 4:23-31; Ps 2; Jn 3:1-8

“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom
of God” (Jn 3:3 KJV).

Our faith in Jesus Christ truly transforms us, that is, Jesus Christ truly transforms us
through our faith in him. Our justification by faith, and not by our own works, is
accompanied by an interior regeneration of our whole being when we believe in Jesus
Christ. In other words, sanctification accompanies justification, with the result that in
being justified by faith we are also at the same time born again from above. Our rebirth
shows that our justification works a real change in us. God works a bath of regeneration
in us, as St. Paul says, saying that “Not by works of righteousness which we have done,
but according to his mercy he saves us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of
the Holy Ghost” (Titus 3:5 KJV).

Our condition in Jesus Christ is totally new and different from what it was before.
We are now justified and sanctified, that is, we are made truly new, righteous, and holy,
and placed in a long process of further growth in sanctification. We are also born again,
that is, regenerated. The change which God works in us is real. We are made a new
creation (2 Cor 5:17), and new men (Eph 4:22-24). Hence St. Paul says, “So you must
also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11).
Christ died to destroy our sin, to free us from depressing guilt, and to give us a new life without sin. He paid our debt according to the law, and so we do not now have to pay it again, being freed from the punishment due to our sins because he suffered it in our place. He then rose from the dead so that we might rise with him to a new, regenerate, born-again life, in which we now seek the things that are above, and no longer those of the earth (Col 3:1-2).

We die in his death to our sins, being freed from sin by his death, and we rise in his resurrection to walk in “newness of life” (Rom 6:4), that is, to live a new, holy, justified, righteous, and born-again life. We are regenerate people in Jesus Christ.

If we were baptized as infants, we need to actualize our faith now as adults in order to activate our regeneration and thus begin to live a truly new life that is different from the life of those who do not believe in Jesus Christ. We are to avoid sin in order to be happy with God and live in his love, and not under his wrath. But if we fall into an imperfection or sin, we can take refuge in his blood poured out for us in sacrifice, in order to be forgiven and healed again, and so once again experience his love.

Christ is now calling us to be born again and born from above, to live a new life—a new kind of life—through our faith in him.

ALL SALVATION COMES ONLY THROUGH THE CRUCIFIED AND RISEN CHRIST

Thursday, 2nd Week of Easter
Acts 5:27-33; Ps 33; Jn 3:31-36

“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him” (Jn 3:36 KJV).

The Son of God is our salvation from the righteous, just, and holy wrath of God against our sins. He was sent to us by the Father to save us from his own just, holy, and necessary wrath, for whoever does not believe in the Son, “the wrath of God abideth on him” (Jn 3:36 KJV). The Son was the means used by God to save us from his own wrath, and forgive us instead of punishing us for our sins. Through the Son—through our faith in him—God could forgive us and at the same time punish our sins in the Son, instead of in us, for he was our substitute before the Father, and God did to him what he otherwise would have done to us. It is therefore important to believe in the Son if we want to be forgiven and reconciled with God.

Thus do we receive relief from the pain and depression of guilt, and are given jubilation of spirit in being reconciled to God and at peace with him; and our conscience stops accusing us, giving us peace in our heart. This state of peace with God through the forgiveness of our sins is the beginning of eternal life. In the Son we have God’s life in us, and we will live forever with him. This is what today’s Gospel says, namely, that “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life” (Jn 3:36 KJV). And St. John says in his first letter that “He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son has not life” (1 Jn 5:12). In fact, if we believe in the Son, we “shall not come into condemnation,” but
rather have already “passed from death unto life” (Jn 5:24 KJV). Through faith, we have
already begun our eternal life with Christ ahead of time in the midst of this old life.

The Old Testament saints also had the Son through faith and hope (Jn 8:56), and so,
therefore, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Rom
4:3; Gen 15:6), as St. Paul says. He was justified by his faith, as we are.

St. Peter says today before the Council, “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader
and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of
these things” (Acts 5:31-32). Forgiveness of sins only comes through the death and
resurrection of Jesus Christ, for, as St. Peter says, “there is salvation in no one else, for
there is no other name under heaven among men by which we must be saved” (Acts
4:12). Even the pagans, if they are saved (see the book of Jonah), it will be through their
faith, and their salvation will come through the death on the cross of Jesus Christ, and
through his resurrection, even though they do not know this, as also Abraham did not
know it.

It is, nonetheless, of supreme importance that Jesus Christ and his saving death on the
cross and life-restoring resurrection be preached to “every creature” (Mk 16:15 KJV),
and that we “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and
of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19), as the risen Christ told us, so that they
might have the assurance of their salvation in Christ, the relief of the forgiveness of their
sins, and the joy of living now with God in Jesus Christ their Lord and Savior.

CONSOLATION IN THE MIDST OF PERSECUTION

Friday, 2nd Week of Easter
Acts 5:34-42; Ps 26; Jn 6:1-15

“They left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to
suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:41).

The apostles Peter and John were persecuted, tried, and beaten by the council for
having disobeyed their warning not to speak any more in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:17;
5:40). They disobeyed men in order to be able to obey God, for they had been sent by
God to preach Christ. The apostles therefore said to the council, “Whether it is right in
the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but
speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20), and “We must obey God rather
than men” (Acts 5:29). For their disobedience to men they were beaten (Acts 5:40), but
for their obedience to God they were consoled. Hence “they left the presence of the
council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts
5:41).

We note their joy in being beaten for the sake of Christ. They were consoled by God
in the midst of their suffering. “For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so
through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too” (2 Cor 1:5). In short, says St. Paul,
“as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation” (2 Cor 1:7
KJV).
Jesus prepared us for this, saying, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you” (Jn 15:20). We cannot follow Jesus Christ with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mk 12:30), and not be persecuted by the world. It is impossible. The life of the crucified Christ is the pattern for the life of his followers as well. “Indeed,” says St. Paul, “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12), and St. Paul’s own life abundantly illustrates this.

But how many are there who try to avoid this persecution by disobeying God, and living like the rest of the world? They are ashamed to bear witness to Christ with their way of living; and so Christ, in turn, will be ashamed of them (Mk 8:38).

When, for example, we preach the truth that people need to hear, there will always be those who will reject our preaching and will attack and persecute us. Christ causes division (Lk 12:51). Those who obey him will be rejected by those who disobey him.

But this is the true path of discipleship. We are no longer of the world. Christ chose us from the world (Jn 17:14,16). We should, therefore, not live like the world, lives which are an endless quest for pleasure. And for no longer living as the world lives, the world will no longer understand us. Such is the life of a true disciple of Jesus Christ. But it is, as we see today, a life that is also filled with divine consolation and heavenly peace. God rewards us, even in this present life, even in the midst of our suffering, if we follow him by walking with him the path of suffering in this world. And our reward in heaven will be great (Mt 5:12).

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Feast of St. Mark, April 25
1 Peter 5:5-14; Ps 88; Mk 16:16-20

“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables... we will continue to devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2,4).

St. Mark was an apostle and evangelist, a minister of the word. In his life we see the importance of prayer and the ministry of the word as a full-time job and vocation, which takes up all of one’s time and energy. The apostles, therefore, did not want to wait on tables in the daily distribution to the poor widows, for to do so they would have had to set aside time that they would have otherwise devoted to prayer and the service of the word; and they did not believe that it would be right for them to do this. They therefore ordained seven men to perform this service. We see, therefore, that the idea and practice of a full-time ministry of the word and of a life dedicated to prayer began very early in the primitive Church. And this has been something which has continued ever since throughout the history of the Church.

How important, then, is this ministry of the word of God, linked to the vocation of a life of prayer. Monks have the vocation of a life of prayer, linked normally to manual work. But the apostles and their successors, who are the bishops and priests, have the vocation to dedicate themselves full-time to prayer, linked to the ministry of studying and preaching the word. They therefore do not have time to wait on tables or do other manual
work, which should be given to other people, to other assistants, or to those who volunteer to provide such services within the Christian community.

How important it then is for us who have inherited this vocation of prayer and ministry of the word, that we faithfully dedicate ourselves full-time to this work, reading good books of theology, studies of the scriptures, and the sermons of the great preachers of the past and present, and that we diligently prepare our sermons so that they truly nourish the people of God! How important it also is that we dedicate ourselves to the liturgy of the hours, to the meditative reading of the scriptures, to spiritual reading, and to times of silent contemplation throughout the day!

How important it is, furthermore, that we live a life worthy of our vocation, living simply and austerely, seeking our joy only in God, not in the pleasures of this world! How important it therefore is that we not waste time in worldly diversions, watching television, going to movies, etc., which only divide our heart! Our life should rather be one of full-time dedication to prayer and the ministry of the word, without deviating either by waiting on tables, doing other manual work, or seeking our joy in secular and worldly diversions.

THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

3rd Sunday of Easter
Acts 3:13-15,17-19; Ps 4; 1 Jn 2:1-5; Lk 24:35-48

“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations” (Lk 24:46-47).

The mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is one single mystery, the paschal mystery, the mystery through which our sins are forgiven and we are saved. This mystery was known and deliberately planned to occur in this way from before the creation of the world (1 Peter 1:20). It was not just an accident or a tragedy that God foreknew and permitted, but rather it was God’s own definitive plan for our redemption.

It was not that Jesus only came to teach us, and unfortunately got himself killed in the process by the people. Nor was his death only an example of how Jesus poured out his life even unto death on a cross out of love for us, nor was it only meant as an example of how God forgives everything, even the killing of his own Son, nor was it only meant as an example of how Jesus, in his great love for us, forgave even those who killed him.

Rather, God planned it in this way because only through the death and resurrection of his Son could we be saved and our sins adequately forgiven, expiated, and totally propitiated. Christ’s death was not a tragic accident, but rather the chosen and desired means through which God could forgive our sins and still remain a righteous and just God who punishes all sin. St. Peter therefore says, “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed” (Acts 2:23).

God desired and planned it like this, so that the law might be established (Rom 3:31) and fulfilled in us (Rom 8:4). The law of God demands the punishment of the sinner. This punishment took place for us in the death of the Son of God, who was our
representative. In this way, the law was fulfilled in him for us, and “he condemned sin in 
the flesh” (Rom 8:3), that is, in his own flesh on the cross. Thus he had to die, according 
to God’s plan, “that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom 8:4 KJV).

His death was no accident, but was necessary for our salvation, and God prepared us 
for it through the prophets, as St. Peter affirms today, saying, “what God foretold by the 
mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled” (Acts 3:18).
Jesus himself tells us the same thing today, saying, “Thus it is written, that the Christ 
should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead” (Lk 24:46). His death was the 
necessary means through which God could justly forgive our sins.

Christ, therefore, died for our sins. “…he is the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn 2:2 
KJV), as St. John says today. As the propitiation given by God, he satisfied the justice of 
God and of the law of God on our behalf. He propitiated this justice. He propitiated the 
righteous, just, holy, and necessary wrath of God against all sin in his death on the cross.
He satisfied this necessary justice. Sin was justly punished in him on the cross as the 
substitute for all sinners (2 Cor 5, 21).

Then, on the third day, he rose from the dead to complete the paschal mystery, the 
mystery of our salvation. Freed and justly forgiven for our sins in the death of Christ, 
what will happen to us next? He rose from the dead for this, so that freed from our sins, 
we might rise with him to a new and risen life.

Hence, his death is our death to sin, and his resurrection is our resurrection to a new 
and risen life. Thus the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ 
completely renews us, and gives us a new life in the Spirit, so that from now on we might 
live according to the Spirit, and no longer according to the flesh.

We have therefore been given a new kind of life in this world. It is the life of those 
who have been born again in Jesus Christ. It is a life centered on God, and lived only for 
God. It is, furthermore, a life in which we need to grow much. It is a life in which we 
are in a long process of sanctification. This means that we have to learn step by step how 
to live only for God in this world.

We learn that there are many things which we now have to leave, renounce, and 
sacrifice if we truly want to live only for God in every aspect of our life. Things, for 
example, which we formerly did only for pleasure, we now learn that we are no longer to 
do.

So, little by little our life radically changes, and becomes a visible witness to the 
Gospel we believe and preach to others. We then realize that we have a mission to 
others, to share with them this good news through our word, backed up by the witness of 
our new way of living. And we discover that a word backed up in this way by the 
personal witness of our new way of living has great power.

Dead, therefore, in the death of Christ to our sins, and risen in the resurrection of 
Christ to a new and risen life, we become new creatures, new men, a new creation in 
Jesus Christ, with a mission to the world. We now have a Gospel to preach and an 
example to give for the salvation of the world, for its transformation through the paschal 
mystery into the new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Rev 21:5).
HE ROSE VICTORIOUS OVER DEATH

Monday, 3rd Week of Easter
Acts 6:8-15; Ps 118; Jn 6:22-29

“Then they said to him, What must we do, to be doing the works of God? Jesus answered them, This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (Jn 6:28-29).

We are still meditating on the resurrection of Jesus Christ and its meaning for us. Jesus’ hearers want to know what work they should now do since he just told them, “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life” (Jn 6:27). They want to know what labor they should therefore now do to be working for the food which endures forever; and he tells them that they are to believe in the one whom God has sent. And what are they to believe about him? They will not understanding clearly what they are to believe about him until he is risen from the dead and sends the Holy Spirit upon them to enlighten their understanding.

We, along with the early Christians, are the ones who can finally understand what we are to believe about him. We are to believe that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God, and that he came into the world principally to die on the cross in punishment for all the sins of all time.

Death is the punishment for sin (Gen 2:17). God told Adam, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:17). So now, on the cross, Jesus suffered this punishment of death, being crucified and punished as a criminal. Yet he himself had no personal sin whatsoever, but rather all our sins were charged to him, and he, being the only Son of God, bore their punishment for us and instead of us, in order to free us from this punishment of death, of eternal fire, and of guilt. Having endured this suffering, he destroyed this punishment for all those who believe in him. Death was no longer needed for the elect. They would no longer need to suffer it, since he suffered it for them. Death itself was therefore destroyed for the elect in his death.

Having destroyed death, he therefore rose triumphant over death. His resurrection shows his victory over death. He is now eternally victorious over death for all who believe in him. For those, therefore, who are in Christ, death is vanquished and changed. It is no longer the door leading to eternal damnation, but rather the passageway leading to eternal life with God.

How important it then is to be in Christ by believing in him. Through our faith in him we are freed from death as a punishment, and we rise with him to a new life. We now live in the risen Christ and are, in him, victorious over death. This punishment has ended for us. In his death he freed us from the wrath of God and from God’s punishment for our sins. We therefore are victorious in his victory. Through his victory—which is his resurrection—we walk in “newness of life” (Rom 6:4). Death as a punishment no longer exists for us who believe in him. His death freed us from death; and in his resurrection we rise to a new and risen life in him.
THE BREAD OF LIFE

Thursday, 3rd Week of Easter
Acts 8:26-40; Ps 65; Jn 6:44-51

“I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (Jn 6:51).

Jesus Christ gives us “the living bread” (Jn 6:51) or “the bread of life” (Jn 6:48) so that we might have eternal life (Jn 6:54), so that we might live forever (Jn 6:51), and never die (Jn 6:49). This bread comes from heaven, and came down to earth so that we might eat it. Jesus Christ himself is this bread. The bread from heaven is his flesh and blood. We are to eat his flesh and drink his blood to have life in us (Jn 6:53), and to remain in him, and he in us (Jn 6:56).

Although Jesus does not explain this at this time, we nonetheless know that his flesh and blood, which we eat and drink, is the eucharist, for he gave us bread, saying “this is my body” (Mk 14:22), and over the cup of wine he said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mk 14:24).

The eucharist is a precious gift which Jesus Christ left us in order to remain in us. It enables us to remain in him, which is his will for us. He said, “Remain in me, and I in you…remain in my love” (Jn 15:4,9). In receiving the eucharist, we receive Jesus Christ into our body and spirit, and he fills us with his love.

By means of the eucharist we can be intimately united with him in silent contemplation and in the prayer of union, which fill our spirit with light. In this state of union with him, we do not hunger or thirst, for he satiates us completely. We only enjoy him. Therefore he says, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst” (Jn 6:35).

Even when we do not experience him so strongly as we do in silent contemplation and the prayer of union, even so, we do not hunger and thirst for him because we know that he is still with us every moment, guiding us in everything, and teaching us every day. And we know that we will experience him again like this when he so pleases, in interior light, which so fills and burns our heart.

How important it then is to celebrate and receive the eucharist frequently, even every day, so that Christ truly be our daily bread, the bread of life, putting the life of God into our body and heart every morning for our illumination and transformation into new men, making us a new creation! In this way we offer every morning the one and only sacrifice of the New Testament, which is the only sacrifice of the only Son of God on Calvary, for our justification, and we receive the bread of life, which is his body and blood for our illumination.
THE CONTEMPLATIVE SILENCE OF ST. JOSEPH THE WORKER

Memorial of St. Joseph the Worker, May 1
Gen 1:26 – 2:3; Psalm 89; Mt 13:54-58

“Is not this the carpenter’s son” (Mt 13:55).

Today we honor St. Joseph, the adopted father of Jesus Christ. St. Joseph was a poor carpenter, a worker, and today we especially honor him as a worker, living a simple, humble, and austere life, a model for all workers.

Work has great value and dignity. The monastic tradition has always emphasized work of all kinds, but especially manual work, such as carpentry. Monasticism sees great value in simple manual work done in silence as a way of focusing the mind and body while at the same time allowing the mind and heart freedom to focus on God. We can contemplate, seated in silence, for various hours during the day, but we can extend our prayer for many more hours through silent work. In this way, we can pray most of the day without fatigue, while at the same time supporting ourselves physically, earning our daily bread by the sweat of our brow.

St. Joseph is a symbol for us of all this, of the dignity of work, especially manual work. But St. Joseph, from whom we hear not even a single word in the Gospels, is also a symbol and model for us of contemplative silence. We see illustrated in him a simple and poor life of contemplative silence and manual work.

This is the monastic ideal, a simple and austere life, focused only on God, of contemplative silence, in which our contemplation is extended throughout the day through silent, contemplative work, in which we pray while we work with our hands. Monks have been imitators of St. Joseph, the simple and silent workman, in their typical work of copying manuscripts and cultivating the land, living in evangelical poverty, only for God, with God as their only pleasure, renouncing the pleasures of the world. So lived St. Joseph in poverty, silence, and work, loving God with an undivided heart, not divided by the pleasures of this world.

Intellectual work, such as writing sermons and preaching, is also important, focusing our mind and heart on God. The silent preparation required for this work is a form of meditation and contemplation.

St. Joseph is also a model for us of silent contemplation, focused only on God, or on Jesus Christ, when we are seated, and not working. Undoubtedly, he prayed in this way before the manger in the cave of Bethlehem, illumined by the Word made flesh before him, in the silence of the night, in simplicity, far from the world with its distractions and pleasures. This form of prayer, without words or ideas, is very important. In this type of silent prayer, we often experience the love of God in our heart in a radiant way, which fills us with love and light. We also see in St. Joseph our model for this kind of passive, illuminated contemplation, the prayer of union, in the silence of the night, illumined by the Son of God made man for us.
“Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68).

The disciples were unable to understand Jesus’ words about the bread of life, and so, many of them “drew back and no longer went about with him” (Jn 6:66). Simon Peter and the twelve, however, decided to remain with him, for they knew from what they did understand of Jesus’ other teachings that he indeed had “words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68). This response of Peter, in any event, has great meaning for us as well: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68). What then are these words of eternal life?

God sent Jesus Christ to us to show us the way to return to God. We have fallen into sin in Adam, and we are therefore far from God and guilty, both because of his sin and our own personal sins. We do not have eternal life in us. We are under the law and its curse of death for our sins. We have no hope, but are rather condemned to death, eternal death, for our sins.

In the midst of this, God reconciled himself with us by sending his only Son to us; and if we believe in him, we will live and be saved. We will be among his elect to receive salvation, to be rescued from sin and the curse of the law for our sins, and to inherit eternal life.

These are the words of eternal life that Jesus Christ has for those who believe in him. He teaches us that he is our salvation from sin, guilt, and the curse of the law, which is death. He came “to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). He pays the price for our redemption from slavery. He pays our debt of death, to the law, and to divine justice with his blood poured out for us on the cross. He redeems from death every single individual who believes in him. Everyone who believes in him is one of his chosen ones, predestined for eternal life. This is why he came into the world, so that these words of eternal life might be preached to every creature (Mk 16:15), to manifest whom are his elect.

What his elect believe about him is that he is our substitution before God, to pay for us our debt of death to the law and to divine justice for our sins, to free us from this payment. Our debt was death. Dying, he paid it for us; and so we who believe in him are now free from this payment. We are now manifested as his elect, predestined from all eternity for eternal life. Now, in him, we have hope. We are justly freed from our guilt. This gives us jubilation of spirit, the true joy of the redeemed, predestined for glory. He assures us of our salvation (Rom 8:30,33); and this is what gives us joy of spirit. In him we are saved, and we follow him because he has these words of eternal life.
“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11).

During this beautiful time of Easter, we meditate today on the image of Jesus Christ the good shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep. We are his sheep, and he gives his life for us, so that we might live through him and draw life from him (Jn 1:16). “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him” (1 Jn 4:9). He is our life. We are in him, and he lives in us. We are to live through him. In him we have the fullness of life.

He gave his life to be in us. He gave us his sacramentalized body and blood in the eucharist so that we might eat him, and thus live in him, and he in us. He wants us to live in him and through him. “…because I live,” he says, “you will live also” (Jn 14:19). We draw life from him (Jn 1:16), the life of God, which he gave us. “As the living Father sent me, and as I live because of the Father,” he said, “so he who eats me will live because of me” (Jn 6:57). He is our life.

Jesus Christ has given his life for his sheep as a good shepherd. We draw life from him, from his fullness (Jn 1:16), and so we remain in his love, as he remains in his Father’s love (Jn 15:9). As Christ lives through the Father, drawing life from him, so we live through Christ, drawing life from Christ, and thus we live in his love. In this way we draw our new life in the Spirit through Christ.

Christ gave his life for us by offering himself as a sacrifice of love to his Father. This uniquely adequate sacrifice of himself as the only Son of God saved us and reconciled us with the Father. As a result, the risen Christ then sent from the Father the Holy Spirit to renew us and fill our hearts with the love of God (Rom 5:5).

How much we need the Holy Spirit and the eucharist, which is the body and blood, person and life of Jesus Christ, with all his love, dwelling in our hearts, illumining them! He saves us from our sins and imperfections which sadden us and darken our spirit. He comes to us every day to save us anew from this darkness, illumining us ever anew with his life and love, and with his ever new gift of the Holy Spirit, who renews us and rejoices our hearts.

Jesus Christ, who gave his life for us as our good shepherd, justifies us before God, making us new, clean, forgiven, and illumined. He shines within us and makes us resplendent, clothing us with his own righteousness and holiness. He is the definitive cure of our guilty conscience, for in his death he destroys our guilt for our sins and imperfections.

He gave his life for us to save us from the death of our spirit by propitiating and placating the wrath of God against our sins. His death in substitution for us freed us from the death of our spirit, and removed from us the pain and suffering of guilt. In his death, we die to death. His death destroyed our death. His death on the cross destroyed death for all his elect.

He therefore rose from the dead on the third day, victorious over death, Satan, and sin. He rose that we might rise new in him to a new life, filled with his love and with the
Holy Spirit. In this way we shall remain in his love and walk in the “newness of life” (Rom 6:4) in the light of his resurrection. As we die with him to our sins, in the same way we rise with him to live a new life, illumined by his love.

Truly, as St. Peter says today, “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Truly, there is no one else who suffered our punishment for us, giving his life for his sheep. He is the only one who has done this, and is the only one who could have done this, for only the only-begotten Son of God, equal to the Father, could do this, could suffer the punishment due for our sins, so that we might be freed from this suffering and from our sins and guilt, and made new and resplendent in God’s sight.

Only God could do this for us, renewing us in this way; and he could only do it as a man; and God became incarnate as a man only once for every man of every nation and religion. There is only one only-begotten Son of God made man. And he became man for all nations, cultures, and religions. He wants everyone to come to him. This is why he said, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15). We therefore preach the Gospel to everyone so that all might have the opportunity to be saved and come to a new life in him with their sins forgiven and their guilt removed.

Jesus Christ is our good shepherd, who said that “no one comes to the Father, but by me” (Jn 14:6). He indeed is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father, except by him. He gave his life for us, so that we might go to the Father through him. “I lay down my life for the sheep,” he says (Jn 10:15). Let us, therefore, come to him who is our good shepherd.

**THERE IS NO OTHER NAME**

Monday, 4th Week of Easter
Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 41-42; Jn 10:1-10

“I am the door: if anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture” (Jn 10:9).

Jesus Christ is “the door of the sheep” (Jn 10:7). We are the sheep. If we go through this door, given to us by God, we will be saved and find pasture. For this, Jesus Christ came into the world, sent by the Father. He came so that we might have life, and have it to the full (Jn 10:10).

There is only one door, and all the sheep have to go through this one door if they want to find pasture and be saved. Jesus Christ is the only door given to men by which they can be saved. Only those who pass through him will be saved, for “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). This is why Peter was sent today to preach Christ to Cornelius. An angel was sent to Cornelius, telling him that Peter “will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household” (Acts 11:14). When Peter preached Christ to them, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, and Peter was surprised to see that “to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18).
This was a new discovery for the early Church, who in the beginning were all Jews. They saw that when they preached Christ to the Gentiles, they too received the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues (Acts 10:46), just as they themselves did. They realized, then, that they were to preach Christ to the Gentiles too, so that they too might be saved and have their sins forgiven, invoking his name. Peter preached to Cornelius’s friends, saying, “To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

Christ came into the world so that this good news might be preached to “every creature” (Mk 16:15), so that everyone—not just Jews—might have the opportunity to have his sins forgiven by invoking his name with faith, and thus be saved and assured of eternal life.

There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles as far as justification and salvation are concerned. All, by nature, are under the wrath of God and the curse of the law for the sin of Adam and for their own sins. Only Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled the law, and he alone suffered its curse for the sake of all the elect. And all who believe in him are his elect and will be forgiven for their faith (Acts 10:43). The law demanded death as the punishment for sin, and Christ died for all his elect, thus fulfilling for them this requirement of the law. Thus when a Gentile believes in him, the death of Christ pays the debt of sin and death for this Gentile. Jesus Christ is, therefore, the Savior of the Gentiles as well as of the Jews, and so is to be preached to “every creature” (Mk 16:15). We are to give to all this opportunity of having life to the full (Jn 10:10). Those who accept our preaching are the elect, predestined to eternal life. We are to make known this one door of salvation to the ends of the earth.

NEWNESS OF LIFE

Thursday, 4th Week of Easter
Acts 13:13-25; Ps 88; Jn 13:16-20

“Of this man’s posterity God has brought to Israel a Savior” (Acts 13:23).

We are, in these readings from Acts, in the first days of early Christianity, after the resurrection, and today we hear the first recorded sermon of St. Paul, given in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia, in present-day southern Turkey.

St. Paul briefly recounts what God has done to save his people throughout their history, until he “brought to Israel a Savior” (Acts 13:23). The Jews, he says, killed him, but God raised him from the dead. He concludes, saying, “Be it known unto you, therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39 KJV).

Such then was the primitive preaching about Christ—dead and risen—in whom is forgiveness, justification, and salvation for “all that believe” (Acts 13:39). The experience of those first days after the resurrection was one of interior renovation through faith in Jesus Christ, dead and risen. They are dead with him to their sins, and risen with
him for a new life in his resurrection. Through faith in him, his death destroyed their sins, and his resurrection gave them a new, illumined, and risen life.

St. Paul told them that they could not be justified before God through the law. This was because no one could keep the law perfectly. They were, therefore, always guilty before God, as far as keeping the law was concerned (Dt 27:26). Only Jesus Christ satisfied the law for them, bearing its curse (Dt 27:26; Gal 3:13; Dt 21:23) and punishment for them. Only he perfectly fulfilled it, without sin, and only he satisfied the justice of God in suffering the punishment of the law on their behalf as their new covenant-head or representative, dying for them on the cross. The law and all its requirements is, therefore, fulfilled for them in Jesus Christ if they believe in him. And his resurrection shows forth the results, namely, that they can now walk in “newness of life” (Rom 6:4), and live in the Spirit (Rom 8:9), risen with Christ (Col 3:1-2), with him shining in their hearts (2 Cor 4:6).

No one achieved this justification through the law. The law was too difficult for them, and only multiplied their sins and increased their guilt in not being able to keep it. But now, through faith in Christ, dead and risen, this guilt is removed from their hearts, and their debt of disobedience is paid by Christ on the cross, taking their punishment, and suffering it for them, and instead of them, thus freeing them now to walk in newness of life in the light of his resurrection.

Such was the new life and joy of these early days of Christianity, and it is our joy too through our faith in Jesus Christ, in whom we have a new and illumined life in peace with God.

NO ONE COMES TO THE FATHER, BUT BY ME

Friday, 4th Week of Easter
Acts 13:26-33; Ps 2; Jn 14:1-6

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (Jn 14:6).

Jesus Christ is the agent sent by the Father into the world, so that all might come to the Father through him. He is the only Son of God made man to reveal the Father to us. He alone has been in heaven with the Father and has come down from there to teach us about God. There is no one else who has ever ascended into heaven and then returned again to earth to reveal to us the things which he personally saw there. So St. John says, “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father has made him known” (Jn 1:18). And to Nicodemos, Jesus said, “No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man” (Jn 3:13). This elliptical saying does not mean that Elijah and Enoch (Gen 5:24) did not ascend into heaven, but rather that no one ascended into heaven, and then returned again to earth to tell us what he saw there, except Jesus Christ, who was in heaven, and then descended to earth to reveal to us what he had seen and heard from the Father.

But Jesus did much more than this. He is also the means whereby we come to the Father. “…no one comes to the Father, but by me,” he says today (Jn 14:6). He is the
way that brings us to the Father, for to come to the Father we must first be justified. This means that we must first be righteous and holy by perfectly fulfilling the law, without sin, so that we shine with the very righteousness of God himself.

But St. Paul teaches us that, beginning with Adam, no one has ever been able to do this. He tells us that by means of the law “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom 3:10), and “no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law” (Rom 3:20). This is because no one has ever been able to perfectly keep the law. Therefore Jesus Christ is the only way given to men by which they may come to the Father (Acts 4:12), and so “no one,” he says, “comes to the Father, but by me” (Jn 14:6).

God himself justifies man through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross when we believe in the Son and the power of his sacrifice. Christ is our new covenant-head or representative, and he lived righteously, fulfilling all the precepts of the law for us, so that his righteousness might be ours. And since the law demands the death of the sinner as punishment for its violation, Jesus Christ, our representative, also fulfilled this requirement of the law for us in his death on the cross, which has infinite value since he is the only Son of God, equal in divinity with the Father. In believing in him, then, we are reconciled with God, our sins are justly expiated by his death, and we are clothed over with his own resplendent righteousness (2 Cor 5:21; Is 61:10).

The Jews before Jesus Christ were also justified by him through their faith, as was Abraham (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3). All who are justified and come to the Father are justified only by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, through their faith in him. He is the way; and no one comes to the Father, but by him.

IF WE SEE CHRIST, WE SEE THE FATHER

Saturday, 4th Week of Easter
Acts 13:44-52; Ps 97; Jn 14:7-14

“If you had known me, you would have known my Father also… He who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:7,9).

Jesus now speaks of the great mystery of his unity with the Father, to the point that he can say that “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). This is why Jesus has come into this world, to be the link between the Father and us. Jesus Christ is in us, at the same time that the Father is in him, and therefore he links us with the Father, being in the Father and in us. He came to establish and perfect this unity, “I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one” (Jn 17:23). Thus, when we see Christ, we see the Father. He is the one who reveals the Father. “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known” (Jn 1:18).

How, then, do we see and experience Christ in order to see the Father in seeing him? We experience Christ when God justifies us and forgives us our sins through Christ’s death on the cross, through our faith in him. It is not we who are able to do this to ourselves. We do not have the power to give relief to our own conscience and to illumine ourselves from within. Only Jesus Christ does this through his death on the cross. God forgives us and renews us only through the merits of the death of his Son on the cross,
when we invoke them with faith, for God is just, and will not forgive us unjustly and without a just expiation for our sins.

But it is God himself who gives us this expiation in his Son, and so, through our faith in the Son, the Father forgives us and removes from us the burden of our guilt, which depresses us. All the saints of the Old Testament were also forgiven only through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, through their faith and hope in the Messiah who was to come. Thus, through Jesus Christ we experience the Father’s forgiveness and love.

We also see the Father in seeing Christ when we participate in the glory of Christ’s resurrection, rising with him to a new, renewed, and cleansed life, to walk in newness of life, illumined from within by Christ shining in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6). The Father, through Jesus Christ, makes us a new creation, new creatures, new men, seeking from now on the things that are above, and no longer the pleasures, delights, and diversions of here below. Our delight from now on is only in God; and so we renounce the delights and delicacies of this world, to live an austere and holy life in Jesus Christ. Being thus risen with Christ, we experience and see the Father.

We experience the Father in Jesus Christ also in the eucharist, in the sacred ritual of the Mass, and in the reception of his body and blood in holy communion, which intimately unites us with Christ, and through him, with God.

Truly, if we know Christ, we know the Father. If we see Christ, we see the Father.

REMAIN IN MY LOVE

5th Sunday of Easter

“Remain in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it remains in the vine, neither can you, unless you remain in me” (Jn 15:4).

On this Fifth Sunday of Easter, we meditate on the beautiful image of the vine and the branches. Christ is the true vine, and we are the branches. Jesus Christ wants us to remain in him, and he in us, as the branches in the vine. Only thus will we be able to flourish and bear fruit.

Christ came into the world from the splendor of the Father in order to communicate this splendor to us, to be the link between the Father and us, so that the splendor of the Father might be infused into us. Therefore Jesus tells us, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; remain in my love” (Jn 15:9). He came to introduce us into this splendid river of divine love in which he himself lives with his Father. Therefore he says, “remain in my love” (Jn 15:9).

We will remain in his love by doing his will; and we will fall out of his love by not doing his will. He wants us to remain in his love as he remains in his Father’s love, and he gives us this love if we remain in him by obeying him. Therefore he says, “If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love” (Jn 15:10).

The key to all of this is obedience. If we want to remain in this splendid river of divine love, we have to do his will. And his will is that we remain intimately united to
him. He wants us to love him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mk 12:30), to love him with an undivided heart, not with a heart divided among the pleasures of the world and of the table, not with a heart divided by a life of pleasure, entertainment, and diversion. He wants our whole heart. He wants a heart reserved for him alone.

To live in this way, we renounce unnecessary pleasures. Monks, for this reason, live a life of prayer and fasting in the desert, far from the world with its distractions, attractions, temptations, noise, and pleasures. St. Bernard’s monks, for example, ate very austerely, without meat, without delicacies, without even seasoning, except salt. But such an austere life is not limited to monks within a cloister. These are values for every Christian, and we can all be edified and inspired by their example and the testimony of their lives.

These, then, are some of our works by which we are sanctified. But, as St. Paul teaches us, no one justifies himself by means of good works. We are too weak and too full of sin for that. Because of the sin of Adam, of which we are all guilty, and also because of our own sins, we are separated from God and under his wrath. It is God himself, and not ourselves, who justifies us in his mercy, and he does so through the blood of his Son. In his blood, the sin of Adam, together with our own sins, is washed away and expiated. Christ paid with his blood, in his death on the cross, the debt of Adam, suffering his punishment and freeing us from his curse.

We are cursed under the curse of the law for our own sins too, and these too are washed away and expiated in the blood of Christ poured out on the cross. Only in this way can we enter into the love of God and be introduced by Jesus Christ into the splendid river of love which eternally flows between the Father and the Son. Christ introduces us into this river by means of his death on the cross, freeing us, through our faith in him, from the burden of our sins and guilt by freeing us from their punishment, dying himself instead of us, suffering the punishment of death in our place, in order to give us the new freedom of the sons of God. And his resurrection shows us the glory of this new life, into which he introduces us.

Then, to remain in this splendid river of divine love, we have to obey him. If we disobey him, we fall out of this love, although not completely out of it, but our sun is darkened and our heart wounded until we reapply the blood of Christ to our heart through repentance, especially in the sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23), invoking the merits of Christ’s death on the cross. Thus we will once again rejoice in his love as his elect, predestined from all eternity for glory. So we shall live in the hope of glory (Rom 5:2), assured of the fulfillment of this glory when Christ will come again on the clouds of heaven.

THE NEW CREATION

Monday, 5th Week of Easter
Acts 14:5-18; Ps 113; Jn 14:21-26

“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him” (Jn 14:23).
This is the great promise of Jesus Christ, that he will make his abode with us, together with his Father—that he will dwell within us. We are reading these words now during this beautiful Easter time when we focus on our new life with the risen Christ. We know that he gave us a truly new life. It is through Christ’s death that God has reconciled himself to us, Christ having given his life on the cross for us, expiating our sins by bearing their punishment in place of us in his own body and with his poured-out blood. He was smitten and killed, “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23), and thus “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24).

Through our faith in him, and not through our works, we are justified and saved (Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8). This is the glad tidings of our faith, namely, that we are made new through the death on the cross of Jesus Christ, who paid our debt with the Father for our sins, completely cleansing us, through our faith in him, from sin and the sadness of guilt. And he rose from the dead to remain with us, so that we might walk in his new light, in the light and happiness of his resurrection. Our debt having been paid, we then rise with him as new men, to be a new creation (2 Cor 5:17).

Now, therefore, if we obey him, he will live in us with his Father, and will make his abode with us. Our obedience shows that we have living faith which manifests itself in good works. If we lack the good works of obedience, it is clear that we do not have living faith, and that we are therefore neither justified nor saved. Without good works there is no salvation; but our good works do not save or justify us. Only Jesus Christ justifies and saves us, and our faith is simply the instrument with which we receive this salvation.

Now, then, is the time for good works according to the moral law of God, which is the rule of our life, though not the covenant of our salvation. If we obey God and do his will, we will walk in his light. “I am the light of the world,” Jesus said; “he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (Jn 8:12). But to have this light, we must follow him, that is, obey him.

We are, therefore, now invited to live in radical obedience, in order to walk with him in the light, and be freed from the darkness. He will then rejoice us with his Spirit (Jn 7:37-39; 4:14) and dwell within us with his Father, loving us. This is the joy of Easter, that Christ rose, and that we, who have died in his death to our sins, rise with him in his resurrection to live a risen life in him, in the light and joy of spirit of the new creation.

This is the day that the Lord has made, the day of the resurrection, the day of the beginning of the new creation, with Jesus Christ and the Father dwelling within us, rejoicing our hearts.

A WITNESS OF THE RESURRECTION

Feast of St. Matthias, May 14
Acts 1:15-17,20-26; Ps 112; Jn 15:9-17

“So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was
taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection” (Acts 1:21-22).

Today is the Feast of St. Matthias, one of the disciples of Jesus, who lived with him and saw him risen, together with the other apostles (1 Cor 15:5-7). He was, therefore, elected after the ascension, but before Pentecost, to be a witness with the eleven to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead was an important part of the proclamation of the faith, the proclamation of the salvation of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for all who believe in him.

All need this salvation because no one is righteous, no one has lived perfectly according to the law of God (Rom 3:10). All are therefore cursed by the law, which says, “Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them” (Dt 27:26). The gentiles had the moral law of God written on their hearts (Rom 1:19-21; 2:15), but they did not keep it (Rom 1:21-22), and so they are “without excuse” (Rom 1:20), just as are the Jews, and hence, “as it is written,” as St. Paul says: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one” (Rom 3:10-12; Ps 13:1-3).

Everyone, therefore, Jews as well as Gentiles, needs God’s salvation, which he sent into the world in his Son Jesus Christ, through his death for our sins on the cross, and through his resurrection, which shows that his death was effective and accepted by God for the remission of our sins, through his substitution for us in bearing our just penalty on the cross.

The apostles, therefore, preached this victory of Jesus Christ over death. We do not have to die eternally if we believe in Christ, because he died for us, remitting our sins, and rose victorious over death, thus introducing a new kind of life, the life of the resurrection, which we can now have in his resurrection. It is a resplendent life, illumined by the light streaming from his resurrection.

So we rise with him to a new and risen life, having died with him to our sins through his death, which paid our debt for our sins, and thus freed us for this new and resplendent life in his resurrection.

St. Matthias joined the eleven to live and preach this. We too live and preach this salvation of God in Jesus Christ, dead and risen.

ALL ARE SAVED IN THE SAME WAY

Friday, 5th Week of Easter
Acts 15:22-31; Ps 56; Jn 15:12-17

“…and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9).

In the first days of the Christian faith, the disciples discovered that the salvation of God, sent into the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, was for everyone who believed, whether he be a Jew or a Gentile. At first, though, they thought that only Jews could be saved through faith in Christ. But seeing that the Gentiles
received the Holy Spirit just as they themselves did, they decided that it was not necessary that the Gentiles first become Jews, be circumcised and keep the whole ceremonial law of the Jews.

This was a great and important discovery, for now Christianity could truly become a universal, world religion for people of every nation who believe in Christ. It was no longer limited only to Jews, or to those who would first become Jews. St. Peter discovered this with Cornelius, and St. Paul discovered it in his travels; for example in Antioch in Pisidia where he preached to Gentiles. “And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48).

God has foreknown and ordained those who were to be saved by invoking the name of his Son. All who truly believe in him are among these blessed elect ones. How important it then is to preach his name and salvation unto the ends of the earth, for this is the plan of God from all eternity for their salvation in Jesus Christ. Through faith in his name they will come to new life, once the Gospel is effectively preached to them.

We ourselves continue to be filled with wonder and amazement at this discovery. It is a marvel in our own lives. We see how the name of Jesus has the power to cleanse us of all guilt and to give us the happiness of God, true happiness, which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. And we obtain this happiness only by invoking with faith the name of Jesus Christ. It is he who heals our wounds and gives us a new heart, radiant with the love of God, and happy in his service, with the burden and pain of our guilt and sin removed from us.

God purifies the hearts of all his elect in the same way, through their faith in Jesus Christ, dead for our transgressions, and risen for our new life. Dying, he paid our debt; and rising he illumined us. Dying, he destroyed our death; and rising, he restored our life. Through his cross and resurrection he renewed the world. So “we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:11), all in the same way, Gentiles as well as Jews. “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek,” says St. Paul, “the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:12-13).

---

WE ARE NOT OF THE WORLD

Saturday, 5th Week of Easter
Acts 16:1-10; Ps 99; Jn 15:18-21

“If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (Jn 15:19).

We are not of the world if we are Christians. This is clear from the scriptures (Jn 15:19; 17:14,16). The world will, therefore, persecute us because our values are different. The world hates us because we are not of the world. Jesus was not of the world, and neither are we, his followers, of the world. “They are not of the world,” Jesus says, “even as I am not of the world” (Jn 17:16). Jesus is not of the world, and, moreover, testifies of it “that its works are evil” (Jn 7:7). Therefore the world hates him
(Jn 7:7). The Christian, therefore, will be hated, rejected, and persecuted by the world, just as Christ was. This is our vocation and life as his followers. “A servant is not greater than his master,” Jesus says today. “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you” (Jn 15:20).

They persecuted Jesus because he testified concerning the world “that its works are evil” (Jn 7:7). By the testimony of our life, by our way of living, by our words, by our writings, and by our sermons we also testify that the works of the world are evil. We testify that worldly entertainments are not worthy of a Christian, and we therefore live in a completely different way. Our whole way of living is completely different from that of the world around us, and so the world hates us and does not accept us. If we were of the world, it would be different. We would be popular and loved by the world.

Unfortunately, however, there are Christians who are ashamed of being Christians, and who imitate the world and live like the world. They try, in this way, to avoid being persecuted by the world. Christ will also finally be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory (Mk 8:38).

But blessed are we when we do not imitate the world, and when we are hated and persecuted by men for Christ’s sake (Lk 6:22). It should not shake us, even if we see everyone hating us for Christ’s sake, for Christ predicted this as our vocation as his followers. “...you will be hated by all for my name’s sake,” he said. “But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Mt 10:22).

We are not of the world, and our whole way of life should testify that the style of the world is evil. We should not live, therefore, in a worldly way; rather we should reject it and testify against it. It is our glory and our vocation to live in this different way, as the witnesses of Jesus Christ in the world, shining “as lights in the world,” “in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation” (Phil 2:15). Let us always remember that we are not of the world, as Christ was not of the world (Jn 17:16). God is our only joy; and this certainly is not true of the world and of its way of living.

HOW TO REMAIN IN THE SPLENDID LOVE OF GOD

6th Sunday of Easter
Acts 10:25-26,34-35,44-48; Ps 97; 1 Jn 4:7-10; Jn 15:9-17

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love” (Jn 15:9-10).

Christ came into the world for our joy. Everyone wants happiness, and wants to be happy; but it is not easy to be happy in this world. Most people believe that an endless quest after worldly pleasures will make them happy, but in the end, they discover that this is not so. Jesus teaches us today that if we remain in his love, we will be happy. And the way to remain in his love is to keep his commandments. Then in the very next verse, he says, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (Jn 15:11). So the way to joy is to remain in his love by keeping his commandments.
Jesus Christ wants us to enter into his love. If we do this, we will also be in the love of his Father, for Jesus is loved by the Father, and he then loves us in turn with the same love with which he is loved by his Father. “As the Father has loved me,” he says, “so I have loved you” (Jn 15:9). Christ says that he wants “that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them” (Jn 17:26). Christ, then, is the channel through which the love of the Father flows to us.

The love of the Father for Christ is the interior love within the Trinity, the love between the Father and the Son. Christ, then, introduces us into divine love, the love which flows between the Father and the Son in ineffable splendor from all eternity. He brings us into the Trinity. This is what will make us truly happy; and the way to remain in this love is to obey Christ.

Christ obeys the commandments of his Father, and thus remains in his love. In this, he is our model. “If you keep my commandments,” he says, “you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love” (Jn 15:10). He also said, “he who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him” (Jn 8:29). Christ always remains with his Father, and his Father with him precisely because he always does the will of his Father. And Jesus Christ does this, “For,” as he says, “I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me” (Jn 6:38). So are we also to do if we want to remain in Christ’s love, and in the love of the Father.

“My food,” Jesus said, “is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work” (Jn 4:34). This is what nourishes his spirit: doing his Father’s will and work. It is his food! What would we have to do to follow this example, and thus remain in his love? His every action was controlled and driven by this desire and determination always to do the will of his Father. “I can do nothing on my own authority,” he says, “as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (Jn 5:30).

Every individual is to discern well what God wants of him, and then dedicate himself to doing it if he wants to remain in the love of God, and so have the joy of Christ in him. If we disobey God’s will, we cannot be happy or remain in the love of God. This is the principle cause of our sadness and depression, namely, not discerning well what God wants of us. If we could learn better what he wants of us, we would be much happier with the true happiness of God, if only we would do it.

But today Jesus teaches us something of what he wants us to do, and that is to love one another. “This is my commandment to you,” he says today, “to love one another” (Jn 15:17). And he gives us an example of this love, “Greater love than this,” he says, “no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). This is the example of his own life, for he is the good shepherd, and “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11). “I lay down my life for the sheep,” he says (Jn 10:15).

If we do this, we will bear fruit, and he wants us to bear fruit. “I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain,” he says today (Jn 15:16). We will bear fruit if we love one another and if we lay down our life for our friends (Jn 15:13). St. John tells us that “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for our brethren” (1 Jn 3:16). It will be revealed to everyone who seeks, how he is personally to do this. And in doing
this and in obeying God in everything else, we will remain in the love of Christ, and in the love of the Father.

If we sin, we need the blood of Christ, who was sent by the Father “to be the propitiation for our sins,” as St. John tells us today (1 Jn 4:10 KJV). No one can always obey (Rom 3:10). We all fail much, and therefore we always need to apply anew the blood of Christ to our heart, wounded by our sins or imperfections which sadden us. But in Christ, through our faith in him, is our cure, sent to us by God, for he suffered our punishment to free us from this sad punishment, so that we might rejoice in the love of God.

THE INTERIOR ILLUMINATION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Wednesday, 6th Week of Easter
Acts 17:15,22 – 18:1; Ps 148; Jn 16:12-15

“He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (Jn 16:14).

The gift of the Holy Spirit will enable us to understand the depths of the mystery of Christ. “…he will not speak on his own authority” (Jn 16:13), Jesus says, but rather “he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (Jn 16:14). The Holy Spirit will not teach us new doctrines, but will give us a deeper understanding of the mystery of Christ. He is an interior teacher who knows the inner depths of God, and then enables us to understand them interiorly in our spirit. He resides in the depths of God, but has also been given to us as a gift to dwell within us too, to interiorly communicate to us, within our spirit, the deep things of God. “…the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God,” says St. Paul (1 Cor 2:10). And “no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (2 Cor 2:11). And “we have received…the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God” (1 Cor 2:12).

This Spirit proceeds from the Father, and is given to us in Messianic abundance through Jesus Christ, risen and ascended. The glorified Christ gives him to us from the Father. “…when the Counselor comes,” Jesus says, “whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me” (Jn 15:26). The function of the gift of the Spirit for us is to glorify Christ by enabling us to more deeply understand his mystery. “He will glorify me,” says Jesus today, “for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (Jn 16:14).

Only Christians receive the Holy Spirit, for the world “neither sees him nor knows him” (Jn 14:17). Only those who believe in Christ will experience him. “…you know him,” says Jesus, “for he dwells with you, and will be in you” (Jn 14:17).

It is the action of the Holy Spirit within our heart which illumines us interiorly. He infuses spiritual understanding into our heart. He makes the love of Christ shine within us. It is he who reveals to us the depths of God in our silent contemplation, when we pray in our heart, seated in darkness, without words or ideas. It is he who gives us true joy and jubilation of spirit as we contemplate the salvation which comes to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is he who gives us interior assurance of our salvation through our faith in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, which satisfied divine
justice and the wrath of God against our sins, and gives us a new life, illumined by his resurrection. It is the Holy Spirit who illumines us interiorly with the light that streams from the risen Christ.

THE ASCENDED LIFE

Ascension Thursday
Acts 1:1-11; Ps 46; Eph 1:17-23; Mk 16:15-20

“So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God” (Mk 16:19).

Today Jesus ascends into heaven, returning to his Father, while we are sent out by him to “preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15); yet at the same time we also ascend with him into heaven in spirit. We have risen with him, and should therefore now “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God,” and set our “minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:1-2). This is the risen life that we should now live in Jesus Christ. In addition, we also ascend into heaven with him in spirit, and should, therefore, live not only a risen, but also an ascended life with him, for God has “raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6).

This should now be the ideal of our new life in Jesus Christ—to live a risen and ascended life with him. We are one with Christ, and so where he is, we also are. Seeking the things that are above, and not those of the world means not dividing our heart among worldly delights and pleasures, but rather renouncing them to obtain the buried treasure and pearl of great price (Mt 13:44-46), and so respond positively to the call to perfection given to the rich young man (Mt 19:21). Seeking only the things that are above means leaving all to be a true disciple (Lk 14:33) and to receive the hundredfold reward (Mt 19:29), considering all else that we have left “as loss for the sake of Christ” (Phil 3:7).

This, then, is our Christian ideal, namely, the ascended life, while at the same time preaching the Gospel to every creature (Mk 16:15) for their salvation through the blood of Christ, knowing that “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:16), for “He who believes in him is not condemned, [but] he who does not believe is condemned already” (Jn 3:18).

This is the new life which Christ has given to us, and so he now ascends to his Father. And “he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking...his own blood” (Heb 9:12), thus bringing his sacrifice to its conclusion and obtaining its results. There, in the heavenly sanctuary, he intercedes for us before his Father (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25; 9:24), showing him his blood, with which he absorbed into himself all of the divine wrath against our sins.

It is this sacrifice which enables us to live a new, forgiven, risen, and ascended life with Christ. According to the eternal plan of God, this sacrifice reconciled God with us, enabling him to justly forgive us if we believe in Jesus Christ. It is this sacrifice which gives us our ascended life, and at the same time sends us out to preach salvation in Christ.
to every creature (Mk 16:15), being his “witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

**NO ONE WILL TAKE YOUR JOY FROM YOU**

Friday, 6th Week of Easter
Acts 18:9-18; Ps 46; Jn 16:20-23

“So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (Jn 16:22).

In this verse, Jesus teaches his apostles that their situation will radically change after his death and resurrection, when they have received the Holy Spirit. They are sad now at his departure, and will be especially sad at his crucifixion, but when he rises, they will see him again and will rejoice. “…but I will see you again,” he says, “and your hearts will rejoice” (Jn 16:22). Moreover, he adds, “no one will take your joy from you” (Jn 16:22).

This is spiritual joy, rooted in Jesus Christ, alive, risen, and present within us, shining in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6). This spiritual joy is the wealth of the Christian. It comes to him through the redemption which he has received in Jesus Christ, through his faith in him. Christ makes us righteous, new, and resplendent through his death for us on the cross, for in his death he suffered in our place our just punishment for our sins, and so freed us from this suffering, and enabled God to justly forgive us for our sins, which is the only thing that can truly sadden us now. In suffering our punishment for us, he freed us from remorse and the sadness of guilt which depresses us. He suffered it instead of us, so that we would not have to suffer it.

Moreover, Christ, through his death and resurrection, clothes us anew with the glorious robe of his own righteousness, making us resplendent before God (Is 61:10), truly righteous and holy, new men (Eph 4:22-24), a truly new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15), new creatures in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came, died, and rose to make all things new (Rev 21:5). God having justly forgiven us through the death of Christ, Christ rose for our justification (Rom 4:25), that we might rise with him to a new, risen life (Col 3:1-2; 2:12; Eph 2:6; Rom 6:4). He illumines us from within by his resurrection; and his Spirit shines in our hearts. All this is the source of our new spiritual joy in Jesus Christ, through our faith in him.

We then begin to live a new life, different from the way we formerly lived. We now renounce worldly pleasures (1 Jn 2:15; James 4:4; Mt 13:44-46; 19:21,29) and seek the things that are above, not those below (Col 3:1-2). To the degree that we live as new men, we will rejoice in Christ, “and no one will take your joy from you” (Jn 16:22). Only sin or imperfections will take this joy from us. But God is always ready to forgive us anew whenever we invoke the merits of Christ’s death on the cross, especially in the sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23), and then we will see him again, and our hearts will rejoice, “and no one will take your joy from you” (Jn 16:22).
"Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” (Jn 16:24).

We should ask the Father in the name of Jesus, and he will give us what we have requested. “...if you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name,” says Jesus (Jn 16:23). Previously the apostles had not asked for anything in Jesus’ name because he was not yet glorified. But now the situation will change with his death and resurrection. Once he is glorified, they are then to begin asking the Father in Jesus’ name, and either the Father or Jesus will grant them their petition. Jesus says, “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it... if you ask anything in my name, I will do it” (Jn 14:13-14). Jesus promises so that “whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you” (Jn 16:26).

The most important thing is that we ask the Father in the name of Jesus. If we do that, either the Father or Jesus will give us what we have asked for. So he says, “In that day you will ask in my name; and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from the Father” (Jn 16:26-27). The Father loves us and will grant our petition because we love Jesus Christ and ask in his name. The conclusion of all this for us is: Ask the Father in the name of Jesus, and we will receive what we have requested, either from the Father or from Jesus.

What, then, should we ask for to test this promise? The best and most secure thing to ask for is that for which Jesus Christ himself was sent into the world, namely, for the remission of our sins and our justification by faith, so that we might be a new creation, new creatures, truly new men in Christ. This petition he cannot deny, and it is, moreover, the most important thing for us, the most needful thing for our life. If we ask for this, especially in the sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23), we will receive it, and will be happy with the happiness of God in the depth of our heart, as Jesus promises us today, saying, “ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” (Jn 16:24).

If we are Christians, we do not believe in a merely natural religion, available to everyone by purely natural means. Our faith, rather, is based on Jesus Christ, who reveals to us the Father and the way of salvation. He died and rose for our salvation. Only if we believe in him can we be forgiven and justified, for he alone bore our sins on the cross and paid our debt for them by dying instead of us, who believe in him. We should, therefore, ask the Father in the name of Jesus, invoking his merits on the cross, that we might be forgiven and justified.
WE ARE NOT OF THE WORLD, BUT ARE SENT TO THE WORLD

7th Sunday of Easter
Acts 1:15-17,20-26; Ps 102; 1 Jn 4:11-16; Jn 17:11-19

“I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (Jn 17:14).

As Jesus Christ was not of the world, neither are we, his followers, of the world, nor should we love the world or the things that are in the world. “Do not love the world or the things in the world,” says St. John. “If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him” (1 Jn 2:15). We are not to be worldly, not to be lovers of the pleasures of the world. “Unfaithful creatures!” says St. James. “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

We are not to find and seek our joy here below in the entertainments and diversions of the world. Rather, as Christians, we are to live a new and risen life in Christ. “If then you have been raised with Christ,” says St. Paul, “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:1-2). Christ did not come into the world to fill himself with its delights, but rather to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45). And thus does he wish us also to be, not lovers of the world and its pleasures, but persons sent into the world with a mission to the world, to save the world, as he was. Christ had a mission to save the world, and he gave us the same mission, to give our life for the world’s salvation.

To love the world in order to save the world is completely different from loving the world in order to seek its pleasures and live a worldly life. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). This is the sense in which we are to love the world, namely, because we have a mission to the world to save it. We should give our life in love for the world, for our brethren, that they might be saved in Jesus Christ. Hence, “the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). He did not come to be served by the pleasures of the world, but to serve, and to give his life in propitiation for our sins, suffering our punishment in our place, to free us from this punishment, and from our sins and guilt, to give us a new life in the light of his resurrection.

In this, Christ is our model. Even though we do not bear the sins of others, we are, nonetheless, to give our life for our friends and brethren, so that they may be saved. “By this we know love,” says St. John, “that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 Jn 3:16). It is clear that Christ wants us to follow his example of giving his life for the world. He said, “If I then, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13:14-15). This is our mission, to give our life in love for our friends and brethren. “Greater love than this no one has,” said Jesus, “that one should lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). So ought we to do.
It is clear, then, what we are to do. We are not of the world, and the world will hate us because we are different, for we do not seek its pleasures, as do the rest. “They are surprised,” says St. Peter, “that you do not now join them in the same wild profligacy, and they abuse you” (1 Peter 4:4). Yes, we are different from the world. The word of God has made us different. “I have given them thy word,” said Jesus; “and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (Jn 17:14). We are not of the world because we do not seek the things of the earth, but rather those that are above, “where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1). God is our only pleasure, to the degree that this is possible, and so we renounce the pleasures of the world. “If you were of the world,” said Christ, “the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (Jn 15:19).

We do not love the world in the sense of a quest for its pleasures (1 Jn 2:15). But yes, we do love the world in the sense that we have a mission to the world to save the world (Jn 3:16). In this second sense, we should imitate the good shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep (Jn 10:11,15,17). We should, therefore, lay down our life for our brethren, to bring them the word of salvation, to preach Christ to them, for “No one who denies the Son has the Father. [And] He who confesses the Son has the Father also” (1 Jn 2:23), and “He who has the Son has life; [but] he who has not the Son of God has not life” (1 Jn 5:12). To bring Christ to the world for its salvation is our mission.

We should, therefore, give the example of the testimony of our life that we are not of the world in the sense of seeking its pleasures (1 Jn 2:15), but rather are persons who have been sent to the world on a mission save the world (Jn 3:16), for “As thou didst send me into the world,” Jesus tells us today, “so I have sent them into the world” (Jn 17:18).

CHRIST GIVES PEACE TO OUR CONSCIENCE

Monday, 7th Week of Easter
Acts 19:1-8; Ps 67; Jn 16:29-33

“I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33).

Jesus Christ came into the world to give us his peace, which is not like the peace that the world gives. “Peace I leave with you,” he says; “my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you” (Jn 14:27). His peace is something which only he can give, for only he removed God’s enmity against us for our sins. In reality, it is God who always loved us and who therefore sent us his Son to remove the enmity which he had against us on account of our sins. Christ did this by satisfying divine justice through his suffering on the cross for our sins. Through his sacrificial and propitiatory death on the cross for us he satisfied the just and necessary wrath of God, thus enabling God to forgive us in all justice, and not only gratuitously. It is this reality, and the revealed knowledge concerning it, that gives us such peace in our conscience. We know through faith that our forgiveness is just, that it does not violate justice, that our just debt and just punishment
have been paid. To know this gives us great peace of conscience, the peace of Christ, which only he can give.

We have, moreover, risen with him to a new life. He sanctifies us through his justification. Christ’s perfect righteousness is given to us, making us truly righteous and resplendent before God, and we can grow every day more in holiness through him living within us.

No other religion can give peace to our heart and conscience as Jesus Christ can, because he alone suffered our punishment to justly justify us. It is this justification through his death which gives us this great peace, which the world cannot give. “…the chastisement of our peace was upon him,” prophesied Isaiah (Is 53:5 KJV). Through his suffering our punishment on the cross comes our peace. By his suffering our punishment, we were justified, and through this justification comes our peace. “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1 KJV).

We have peace, then, in Jesus Christ, peace in our heart and peace in our conscience. In the first order, Christ did not reconcile us with God, but rather he reconciled God with us by satisfying God’s justice and God’s wrath through his death on the cross. God could then forgive us in all justice, as well as in all mercy. It is this which gives us such peace with God, and this peace will sustain us through the tribulation we will suffer in the world. He therefore tells us, “be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). Being reconciled with God, we have peace in the midst of all our tribulation in the world.

LIVING CONTEMPLATIVELY IS THE CONTEXT FOR CONTEMPLATING THE GLORY OF GOD

Thursday, 7th Week of Easter
Acts 22:30; 23:6-11; Ps 15; Jn 17:20-26

“The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them” (Jn 17:22).

Christ came into the world that we might see and contemplate his glory, which is the glory in which he lives with the Father. Christ gives us access to God and to the experience of the glory of God in our heart. He wants us to contemplate this glory and thus receive from his fullness (Jn 1:16). He wants us to remain in this glory which he has with the Father (Jn 15:9). He wants us, as we contemplate his glory, to be transformed from glory to glory into his own image (2 Cor 3:18). This is why he came, because no one living has seen God and can reveal him to us, except him (Jn 1:18). For this reason Christ wants us to be with him, namely, to see and contemplate his glory. “Father,” he said, “I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me” (Jn 17:24). He gave us his glory that we might contemplate it. “The glory which thou hast given me,” he said, “I have given to them” (Jn 17:22).

In contemplating the glory of Christ, we contemplate the glory of God, the glory of the Father, the glory of the Trinity. Upon ascending into heaven, Christ sent forth from
the Father the Holy Spirit to reveal to us the glory of the Trinity, the glory of Christ shining in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6).

By renouncing the world and its pleasures, we can obtain this hidden treasure, this pearl of great price of contemplating the glory of God in the face of Christ (Mt 13:44-46; 2 Cor 4:6). Those who want to contemplate this glory are invited to live contemplatively, that is, to renounce the pleasures of the world and live only for God with an undivided heart (Mt 19:21,29). This call is for all, but especially for those who have responded to the call to the priesthood or religious life, which is indeed, in either case, a whole way of life, a celibate life of prayer, simplicity, and evangelical poverty, working in the Lord’s vineyard. This call to live contemplatively is also the call to the monastic life, a life of prayer and fasting in the desert, far from the world and its pleasures and distractions, lived in simplicity and evangelical poverty, dedicated to the contemplation of the glory of God shining on the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:6).

Those who wish to respond to this call and live in and contemplate this glory should live contemplatively, that is, renounce the pleasures of the world and live in evangelical poverty and simplicity, for living in this way is the context in which we can contemplate the glory of God.

THE WORLD WILL PERSECUTE THE CHRISTIAN

Friday, 7th Week of Easter
Acts 25:13-21; Ps 102; Jn 21:15-19

“Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go. This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God” (Jn 21:18-19).

The two readings today are focused on Saints Peter and Paul, the two pillars of the Church, and they focus on their deaths whereby they were to glorify God. In the Gospel, Jesus predicts the death of St. Peter; and in the first reading, Festus, the governor, tells King Agrippa that he is going to send Paul to Rome to be tried by Caesar, saying, “when Paul had appealed to be reserved unto the hearing of Augustus, I commanded him to be kept till I might send him to Caesar” (Acts 25:21 KJV).

We can see in today’s readings an important aspect of the Christian life, namely, that a true witness to Jesus Christ will suffer persecution in this world, which is so far from God. The world is guilty before God because of the sin of Adam our progenitor and first covenant-head. Adam lost his harmonious relationship with God for himself and all his descendents. His sin then multiplied in the world, where man forgot God, and dedicated himself to himself and to his own pleasures. Jesus Christ was then sent into the world to save it from all this through his sacrifice of himself on the cross, whereby he died instead of us to pay for us the penalty for our sins. He thus placated the wrath of God against the human race, for the brief suffering of the only Son of God had greater value before God than the eternal suffering of the whole human race. Thus God regarded the just debt of Adam as paid by the death of Christ for all who believe in him. Hence, as in Adam all
who were descended from him died, so in Christ all who believe in him are saved (Rom 5:18).

But when the apostles Peter and Paul preached this good news to a world lost in sin and its own pleasures, many rejected this proclamation of salvation, preferring to remain in their worldly pleasures and sins. The preaching of the apostles did not please them. And the apostles were persecuted and martyred.

This, then, is the pattern of the apostolic life, of the life of the preacher of the Gospel of the salvation of God in Jesus Christ to all who believe in him. If we preach this, we also will be rejected and persecuted by the world which does not want to hear this, because it wants to remain in its worldly pleasures. The world does not want to convert, and so it persecutes all those who preach the Gospel to it.

We have to prepared for this, and not be afraid or ashamed of bearing witness to Jesus Christ, for “everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 10:32).

BY HIS RESURRECTION, HE RESTORES OUR LIFE

Saturday, 7th Week of Easter
Acts 28:16-20,30-31; Ps 10; Jn 21:20-25

“For this reason therefore I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain” (Acts 28:20).

St. Paul has finally arrived as a prisoner in Rome, and convokes the Jews and tells them these words, namely, that he is a prisoner for having testified to “the hope of Israel” (Acts 28:20). The hope of Israel was the coming of the Messiah, culminating in his resurrection from the dead. St. Paul mentions the resurrection from the dead several times in his various defenses. Before the council in Jerusalem he cried out, saying, “with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead I am on trial” (Acts 23:6). And before the governor Festus and King Agrippa in Caesarea, Paul testified that “the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to the people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:22).

Tomorrow we end the Easter season, in which we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. His resurrection is an important element of our faith. We are saved by the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, that is, by his death and resurrection. His resurrection confirms that his death was successful before God, and that our sins have truly been forgiven by his death when we believe in him and invoke the merits of his death on the cross. He died to save us, to forgive and justify us, and to make us truly righteous and holy, resplendent before God, a new creation, new creatures, new men, clothed now with Jesus Christ himself (Gal 3:27; Rom 13:14) and with his own resplendent righteousness (Is 61:10). All this is because he paid our debt of punishment for our sins with his death on the cross.

Then, we being now free from sin, he rose from the dead so that we might rise with him to a new and illumined life, to walk now with him in the newness of life (Rom 6:4),
to walk in his light (Jn 8:12). He rose for our sanctification, to manifest our justification in a new and holy life. Thus he renews the human race by his resurrection.

In his death, Christ destroys our death, our pain, our punishment, our alienation from God, and our guilt. In his resurrection, he restores our life, giving us a life that is now truly new, holy, and illumined. He really changes us, and makes us truly righteous and resplendent with the very righteousness of Jesus Christ himself. The curse from the sin of Adam is removed from us by the death of Christ; and his harmonious life with God in Eden is restored to us by his resurrection from the dead. He destroys our death and restores our life by his paschal mystery.

THE HOLY SPIRIT, THE POWER BEHIND THE NEW CREATION

Pentecost
Acts 2:1-11; Ps 103; 1 Cor 12:3-7,12-13; Jn 20:19-23

“Jesus said to them again, Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:21-23).

Today is Pentecost, the day on which Jesus Christ, dead, risen, ascended, and glorified at the right hand of the Father, sent forth from the Father the Holy Spirit upon the Church for our salvation and the forgiveness of our sins. It is only when Christ has been glorified and has presented the blood of his completed sacrifice in the heavenly sanctuary before his Father, that he sends from the Father the Holy Spirit for the sanctification of his Church. All the power of his sacrifice on the cross is on this day given to those who believe in him. This day of Pentecost, therefore, completes and consummates the paschal mystery.

It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to invoke Jesus as Lord and Savior, and thus be forgiven and saved through his name, as St. Paul affirms today, saying, “no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3). And in invoking Jesus as Lord with faith, we are saved and forgiven, as St. Paul affirms, saying, “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with his heart and so is justified, and confesses with his lips and so is saved… For everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:9-10,13).

St. Paul put this doctrine into practice in the jail in Philippi when the jailer asked him and Silas, saying, “Men, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:30-31). And so it was, and so it is, because, as St. Peter says, “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Jesus Christ is the only Son of God and the only Savior definitively sent into the world for our salvation. Through faith in him, the sins of all who believe in him are expiated. And it is the Holy Spirit that gives us the power to invoke his name with saving faith, for “no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3).
It is the work of the Holy Spirit to lift up Christ, not himself. “But when the Counselor comes,” says Jesus, “whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me” (Jn 15:26). This is his function. He inflames the love of Christ in our hearts. He does not teach us new things, but rather reminds us of what Christ has taught us and helps us to understand it more deeply. “When the Spirit of truth comes,” says Jesus, “he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (Jn 16:13-14). His office is to lift up Christ, not himself. “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (Jn 14:26). The Holy Spirit’s task, then, is to give us a deeper understanding of the mystery of Christ, particularly his paschal mystery, through which we are saved through our faith in him.

But it is not our faith that saves us, as though our faith were a virtue that pleased God, and which he therefore rewarded by giving us salvation. Our faith is only an instrument through which we receive God’s salvation. What saves us is not our faith with which we invoke Jesus as Lord, but rather the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, who honored the law of God by fulfilling it perfectly and by suffering its punishment for us who have not kept it perfectly (Dt 27:26; Gal 3:10). The life and death of Jesus Christ confirmed, established, honored, and fulfilled the law of God for us (Rom 3:31); and through our faith in him, God accepts us as though it were we who had done and suffered all this.

And so it is, for Jesus is our new covenant-head, just as Adam was our first covenant-head. And as we are considered and are sinners in being sons of Adam, our first covenant-head, so are we considered and are saved in being sons (by faith) of the new Adam, our new covenant-head, Jesus Christ. It is faith which enables us to receive this salvation, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives us the power to call Jesus Lord and have this saving faith in him.

The result of this work of Jesus Christ, received through our faith, is the remission of our sins, in which we are made a new creation. We are made new creatures, and the apostles and their successors are sent into the world with a new power to forgive sins. It is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which remits our sins and clothes us in his righteousness, thus creating the world anew. And all this is worked through the power of the Holy Spirit, given to the Church for the remission of sins. So as “the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2) at the first creation, so in the same way it is the Spirit of God who is the power behind the new creation.
“And my neighbors laughed at me and said, He is no longer afraid that he will be put to death for doing this; he once ran away, and here he is burying the dead again” (Tobit 2:8).

Tobit was a righteous man of the tribe of Naphtali. He was deported to Nineveh and lost everything when Sennacherib, king of Assyria, sought his life for burying the Israelites slain by the king.

Tobit was a man of faith, justified and saved, not by his good works (Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16), but by his faith (Rom 4:3; Gen 15:6), which manifested itself in good works. He lived in great faithfulness to the law of Moses, even to the point of risking his life. He gives various striking examples of his fidelity to the will of God as revealed in the Mosaic law. He says that “All the tribes that joined in apostasy used to sacrifice to the calf Baal, and so did the house of Naphtali my forefather. But I alone went often to Jerusalem for the feasts, as it is ordained for all Israel by an everlasting decree” (Tobit 1:5-6). He had the courage of his convictions to do what was right, even though he was the only one who did it. He was blessed for this. He was often the only one in his whole tribe who remained faithful to this and other obligations of the people of Israel.

“Now when I was carried away captive to Nineveh,” he tells us, “all my brethren and my relatives ate the food of the Gentiles; but I kept myself from eating it because I remembered God with all my heart” (Tob 1:10-12). Tobit alone remained faithful to the will of God concerning food when his whole family and all his relatives abandoned the Israelite diet according to the law, and ate like pagans. And when he recovered his wife, his son, and his house, after losing them for having buried the Israelites slain by the king, he continued burying the dead as an act of charity, and in this he continued putting his life in danger.

Tobit, in his virtuous life, is an example for all of us. He lived an heroically virtuous life, often being the only one in his environment who did the will of God in a particular matter. We also are called to confess Christ before men (Mt 10:32), and not be ashamed of him (Mk 8:38), or of his will, even if we are the only ones in our environment who remain faithful to certain obligations that are according to God’s will.

There are many examples of this kind of virtue today which can inspire us to remain faithful. Priests, for example, who are faithful to their obligation to pray the liturgy of the hours and to dress clerically, in accordance with canon law, are inspiring examples for all, of this kind of fidelity. This faithfulness can help many in the Church today to imitate their example, each according to the obligations of his or her own state in life and vocation.

The exterior obligations of our vocation, faithfully observed, should be expressions and visible signs of our interior devotion and love of God. They are signs of faith which inspire many, and are much needed in our world today, so forgetful of God.
“Which commandment is the first of all? Jesus answered, The first is, Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mk 12:28-30).

This is the first commandment for all who believe in Jesus Christ. It is not just for some special group within the Church. It is not just for priests and religious. It is not just for celibates who have even renounced Christian marriage in order to love God alone with all the love of their heart, without any division, not even the division of loving a Christian spouse within the sacrament of matrimony. This commandment is rather the first commandment for every Christian.

Christ wants us to love God with all our resources, that is, with all our energy, intelligence, strength, heart, mind, and soul. This is his first and most important commandment. He wants our whole heart, all the love of our heart, all of our work, all of our time, all of our dedication. In whatever state of life we are in, he wants all of us, to the degree that we are able to offer and dedicate ourselves in this way while still fulfilling the responsibilities of our state in life. This is why the Church has always taught (and still teaches) that celibacy is a higher call than marriage, namely, because the celibate can love God with less division of heart, that is, with a heart more completely and radically undivided in its love for God, and for him alone, thus fulfilling the most important commandment in a still more radical way. But in this way, the celibate functions as a mirror for the whole Church, showing it in a clearer and more radical way what all should strive to do, each in accord with the responsibilities of his or her own state in life.

In fact, as we heard in yesterday’s Gospel, in the world of the resurrection, all will be celibate, for “those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Lk 20:35), but “are like the angels in heaven” (Mk 12:25). All will be celibate because only “The sons of this age marry or are given in marriage” (Lk 20:34). Those who now in this present age are already celibate for the love of God are, therefore, eschatological signs, that is, signs of the future, reminding the whole Church of her own future state, serving as mirrors for her to see her own future in seeing those who are celibate now, ahead of time.

Every Christian is, therefore, called to live by this greatest of all commandments, that is, to live in simplicity, following the spirit of evangelical poverty, not dividing his or her heart among the pleasures, delicacies, and delights of this world. All are called to love God with all their heart, in accordance with the responsibilities of their state in life.

And, as Jesus added a second commandment, we also know that we are to spend our life helping our neighbor with our gifts and talents. We are to dedicate our lives to help and save our neighbor.
“How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, declared, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand till I put thy enemies under thy feet. David himself calls him Lord; so how is he his son?” (Mk 12:35-37).

Jesus Christ is the son of David, but he is much more than merely that. In fact, David himself calls him “Lord” in Ps 109:1. In addition to being the son of David, he is also David’s Lord, and the Lord of all. He is the only Son of God, and therefore God. He is also the redeemer and Savior of the world.

Jesus Christ is our Savior, and he saved us by being our satisfaction for our sins before the Father. He is the means that God needed to be able to forgive us and still remain just, as is fitting for God. Without Jesus Christ, the just God could not justify us and remain a just God, for every sin needs to be punished. But through Jesus Christ, God could forgive and justify us without violating his justice, for Christ is the victim that was substituted for us to bear our sins on the cross, and there suffer their penalty instead of us. He was cursed by God for us and instead of us (Gal 3:13). Thus our sins were justly punished by Christ substituting for us.

In this way Jesus Christ fulfilled the sin offerings which God gave to Israel, in which the sinner put his hands on the head of the animal, indicating that he was transmitting his sins to the animal, which he then slew before the Lord, indicating that the animal had thus paid the punishment of death for the sake of the sinner, who was then forgiven by God. God forgave them for their faith, through the fulfillment of these types in the one true and adequate sacrifice of Christ, symbolized by these Old Testament types. Christ saves us in this way, by being a victim substituted for us, who bears our sins, and is slain instead of us to pay the penalty we owed, so that we could be justly forgiven and justified. Christ is the reality that these Old Testament sacrifices were meant to symbolize for the instruction and preparation of the people.

Thus “the chastisement of our peace was upon him” (Is 53:5 KJV). He suffered the just penalty for our sins, and in so doing brought us peace. This is because “the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:6 KJV). Thus did he satisfy the law and the justice of God, and so we are no longer condemned if we believe in him (Rom 8:1). Sin was condemned in the flesh of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:3) on the cross, and this fulfilled the justice of the law for us (Rom 8:4). He gave his life in expiation for sin. “…it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin… by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities…and he bare the sin of many” (Is 53:10,11,12 KJV).

Jesus Christ is indeed much more than merely the son of David.
WIDOWS AND THE POOR OF YAHWEH

Saturday, 9th Week of the Year
Tobit 12:1,5-15,20; Tobit 13; Mk 12:38-44

“And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living” (Mk 12:42-44).

This poor widow who put all that she had into the treasury represents Jesus’ ideal, the ideal of evangelical poverty. She is for him one of the anawim, the poor of the Lord, who have lost everything of this world, all its pleasures, and remain only with God. They live only for God. This is the ideal of the life of a true widow, who stays inside her house (Judith 8:4), wearing “sackcloth” and “the garments of her widowhood” (Judith 8:5), “worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day” (Lk 2:37). The true widow “is left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day” (1 Tim 5:5). “But she that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth” (1 Tim 5:6 KJV). The widow Judith “fasted all the days of her widowhood” (Judith 8:6), and the widow Ana, who saw the child Jesus in the temple when she was eighty-four years old, “did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day” (Lk 2:37). Her entire life was dedicated to God in the temple in prayer and fasting.

St. Paul speaks of widows together with celibates and virgins. He says that “The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and he is divided” (1 Cor 7:32-34). To the widows he says, “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I am” (1 Cor 7:8). And again about the widow he says, “in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is” (1 Cor 7:40), that is, single.

There are widows today, as in the days of St. Paul, and there are also celibates today, persons living the religious life, the celibate life for the love of God in order to have an undivided heart in their love for God and in their service of him, serving day and night in prayer and fasting. It is this ideal that we meditate on today, the ideal of the religious life, celibate for the Kingdom of God, the ideal of priestly celibacy, the ideal of the life of a true widow. It is a life of simplicity and austerity, that renounces the pleasures of this life, for those of the Kingdom of God and of the new creation. It is a life with God, in which we seek our joy only in him, and not in the delights of this present life (Col 3:1-2). It is a life of prayer and fasting, of meditation, spiritual reading, and evangelical poverty. It is the life which has the hundredfold reward (Mt 19:29).

This is a life separated from the world and its attractions and distractions which divide our heart from an undivided love of God alone. That is why it is lived in reclusion, living inside one’s house, or not leaving the temple, dressed differently, in widows’ dress, marking them off still further from the world. It is spent in fasting and prayer, denying oneself the delights of this world to better live for those of God.
THREE PERSONS IN ONE NATURE

Trinity Sunday
Dt 4:32-34,39-40; Ps 32; Rom 8:14-17; Mt 28:16-20

“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all…” (Rom 8:32).

I

Today is Trinity Sunday. The Trinity is the mystery that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all three equally God, equal in divinity. Therefore Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19).

All three are persons, but they are not different beings as are human persons, each human person being a separate and different being. These three divine persons, on the contrary, have but one single being between them, one single substance, one single essence, one single nature. All these latter terms mean basically the same thing. But they relate among themselves as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whereby the Father sends the Son, but the Son does not send the Father. So, for the salvation of the world, the Father sent the Son to become man to be able to suffer as a man on the cross to save us from our sins. His death satisfied the divine justice and wrath, because the divine Son paid the debt of punishment for our sins.

Yet we cannot say that it was unjust or cruel of the Father to send his Son and afflict him in this way with our sins and punishment, for the Son is but one single being, one single substance, with the Father. The Son (as is the Father, and the Holy Spirit) is the one and only God. Therefore the truth is that the one and only God suffered our punishment for us to be able to justly forgive us, for it is fitting that God be just. And because it is God who suffered our punishment to save us, this act of salvation is both infinitely just and infinitely merciful. It is much more merciful and much more just than if God were simply to forgive us gratuitously without regards to justice and the need that the debt of sin be paid. So God came himself in the person of his Son, and bore the burden of our sins in his death on the cross, thus freeing all who believe in Jesus Christ from the burden of sin and guilt.

II

It is, moreover, a great wonder that in God there is but one single mind and one single will, which pertain to the one nature, or essence, or substance of God; and that each of the three persons shares in this one divine mind and one divine will. Yet each divine person possesses this one mind and one will, each according to his own mode, that is, as Father, or as Son, or as Holy Spirit. In addition, Jesus Christ also had a human mind and a human will, distinct from his divine mind and divine will, but perfectly united and submissive to his divine mind and divine will, which he held in common with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Mind and will pertain to the nature, not to the person. This can be clearly seen in the case of Jesus Christ, since he had but one person and two natures. His one person was
divine. Of his natures, one was divine, the other was human. Therefore his human mind and will have to pertain to his human nature, since he had no human person to which they could pertain. In the same way, then, his divine mind and will must also pertain to his divine nature, rather than to his divine person.

But if the divine mind and will of Jesus Christ pertain to his nature, then the divine mind and will of the Father and of the Holy Spirit must also pertain to their nature, and not to their persons. But in God there is only one nature, which all three persons possess in common. So if the divine mind and will pertain to this one common nature, and not to the individual persons, then it is clear that each of the three persons shares in this one common divine mind and will, because they share this one common nature between them. Hence, it is clear that in God there is only one divine mind and one divine will, shared between all three persons, although each person possesses this one mind and will, each according to his own mode.

Therefore, when the Father sent the Son into the world for our salvation, there was but one divine mind and will operating in this mission, although each person was using this one common mind and will, each according to his own mode, as Father, or as Son, or as Holy Spirit. God, therefore, in sending his Son to die for our sins, came himself to bear our sins in the person of the Son. There is but one single divine mind and will operating in this mission of the Son to die on the cross for our sins.

THE NEW ETHICS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Monday, 10th Week of the Year
2 Cor 1:1-7; Ps 33; Mt 5:1-12

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God (Mt 5:3).

Jesus begins his sermon on the mount with the beatitudes. It is his programmatic introduction, the new ethics of the Kingdom of God. This is how those who are called to enter the Kingdom are to live. This is the new way of life of the regenerated. So lives the new man in Jesus Christ, he who has been born again through faith in him.

In the beatitudes Jesus emphasizes evangelical poverty, particularly in St. Luke’s version (Lk 6:20-26). Jesus blesses the poor, those who are hungry, those who weep now, and those who are persecuted for the sake of the Son of Man (Lk 6:20-22), while he curses the rich, those who are full, those who laugh now, and those whom the world praises” (Lk 6:24-26).

This is a new way of living. It is the ethics of the Kingdom of God. It is the opposite of the ethics of the world. In the Kingdom of God, it is not the rich and satisfied, those who fill themselves with the delights of the table and of the world, who are blessed, but rather the poor, especially the poor in spirit, the humble, the simple, and those who are hungry now. It is those who are persecuted for their good life and their simplicity that Jesus praises, those who sacrifice the delights of this world to live for God alone with all their heart. These are the ones who are truly blessed, the poor in spirit; not the rich living in their pleasures.
How hard it will be for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God (Mt 19:23)!
“...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle,” says Jesus, “than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 19:24). The rich man, surrounded by his pleasures and delicacies, has his heart divided by them, and does not live for God alone. He has already had his consolation in the pleasures of this world, and he will not also have it in God. “...woe to you who are rich,” Jesus says, “for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6:24). He could say the same thing to those who are full and who laugh now and spend their life in the pastimes of this world. It is the same thing which Abraham said to the rich glutton in hell. “Son,” he said, “remember that you in your lifetime received your good things” (Lk 16:25).

Blessed rather are those who have left all for Jesus Christ. It is they who will receive the hundredfold reward (Mt 19:29). God chooses “what is foolish in the world to shame the wise” (1 Cor 1:27), and he curses “those who are at ease in Zion, and those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria...who lie on beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat lambs from the flock” (Amos 6:1,4). In their pleasures they have forgotten God. “...when they had fed to the full, they were filled, and their heart was lifted up; therefore they forgot me,” says the Lord (Hosea 13:6).

Blessed rather are the anawim, the poor of the Lord, who have lost all, and live only for God. This should be the ideal for our life as new men in the Kingdom of God.

A MAN FULL OF FAITH

Memorial of St. Barnabas, June 11
Acts 11:21-26; 13:1-3; Ps 97; Mt 10:7-13

“...for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a large company was added to the Lord” (Acts 11:24).

Today we commemorate St. Barnabas, one of the first disciples after the resurrection, and the companion of St. Paul on his missionary journeys. St. Luke describes him as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24), and by means of his ministry “a large company was added to the Lord” (Acts 11:24).

How important it is that we have this kind of faith. We need it both to direct our own life according to the will of God, so that we do not go astray through fear of being different from others, and we also need it to bring other people to the Lord for their salvation and new life in Jesus Christ. This is the kind of faith that St. Barnabas had, and as a result he was full of the Holy Spirit, that is, full of power to preach and to testify concerning Jesus Christ, and full of the happiness of God in being saved in Jesus Christ. Such a man has great power, and his word can sustain many and kindle in them the faith which saves. Such faith, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, made Barnabas a missionary, for “the Holy Spirit said, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2).

What, then, does this kind of faith do in the heart of a person? Such faith in Jesus Christ can assure one that he is saved by the death of Christ on the cross from his sins and imperfections which sadden and depress him. In being justified through his faith, one is
now no longer condemned. He no longer lives under the condemnation of God, but rather his spirit is freed from the burden of guilt. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1) for God “condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom 8:3-4). That is, in sending his Son “for sin” (Rom 8:3), or as a sacrifice “for sin,” God “condemned sin in the flesh” of Jesus Christ on the cross (Rom 8:3). Sin was thus condemned so that we might not be condemned. And sin was condemned in the flesh of Jesus Christ in that he suffered the penalty of the law against sin, thus fulfilling “the just requirement of the law” for us (Rom 8:4). Christ “fulfilled” “the just requirement of the law” (Rom 8:4) for us in his death. Hence the law can no longer condemn us. Its just penalty has been justly paid in the death of Christ, and we are therefore freed, and not condemned. We are saved.

So preached St. Paul, and so is one freed and justified through faith in Jesus Christ. St. Barnabas was a great preacher of this mystery.

THE RENUNCIATION OF THE WORLD

Friday, 10th Week of the Year
2 Cor 4:7-15; Ps 115; Mt 5:27-32

“…always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2 Cor 4:10).

Today St. Paul speaks about the cross in his own life. Christ saved us by his cross, and then he recommended it to us as a way of life if we want to follow him. St. Paul says that he always carries the death of Jesus, thus living himself the mystery of the cross, so that the life of Jesus might also manifest itself in him. Jesus told us, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mk 8:34). This is the true path of the disciple of Jesus, namely, taking up the cross and following him. We are to renounce all, carry the cross, and follow him. But if, on the contrary, we try to save our life in this world by renouncing the cross, we will lose our life with God. If, though, we accept the way of life of the cross, the life of renouncing the world and all things, we will save our life with God (Mk 8:35).

The cross is our new way of living as Christians. It means renouncing the world and its delights and pleasures to live only for God with all our heart, with an undivided heart. We are to sacrifice our life for the love of Christ. This is to live in the Spirit; and not according to the flesh. We are to live according to the new man, directed by the Spirit of God, and no longer according to the desires of the flesh, for “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Rom 8:6). And “whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mk 8:35). For “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:25). These sayings apply to all Christians, to each in accordance with his state in life.

This means that we have to be crucified to the world, and the world to us (Gal 6:14). We die to the world and its pleasures to live only for God with all our heart, with an
undivided heart. If we are occupied with the pleasures of this world, our affections and heart will be divided away from a pure love, reserved for the Lord alone. Therefore we glory with St. Paul in the way of the life of the cross. He said, “But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

This is a new way of living in this world, reserving the heart only for God, and renouncing everything else. This is the sure path, blessed and approved by Jesus, to obtain the buried treasure and the pearl of great price (Mt 13:44-46). They are obtained only at the price of renouncing all else. As the man who discovered the buried treasure could obtain possession of it only by first selling all that he had in order to be able to buy the field where the treasure was buried, so will we be able to experience the life of Jesus within us only by embracing his cross and renouncing all else for the love of him.

THE ATONEMENT
Saturday, 10th Week of the Year
2 Cor 5:14-21; Ps 102; Mt 5:33-37

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

With this verse we are at the heart of the mystery of the atonement which Christ worked for us on the cross. In himself, Christ was without sin, but for our sake God “made him to be sin” (2 Cor 5:21), that is, he laid our sins upon him. God did this so that Christ might suffer for our sins their just punishment according to the law, so that we would not have to suffer it, but rather could go free, justly forgiven, being made righteous before God. St. Paul therefore says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). “The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:6 KJV). Hence “the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Is 53:5 KJV). His “chastisement” brought us peace because he suffered instead of us for our sins. He was cursed by God instead of us for our sins to free us from the curse of God. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree” (Gal 3:13; Dt 21:23).

Hence God, “sending his own Son…for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom 8:3-4). In other words, God sent his Son as a sin offering, and thus he condemned sin in the flesh of Jesus Christ, in order to fulfill the just requirement of the law for us. The just requirement of the law was that sinners die for their sin. Jesus Christ fulfilled this just requirement of the law for us by dying on the cross. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). We are, therefore, no longer condemned, but are rather made righteous through our faith in Jesus Christ. “…in him we…become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

Hence we are reconciled with God (2 Cor 5:18-20) and made a new creation, for “if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: Old things are passed away; behold, all things
are become new” (2 Cor 5:17 KJV). We are, therefore, no longer to live for ourselves, but only for him who died and rose for us, for “he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor 5:15). We, therefore, now have a new life, in that we live no longer for ourselves, nor for our pleasures, but only for him who saved us and gave us this new life. In this sense we die for him who died for us: for if “one has died for all; therefore all have died” (2 Cor 5:14). We die to our old way of living for ourselves and for our pleasures, and now we are made new, and live only for him who died and rose for us (2 Cor 5:15). We live, therefore, dead to our former manner of living for our own pleasures, and risen now in Christ for a new way of life in him, living only for him who died and rose for us (2 Cor 5:15). This doctrine of the atonement gives peace to the conscience, and those who preach it have a ministry of reconciliation, reconciling God with man.

THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

Corpus Christi
Ex 24:3-8; Ps 115; Heb 9:11-15; Mk 14:12-16,22-26

“For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb 9:13-14).

Today is Corpus Christi, the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ. Christ’s body and blood are the sacrifice offered to God on the cross, on Calvary, for our redemption. This one and only sacrifice of Calvary is made present for us each time that the sacrifice of the Mass is offered. The bread during the Mass becomes the body of Christ, and the wine becomes his blood. It is not just a symbol of his body and blood, but his true body and true blood. This is why the Mass is a true sacrifice, the very sacrifice of Jesus Christ offering himself to the Father on the cross on Calvary. The Mass makes present for us the one and only sacrifice of Christ, offering himself to the Father on the cross. It is not a repetition of Christ’s one and only sacrifice, but rather it makes us present on Calvary at the moment of his one and only sacrifice on the cross for our salvation.

So did Jesus want it to be. He wanted us to have this sacrament in order to enter into his one and only sacrifice for our salvation. We can, in fact, as his mystical body, even offer ourselves together with Christ to the Father in love and self-gift in the Mass. We make ourselves a sacrifice to the Father together with Jesus Christ. This is what we do at Mass. We offer Christ to the Father, and at the same time we offer ourselves to the Father together with him, uniting our sacrifice of ourselves with his one and only acceptable sacrifice to the Father. The eucharist is thus our sacrifice, the perfect worship and sacrifice of the New Testament, our perfect cult, worship, and adoration of the Father. This is the only sacrifice that we have left to us today, the one sacrifice of Christ that has fulfilled all the other sacrifices of the Old Testament.
By his sacrifice of himself, Christ gave perfect worship to his Father, and infinitely pleased him for our salvation. In his death he satisfied all the demands of divine justice, paying with his blood poured out for us our debt of sin in accordance with the law. He fulfilled the law for us, who have not kept it, and he suffered for us the penalty prescribed by the law for those who do not keep it. His sacrifice, therefore, gives us relief from our guilt, and renews us, making us new men, resplendent before God with the very splendor of Jesus Christ himself. He removed our condemnation and restored our life by his sacrifice.

The body and blood of Christ is also our food. Not only do we offer Christ to the Father with Christ, but Christ also gives us his body to eat, and his blood to drink, that we might have his life in us. The bread and wine are transformed into Jesus Christ, whom we eat and drink in order to have him within us, filling us with his divinity incarnate in his sacred humanity, and then sacramentalized for us. His divinity incarnate in his humanity and then sacramentalized for us nourishes us spiritually. This holy communion fills us with light, happiness, and spiritual joy. It is God incarnate and sacramentalized, shining within us to unite us with himself.

The reception of the eucharist, therefore, makes us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). It divinizes us. Christ’s divinity enters sacramentally into our body and heart, illumining us from within. We are, therefore, illumined by the divinity of Jesus Christ within us by means of holy communion. His flesh, divinized by his divinity, and containing his divinity, his divine person, comes into contact with us and enters into our humanity, thus divinizing our humanity, transforming us, and sanctifying us. It makes us new men, a new creation. His divinized and divinity-bearing humanity illumines our humanity from within.

How beautiful it then is if, after receiving holy communion, we remain in silent prayer! This is the best time for silent prayer, prayer without words or ideas, in which we can enter into union with God, and in which our spirit can be united to God. This time after communion is the best possible time to experience God in contemplation. It is the best time for silent adoration, for the prayer of quiet, and for the prayer of union.

THE KINGDOM OF PEACE

Monday, 11th Week of the Year
2 Cor 6:1-10; Ps 97; Mt 5:38-42

“You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Mt 5:38-39).

Here we see the final stage in the development of the Biblical teaching on vengeance and violence. In the book of Joshua, we see that God directed the Israelites to conquer many cities and kill everyone in them. In this way God gave them a land that they could live in. But today we see Jesus teaching that we should “not resist one who is evil,” but rather turn the other cheek if we are struck (Mt 5:39).
We should still try to conquer the world for Christ (1 Jn 5:4-5), but using only peaceful means. Hence we can still read the book of Joshua as the word of God for us, but we read it now through the lens of the teaching of Jesus against violence. Hence we see ourselves in a state of holy war against the world, but using only peaceful means. Yet God did not reveal all of this at the beginning, but only little by little.

We see this teaching of Jesus exemplified in his own life when he forgave from the cross those who were killing him. It is also exemplified in the life of St. Paul, who never sought to take revenge against any of his many persecutors. Jesus, “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly”, says St. Peter (1 Peter 2:23). And St. Paul says, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them… Repay no one evil for evil…never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says to Lord” (Rom 12:14,17,19). God is the one who will take vengeance for us on one who is evil, and not we ourselves; therefore we should not avenge ourselves, but rather “leave it to the wrath of God” (Rom 12:19), for he will take vengeance for us. Vengeance is his; not ours.

What would the world be like if those who believed in Jesus Christ lived in this way? The blessed Franz Jägerstätter is an inspiring example of this for us. He refused to do military service under Hitler, and was therefore martyred by the Nazis. We should not resist with violence one who is evil (Mt 5:39). I believe this means that we should not kill, or make war, or participate violently in a war; but rather should turn the other cheek and refuse to kill. “Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling,” says St. Peter (1 Peter 3:9). And “See that none of you repays evil for evil,” says St. Paul (1 Thess 5:15). If many Christians lived like this, we would live in the Kingdom of God, where “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them” (Is 11:6). Even one single person who refuses to kill or to serve violently in a war would make a difference in the world. It would give a powerful witness, and bring us closer to the Kingdom of God.

CELIBACY AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

Thursday, 11th Week of the Year
2 Cor 11:1-11; Ps 110; Mt 6:7-15

“For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Cor 11:2 KJV).

We see in this verse that we have a nuptial relationship with Jesus Christ. St. Paul says he has espoused us to only “one husband,” who is Jesus Christ. And so we are “as a chaste virgin” presented to Christ. “...for I have espoused you to one husband,” St. Paul says, “that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Cor 11:2). So we have a nuptial relationship with Christ. We see that this is the ideal, namely, that our relationship with Christ should be nuptial and exclusive, or as exclusive as we can possibly make it in keeping with the responsibilities of our state in life. Married people
will have an exclusive relationship with Christ in keeping with their state in life as married people; but those who are celibate for the Kingdom of God, that is, those who have consecrated themselves to God as religious or consecrated persons, can have a nuptial relationship with Christ in which Christ is literally the only spouse of their heart. For them their nuptial relationship with Christ is still more exclusive than that of married people.

Every Christian should have Jesus Christ as the only spouse of his heart, with whom he has an intimate and exclusive relationship, and he should always guard his heart lest it become divided. Married people do this together as a couple, as “one flesh,” with Christ uniting himself with them in their marriage. Celibates do this in their own way with a radically undivided heart, not even divided by the love of a Christian spouse in the sacrament of matrimony. Celibacy is for this reason a state in life more radical than marriage in the exclusivity of its nuptial relationship with Christ, as literally the only spouse of their heart. Celibates can, therefore, literally love Jesus Christ with all their heart, with all the affective energy of their heart going only to him, without any division whatsoever, with a completely undivided heart.

St. Paul therefore describes the celibate vocation as follows: “The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and he is divided. And the unmarried woman or virgin is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband” (1 Cor 7:32-34). St. Paul emphasizes the greater exclusivity of the celibate’s relationship with Christ.

It is for this reason that the Church has always considered celibacy to be a higher vocation than marriage. The rejection of this teaching by many today in Western Europe and the United States is another reason why religious life is dying today in these countries, for if one no longer believes that celibacy enables him to have a more exclusive nuptial relationship with Christ, he lacks a major motive for choosing this way of life.

THE SUFFERING OF THE HEART OF JESUS

Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus
Hosea 11:1,3-4,8-9; Is 12; Eph 3:3-12,14-19; Jn 19:31-37

“But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water” (Jn 19:34).

The soldier pierced Jesus’ side with a spear to verify that he was dead. But why did water also come out, and not just blood? Could this be an indication that he was not only dead, but that his heart literally broke from what he suffered in his heart on the cross spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally?

And what did he suffer in his heart? He suffered the hatred of the men whom he had come to save. But all the martyrs also suffered the hatred of men, and yet many of them suffered this with joy and courage, such as St. Ignatius of Antioch, who longed and
thirsted for martyrdom, and begged the Romans not to intervene on his behalf to commute his sentence of death. But Jesus, on the contrary, had great fear before he suffered, and asked his Father that his cup of suffering might be removed from him (Lk 22:42), and in his agony before his death “his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground” (Lk 22:44). We also have Jesus’ cry of dereliction from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34). How different was the death of Jesus from that of many martyrs—like St. Ignatius of Antioch—who went to their death with joy and a great desire to die for Christ. How different was it from the death of St. Polycarp, who died in silence as he was burned alive! What then did Jesus Christ suffer in his heart more than these others, which made his death so much more horrible than theirs?

The answer is that he suffered the wrath of God for all the sinners of the world in his love for us. God himself smote, chastised, and abandoned Jesus on the cross so that he might suffer in his heart the divine wrath which all sinners deserved, in order to free us from this great suffering of heart. He experienced in his heart the abandonment of God on the cross and the depression of hell in our place, to save us from such suffering, so that we might live in the happiness of God, and even die in happiness like so many martyrs.

Jesus Christ was smitten and wounded by God in his human heart. This was his greatest suffering, the suffering of being alienated from God in his heart. “...he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed...and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:5-6 KJV). Jesus Christ was even cursed by God (Gal 3:13) in being hung from a tree (Dt 21:23); and in being cursed in place of us, he “redeemed us from the curse of the law” (Gal 3:13).

Today, on this solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we remember the great suffering of the heart of Jesus on the cross, which saved us, namely, his being abandoned by his Father in order to absorb the divine wrath for us, to free us from this wrath.

YOU CANNOT SERVE TWO MASTERS

Saturday, 11th Week of the Year
2 Cor 12:1-10; Ps 33; Mt 6:24-34

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt 6:24).

This verse is the key to understanding the Christian life, that is, the life of the regenerate, of those who have been born again in Jesus Christ through faith. The Holy Spirit makes them a new creature with new interests, with a new orientation, and with a new ethic. They now live by the ethic of the Kingdom of God. All of this means that they now live only for God in every aspect of their life. They no longer live for the delights of food and drink, nor are they any more concerned about the beauty of their clothing. They seek, rather, only the Kingdom of God and its justice. They want to live justified by God, made new and resplendent by him, forgiven for their sins and
imperfections, and at peace with him. So does Jesus say today, namely, “seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Mt 6:33 KJV).

“Therefore I tell you,” Jesus says today, “do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on” (Mt 6:25). Our concentration should not be divided like this, but rather be focused only on God, only on one Master, not on two masters, not on many masters. One cannot serve two masters well. We cannot serve both God and mammon well at the same time. Mammon is the delicacies and delights of this world, the pleasures of the world, which divide the heart. Jesus teaches us today that we cannot love or be well devoted to God and to mammon at the same time. We are rather to eat simple, basic, ordinary, and healthy things, and not involve ourselves with worldly clothing or the delights of this world in the matter of food, drink, and clothing—the basic elements of life. Then we will be able to put all our concentration only on God, as do the poor of the Lord, the poor in spirit, the anawim of Yahweh.

It will be very difficult, on the other hand, for a rich man, who is concerned about all these things—about mammon—to enter into the Kingdom of God (Mt 19:24). It would be like a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle (Mt 19:24), for he has already had his reward in the delights of this present life (Lk 6:24; 16:25). “…the kingdom of God,” says St. Paul, “does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17).

The first commandment of Jesus is, therefore, to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mk 12:30). If we were to do this, we would not divide our heart with mammon and with the pleasures of this world, but would rather love God as our only Master and only treasure (Mt 6:19-21). This is important, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mt 6:21).

CHRIST CALMS THE STORMS IN OUR HEART

12th Sunday of the Year
Job 38:1,8-11; Ps 106; 2 Cor 5:14-17; Mk 4:35-41

“And he awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, Peace! Be still! And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (Mk 4:39).

Today Jesus calms the wind and the sea, and they obey him. “And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (Mk 4:39). This is important for us because it is the same Jesus Christ who died, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father, who calms our hearts and gives us interior peace in the midst of the storms that arise within us. This episode in the boat symbolizes for us what Jesus Christ does in our hearts.

How easy it is to lose our peace, and experience a storm in our heart by falling into an imperfection! God allows us to experience this in order to move us to avoid this imperfection in the future, and thus grow in holiness and in a life of perfection. Yet at the
same time he gives us the remedy for our suffering and for the pain in our heart. This remedy is Jesus Christ himself, who died and rose for us. By calling upon him and by invoking the merits of his death on the cross, he stands for us before the Father to absorb the Father’s just wrath against us for our sins, and to suffer it himself on the cross, instead of us. Thus the necessary wrath of God is expressed against us for having done wrong, but at the same time it is absorbed for us by the Son of God on the cross, to free us from this suffering, from this pain of heart, from this guilt, from this storm in our heart. And so God, through Jesus Christ, calms the storm in our heart, and gives us great peace. This happens through our faith and prayer, when we ask it of Christ, because for this he suffered on the cross, namely, to place himself between us and the Father in order to absorb our just punishment and the divine wrath justly directed against us.

This is why Jesus established the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23), so that through this sacrament we might be able to experience the mediatory work of Christ on the cross, and receive genuine relief from the pain in our heart caused by our imperfections and sins, and see the storm in our heart changed into a great calm.

When this happens, we see all things made new, for truly “if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new,” as St. Paul affirms in today’s second reading (2 Cor 5:17 KJV). So does God renew us, and so do we grow little by little in holiness. All this works through faith. We always have to call upon Jesus Christ ever anew in every new storm. We are never independent, but rather always dependent upon him who died and rose for us, so that we might live for him alone.

Since Jesus Christ died for us, we should therefore all die to our own life, and from now on live only for him who died and rose for us. So does his love for us in dying for us control us, that we cannot live any more for ourselves, but only for him from now on. So says St. Paul today, saying, “the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor 5:14-15).

This is a great mystery. It is the mystery of our death and resurrection in Jesus Christ (Rom 6:4). Since he died for us, we die to ourselves. And since he rose, we rise new in him to live henceforth no longer for ourselves, nor for our own pleasures, but only for him who died and rose for us (Col 3:1-2).

To live in this way, no longer for ourselves nor for our pleasures, is a great change and transformation. It is a new way of living in the world. We are now to live only for God in everything, with Christ as our Savior from all the storms in our heart. In his death is our death to our old life of sin, and in his resurrection is our resurrection to a new life in him, freed from the wrath of God, and with a new purpose in life, namely, to live from now on for him alone.
GOD CALLED HIM IN THE DESERT

Homily for the Birth of John the Baptist, June 24, 2009
Is 49:1-6; Ps 138; Acts 13:22-26; Lk 1:57-66,80

“And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel” (Lk 1:80).

Today we celebrate John the Baptist, who lived in “desert places” (Lk 1:80) since his youth, and was there when the word of God came to him, calling him to be a prophet, to prepare for the coming of the Lord into the world. St. Luke says that “the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert” (Lk 3:2).

What was he doing in the desert? Why did he choose to live where there was no life? Why did he want to live in earthly barrenness, in a cave, dressed not in civilized clothing, but rather in “a garment of camel’s hair” with “a leather girdle around his waist” (Mt 3:4)? And why, instead of eating the normal food of civilized people, did he eat “locusts and wild honey” (Mt 3:4)? What was his motive for behaving in such an extraordinary way, living in solitude, in “desert places,” with the unencumbered horizon of a vast desert?

We know that he was a man of God with a mission from before his birth to convert many, and “make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Lk 1:17). He chose to live alone, in the desert, because there he could purify himself of his appetites and unite himself with God in prayer, and thus have a “mouth like a sharp sword” and be “a polished arrow” in the Lord’s “quiver” (Is 49:2). He had to live with God first in order to be able to speak his word with power and effect. The Lord put his word into his mouth, and set him “over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer 1:10). Many will fight against him, but they shall not prevail against him for the Lord will be with him (Jer 1:19). He was a light to the nations to bring the truth and the salvation of God unto the ends of the earth (Is 49:6). He came as a voice which cries in the desert to prepare the way of the Lord and to make straight his paths, to fill up every valley, and to make low every mountain (Is 40:3-4).

The desert is the best place for this kind of life. Earthly barrenness is the place par excellence of heavenly manifestation; and he not only ate wild honey, but also knew the sweetness of God in his heart in these barren wastes with nothing else to take up his attention or interest. There he could live a solitary life for God alone, a life of prayer and deep contemplation, resting in the fullness of God and refreshed by it, a life of reading and study of the word of God. In the desert God is closer.

We also are all called to be the mouth of the Lord, like his sharp sword, to speak the truth, to awaken those who are asleep, and to convert hearts. For such a vocation there is no better place than the desert, than solitude, than an earthly wasteland, where we experience par excellence heavenly manifestations, and savor the honey of the presence of God in our heart. So did John live in the light in the desert, and was a witness to the light (Jn 1:8). He is a model for all who seek God today, and he shows us how to find him, and how to be his prophet. God is calling us in this way. He wants to reveal himself to us in the wasteland, and then send us to proclaim his truth, and preach his word. How will you respond?
“Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 7:21).

We are justified by our faith, not by our works (Rom 3:20,28; Gal 2:16). This is because we are not always able to fulfill all the requisites of the law and of the will of God. “Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them” (Dt 27:26). “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (James 2:10). And so we find ourselves in a condition of being cursed, and not justified by our works. We are always failing in something—if not today, then tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow. We rarely go more than a few days without doing something wrong, which our conscience then accuses us of; and so again and again we find ourselves with an unpaid, unfulfilled debt with God. It is only Jesus Christ who has paid our debt for us, thus freeing us from our guilt and pain of heart and giving us again the happiness of God in our spirit.

When we fail in something, we feel guilty and lose our peace with God, sometimes we have to suffer in this state of conviction of sin until Christ washes us anew with his blood poured out for us in sacrifice. We always need the salvation which God has given us in Jesus Christ, and we always need to reapply his blood to our heart newly wounded by ever new imperfections or sins.

Yet at the same time our faith and our justification by faith must show themselves and flourish in good works and in obedience to the will of God. If we do not have good works, then our faith is dead, and we are not really justified. If we think that we only need to believe and to say, “Lord, Lord,” we deceive ourselves, and the house of our life is built upon sand; while he who “hears these words of mine and does them,” Jesus says today, “will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock” (Mt 7:24).

How important it then is to try to do the will of God. Jesus said, “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Mt 12:50). And to the woman who said, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!” Jesus answered, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (Lk 11:27-28). And he said, “He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me” (Jn 14:21), and “If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love” (Jn 15:10).

The way of trying to keep God’s commandments and always do his will is the sure way to remain in his love, and in peace with him in our heart. And what is his will? St. Gregory of Nyssa says in today’s office of readings, “The vision of God is offered to those who have purified their hearts.” This is the will of God, that we purify our heart by purifying ourselves from the appetites of the flesh, to be able to perceive and live in his light and love.
“And he stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, I will; be clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed” (Mt 8:3).

Today Jesus instantaneously cures a leper of his leprosy with only a word. “Be clean,” he said. “And immediately his leprosy was cleansed” (Mt 8:3). We see that the cure was immediate, occurring at the very moment that Jesus said “be clean,” and that it was miraculous, the result of divine, not human or natural power. It was something completely beyond what the leper could have done to himself by his own power. The leper simply could not cure himself, no matter what he did, how hard he tried, or what remedy he took.

Jesus’ cures were signs of the arrival of the Messianic Kingdom (Mt 11:5); and in this kingdom Jesus forgives sins (Mk 2:5). Jesus’ way of forgiving sins is the same as his way of curing leprosy. It is instantaneous, miraculous, the result of divine not human power, and something completely beyond anything that we ourselves could ever do to ourselves. No matter how much we try to raise ourselves up out of the depression caused by our guilt after having fallen into an imperfection or sin, we see that our efforts are in vain, and that we simply cannot lift ourselves out of this pain of heart, but that we rather remain the same, or even get worse, with our sadness only increasing.

Only Jesus Christ can save us from this situation and completely cleanse us of the leprosy of sin with his miraculous divine power in a way totally beyond our human ability; and often he does it instantaneously. We experience this par excellence in the sacrament which Jesus gave us for this purpose, the sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23). In a single moment Christ can lift the depression of our spirit by giving us sacramental absolution for our imperfection or sin which so overwhelmed us. And the change in us is radical. We feel completely freed from all guilt, and totally renewed in our spirit and heart with the happiness of God overflowing from our heart. Those who have never experienced this sacrament find it difficult to believe that Christ can so transform us in this way and make us really righteous.

The psalmist described a prophetic foretaste of this experience when he spoke of the happiness of God’s people, saying, “Blessed are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O Lord, in the light of thy countenance, who exult in thy name all the day, and extol thy righteousness” (Ps 88:15-16). Such was the joy of God’s people, regenerated by their faith through the goodness of God, who granted to them ahead of time the forgiveness to be won by his Son’s death on the cross. St. Gregory of Nyssa also tells us something similar today in the office of readings, saying that we should cooperate with the grace of Christ, who purifies us, and purify ourselves too of our appetites, in order to be able to see the splendor of God reflected in the beauty of our own soul, created anew by Jesus Christ.
THE COMING OF THE LORD

Saturday, 12th Week of the Year
Gen 18:1-15; Lk 1; Mt 8:5-17

“Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there they will weep and gnash their teeth” (Mt 8:10-12).

Today Jesus cures the servant of a centurion who has such humility and faith that he does not consider himself worthy that Jesus should enter into his house, but only wants him to say a word at a distance so that his servant might be healed. When Jesus saw his humility and faith, “he marveled” and said, “not even in Israel have I found such faith” (Mt 8:10). Seeing this gentile’s faith, he then expresses his vision of the future, when the gentiles who would believe in him will “come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,” while the Jews, who do not believe in him, “will be thrown into the outer darkness” (Mt 8:11-12).

This is our vision of the future, that the elect of all the nations, who believe in Jesus Christ, will sit with the patriarchs at the Messianic banquet in the Kingdom of God. Our life of faith is not just for here below, not just for this present life, but rather for an eternity with God in heaven in great peace and light with all his angels and saints. We are, therefore, to believe in Jesus Christ and purify ourselves now to be prepared for the fulfillment of this hope in the kingdom of our Father.

While we are preparing ourselves for the coming of the Lord, to be counted worthy to sit at table with the patriarchs in the Kingdom of God, we realize that we are already beginning to live, even now, ahead of time, an anticipation of the joy of that heavenly kingdom. We see that the splendor and happiness of the last day is already beginning to shine upon us even now, and that we are walking more and more in its light.

There are many mysteries of the life of faith upon which we can meditate. One of them is the future, the last days, the second and glorious coming of our Lord Jesus Christ upon the clouds of heaven. For then “he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Mt 24:31). We can, in a certain sense, live even now in that great day, living already, ahead of time, an anticipation of its glory. But we have to prepare ourselves now for that glory. St. Paul therefore prays that God “may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thess 3:13). We want to be as blameless as possible, even now, for the coming of the Lord with all his angels and saints.
“God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it” (Wisdom 2:23-24).

Today our scripture readings speak of death. Death entered the world because of the sin of Adam, and all die because of his sin. He had immortality, but lost it by sinning, and therefore no longer had it to bequeath to his descendents. Death was the punishment of the sin of Adam because he disobeyed the commandment of God, who said, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:17). St. Paul affirms this connection between sin and death, saying, “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23), and “as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned” (Rom 5:12), and “because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man” (Rom 5:17).

We note that even infants, who never personally sinned, die, not as a punishment for their personal sins, which they did not have, but because of the sin of Adam. St. Paul says that even before the law of Moses was given, everyone still died, even though there was no positive law which they disobeyed. That is, even though their sins were not as serious as Adam’s, even so, they still died because of Adam’s sin. St. Paul affirms this, noting that “sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law” (Rom 5:13). In other words, their sin was not as serious as Adam’s because they lacked the law. But even so, they still died because of the serious sin of Adam. So St. Paul says, “Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgressions of Adam” (Rom 5:14), as in the case of infants. The conclusion is that we die because of the sin of Adam. One single man was able to constitute all of us sinners, and hence subject to death, even when we were infants and had not yet personally done anything. We die, therefore, because of Adam’s sin.

In a similar way, all the elect, that is, all who believe in Jesus Christ, are constituted righteous, forgiven for their sins, and given eternal life by one single man, Jesus Christ, for “as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men” (Rom 5:18). And this justification also happens when we believe in him, that is, before we have done any good thing to deserve it. As death passed to all through one single man Adam, so eternal life and victory over death came upon all the elect through one single man Jesus Christ. Christ is the victor over death for all who believe in him.

Christ conquers both spiritual and physical death. Spiritual death is separation from God, alienation from him. This is the death of the soul, the death of the spirit. Christ conquered spiritual death by taking onto himself the punishment for the sin of Adam, and being an infinite person, his death on the cross finally put an end to the punishment for the sin of Adam; and those who believe in him are saved from spiritual death, from separation and alienation from God, and are reunited to him. Our spiritual death is overcome by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. The merits of the death of Christ
erase the guilt of all the elect. The sin of Adam is forgiven for them, together with their own sins, and they can live in the light.

Christ is at the same time the victor over physical death as well, and we see this in today’s Gospel when he raises a twelve year old girl from the dead. He is our life and resurrection. We see his great victory over physical death in his own resurrection from the dead on the third day. By his power, all who believe in him will rise bodily when he comes again in his glory on the clouds of heaven. But even now, he conquers our physical death, in that the physical death of a believer, born again in Jesus Christ, is not the same as the death of an unbeliever, nor is it like the death of a sinner not forgiven by Christ. For a believer, physical death is transformed into a passageway into eternal light in heaven with God and all his angels and saints.

Jesus Christ is, therefore, our great hope, the conqueror of death, he who forgives our sins and justifies and sanctifies us. When we shall die, he will take us to heaven to be with him in glory in ineffable light. And on the last day he will raise us in our bodies, now glorified, to live with him forever in the world of the resurrection. We now live in this hope. It illumines us in the darkness of this present life. Christ frees us from spiritual death, from the burden of our sins and from the pain in our heart caused by our guilt. He renews and vivifies us, conquering for us at one and the same time both our spiritual and our physical death. He is the victor over death.

THE ZEAL OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL

Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, June 29
Acts 12:1-11; Ps 33; 2 Tim 4:6-8,17-18; Mt 16:13-19

“...you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church” (Mt 16:18).

The Church of Christ is built upon St. Peter and upon his faith; and in a certain sense, it is also built upon St. Paul, the “fearless preacher” of its mysteries (Preface). Both were men filled with zeal and dedication. We see this in their characters. We see it in St. Peter trying to walk on the water in imitation of Jesus (Mt 14:28), and, after the resurrection, in putting on his outer garment and springing into the sea, to get to shore first, where Jesus was (Jn 21:7). Such was his character, impetuous, and filled with zeal for Jesus Christ. At the last supper Peter said, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death” (Lk 22:33). And when the chief priests charged Peter to speak no more in the name of Jesus, he said before the whole council, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20), and “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). And before the entire council Peter also had the courage to say, “This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:11-12). And when the chief priests had beaten Peter and the other apostles for preaching Christ and charged them to preach in that name no longer, “They left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day in the temple and at home they did not
cease teaching and preaching Jesus Christ” (Acts 5:41-42). We note that when they were charged to preach no longer in the name of Jesus, “they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus Christ” (Acts 5:42).

St. Paul was an intellectual, but he had the same zeal and impetuosity as St. Peter. “But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1), went to Damascus to bring them back as captives, when he heard the Lord’s voice and saw a great light which converted him. He was immediately baptized in Damascus, “And in the synagogues immediately he preached Jesus, saying, He is the Son of God. And all who heard him were amazed” to see that he was converted and was now preaching Christ with such zeal (Acts 9:20-21).

And where are we when we see the example of such zeal in these two pillars of the Church? They were ready to travel, to go even to the ends of the earth to preach Christ. In what way do you preach Christ? People need to hear your faith expressed in order to be inflamed themselves with a faith which will change and enrich their life. What Christ needs today are people who will proclaim their faith in him, and expound his doctrine.

And what is it that Saints Peter and Paul preached? They preached God’s salvation in Jesus Christ the Son of God made man to bear the sin of Adam and our sins, and to suffer their just punishment according to the law to propitiate and fulfill divine justice, for our spiritual liberation from sin and its punishment, so that we might be clothed with the very righteousness and splendor of Jesus Christ himself. St. Peter said that Christ “himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24). And St. Paul said that Christ is the one “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins” (Rom 3:25). Or, in other words, God now properly expiates sins in the blood of Christ, which pays their just debt of suffering. And this shows that God is just, and was still just even when he forgave the sins of the Old Testament without this expiation, for he passed over those sins with the intention of properly expiating them in the future with the death of his Son on the cross.

Thus both St. Peter and St. Paul proclaimed the same faith in the salvation of God through the sacrifice of his Son Jesus Christ on the cross.

**HAVE WE PASSED THE TEST?**

Thursday, 13th Week of the Year
Gen 22:1-19; Ps 114; Mt 9:1-8

“…because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore” (Gen 22:16-17).

This was the great test of Abraham, but Abraham did not know that it was only a test. He thought that he really had to sacrifice his only and beloved son, the son of the promise and of the covenant, for whom he had waited so many years, thinking that Sara would never be able to give birth to a son. At last Isaac was born, and now God asks him to
sacrifice him. Abraham obeys and goes to sacrifice that which is most valuable and precious to him, his beloved son, the son of the promise. Seeing this, the angel said to him, “now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Gen 22:12). Because he was ready to make this sacrifice, God promised that he would greatly bless him, multiplying his “descendents as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore” (Gen 22:17).

This text of the word of God teaches us to do the same as Abraham, that is, to obey God, even if it means that we must sacrifice the most important and valuable thing in our life. And if we pass this test, God will greatly bless us. God wants us to remain faithful to him and to do what he asks of us. He wants us to live and act as he leads us to live and act, and he wants us to remain faithful to this, even when it is very difficult, even when it causes us to lose the most valuable thing in our life.

If we pass this test, God will greatly bless us, but if, out of fear, weakness, or cowardice, we are unfaithful, we will not be blessed, and will rather suffer from guilt, and will have a great pain in our heart, the fire of guilt burning our heart from within. Often we fail this test, and this is our great sin and suffering, the cause of pain and depression in our heart. So we should learn this lesson well, and begin to obey exactly, especially when it is difficult to obey. We will never be happy if we do not learn this lesson. We cannot be happy if we refuse to obey and to sacrifice what God asks us to sacrifice. The way of obedience is the way of blessing, especially when it is difficult to obey. Those who are ashamed of Christ and of his will before men, will not be blessed; and Christ will be ashamed of them before his Father (Mk 8:38).

We should repent, therefore, of the times we did not follow the example of Abraham, and we should resolve to change our life, and in the future to obey God always, even if this obedience requires a great sacrifice of us, like the sacrifice of an only son. Then will we truly be blessed and happy.

THE JOY THAT RESULTS FROM FAITH

Feast of St. Thomas, Apostle, July 3
Eph 2:19-22; Ps 116; Jn 20:24-29

“He answered him, My Lord and my God! Jesus said to him, Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed” (Jn 20:28-29).

Today is the feast of St. Thomas the Apostle, he who doubted that Jesus rose from the dead, but after seeing him, believed and confessed his faith in an extraordinary way, saying, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:29).

How important it is to have deep faith like that of St. Thomas. He had to see Jesus Christ risen from the dead to be able to believe so deeply. But it is not necessary to see the risen Christ in order to believe in him and receive all the benefits of faith. In fact, “Blessed,” says Jesus today, “are those who have not seen and yet believed” (Jn 20:29). We are those people. We can have the same benefits of the faith even without seeing him risen from the dead with the eyes of the body. St. Peter also speaks of this, saying that
“Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:8-9).

Through faith we enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ, whom we love, and who loves us, and we grow in his love, fed daily by him. It is Jesus Christ who is the Lamb of God who takes away our sins and puts his heavenly peace in our heart, illumining us from within with his splendor with which he shines in our heart (2 Cor 4:6). It is he who saves us by taking our sins from us and bearing them himself—including the sin of Adam—expiating them by his death on the cross.

It is Jesus Christ who manifests that God is just in forgiving our sins, for with his own blood he expiated them, suffering their just punishment for us and instead of us, in order to free us from this alienation from God, saving us from God’s wrath by absorbing this wrath into himself on the cross. Thus we see the infinite justice of God in requiring the blood of his own Son in payment of the penalty for the remission of our sins. But this is a justice that is infinitely merciful, for it is God himself, in the person of the Son, who pays our debt.

All this happens for us if we have faith and are truly born again in Jesus Christ. We are new creatures (2 Cor 5:17) with the life and love of God in us. And how happy we are if we also live in accord with the will of God, always doing what he guides us to do! This life of faith and obedience is a truly new life; and we are made new creatures through our faith in Jesus Christ and through his sacraments which he gave us in order to become truly new, living in his light, peace, and love. When God forgives us and clothes us with the splendor of Jesus Christ, we rejoice from the very depth of our heart and soul—even without having seen him in the flesh—rejoicing “with unutterable and exalted joy” (1 Peter 1:8).

FASTING IN CHRISTIAN AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

Saturday, 13th Week of the Year
Gen 27:1-5,15-29; Ps 134; Mt 9:14-17

“Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? And Jesus said to them, Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Mt 9:14-15).

We now live in the days when the bridegroom has been taken physically from us, and therefore we now fast. Fasting is an important element in the life of every Christian, for by fasting we keep guard over our heart that it remain undivided, reserved for the Lord alone, not divided among the many delights and delicacies of the table and of the world in general.

Fasting is also very important for monastic and religious life, and in this we may also include societies of apostolic life and all who are celibate for the Kingdom of God.

A monk or hermit is someone who lives a life of prayer and fasting in the desert, far from the world. He lives in the desert to separate himself from the world with its
distractions, noise, attractions, temptations, delicacies, and delights, in order to focus on God alone with all the affection of his heart. He guards his heart in the desert so that it not divide between God and the delights of the world, in order to live in peace and light with God in a contemplative life of prayer and union with him. A monk or hermit lives a life of stability, obedience, and conversion of ways. That is, he lives for God alone, in stability, not traveling about for pleasure, but rather focusing his life and mind on one thing only, God, in one single place, without distraction. He obeys God in all that he reveals to him, and lives as God guides him in order to remain in his peace and love. He completely converts himself from a worldly way of living (conversion of ways), leaving behind the endless quest of the world for pleasure, in order to live in God’s love, light, and peace. For the monk fasting is an integral element of his new life. It means avoiding and renouncing the delights of the table and of life in general, and rather eating and living in great simplicity, embracing evangelical poverty and the life of the cross.

Religious and those living celibacy for the Kingdom of God live a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience—whether in formal vows or not—in order to live for God alone with all their heart, with an undivided heart reserved only for the Lord and the service of the Church. For them poverty is essential for maintaining an undivided heart; they live chastely, without dividing their heart with the love of a woman; and they try to obey the will of God in every detail of their life so as to remain in his peace. For religious, fasting is essential. They no longer live for the unnecessary pleasures of the world, but rather simply, poorly, and without worldly pleasures, eating simple, plain, healthy food, without delicacies, so as to find their pleasure in God alone, to the degree that this is possible.

We live now, therefore, in the days of fasting.

THE SUFFERING OF THE PROPHET

14th Sunday of the Year
Ez 2:2-5; Ps 122; 2 Cor 12:7-10; Mk 6:1-6

“The people also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them; and you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord God” (Ez 2:4).

The prophet Ezekiel was sent to the exiles of Israel living in Babylon, but they did not accept him, nor did they want to listen to him. They were stubborn because they did not want to hear God. The Lord told him that “the house of Israel will not listen to you; for they are not willing to listen to me; because all the house of Israel are of a hard forehead and of a stubborn heart” (Ez 3:7). If he were sent to pagans, it would be different. They would listen to him. “Surely, if I sent you to such [to pagans], they would listen to you” (Ez 3:6). Such was the life of the prophet Ezekiel, but even so, he was given the mission to speak to the exiles all that the Lord would give him to speak, without fear of them. “…be not afraid of them,” says the Lord, “nor be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns are with you and you sit upon scorpions; be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks” (Ez 2:6). They may not accept his words, but at least “they will know that there has been a prophet among them” (Ez 2:5).
This is the vocation of a prophet. It is someone to whom God has revealed his truth to communicate it to one’s people, or, as a missionary, to a foreign people. As Christians, we have a prophetic ministry to proclaim to others our faith and the revelation God has given us, for the sake of their conversion, salvation, and growth in faith. But often we experience exactly what Ezekiel experienced—rejection.

Many do not want to be converted. They do not want to change or grow, and they do not want to be challenged by the word of God, or by a prophet or preacher. They want to remain as they are. They want to stay in their pleasures and worldly life, and if we preach to them, they will reject our message and example. We need to be prepared for this rejection. Jesus prepared us for it when he said, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (Jn 15:18-19). We are not of the world, for Christ has chosen us out of the world to live from now on for other values, for the Kingdom of God, for the new creation. For the sake of this call, we are prophets in the midst of the world, lights and witnesses in the darkness. That is why St. Paul prays “that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life” (Phil 2:15-16).

This is our vocation as Christians, that is, to be prophets in the midst of a perverse world which will reject us. This is our thorn in the flesh, and it may be that persecution and rejection were the thorn that St. Paul speaks of. At first he asked that this thorn be taken from him, but at last he accepted it, and even gloried in all the insults, persecutions, and hardships which he suffered for the sake of Christ (2 Cor 12:10). We need to learn this, that is, to accept persecution and the rejection of our message and witness, and to accept this with joy, for we are suffering it for the sake of Christ (Mt 5:10-12; 1 Peter 4:13-14).

We cannot be greater than Jesus Christ. If he suffered persecution, we will also suffer persecution if we are really his followers. “A servant is not greater than his master,” he said. “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you” (Jn 15:20). This is our vocation. We are called to be prophets and to suffer as did Christ and the prophets of the Old Testament. They will persecute us because they do not know God, nor do they know his truth. This is what Jesus told us, saying, “all this they will do to you on my account, because they do not know him who sent me” (Jn 15:21).

This is how the people of Nazareth reacted today when Jesus taught in their synagogue on the Sabbath. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? … Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary? … And they took offense at him” (Mk 6:2-3). He experienced what Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel experienced, that a prophet is not accepted in his own land.

But this is the correct path, this is the path of a true follower of Jesus Christ, that is, the path of being a prophet rejected by many. But we are not to be afraid of them, but rather to give our witness to the truth, and preach the word of God; and God will strengthen us. “Behold,” says the Lord, “I have made your face hard against their faces, and your forehead hard against their foreheads. Like adamant harder than flint have I made your forehead; fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house” (Ez 2:8-9).
“...he said, Depart; for the girl is not dead but sleeping. And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose” (Mt 9:24-25).

We see here that Jesus Christ is victorious over death. He could raise this girl from the dead as he raised Lazarus and the son of the widow of Nain from the dead. Jesus has this power because he came to expiate the sin of Adam and the sins of all who believe in him. And because death entered the world as the punishment for the sin of Adam (Gen 2:17), in expiating this sin by his death on the cross, he also conquered death. By raising the dead he demonstrated that he was indeed the victor over death; and his own resurrection was the greatest proof that he is the conqueror of death.

Spiritual death—that is, separation from God—is also the result of sin, and if one does not repent, he will die eternally when he dies physically. Jesus Christ came to free us from spiritual death, and to change our physical death into a portal of eternal life, and not of eternal death. His death paid our debt of the punishment of death, so that we would not have to die eternally if we believe in him. He suffered death instead of us, so that we would not have to suffer it; therefore our physical death is changed. It is now the way of access into eternal life for those who believe in him, and no longer the portal into eternal death.

A person who is spiritually dead, that is, separated from God by sin, is someone who does not have true happiness, who does not have the happiness of God in his heart. He lives, rather, in inner darkness, guilt, and sadness. He has a great pain in his heart that he cannot cure, and his conscience constantly accuses him. It is a life of death, on its way to eternal death.

Christ saves us from this spiritual death by suffering it in place of us, being made a curse for us on the cross to save us from this curse of God (Gal 3:13). He suffered alienation from his Father on the cross for us, and instead of us, to free us from this alienation of spiritual death, caused by our sins. When we invoke Jesus Christ with faith, especially in the sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23), he forgives our sins and frees us from the pain of spiritual death.

So then “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9). Your sins will be expiated by his death on the cross, and the great pain of guilt in your heart will disappear. You will be a new creation in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:17), you will have the happiness of God in your heart, and you will sing a new song, the song of the redeemed of the Lord. And you will indeed know that Jesus Christ is the conqueror of spiritual death, and the victor over death.
“And preach as you go, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 10:7).

The Jews at the time of Jesus yearned for the coming of the Kingdom of God and for the Messiah who would inaugurate it. When the Messiah came, the Kingdom of God was the central theme of his preaching. His first recorded adult words are, “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 4:17). In other words, the great hope of Israel had come to God’s people with his coming. They are now therefore to repent and believe in the Gospel. He came into all Galilee, preaching “the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:14-15).

At last the forgiveness of sins had definitively arrived, the time for their proper and full expiation with the sacrificial death of the Messiah and the establishment of his Church with its power to forgive sins in his name through the merits of his death on the cross. And with his resurrection there dawned a new and forgiven life for those who believe in him and live from his sacraments, which he left us for this purpose, especially the sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23) and the eucharist, through which we are definitively assured that our sins have been truly forgiven, and through which we feel fully forgiven and filled with the grace, love, and peace of God in our hearts.

This is the eternal kingdom that Jesus Christ came to bring into the world, a dominion of peace without end and without limits. This is the Kingdom of God which the angel Gabriel promised the Virgin Mary, saying that her son “will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:33). It will be a kingdom of universal peace over the whole earth till the end of the world, and he will be its king. His peace will penetrate the hearts of his elect, illumining them from within (2 Cor 4:6), removing all sin and guilt, and giving us the new life of God and his happiness.

Such is the power of his sacraments which can assure us with such certainty and conviction that through his death our sins are now indeed forgiven and gone. We live in this kingdom of peace—by means of these sacraments—in our new life of faith in Christ. Thus is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom…from this time forth and for ever” (Is 9:7). Hence “In his days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth. He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth” (Ps 71:7-8 KJV). And “His name shall endure for ever: his name shall be continued as long as the sun” (Ps 71:17 KJV). This is the beginning of his everlasting dominion, for “his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Dan 7:14).

Blessed are we if we belong to this kingdom of peace and salvation. It is ours in his Church, by means of his sacraments, through our faith in Jesus Christ.
“...and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Mt 10:22).

This is Jesus’ prediction, namely, that such will be our future, that we will be hated by all for his name’s sake (Mt 10:22). Perhaps we do not experience this all the time, or perhaps we are not experiencing it right now, but it is always something on our horizon if we are true Christians, that is, persons born again in Jesus Christ. And so it is, because the majority will always follow and imitate the values and customs of the culture in which they live. But these values and mores are not always in accord with our faith or with the way God is directing us to live and behave. In such a conflict between the culture and God’s most perfect will for us, for the majority, the culture will always win; and those who remain faithful to the will of God and oppose the culture and its false and worldly values and customs will always be very few. Perhaps you will be the only one in your environment who will remain faithful to the will of God in many important things. In such a case, it would be normal for you to be persecuted and hated, even at times by everyone, with no one taking your part or supporting you. “...and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake,” Jesus says (Mt 10:22).

In such a case, you have to persevere unto the end, and give a good witness to everyone. At times you will be persecuted for this very perseverance, and will have to flee to another city. Do so! Jesus tells us that there will always be a city where we can take refuge. “When they persecute you in one town,” he says, “flee to the next; for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes” (Mt 10:23).

We shall be truly blessed if we are thus persecuted for our faith in Jesus Christ and for our obedience to his will. God will give us a refuge, and he himself will be our refuge; and for having suffered for him, he will greatly bless us, giving us new and even better opportunities to live for him alone and to give a good witness that will help many.

Such will be our life as true Christians. We will no longer be of this world (Jn 17:14,16), nor will we any longer imitate its worldly customs, believe its false values, or follow its endless quest for pleasure. We shall rather embrace the cross, and live its mystery, losing and hating our life in this world for the love of Christ (Mk 8:35; Jn 12:25). A true Christian has been called out of the world by Christ, and therefore the world hates and persecutes him, as it hated and persecuted Christ (Jn 15:18-19; 17:14). “I have given them thy word,” said Jesus to his Father; “and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (Jn 17:14). By being faithful in this situation, without trying to imitate the worldliness of the world, we will be sanctified and blessed by God.
THE MONASTIC LIFE,
THE IDEAL OF ST. BENEDICT

Feast of St. Benedict, July 11
Prov 2:1-9; Ps 33; Phil 3:8-14; Mt 19:27-29

“Then Peter said in reply, Lo we have left everything and have followed you. What then shall we have” (Mt 19:27).

Jesus calls us to leave everything for him, and promises us a hundredfold reward. He called Simon and Andrew, saying, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mt 4:19). And “Immediately they left their nets and followed him” (Mt 4:20). In calling James and John, “Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him” (Mt 4:21-22). We note that they left even their father—everything. St. Luke tells us that these same apostles, “when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him” (Lk 5:11). And to “Levi, sitting at the tax office,” Jesus said, “Follow me. And he left everything, and rose and followed him” (Lk 5:27-28).

For having left everything for Jesus, he promised them “a hundredfold reward,” saying, “every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life” (Mt 19:29). Indeed, for having left all for Jesus, they have made themselves the last in this world, but they will be the first with God; while those who are first in this world will be the last with God, for “many that are first will be last,” says Jesus, “and the last first” (Mt 19:30).

St. Benedict, whom we honor today, is an example of all this for us. He left a world full of sin to live with God in the wilderness, and later left even his small town to live a life of prayer, fasting, and purification as a hermit in a cave for three years. Afterwards, many came to recognize his wisdom, and began to follow him and imitate his desert living. He built monasteries for them and wrote a rule to guide them in their monastic life.

St. Benedict “withdrew from the world of men, knowingly unacquainted with its ways and wisely unlearned in its wisdom” (Breviary; St. Gregory the Great, Life of St. Benedict). He knew that to obtain the greatest treasure of all, which is hidden from the rest, he would first have to sell all that he had (Mt 13:44-46) and live henceforth for God alone in every aspect of his life. This is the monastic life, a life lived for God alone by renouncing all else. He could have said with St. Paul that “whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ” (Phil 3:7). All the pleasures of this world, its delicate food and the luxurious life of the rich he left behind to obtain this treasure, this divine wisdom, which he bequeathed to his disciples, the monks. All the things that were once gain for him, he now “counted as loss for the sake of Christ.” Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil 3:7-8).

He had to renounce all these things and leave them behind in order to obtain the greatest treasure of all, just as the “merchant in search of fine pearls” had first to sell all that he had in order to buy the pearl of great price (Mt 13:45-46).
So St. Benedict renounced his secular clothing and the town to live in the wilderness, in a cave, losing all the things of this world for the sake of Christ, and he counted them as rubbish in comparison with the riches he gained thereby. The opposite of all this are those who “live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Phil 3:18-19). These are they who seek their pleasures here below in the delights of this world, and know nothing of the riches of Christ and the glory of the cross, “by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world,” as St. Paul affirms (Gal 6:14). In St. Benedict and in the monastic life we see the splendor of the cross and the beauty of desert living, namely, living for God alone in every aspect of our life.

Do you feel called to the desert life? If you do, seek a way to make this dream come true for you.

WHAT IS OUR MISSION?

15th Sunday of the Year
Amos 7:12-15; Ps 84; Eph 1:3-14; Mk 6:7-13

“So they went out and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them” (Mk 6:12-13).

Today we see the mission of the twelve apostles. Jesus associates them with himself in his own mission to the world. They have a message, the same message as Jesus, namely, that “The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 10:7). So did John the Baptist preach (Mt 3:2), and so preached Jesus (Mt 4:17), and so also did the apostles preach (Mt 10:7). This is the message of salvation. It is a call to repent and believe in the Gospel. Through this faith the people’s sins will be forgiven, they will be saved, born again as sons of God, and made righteous and new with the very righteousness of Jesus Christ himself. They should believe in the Gospel during Jesus’ lifetime, but their forgiveness and justification come to them ahead of time through the merits of his death on the cross. The preaching of the apostles during the lifetime of Jesus was therefore the beginning of the Kingdom of God and the grace of the Gospel.

They should, therefore, take up their mission without worrying about material things, which are completely secondary. They should just go and begin now, and depend upon the hospitality of the people for their needs—lodging, food, drink, etc. They should live simply and travel light. The message we preach is the main thing, the means and media we use are secondary. If our message is correct and powerful, it will have its effect, and will be communicated by word of mouth until many hear it. Even today with all our technology, a true message is best communicated by word of mouth from person to person, and so it will become known and spread abroad. Therefore do not worry about how you will travel or your means of communication. And “He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, where you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place” (Mk 6:8-10). They are to stay in only one house, not going from house to house to experience better or different food.
At times, people will not accept us or listen to us. In such a case we are to shake their dust from our feet “for a testimony against them” (Mk 6:11), and continue preaching elsewhere. It is God who has given us our message, not men, and we have to obey God, and not man when the two are in conflict. So did the apostles when the council charged them to speak no more in the name of Jesus. They said, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).

So also was the case with the prophet Amos in the first reading today when the priest Amaziah said to him, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom” (Amos 7:12-13). And Amos answered that he was not a prophet by profession nor did he belong to a prophetic guild, but was rather a herdsman; yet God called him to prophesy to Israel, and because his vocation came from God and was not something that he himself chose, he must therefore obey it and prophesy. He said, “the Lord took me from following the flock and the Lord said to me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel” (Amos 7:15). “The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8).

And so it is with us too. Our faith in Jesus Christ has given us a message and a mission, and we must obey it; if not here, then somewhere else—but it is our obligation to obey God’s call. We can use whatever means are available to us to spread the word, and if the message is correct, God will bless it and spread it abroad for us.

St. Paul speaks today of the message which we should preach and make known. It is that God has predestined and chosen us to be his adopted sons in Jesus Christ, washed, saved, and forgiven by his blood, in order to live for the praise of his glory, so that all things might be reunited in Christ, as the head of all things. We, therefore, are to live for this, for the fulfillment of this plan, living for the praise of his glory, for the reunification of all things in Christ. God chose us for this “before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph 1:4). We are his elect, chosen before creation to be his saints and to live for him alone, “to live for the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:12).

We do not choose ourselves, anymore than Amos chose himself. God has chosen and predestined us for this. Our vocation comes from God; not from ourselves, not from men. Therefore we have to obey, even if people oppose us. In that case, we must simply shake their dust off our feet “for a testimony against them” (Mk 6:11), and continue preaching the Gospel elsewhere, as did St. Paul, and using whatever means of communication are available to us. And if it is his message that we are preaching, God will bless our mission, and spread our word abroad.
DO YOU WANT TO FIND OR LOSE YOUR LIFE?

Homily of Monday, 15th Week of the Year
Ex 1:8-14,22; Ps 123; Mt 10:34 – 11:1

“He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 10:39).

A whole philosophy of life is contained in this verse. It is a new way of living in this world, and it is the exact opposite of the philosophy of the world, which tells us that we should save our life in this world in a worldly way, filling our life with its pleasures. In the face of this worldly philosophy, Jesus presents his doctrine of the cross. According to Jesus’ new doctrine, those who live according to this worldly philosophy will die, and lose their life in vain: “He who finds his life will lose it” (Mt 10:39). Only those who lose their lives in this world for the sake of Jesus Christ will truly find and save their life.

This is the teaching of the few, because the majority will always choose the philosophy and the so-called wisdom of this world, which tells us that to be happy we have to find our life and our happiness here below in this world, in its delights, delicacies, and pleasures. But Jesus teaches us that if we live in this worldly way, we will not be able to keep the first and most important commandment of all, which is to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mk 12:30). One who is every day seeking his delight here below, has already divided his heart, and can no longer love God with all his heart. He has not reserved his heart for God alone, but rather is dissipating it amid the unnecessary pleasures of this life.

Only he who loses his life in this world for the love of Christ can fulfill the first and most important commandment of all. Only he who loses his life in this world can love God as he should, with all his heart and life. Only he who loses his life in this world can purify his senses and his spirit from other things, appetites, and pleasures, to live for God alone and find his happiness only in him. Only he who loses his life in this world will be purified in his five senses and in the three faculties of his spirit (mind, memory, and will) to enter into union with God in contemplative prayer.

This is the authentic way of life, the hard and narrow way, which few know, and even fewer choose, but it is the only way of life (Mt 7:13-14). The majority will always choose the wide and easy way that leads to destruction, the way of the wisdom of this world, the way of finding and saving one’s life in a worldly way in the delights of the table, and here below in general. Truly, “the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many” (Mt 7:13); but “the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Mt 7:14).

The choice is yours. You have to decide which way you want: the difficult way of life, of the few; or the easy way of destruction, of the many. Do you want to find or lose your life? The choice is yours.
“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt 11:28-30).

In Jesus Christ there is rest for our souls. Only in him can we find the true rest for our soul that we seek and yearn for. It is, above all, our sins and imperfections that cause us to be heavy laden. Only God can relieve us from this burden. This is the burden of guilt, the burden of depression, caused by our sins and imperfections. Yet even this pain helps us, for it teaches us God’s will for us with greater exactitude, and motivates us to correct ourselves and to learn new and better ways of behaving. We do not want to be depressed. So we avoid behavior that we know causes us to become depressed; and in this way we live better and more in accord with God’s will for us.

The yoke of Christ, on the other hand, which is his will for us, or the way he wants us to live and the things he wants us to do, or not do, does not depress us, but rather is easy and light, and rejoices our heart. We should, therefore, not only do his will—carry his yoke—but also bring to him our burden, sadness, depression, guilt, and sin, so that he can heal us and give true rest to our heavy-laden soul. Only in Christ will we feel this rest in the depth of our spirit, after having become heavy laden by offending him with our imperfections.

Jesus Christ left to his Church the power to forgive sins through the merits of his death on the cross for us. Through the sacraments, the Church applies the blood of Christ to our heart, wounded by our sins or imperfections, and heals us. Christ, through his sacrament of reconciliation (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23), gives us new life and happiness, where there was formerly sadness and pain of heart. This is why he died on the cross, to free us from this pain of alienation from God. He himself suffered this pain of alienation from his Father on the cross instead of us, to expiate our sins by suffering for us the punishment justly due to them. The only thing that he requires of us is our faith, a profession that we believe that he bore our sins and paid for us our debt of suffering and punishment due to our sins. And this debt does not have to be paid twice, that is, once by him, and again by us. It rather needs to be paid but once, by him; not by us. By his wounds we are healed (Is 53:5). “…the chastisement of our peace was upon him” (Is 53:5 KJV) for “the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:6 KJV). Because he was punished by God for our sins, we find in him rest for our souls. If then in the future we walk more exactly in his ways—which this pain taught us and motivated us to follow—we will live in peace. We will no longer be labored and heavy laden.
“Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles” (Mt 12:15; Is 42:1).

St. Matthew presents Jesus today as the fulfillment of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. St. Matthew cites today the first of the Suffering Servant hymns (Is 42:1-4). This Servant is the beloved of God. God puts his Spirit upon him, “and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles” (Mt 12:15; Is 42:1).

The Jews sought the righteousness of God, that is, they longed to be righteous and justified by God through faith (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3), and to grow in holiness through their obedience to his will and their observance of his law. But it would be this Servant who would also announce the righteousness and salvation of God to the Gentiles, who did not have the revelation and the written law of God. This Servant, then, would bring the righteousness of God to both Gentiles and Jews, for he is the fulfillment of God’s salvation for all. He justifies the Gentiles as well as the Jews through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

Although the Jews were justified by their faith since the days of Abraham (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3) and their sins were forgiven through their faith, nonetheless their sins were not yet justly or properly expiated until the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. God only forgave them with the intention of properly expiating their sins later through the death of his Son (Rom 3:25-26). Jesus Christ is, therefore, the Savior of the Jews too, and now with him present with them in the flesh, they have the fullness of God’s salvation with them; and in his resurrection they can rise with him to a new and risen life. Hence the Jews can now hope in this Savior along with the Gentiles, as the text says, “and in his name will the Gentiles hope” (Mt 12:21). The coming of Jesus was the first announcement of salvation to the Gentiles, as our text says, “and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles” (Mt 12:18). From then on, man has salvation in Jesus Christ—Jews as well as Gentiles.

This salvation is something interior. It is the cleansing of the conscience, which gives us joy of spirit, the happiness of God and of the Holy Spirit in our heart, “For the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). To have our sins forgiven and to have the new life of God shining in our heart is something interior. The Savior, therefore, will be gentle. “He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will any one hear his voice in the streets; he will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick, till he brings justice to victory” (Mt 12:19-20). He will be a gentle and benevolent Savior; and in him we will find the happiness of God which we so yearn for and seek. He will bring justice to victory, that is, he will bring his righteousness and salvation which justifies and renews us, illumining us with new life and happiness in the Lord.
“And he said to them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place and rest a while... And they departed into a desert place by ship privately” (Mk 6:31,32 KJV).

We see two things in today’s Gospel: 1) Jesus and his disciples seek a time of rest in “a desert place,” and 2) Jesus, as a good shepherd, desires to pasture his people who are like sheep gone astray, without a shepherd.

Both Jesus and his disciples were very active in their ministry, but now he wants to withdraw from the multitude and rest for a while in “a desert place,” in silence and peace. Actually, Jesus did this quite often. He withdrew from his disciples and went off alone to “a desert place” to pray; and at least once he spent the entire night in prayer on a mountain: “And it came to pass in those days,” says St. Luke, “that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God” (Lk 6:12 KJV).

But today he takes his disciples with him as he goes off to “a desert place” to pray. This he also did on the mount of Transfiguration, when “he took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray” (Lk 9:28), and he did it again in the garden of Gethsemane when he took these same three disciples, wishing them to be with him as he prayed (Mk 14:33).

Prayer in “a desert place” was essential for Jesus in two senses. First, as the eternal Word, the eternal Son of the Father, he lived in constant communion with his Father and the Holy Spirit, in which he as Son always related to his Father as a son relates to his father, even though he was of the same divine substance as the Father, and equal to him in divinity, being fully God. This intimate communion from all eternity with his Father is like contemplative prayer, a communion of life and love, without words or ideas. Secondly, as a true man, Jesus also needed to pray, just as he needed to eat and sleep. This is because he had a human soul, containing a human mind and a human will as part of his human nature, and as prayer is necessary for a human soul, it was also necessary for him as a true man, even though he was a divine person, and therefore God. (Since he also had a divine nature, he also had a divine mind and a divine will which pertained to his divine nature). In his prayer as a perfect man, therefore, Jesus Christ is our model for what our prayer should be.

Prayer, especially contemplative prayer, is fundamental for a human being if he wants to be complete and act as God wants him to act. The scriptures are filled with prayer, we need only refer to the psalms. Man was made for contemplative prayer, to go apart to “a desert place” and commune with God. Thus does he find the peace that he longs for and needs, and the rest for his spirit which renews him. Thus does he also find the love that he needs, and for which he was created. In “a desert place,” man can enter into communion with God which gives rest to his spirit. It is like a sweet and restful dream. In contemplative prayer in “a desert place,” he rests in the arms of God, embraced and loved by God. And from this prayer in “a desert place” he rises up well rested and refreshed in both body and spirit, with a peace not of this world. This is what Jesus did from all eternity as the eternal Word of the Father; and it is what he did as a true man in the desert places of Palestine. And today we see that he takes his apostles with him to...
teach them also this necessity of their nature. Even in the midst of their ministry, when
his “apostles gathered themselves together unto Jesus, and told him all things, both what
they had done, and what they had taught…he said unto them, Come ye yourselves apart
into a desert place” (Mk 6:30-31 KJV).

We have the same need that Jesus had for contemplative prayer in “a desert place.”
The attraction of the desert is the attraction of God. God draws us to the desert to be
alone with him, to seek him, to enjoy his presence and love, and to be renewed and
rejuvenated by our contact with him in silence and solitude, without distraction or noise,
far from other people and obligations. In the desert the heart can rest and experience the
peace of God.

Monks make a whole program of life out of these episodes when Jesus rested in
“desert places.” This is their specialization. They are specialists, and their specialty is
contemplative prayer in a desert place, far from the world. They create oases in the
deserts of this world, places of contemplation, centers of spiritual refreshment, for those
who labor and are heavy laden (Mt 11:28).

But today we also see that when Jesus arrived at the “desert place,” he saw a great
multitude, which were “like sheep without a shepherd” (Mk 6:34). And so it also is with
us. Although we long for the solitude of the desert and for contemplative prayer, we also
long to teach others, who are like sheep gone astray, who do not know where to find good
pasture, and who waste much time looking for it in vain, finding only thorns and thistles.
They need someone who can preach to them the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. This
also is our responsibility as Christians, that is, to preach Christ and salvation through his
blood. He frees us from our sins and the pain and depression caused by guilt by himself
suffering the pain of alienation from his Father for us on the cross. He suffered this to
free us from having to suffer it again, since his suffering satisfied our debt of suffering
and punishment for our sins, thus satisfying the requirements of divine justice, and setting
us free.

Yes, Jesus invites us to the desert; but he also invites us to preach the Gospel of
salvation to those who are “like sheep without a shepherd” (Mk 6:34).

TRUE FAITH

Monday, 16th Week of the Year
Ex 14:5-18; Ex 15; Mt 12:38-42

“An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except
the sign of the prophet Jonah” (Mt 12:39).

Asking Jesus for a sign was itself a sign of their lack of faith in him, which the scribes
and Pharisees should have had after seeing so many miracles, healings, and signs. It was,
in other words, a refusal to believe when they had already been given sufficient evidence.
Instead of requesting still another sign, they should simply have believed in him to
experience his salvation. But Jesus does promise them one more great sign, his
resurrection, which should convince all men of good will. He said, “For as Jonah was
three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Mt 12:40).

Jesus then gave them two examples of faith: that of the queen of the South, and that of the Ninevites in the days of Jonah. These are both examples of pagans who had more faith than the scribes and Pharisees who were requesting still another sign from Jesus. These pagans of Nineveh, says, Jesus, “will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and something greater than Jonah is here,” and yet they do not believe in him (Mt 12:41). And the queen of the South came to hear Solomon, and “something greater than Solomon is here,” yet they refuse to believe (Mt 12:42).

And where are you in all this? You have even seen the great sign promised here by Jesus, his resurrection. Do you truly believe in him as your Savior who can save you as he saved the Israelites from the Egyptians in the Red Sea? Moses said to them, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today... The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be still” (Ex 14:13-14).

This is the salvation that God will work for you through Jesus Christ when you believe in him and entreat his help, especially through his sacraments. He will free you from the Egyptians, who for us are the devil and his followers, and sin and spiritual death, which is the result of sin. This is why Jesus Christ came into the world, to give you this freedom and salvation if you believe in him and live from now on for him with all your heart. He will give you his light, and make you walk with him in light. He will forgive you your sins and imperfections, and will give you new life. You will rise with him to live a new and risen life (Rom 6:4), lived for him alone in his light, with a clean conscience and with God’s joy in your heart. Thus does he wish you to live: in his light, and not in the darkness and sadness of sin (Jn 8:12; 12:46). You should then leave behind your old worldly life, to rise and even ascend with him to an ascended life (Eph 2:6; Col 2:12). You must believe in the power of his blood, which paid the debt of punishment for your sins, and rise with him to new life (Rom 6:4; Col 3:1-2). This is what he promises to those who have true faith in him.

THE MYSTERY OF UNBELIEF

Thursday, 16th Week of the Year
Ex 19:1-2,9-11,16-20; Dan 3; Mt 13:10-17

“This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (Mt 13:13).

To the multitudes Jesus speaks in parables, but to his disciples he explains the mysteries of the Kingdom of God, for “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven,” he said, “but to them it has not been given” (Mt 13:11). Had he preached to the multitudes in a clear and direct way, they would not have understood. His intimate disciples who lived with him were able to understand more, but even they had great difficulty understanding.
After his death and resurrection it was different. Then the apostles could and did preach to the multitudes the full *kerygma* of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and thousands of people were converted, for the fullness of the mystery of Christ was then known, and the gift of the Holy Spirit had been given. We now live in those days, so we can now preach Christ clearly and openly, and the grace will be there for all those who are predestined to life to understand and believe. But the lifetime of Jesus was not yet the time for such open and clear preaching. Nonetheless Jesus’ parables still helped the multitudes somewhat, and they could afterwards remember them and then better appreciate the depth of their meaning. We also are now living in a time when we can read Jesus’ parables and understand them in light of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

Nonetheless even today many are blind and deaf, and neither understand nor believe our preaching. It has not been granted to them to understand the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. They are only able to understand parables and stories, but not the mystery of Christ; and they do not want to convert and live for Christ alone with all their heart and life. Their heart has grown fat and they have closed their ears.

What should a preacher do in such a case? Should he stop preaching the fullness of Christ to the multitudes, and preach only to the few who can understand? No. He should continue preaching the full mystery of Christ to everyone. Those to whom it has been given to understand will believe, and the rest will shut their eyes and stop up their ears. In fact, it will be our preaching which will stop up their ears. This is why the Lord said to Isaiah, “Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed” (Is 6:10). Such is the plan of God. So are all things preordained. Our part is to preach the fullness of Christ—whether they believe or not—and to testify that through his death, by faith, our sins are forgiven, and that in his resurrection we can rise to a new life in him, and that we should then live henceforth for him alone who died and rose for us (2 Cor 5:15). Those who are predestined for life will eventually believe.

**THE THORNS CHOKE US**

Friday, 16th Week of the Year
Ex 20:1-17; Ps 18; Mt 13:18-23

“As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (Mt 13:23).

The saints of every age of the Church are those who guard themselves from the thorns of this world which choke the seed of the word of God sown in their heart. In St. Luke’s version we read, “And for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature” (Lk 8:14). The thorns are above all the “pleasures of life” (Lk 8:14). Jesus warns us against the pleasures of life, especially gluttony which weighs down the heart, making it heavy and sluggish. He says, “But take heed to yourselves lest
your heart be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare” (Lk 21:34).

Truly, we are to have but one treasure only, the Lord, and no other treasure in this world. “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth…” Jesus says, “but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven… For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mt 6:19-21). Our heart should center itself only on God, and not on the treasures and pleasures of this world, for we cannot serve two masters (Mt 6:24). This is why it is so difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God, namely, because he is surrounded by the riches and pleasures of this world. Jesus said, “How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God!” (Mk 10:23). In fact, continues Jesus, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mk 10:25). Normally a rich man puts his heart in the delicacies of this world, which are like other gods which divide his heart.

The first reading warns the Israelites of the danger of other gods. The first commandment is, “I am the Lord your God… You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:2-3). They are not even to make images of other things, lest they treat them like gods. “You shall not make for yourself a graven image” (Ex 20:4). In this Israel was to differ from all her neighbors who all made images of their gods. “You shall not bow down to them or serve them,” say the Ten Commandments; “for I the Lord your God am a jealous God” (Ex 20:5). This was also the first commandment of Jesus: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mk 12:30).

If we want to be contemplatives, this should be our manner of life in this world because this is the way of life which nurtures contemplation. This is because to contemplate we have to be focused only on God with all our heart, sacrificing the unnecessary pleasures of this life which are like thorns which choke us so that we do not bear fruit. We should guard our heart from thorns which are “the cares and riches and pleasures of life” (Lk 8:14).

THE OFFSCOURING OF ALL THINGS

Feast of St. James, July 25
2 Cor 4:7-15; Ps 125; Mt 20:20-28

“…whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:27-28).

Today we are presented with a great contrast. James and John want to be the first among the apostles, sitting at Jesus’ right and left in his Kingdom (Mt 20:21); but Jesus teaches them that to be first they must make themselves the last of all, and that the life of an apostle is one of suffering and persecution in this world. They will drink from the same cup of suffering that Jesus drinks from (Mt 20:22-23), and will be the last of all and the servants of everyone. For an apostle, this present life is not a time of rewards and honors, but rather of war, persecution, and martyrdom. As Christ was persecuted and crucified, so also his apostles will suffer in this world. They will not be the wise of this
world, but rather fools for Christ’s sake (1 Cor 4:10). Yet they will not be completely destroyed, but like St. Paul, they will continue preaching the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ for the renewal of the world and of the Church. As Christ gave his life, so too will the apostle give his life.

St. Paul describes his own life today, yet it is at the same time the description of every apostle in every age. “We are afflicted,” he says, “in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor 4:8-9). So it was with St. James, whom we honor today, and so it will be for you too if you live the life of an apostle, following God’s guidance in your life. You will be persecuted and dishonored in this world for the sake of Christ. So was the life of St. Paul who was stoned, imprisoned, and martyred; but to the end he continued preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This present life is for an apostle a time for fighting the battles of the Lord, and for promoting the Kingdom of God in this world.

“For I think,” says St. Paul, “that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men…we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things” (1 Cor 4:9,13). So will our life also be as the apostles of Jesus Christ in this world. But all this is part of God’s plan. It is all foreordained for your good and that of the world. And in spite of all this suffering, you are to continue to preach the Gospel in every new situation in which you find yourself, and to continue to obey God’s guidance in all things, living as he directs you to live and thus continuing to give witness in this world for its illumination (Phil 2:15). So, like St. Paul, “when reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we try to conciliate” (1 Cor 4:12-13). As apostles, we will be treated “as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Cor 6:9-10). In short, we are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2 Cor 4:10).

THE EUCHARISTIC CHRIST
SANCTIFIES, ILLUMINES, AND RENEWS THE WORLD

17th Sunday of the Year
2 Kings 4:42-44; Ps 144; Eph 4:1-6; Jn 6:1-15

“Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated” (Jn 6:11).

Today Jesus feeds five thousand men with five loaves and two fish. He gives thanks over the bread and distributes it among the people. Then, in the Gospel of John, there follows a long discourse on the bread of life, the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Jesus himself is this bread of life. The living bread is his body and blood. This entire chapter of St. John’s Gospel is about the eucharist, for in the eucharist Jesus feeds us miraculously with the bread of life, that is, with himself, with his eucharistic flesh and blood. In the eucharist we consume Jesus Christ sacramentalized for the life of the world.
Jesus Christ is the second person of the Blessed Trinity, the eternal Son of the Father, who existed from all eternity in the bosom of the Father. He became incarnate through the work of the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary. In the incarnation his divine person with his divine nature entered into union with a human nature and sanctified it. His humanity and his human body contained his divinity and his divine person here on earth for the transformation of the world. By means of our contact with him in faith we are transformed and sanctified, instructed, and changed.

Jesus Christ justified and saved us by his death on the cross, whereby he paid our debt of punishment and suffering for our sins, thus satisfying divine justice. In the eucharist, his death on the cross is made present for us so that we can participate in his sacrifice, and be freed from the punishment due to our sins. Then, in holy communion we eat the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ which were offered in sacrifice to the Father in substitution for us to suffer our punishment for our sins. By eating his flesh and drinking his blood, we eat the flesh and drink the blood of God for our transformation and divinization. As his physical body contained his divine person and his divine nature in human form, in the same way his eucharistic body, which is an extension in space and time of his physical body, also contains his divinity and his divine person, but now in a form that we can eat and drink for the life of our soul.

The divine person of Jesus Christ divinizes his humanity, that is, it fills it with divinity, even though it always remains a human nature, with a human mind and a human will. Nonetheless, for our salvation, his humanity is full of his divinity, illuminating his humanity from within. God did this for our salvation, so that we, who have been justified by his death on the cross through our faith in him, may now also be divinized by eating and drinking his flesh and blood which contain for us his divinity. Thus by receive holy communion with faith, those who are justified by his death can now be sanctified and divinized, with his divinity illumining us from within just as his divine person illumined his physical humanity from within and divinized it. And as his humanity always remained human, even though divinized, in the same way we also always remain human although divinized by eating and drinking the eucharistic body and blood of Jesus Christ. We receive and eat Jesus Christ sacramentalized in the eucharist. And this is for our illumination and divinization. Thus the divinity of Jesus Christ illumines our humanity from within, divinizing it.

The eucharist is also a sacrifice of praise which we offer to the Father with the Son, in the Holy Spirit. Christ offers himself to the Father, pouring out his life in love for us, in substitution for us, but also as a sacrifice offered in love and self-gift to the Father. Christ’s sacrifice of himself in love and praise to the Father becomes our sacrifice of praise also, which we offer with him to the Father in the Mass. The Mass is, therefore, our great act of worship, cult, and adoration of the Father with the Son in the Holy Spirit. It is the perfect sacrifice of the New Testament, which Christians offer to God with Christ, in the Holy Spirit. It is our sacrifice of praise, love, and the gift of ourselves with Christ to the Father.

Christ came to the earth for our justification, sanctification, illumination, transformation, and divinization. He justifies us by his death in substitution for us. Then we can rise with him in his resurrection to a new life in God. Finally, through the eucharist we can continue to grow in holiness through our contact with his eucharistic body which divinizes us, putting us into sacramental and physical contact with the
humanity of Jesus Christ, which contains his divinity, to illumine us from within. In the eucharist, his divinity illumines and divinizes our humanity from within. Thus does God work the salvation and transformation of the world through Jesus Christ.

THE MUSTARD SEED

Monday, 17th Week of the Year
Ex 32:15-24,30-34; Ps 105; Mt 13:31-35

“The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches” (Mt 13:31-32).

Such is the Kingdom of God. It begins as something very small, like a tiny mustard seed, but with the passage of time it comes to take over our entire life, and change society and the world as well. The Kingdom of God begins in our heart with a word of God, which we receive and believe in. God then makes it grow in our heart until it reaches the point that it becomes the main force in our life. It is God’s life within us which transforms everything else. From very small beginnings it becomes the only love of our life, to which we dedicate all our love, attention, interest, and time. It is the love which fills our heart, and not only our heart, but the world as well, changing and transforming it.

The Kingdom of God is the conglomeration of souls regenerated by their faith in Jesus Christ, who was crucified to pay our debt of suffering in punishment for our sins so that God could justly forgive and cleanse us of them, making us righteous and new in his sight. The Kingdom of God is the union or society of all those souls reborn by their faith in Jesus Christ with their sins forgiven and their souls renewed and clothed anew in the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself. They draw their life from Christ (Jn 1:16). They are the branches of the vine which is Christ, from whom they receive life. They eat his flesh and drink his blood to be divinized, to be able to shine in this world, illumining it from within and transforming it. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ makes them new, new creatures, new men, justified by their faith in him. They form the society which continues to offer the sacrifice of Calvary in the world through the eucharist. It is this sacrifice which is the life of the world, the interior and transforming light of the world, the force which renews and rejuvenates all things.

The members of the Kingdom of God should love God with all their heart and life (Mk 12:30), and not divide their heart among worldly pleasures and delights, but rather live only for him who died and rose for them (2 Cor 5:15). They live from his death, offering with him his sacrifice of himself to the Father in the eucharist. They also live from his resurrection, having risen with him to a new, illumined, and risen life.

The first reading about the golden calf shows us the evil of idolatry, the worship of strange and false gods. This is the great sin. But you too are guilty of this sin if you continue to live for the delights of this world after believing in Jesus Christ, for you are dividing your heart, instead of dedicating yourself completely to God. Christ seeks and
expects to find hearts that are undivided in their love and dedication to him in the Kingdom of God.

THE TIME OF PREPARATION

Thursday, 17th Week of the Year
Ex 40:16-21,34-38; Ps 83; Mt 13:47-53

“So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there, there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 13:49-50).

We are now awaiting this end of the age when “the angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous” (Mt 13:49). It is now midsummer and the fruits of the earth are ripening for the harvest. The harvest of the fruits of the earth is the great symbol of the final harvest of the earth at the end of the age, when the angels, the reapers, will come out and separate the weeds from the wheat and cast the weeds into the fire, and the wheat into the barn. The fire is the eternal fire of hell, where “there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 13:42), and the barn full of wheat is the fullness of the Kingdom of God. We now await this day of judgment, a day of fire and light: fire for “the sons of the evil one,” and light for “the sons of the kingdom” (Mt 13:38). “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43).

“So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous” (Mt 13:49). They will cast the wicked “into the furnace of fire; there, there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 13:50). It will be like a net full of fish, which the fishermen drag ashore, and sit down, putting the good ones into baskets, and throwing the bad ones away (Mt 13:48).

God would like to gather everyone, and so he throws the net into the sea, but he also knows that not all will be good and worthy of the Kingdom of God. It is up to us then to receive the justification of Christ with faith so that God, through sending his Son as a substitute for us on the cross, absorbing in this way his righteous wrath against our sins, can justly forgive us. He then clothes us with the righteousness of Christ himself when we believe in him and invoke his merits for the forgiveness of our sins. And so we shine even now with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Then we must cooperate with the grace of God, and try to obey him in everything to that we might be sanctified. Only those who are justified and sanctified will be chosen and put into baskets at the end of the age. The rest, the angels will cast into the furnace of fire.

We are now awaiting this day of glory and light, clothing ourselves with the righteousness of Jesus Christ, living from his resurrection. But this present life is also a school in which God is always teaching us new things and punishing us in our heart for our errors, imperfections, and sins, so that we will learn and be prepared and perfected on the last day to be among the elect who will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of our Father.
“On the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves and present an offering by fire to the Lord. And you shall do no work on this same day; for it is a day of atonement for you before the Lord your God” (Lev 23:27-28).

The Day of Atonement is one of the most important holy days in Israel, and its details are explained in the sixteenth chapter of Leviticus. On this day two male goats were offered in expiation for the sins of the people. One was slain and offered in the sanctuary and his blood sprinkled upon the mercy seat, that is, the propitiatory, or the cover of the ark of the covenant. The other male goat was not slain, but Aaron put his hands on his head and confessed over him the sins of the people, putting them upon this animal, who was then led out into the desert and let go, carrying away with him into the desert the sins of the people. Scripture says, “and Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and send him away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land; and he shall let the goat go in the wilderness” (Lev 16:21-22).

Here we see the practice of confessing and placing the sins of the people on an animal by putting their hands on his head and making this confession. In this particular case the goat carried these sins away into the desert. In the usual sacrifices for sins (Lev 4) the sinner also placed his hand upon the animal’s head and then killed him, while the priest sprinkled his blood in front of the veil of the sanctuary and put it also on the horns of the altar of incense (Lev 4:4-7). The meaning is that the sins of the sinners are transferred from the sinners to the animal, who dies in vicarious punishment for the sinners, in their place, substituting for the sinners, thus paying the sinners’ debt of suffering in punishment for their sins, and the sinners go free, their due punishment having been justly paid for them by the animal.

In itself, as St. Paul teaches us (Heb 10:4), the sacrificed animal does not have the power to take away sins, but rather functions sacramentally, in that the sacrificed animal represents the perfect sacrifice of Christ, which does have this power to substitute for us and suffer the suffering due to us in punishment for our sins instead of us, if we believe in him. So God gave the Israelites these sacrifices, so that by confessing their sins over the head of the animal, placing their hand upon his head, their sins were forgiven ahead of time through their faith in the sacrifice which represented for them the only sacrifice which in itself actually does have this power, namely, the sacrifice of the only Son of God on the cross.
“Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter. And the king was sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given” (Mt 14:8-9).

John the Baptist had great courage in reprehending the king for having married his brother’s wife. For having testified to this truth (Lev 18:16; 20:21), Herod arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison (Mt 14:3), and in the end decapitated him in prison without trial. In this, John was an example of what could also happen to Jesus, since after John’s death, Herod said that Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead (Mt 14:2). This saying of Herod shows the danger that Jesus was in. If Herod killed John, and now thinks that Jesus is John raised from the dead, perhaps he would want to kill him again.

So it always is, even with us. If we act like John, speaking the truth that others need to hear, we put ourselves in danger. But such is the life of a prophet, and of a true Christian as well. In one way or another we are obliged to speak the truth that people need to hear, whether they want to hear or not, whether they listen or not. The necessity is in us if we want to be faithful to the truth and to our vocation as Christians. Whether others hear or not is not our problem. It is their problem. Our problem is to speak. If they do not hear, then they are responsible for their own death with God, but we will have done our part, fulfilled our obligation, in warning them of the danger they are in. If we do not warn them for fear of being rejected or mocked by them, then they will die spiritually, but we will be held responsible for not having warned them of the danger they were in for behaving as they did (Ez 33:6-9). In short, we are watchmen. Our responsibility is to warn people of the danger they are in (Ez 33:7).

“So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked man, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand” (Ez 33:7-8).

Being a watchman, though, is dangerous, as we see today. It cost John the Baptist his life. Yet Jesus says, “whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mk 8:35).

Our vocation as Christians is to give testimony to the truth by the witness of our life and by our word. Thus will we lose our life in this world in order to save it with God.
THE GLORY OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST

18th Sunday of the Year
Ex 16:2-4,12-15; Ps 77; Eph 4:17,20-24; Jn 6:24-35

“Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give you” (Jn 6:26-27).

Jesus complains that this crowd has followed him only because they have eaten of the loaves and filled themselves with bread, instead of following him because they had seen divine signs and are seeking God. Jesus therefore says that they should rather work “for the food which endures to eternal life,” which the Son of man will give them (Jn 6:27). They then ask him what they should do to be working for this permanent food. Jesus responds, saying, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (Jn 6:29). In other words, if they want to have this spiritual food “which endures to eternal life,” they have to believe in Jesus Christ, whom God has sent for their salvation.

This is the great work which they must do, namely, believe in Jesus Christ. But in reality it is not a work, but rather faith. They have to have faith in him because God has sent him to them for their salvation, to give them the bread “which endures to eternal life.” And he himself is, moreover, this bread “which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world” (Jn 6:33). He himself is this heavenly bread, this bread of life, this living bread, which “gives life to the world” (Jn 6:33), and which “endures to eternal life.” It is for this bread which they are to work, and not for the bread which perishes.

Man is made for more than this present life. He is made for more than bread that perishes. Perishable bread is not sufficient for him. “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4). But how many today know this? All their work is for the bread, the food, the necessities of material life, and the pleasures of this world and of this life. Such a life is unworthy of a human being, who is something more than the beasts of the field that can content themselves with only this.

We should rather live for God, for his glory, to experience his glory, and to live in it. Moses and Aaron said to the people in the desert of Sinai, “At evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord” (Ex 16:6-7). It is for this glory that we should live. It is for this that the Lord saved Israel and led them out of the land of Egypt, to be his own people, to know his laws and his will, and to live according to his will, and be united with him as their God. And he will reveal to them his glory, and they will see and experience it.

And in the morning they saw the glory of the Lord when he “gave them bread from heaven” (Ps 104:40), and “rained down upon them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven. Man ate of the bread of the angels” (Ps 77:24-25). “And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the desert, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud” (Ex 16:10). This was the glory of God which Moses and Aaron predicted, saying, “and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord” (Ex 16:7).
This is the glory that we too yearn for; and we have it in Jesus Christ, who is “the true bread from heaven (Jn 6:32), “which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world” (Jn 6:33), life which does not perish, because he is the bread “which endures to eternal life” (Jn 6:27). This is the bread for which we are to work; and the work which we are to do to obtain it is to believe in him. “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (Jn 6:29).

Through faith we come into contact with this glory for which we were made. By believing in Jesus Christ we are remade. Our sins are more than merely pardoned; even their just punishment is paid for us by the suffering of the Lamb of God on the cross. Justice is satisfied. It is not merely a free pardon. Our debt of suffering in punishment for our sins is actually paid for us, and that by the death of the Son of God himself on the cross. Divine justice itself is satisfied, and we are freed to live a new life in the light with Jesus Christ. Our old man is put off in him, and we are now clothed anew with the new man (Eph 4:22-24; Gal 3:27; Rom 13:14). This is the renewal of our mind (Rom 12:2) and heart. It is walking in the Spirit, and no longer according to the flesh (Rom 8:5,13). It is rising with Christ to a new and risen life (Rom 6:4). Jesus, therefore, says today, “he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst” (Jn 6:35). Jesus Christ is the fountain of this new life. He forgives and renews us. He makes us new men in him (Eph 4:24), a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Rev 21:5), with renewed minds (Rom 12:2).

Jesus Christ works in us through his sacraments, when we come to him with faith. God justifies us through the death of Jesus Christ when we believe in him and invoke the merits of his death on the cross. He forgives us and cleanses our conscience, giving us a new life. We rise with him in his resurrection (Rom 6:4), and draw life and glory from him (Jn 1:16). We live, therefore, henceforth for him, and for him alone, with all our heart. This is the meaning of believing “in him whom he has sent” as “the work of God” (Jn 6:29). It is believing for the sake of having this new life which in him “shall not hunger” (Jn 6:35).

THE EUCHARIST DIVINIZES THE HUMAN RACE

Monday, 18th Week of the Year
Num 11:4-15; Ps 80; Mt 14:13-21

“Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass; and taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds” (Mt 14:19).

Today Jesus miraculously feeds the people in the desert. This is a foretaste of the eucharist, in which he feeds us with heavenly bread, which is his eucharistic body. The eucharist is bread which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world (Jn 6:33). This eucharistic bread is Jesus Christ himself, who came down to the earth from heaven so that we might eat his flesh and drink his blood, and so live a new life in him, fed on his body and blood, which contain his divinity.
His divinity united with his humanity in the incarnation. His divine person, with his divine nature, assumed a human nature with a human mind and a human will, so that we could have direct, physical, and sacramental contact with God for our transformation and divinization. In this divinization, though, we, of course, remain human, even though we are divinized by our contact with the body and blood of Jesus Christ. In a similar way, the humanity of Jesus remained human even though his human body, human mind and human will were divinized by their contact with his divine person with its divine nature. Yet the divinization of Jesus’ humanity was far more intense than our divinization because of the uniqueness of the hypostatic union uniting his humanity to his divinity. In short, to be divinized means to be filled with divinity, to be transformed and illumined from within by contact with God while we remain human.

Jesus Christ, therefore, came to the earth for our divinization. He sacramentalized his human body and blood, which contain his divine person and divine nature, so that in eating his eucharistic body, we could touch God in a physical, sacramental way and be transformed and divinized by this touch, by this contact with his divinity.

In the incarnation, the humanity of Jesus Christ was divinized, and through contact with his divinized humanity all humanity might be divinized. Thus the incarnation took place for the divinization of the human race. The human race is made a new creation by means of the incarnation, if we have faith in Jesus Christ, are saved and justified by his death, risen with him in his resurrection, and spiritually fed by him in the eucharist.

The eucharist is for the transformation of the world because it makes present the expiatory death of Jesus Christ on the cross, and puts us into physical, sacramental contact with the *divinized and divinizing* body of Jesus Christ himself.

SPECIALISTS IN CONTEMPLATION

Transfiguration of the Lord, August 6
Dan 7:9-10,13-14; Ps 96; 2 Peter 1:16-19; Mk 9:2-10

“And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them” (Mk 9:2-3).

Today Jesus allows Peter, James, and John a glimpse of his glory. The splendor which they saw in Jesus on this high mountain was normally hidden from their eyes, yet it was his true glory shining through the covering of his humanity. Jesus wanted them to have this physical glimpse of his glory to strengthen them in their faith in him.

It is the same with us. We do not always see the splendor of Jesus Christ. We simply live a life of faith and faithfulness in our following of him, trying always to do his will. But from time to time he manifests himself to us in his glory, and we experience him shining in our heart, illumining us from within. Some people only rarely experience this, while others live often in his splendor, illumined by him.

For the sake of this experience, Jesus led these three disciples “up a high mountain apart by themselves” (Mk 9:2). It was not in the midst of the crowd that they had this
vision. It was on top of a high mountain, where they went to pray (Lk 9:28). They were “by themselves,” “apart,” “alone.”

Times like these are essential for a disciple of Jesus Christ. We need to go “apart,” “by ourselves,” “alone” often, as Jesus did to be alone with his Father in prayer on a mountain at night, or in the desert very early in the morning before dawn. As a man, he needed this time alone with God. And we need to persevere in this, even when we do not experience anything special, and when we only want to sleep. By regularly doing this, Christ may frequently reveal himself to us in his glory in our heart.

For the sake of these heavenly manifestations we should also try to keep our mind free from unnecessary distractions. We should not read everything. We should have custody of our mind as well as of our eyes, and not only concerning sexual matters. This is why strict monks, like the Carthusians, do not read newspapers or watch television or movies or listen to the radio. We must have custody of our mind as well as of our eyes if we want to be contemplatives.

It is also good—if God so calls us—to go apart not only once in a while, but even to live apart, alone, on a high mountain, as specialists whose specialty is contemplation, and to do so for the enrichment of the whole Church. This is how monks try to live. But other Christians too can try to live at least something of this specialty for the spiritual enrichment of us all.

**LOSING OUR LIFE FOR CHRIST**

Friday, 18th Week of the Year
Dt 4:32-40; Ps 76; Mt 16:24-28

“For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16:25).

We are to be witnesses for Jesus Christ in this world. But giving witness to the truth in the world will mean being persecuted and rejected by the world, which does not want to hear our witness. Yet those who want to have life in Jesus Christ will give this witness and will suffer this persecution. They will lose their life in this world for the sake of Christ; but they are the ones who will find their life in him. Those who fear this rejection, and for that reason do not give the required witness, will save their life in this world and will not be persecuted, but they will lose their life with God.

Thus we see that the true Christian life is a life of the cross, a life that lives the mystery of the cross, that loves to sacrifice itself in this world for the love of God and for the love of the truth. So does Jesus Christ teach us today, saying, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mt 16:24). We are not to be ashamed of Christ and his will. We are rather to do his will before others without being ashamed of him, “For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mk 8:38). It is much better to confess him before others by doing his will and giving the witness that he wants us to
give, for “every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 10:32).

Our way of living should be our best witness, our best sermon. Our life should reflect our values, the values of Christ. Our way of life should show that we are truly losing our life in this world for the sake of Christ. It should be obvious to all that we have lost our life for Christ, that we are living a life of evangelical poverty, of prayer and renunciation of the delights of this world in order not to distract ourselves from God, so that we might live for him alone, and find our joy in him alone.

We are not to live a worldly life, one that seeks its joy in worldly things. We should rather keep custody of the eyes, and of our mind as well, not filling it with harmful, worldly images. Custody of the eyes alone is not enough. We must also keep custody over our mind, not filling it with just anything. Indeed, “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:25).

Strict monks are good examples of all this. They do not read newspapers or watch television or movies or listen to the radio, in order not to fill their minds with useless and harmful images. The simple and austere diet of the desert fathers and of the monks of St. Bernard is also an inspiration for us to live only for God in every aspect of our life; and not for the pleasures of this world. In short, we must deny ourselves and lose our life in this world for the sake of Jesus Christ if we want to save our life with him, and be his true followers.

A SURE GUIDE TO SANCTITY

Saturday, 18th Week of the Year
Dt 6:4-13; Ps 17; Mt 17:14-20

“Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Dt 6:4-5 NKJV).

This is the Shema, the great prayer of the Jews. It is also the first commandment of Jesus Christ. And it is the first commandment of every true Christian. In this commandment is the secret of a new way of living in this world. It is the secret of the saints. It is the secret of the monks of the desert, of the Desert Fathers. And it is our secret too if we wish to become saints. It shows us what we must do if we want to become saints. And what is that? It is that we should live for God alone in this world, and that we should live only for him with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength. In fact, you should be thinking about this all the time. You should talk about this “when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (Dt 6:7). This principle should be always in your mind in all you do, in every decision you make, in every activity in which you take part. Always and in everything you should ask yourself whether you will divide your heart or not if you do this or that. There are certain things—even good and innocent things—which you should never do, only because you know that if you do them, you will divide your heart, and you will no longer be living only for God in every aspect of your life, with all your heart.
Why did the monks live in the Egyptian desert in the fourth century? Why did they leave their family, their home, their comfortable life, and their good diet, to live alone in the desert with an austere diet, occupying themselves in prayer, study, reading, and silent work? It was because they wanted to live for God alone always, with all their heart, soul, and strength, in every aspect of their life, seeking all their happiness only in God, and no more in the unnecessary delights of this world. This first commandment of Jesus Christ directed them to live in this way.

Such is the life of sanctity. Religious are the ones who are the most capable of living in this way. They have renounced marriage and have left their family and friends, have renounced secular living and a secular lifestyle. They have renounced secular clothing, and have embraced a life of evangelical poverty, which means, living only for God, and renouncing everything else. Among “religious” I include here all who live celibacy for the Kingdom of God. This includes priests and societies of apostolic life, even though they are not “religious” in the technical sense. If they lived more in accord with this first commandment in every aspect of their life, they would enjoy more happiness in their state in life. This is a commandment that leads to sanctity, to union with God in the light. It is a sure guide for those who wish to become saints in this world.

FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

19th Sunday of the Year
1 Kings 19:4-5; Ps 33; Eph 4:30 – 5:2; Jn 6:41-51

“I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (Jn 6:51).

Jesus Christ is “the bread of life” (Jn 6:48), “the living bread which came down from heaven” (Jn 6:51). He is “the bread of life,” so that we might eat of it and live forever. This bread gives us eternal life. “…if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever” (Jn 6:51). “This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die” (Jn 6: 50).

This “living bread,” this “bread of life,” is the great gift that Jesus Christ has given to us so that we might have divine life in us. Christ came from God, from the bosom of the Father, to give us the life of God which does not die, so that we might live with God, even now, by eating this bread; and afterwards, in heaven, and then in the world of the resurrection when Christ comes again in glory with his holy angels on the clouds of heaven.

This new life in God begins now when we believe in Jesus Christ, whose sacrifice of himself gained all this for us. St. Paul tells us today that “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:2). It is this sacrifice of himself which saved us. He perfectly pleased his Father by his life and his sacrifice of himself on the cross, so that the Father raised him from the dead and poured out his Holy Spirit upon all who share with him a human nature, if only they believe in him as their redeemer. His gift of himself in love to the Father always pleased the Father, as he
offered himself in this way from all eternity, but when he did it this time in human flesh on the cross, the result was the salvation of all who share his human nature and believe in him.

Jesus Christ not only infinitely pleased his Father by the loving gift of himself on the cross, but he also bore our sins, and by his suffering paid our debt of suffering for our sins, so that we would not have to suffer it any more. Simply by invoking with faith the merits of his suffering, we will be justified and forgiven for all our sins, and freed from our guilt for them.

Then, rising with him in his resurrection to a new life, we are fed by him, so that we might live with God’s life in us, nevermore to die. It is this bread of life that we remember today with gratitude. Since Jesus Christ is God and man, he can let us eat his human body, which he sacramentalized for us in the form of bread. In eating his human body, we eat him, the only Son of God made man. We eat the flesh of God, and drink his blood. If God were not man in him, he would not have a body that we could eat; but being man, he can give us himself to eat. Yet being also God, we do not only eat the flesh of a man, but also the flesh of God for our life, so that we feed on God, and are nourished by God, by divine food, having his life in us in a physical and sacramental way. God gives his body and blood for the life of the world. If we eat him, we have the life of God in us.

The eucharist is our manna. In the morning we see the glory of God, as the Israelites saw the glory of God in the morning when they discovered the manna which came down with the dew and covered the face of the desert (Ex 16:13-14). In the morning we discover this bread from heaven which strengthens our spirit, so that we can walk and grow in the life of God. It is like the cake baked on hot stones in the desert, south of Beersheba, where Elijah fled to save his life. He was asleep under a broom tree when an angel awoke him and showed him the cake and a jar of water. Twice the angel awoke him and said, “Arise and eat.” And twice Elijah ate of this heavenly bread, “and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God” (1 Kings 19:8).

The eucharist is our bread from heaven, our “bread of life,” our “living bread,” which Jesus Christ gives to those who believe in him and are justified and saved by his sacrifice. He gives us this bread to strengthen us in our new life, and to fill us with himself for our divinization and sanctification. With this bread we continue to offer his one and only sacrifice of himself on the cross to the Father, the perfect sacrifice of the New Testament, in which is our salvation. It is this sacrifice which propitiated the Father, infinitely pleasing him, and winning thereby our salvation. At the same time this sacrifice also paid our debt of suffering for all our sins, so that we could go free, forgiven and saved by our faith in him.
“He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world, will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:25).

This verse from today’s Gospel describes a whole orientation of life. It is the orientation of the saints. The saints are those who hate their life in this world. They are those who have renounced the life lived according to the desires of the flesh, the desires for the pleasures of this life. They have renounced the entertainments and diversions of this world. All of this was the life of the old man. The new man is the regenerate man, born again in Jesus Christ, who now seeks the things that are above, and no longer the unnecessary pleasures of this world (Col 3:1-2). This is because “if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live” (Rom 8:13). Living according to the flesh is not limited only to great or sexual sins, but includes all the works of the unregenerate old man, all seeking after unnecessary pleasures in the things of this world.

The ideal is to hate our life in this world; not to love it. He who loves his life in this world is one who loves, seeks, and takes part in these diversions. The one who lives like this will lose his life with God. He divides his heart, and does not love God with all his heart and all his soul. But how many live this way? The majority, no doubt! We should not live like the majority if we want to be saints. We are not to be lovers of the world. “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him” (1 Jn 2:15).

We are, rather to renounce the world if we want to be saints. We should even hate our life in this world, renouncing the world, its pleasures, and its lifestyle. “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). A friend of the world cannot love God. He who loves his life in this world cannot love God as he should. He rather loves himself—and in the wrong way—and the pleasures of his body. He lives “according to the flesh,” and “will die” as far as God is concerned (Rom 8:13).

But the one who has risen with Christ is different. He lives for God; and because he wants to love God with all his heart, he renounces the world and its unnecessary pleasures. He “hates his life in this world,” to keep it with God (Jn 12:25). He seeks only the things that are above; and not those of the earth (Col 3:1-2). He loses everything for Christ (Phil 3:8), and considers it all as rubbish, in order to gain Christ (Phil 3:8). He puts “to death the deeds of the body,” and so will live (Rom 8:13). He has “crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24). He does not follow the majority, nor does he imitate their lifestyle, their behavior, or their approach to life in general. This is the one who will save his life, and become a saint.
THE IMPORTANCE OF FORGIVENESS

Thursday, 19th Week of the Year
Joshua 3:7-10,11,13-17; Ps 113; Mt 18:21 – 19:1

“Then his lord summoned him and said to him, You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” (Mt 18:32-33).

This is the parable about the servant who was forgiven by the king for an enormous debt of ten thousand talents because he prostrated himself and begged forgiveness. But when that servant went out, he refused to pardon the debt of a fellow servant who owed him only a hundred denarii. For not having pardoned the debt of his fellow servant, the king handed his servant over to the jailers until he pay back in full. The moral is: “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Mt 18:35).

We need to be aware of the great mercy of God towards us in forgiving our sins. It is a very great debt that we have with God, yet he always forgives us, even “seventy times seven” times (Mt 18:22) if we ask him. We, therefore, should treat our fellow servants in the same way when they offend us by their words or actions. We may rebuke them, but if they repent, we must forgive them, and not just once, but even seven times a day, for Jesus said, “if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, I repent, you must forgive him” (Lk 17:3-4).

If we are honest with ourselves, surely we will admit that we have to ask God’s forgiveness almost every day, and often more than once a day. We do something wrong, and we feel bad about it and guilty. Our peace is disturbed. Our conscience accuses us. But we know that we can always ask forgiveness, and if we ask, especially in the sacrament of reconciliation, God will give it to us, and our peace will be restored. So are we then to treat others, always forgiving them their words which hurt us or their actions which annoy us. If we refuse, God will also refuse to forgive us. “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Mt 6:14-15).

We cannot be happy without God’s forgiveness. But after confessing our sins and receiving his absolution, what great peace we feel! How great is the happiness that fills our heart! As God’s forgiveness is such a great thing in our life, so also should be our readiness to forgive others when they injure us with their words, or annoy us with their actions.
“For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it” (Mt 19:12).

This is an important Biblical text for celibacy. Jesus says here that there are those who do not marry for the sake of the Kingdom of God, that is, they have made themselves eunuchs in a figurative sense by not marrying. So we see that the Kingdom of God can be a legitimate and good motive for renouncing marriage. One renounces marriage and family in order to dedicate himself more exclusively to God and to the Kingdom of God, to a life of prayer, solitude, renunciation of the world, silence, sacrifice, fasting, and ministry. One can do all these important things *better* if he does not have a wife and family. Jesus, therefore, blesses *more* the one who “has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God.” He will “receive manifold *more* in this time, and in the age to come eternal life” (Lk 18:29-30).

The celibate can better serve only one master (Mt 6:24). His heart can remain integral in its love for God, without the division of a human love. He can better renounce the pleasures of this world, and live only for God with all his heart, all his soul, all his mind, and all his strength (Mk 12:30). And this is the most important thing. It is the first commandment.

St. Paul therefore writes, “It is well for a man not to touch a woman” (1 Cor 7:1), and “I wish that all were as I myself am,” that is, celibate (1 Cor 7:7). He also said, “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do” (1 Cor 7:8). And about virgins he says, “So he who marries his virgin does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better” (1 Cor 7:38). Concerning widows, he says that they are free to marry again, “But in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is” (1 Cor 7:39-40).

Finally, St. Paul says, “The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and he is divided” (1 Cor 7:32-34). Celibacy better enables us to live only for the Lord, without being divided. The celibate has a life of greater silence and solitude for God, and for spiritual reading and prayer. Without a family, he can remain in much silence, and live a simpler and more austere life, only for God, far and more separated from the world, from television, movies, secular music, and other invasions of the world, which distract and divide the heart. As a result, the celibate, dedicated in this way more exclusively to God and to his Kingdom, can also better exercise the ministry of preaching the word of salvation in Jesus Christ.
THE NUPTIAL LOVE OF THE VIRGIN MARY

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, August 15
Rev 1:19; 12:1-6,10; Ps 44; 1 Cor 15:20-27; Lc 1:39-56

“And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars (Rev 12:1).

Today we celebrate the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven. After her death, she was assumed body and soul into heaven as a special privilege because she was the Mother of God. This text of the Apocalypse has traditionally been understood as a description of her in her glory after her assumption. She is a beautiful and glorious woman, “clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (Rev 12:1). She is beautiful, the bride of God himself. She is “terrible as an army with banners” (Ct 6:4). She is the fulfillment of the bride of the Song of Songs, and her bridegroom is God. In this, she is a type and example for us all—human beings who can have a nuptial relationship with God. Jesus Christ has united us to God, and now we are like his bride. We see in the Virgin Mary our own ideal relationship with God, and all this is described symbolically in the Song of Songs. The bridegroom is God; we are the bride, and so also, and in the most perfect sense, is the Virgin Mary. As we marvel at her beauty and at the beauty of her relationship with God, we are inspired to develop a similar relationship.

Hence, filled with admiration, we say, “Who is this that looks forth like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army with banners?” (Ct 6:10). Her great beauty, which shines in heaven, comes from her loving relationship with God. His love beautifies her. She lives alone with this great love of her heart. She lives in a desert of solitude with him, reclining upon him. “Who is this,” we say, “that is coming up from the desert, leaning upon her beloved?” (Ct 8:5). It is the Virgin Mary, all perfumed with the love of God. Truly, “What is that coming up from the desert, like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of the merchant?” (Ct 3:6). It is the Virgin Mary coming up from her contemplation, all perfumed with the fragrance of God.

Thus does the love of God beautify us. It gives us the odor of sanctity; and the desert is the place *par excellence* for this loving encounter with God. This is why the desert, with its solitude and silence, has always been the favorite place of monks in their desire to live in the love of God. And the Virgin Mary, in her solitude with God, wrapped up in his love, is their model. We too can be all perfumed with the fragrance of God, the odor of sanctity, alone with him in contemplation in the desert. This is because our bridegroom is “like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices” (Ct 8:14). He communicates his fragrance to us, and we exhale perfume. “Like cinnamon and camel’s thorn,” we say with her, “I exhaled the aroma of spices, and like choice myrrh I spread a pleasant odor” (Sir 24:15). She is all perfumed with the aroma of her contemplation in solitude. She is “like the fragrance of frankincense in the tabernacle” (Sir 24:15), and her “blossoms became glorious and abundant fruit” (Sir 24:17). So she says to us, “Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits. For the remembrance of me is sweeter than honey, and my inheritance sweeter than the honeycomb” (Sir 24:19-20). She is the great model of a person who is full of God, made
resplendent by his love. Hence in this great love, she “grew tall like a cedar in Lebanon, and like a cypress on the heights of Hermon.” She “grew tall like a palm tree in Engedi, and like the rose plants in Jericho” (Sir 24:13-14).

She has her secret hideaway in a forest of aromatic trees (Ct 4:6), with beams of cedar and rafters of cypress (Ct 1:16), and she sleeps on a bed of flowers (Ct 1:16), with her beloved like a bag of myrrh lying between her breasts (Ct 1:13). Her beloved goes to this hideaway to be alone with her in love, and he says, “Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will hie me to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense” (Ct 4:6).

He is for her “As an apple tree among the trees of the wood” (Ct 2:3), and she eats raisins and is refreshed with apples, for she is sick with love (Ct 2:5), and the scent of her breath is like apples (Ct 7:8). She lives in remote places, to be alone with the beloved of her heart. And he calls to her to “Depart from the peak of Amana, from the peak of Senir and Hermon, from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards” (Ct 4:8). Because she lives in these remote forest hideaways, the scent of her garments is like the scent of Lebanon (Ct 4:11). She also has a cabin, where “The mandrakes give forth fragrance,” and she says, “over our doors are all choice fruits” (Ct 7:13).

So lives the Blessed Virgin Mary with the beloved of her heart; and so should we also live.

THE EUCHARISTIC BREAD GIVES LIFE TO OUR SOUL

20th Sunday of the Year
Pro 9:1-6; Ps 33; Eph 5:15-20; Jn 6:51-58

“As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me” (Jn 6:57).

We are saved through Jesus Christ. He gives us new life. He renews us interiorly, filling us with his own divine life, which is the life of his divine person, contained within a human nature, and then sacramentalized in the form of bread and wine. In this way we can truly eat his flesh and drink his blood, and thus have within us the life of God, which transforms us. Eating his body unites us to God. It puts God into us, and us into God. Jesus unites us to God because Jesus Christ is in the Father and the Father in him by nature, for they share the same nature, the same divine being. And through the eucharistic bread which we eat, the same Jesus Christ is also in us, and we are in him. Since Jesus is one with the Father, and now, through the eucharist, is also one with us, he becomes the link which unites us to God. Thus by receiving communion with faith, we are united to God. “In that day,” said Jesus, “you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (Jn 14:20).

It is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which saves and justifies us. It is the sacrifice of his death on the cross which infinitely pleased the Father, and which paid our debt of suffering in punishment for our sins and for the sin of Adam. And it is in his resurrection that, once we have been forgiven and justified by his death, we rise in him and with him to a new and risen life. But in this new and risen life, we grow in sanctity
through our union with the Father by means of our union with Jesus Christ. And this union takes place above all, through the eucharist.

Through the eucharist, we live through Jesus Christ, that is, we draw life from him, or we live by means of him, or from him, or because of him, just as he lives through the Father, or because of the Father, or by means of the Father, or from the Father, drawing his life from the Father. Thus we draw life through Jesus Christ. “As the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me” (Jn 6:57). This is the way God chose and gave to us so that we might have divine life in us. In this way Jesus Christ gives us new life and shines in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6). We will live through him. Because he lives, we live. We live because of him. “Yet a little while,” Jesus said, “and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also” (Jn 14:19). We live because he lives. He is our life. As he lives from his Father, so we live from him. “...he who eats me will live because of me” (Jn 6:57) “as...I live because of the Father” (Jn 6:57). We live through Christ or because of Christ by eating his eucharistic flesh, which is his flesh sacramentalized for us in the form of bread. Such is the plan of God to unite man with God. “God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him” (1 Jn 4:9). And we live through him by receiving him in holy communion.

If we do not receive the eucharist, we will not have his life in us, and we will not grow in sanctity, nor be made truly new creatures, really justified by Jesus Christ. “Truly, truly, I say to you, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (Jn 6:53). We are truly made righteous and new, and really justified—not just declared righteous—because we eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus Christ. Those who have not had this experience, that is, those who do not receive the eucharist, do not have the fullness of Christ’s life in them, for “if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of man...you have no life in you” (Jn 6:53). True justification and transformation is dependent on receiving Christ sacramentally in the eucharist.

The flesh of Christ is real food, and it gives us the life of God, and unites us with God, for it unites us with his Son. “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (Jn 6:56). So if we want to grow in Christ and in holiness, the means to do so is the eucharist. “For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed” (Jn 6:55). And “he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” (Jn 6:54).

In the eucharistic sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Mass, we offer with Christ to the Father the sacrifice which justifies, us, which perfectly pleased the Father, and which paid our debt of suffering in punishment for our sins. And in holy communion we eat the eucharistic Christ so that his divine life be in us, and we be truly changed, really made righteous, and sanctified. If we want to grow in Christ, in the life of God, and in our union with God, the way is to frequently—even daily—celebrate and receive the eucharist.
THE CALL TO PERFECTION

Monday, 20th Week of the Year
Judges 2:11-19; Ps 105; Mt 19:16-22

“Jesus said to him, If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mt 19:21).

This is the great call to perfection. We can be perfect by renouncing all else of this world for the sake of Jesus Christ in order to follow him with all our time, energy, mind, soul, heart, and strength” (Mk 12:30). This call to perfection is directed to all (Lk 14:33; Mt 5:48), although here it is directed to this rich young man. Depending on one’s state in life, one can answer this call in a more, or less radical way. In this case, this rich young man is invited literally to leave all and unite himself to the band of apostles and follow Jesus wherever he went in order to preach the Gospel. He refused this call because he found it too difficult. In reaction, Jesus said, “it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven … it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 19:23-24).

And what does this mean for us? If, for example, our work is writing, does this mean that we have to live without clothing, without a desk, without a chair and lamp, without books, and without a computer? I do not believe this is necessary. But then what is the meaning of this scripture for us? It is a call to perfection that few want to hear or follow. It means that we are to serve God completely. We may have all the tools necessary for our profession and work, but outside of that, we are to live a life of radical poverty. St. Maximilian Kolbe is a good example of this. He had all the proper tools of his profession as a writer, printer, and publisher. He had large machines, but he and his religious companions lived in great simplicity, eating very simply off tin plates, on a simple table, and dressing in Franciscan habits. Their neighbors were shocked at the simplicity and poverty of their life.

So should be our life too if we want to live a life of perfection, a life for God alone in every aspect. Truly, there are few, even among religious, who follow this call to perfection, for it is difficult, and the sacrifices required are real. It is a call to change our style of life, of dressing, of eating, and of spending our free time. Instead of spending our free time in worldly pastimes, we now use this precious time for the Lord. Instead of dressing in a worldly way, if we are priests or religious, we dress religiously. Instead of taking pleasure trips, we practice stability and sobriety. Instead of eating delicacies, we eat simple, plain, austere food for the love of God. This is how we should respond to Jesus’ call to perfection, and so live for God alone with all our heart, mind, and soul. This is the narrow path of the few that leads to life, not the easy path of the many that leads to destruction (Mt 7:13-14). Let us be among the few that choose it.
CONTEMPLATING THE GLORY OF GOD

Memorial of St. Bernard, August 20
Sir 15:1-6; Ps 118; Jn 17:20-26

“The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one” (Jn 7:22).

Today we celebrate St. Bernard, the second founder of the Cistercian Order. This monastic order was founded in 1098 by Robert of Molesme, Alberic, and Stephen Harding in Citeaux, France. Their life was so strict and austere that their greatest worry and fear was that they would never get any new recruits, for although their neighbors admired them for their piety, they were horrified at their way of life. Their problem, however, was solved when one day there appeared at the gates of the monastery, Bernard, with his four brothers and twenty-seven other friends, all seeking to enter as novices. Bernard came to be the abbot of a new foundation in Clairvaux, France, and became a great preacher and writer of the love of God. Today’s Gospel describes well his spirit of love for God.

Christ gave us his glory, which is the same glory which the Father gave to him. He lives in this glory. He wants us also to live in this same glory. It is the glory of the love of God in our heart, which we have through Jesus Christ. The same love with which the Father loves the Son from all eternity is now also in us through Jesus Christ. The Father loves us as he loves his only Son. This is why the Father sent Jesus Christ into the world—so that the love which the Father has for the Son might be also in us. Jesus prayed to his Father, saying, “I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them” (Jn 17:26). It is a Trinitarian love, the love which exists within the Blessed Trinity. We now have, through Jesus Christ, a participation in this divine love which flows eternally between the Father and the Son.

It is Jesus Christ who communicates this love to us, especially in the eucharist. He comes to live in our heart through his body and blood which we eat and drink. Then, in contemplative prayer, he deepens this love in our soul. He himself comes to live in us, bringing us the love of the Father (Jn 14:23). He who is one with his Father comes to be one with us. He unites himself to us in the eucharist, and so we are united at the same time with the Father (Jn 14:20).

In contemplative prayer we see his glory, the glory which the Father has given him, and this glory also shines in us, illuminating us from within. St. Bernard lived for this glory. This is why he became a monk, leaving behind everything else to live for and in this glory. Hence he lived a life of silence within an enclosure, dedicating himself to singing the praises of God in the monastic choir, and living the cloistered life, when he was not on one of his many preaching missions throughout Europe. The austerity of this life energized his spirit, for it purified him for God, for the contemplation of his glory. Living for God alone, he lived in his love and wrote of the divine love which filled his heart.

St. Bernard is an example for us all. Everyone can live in the love of God and dedicate himself to contemplating his glory. Christ gave us this glory so that we might contemplate it and thus grow in his image (2 Cor 3:18). “The glory which thou hast
given me,” said Jesus, “I have given to them” (Jn 17:22). And, “Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me” (Jn 17:24). To behold his glory is to contemplate it. The contemplative life, which is the monastic life, is dedicated to contemplating God’s glory. And we have seen this glory through Jesus Christ. “And the word became flesh,” says St. John, “and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (Jn 1:14). We live for this vision of his glory. We renounce everything else, as did St. Bernard, to see and contemplate this glory, to live in this glory. And it is by means of Jesus Christ that we receive this glory, this fullness of God—especially when we receive him in Holy Communion. “And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace,” as St. John affirms (Jn 1:16). And this fullness, this glory, transforms us as we contemplate it. “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor 3:18 KJV).

THE WAY OF THE FEW

Friday, 20th Week of the Year
Ruth 1:1,3-8,14-16,22; Ps 145; Mt 22:34-40

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment” (Mt 22:36-38).

This is the first commandment of Jesus Christ. It is the most important thing in the world for a Christian. After being saved by our faith in Christ, we should concentrate on this first commandment.

The first commandment is connected with the ideal of evangelical poverty. By practicing evangelical poverty we love God with all our heart, soul, and mind—that is, with all our resources, with our whole being. This is why the poor are the ones Jesus pronounces blessed (Lk 6:20), especially the poor in spirit (Mt 5:3). It is because they live only for God. They are the anawim, the poor of the Lord, who are truly happy and blessed. They are blessed because their heart has been purified of other things, of idols, of other gods, of foreign and false gods, and they now live only for the Lord with all their heart, poor in this world. They live for God in simplicity and plainness, a simple, basic life without adornment.

This first commandment is also related to fasting. One who eats delicacies and sumptuous food has already divided his heart and already had his reward in this present life. Better by far is a life of prayer and fasting in the desert, far from the world with its delights and pleasures. The monastic life is such a life in the desert, lived only for God, a life of sacrifice and of the renunciation of the world for the sake of the delights of the spirit and of the new creation. This is why monks fast and live in the desert. It is because they want to purify their heart and focus themselves only on God. They want to fulfill the first commandment and love God with all their strength, without division of heart. They do not want to hear from Abraham what the rich glutton Dives heard when he
arrived in hell after having “feasted sumptuously every day” (Lk 16:19). Abraham said to him, ‘Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things” (Lk 16:25). We need to pay attention to Jesus’ words when he said, “woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation (Lk 6:24).

If we pay heed to the first commandment and live it well, we will be able to avoid the condemnation of those who have already had their reward in the good things of this present life. To love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind, means not to divide our heart among the pleasures of this world, but rather to live as the blessed poor in spirit. Hence many have chosen to live a life of prayer and fasting in the desert, far from the world and its pleasures.

But how many live according to this ideal? Very few, even among religious, for this is the narrow way of the few that leads to life, not the wide and comfortable way of the many that leads to destruction (Mt 7:13-14). May we be among the few who find it.

A KINGDOM OF PEACE
Queenship of Mary, August 22
Is 9:1-3,5-6; Ps 112; Lk 1:26-38

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:31-33).

The Virgin Mary, whom we honor today as Queen, gave birth to a son to whom would be given the throne of his father David. “…he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:32-33). This is the Messianic kingdom which he has inaugurated and in which we now live. When he was born, the people who walked in darkness saw a great light; and on those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, light shined (Is 9:2).

The Virgin Mary is Queen because she is the mother of this great King who has an eternal kingdom of light and peace upon the earth. His birth gave glory to God in the highest, and brought peace on earth. Through him we can all be born anew as new men (Eph 2:22-24) in a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Rev 21:5). And this Queen is our mother, for we have been made adopted sons of God in her son. If he is King over the whole earth, bringing it peace and joy, she is its Queen, shining in his light.

If we want peace, we should take refuge in him, for he brought peace on earth in his birth and is the Prince of Peace. “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom” (Is 9:7). Who does not want peace in his heart, peace in his life? For this he came to the earth—to establish a kingdom of universal peace for all who believe in him, take refuge in him in their problems, and obey and serve him with all their heart. He is the Prince of Peace. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you,” he said; “not as the world gives do I give to you” (Jn 14:27). His peace is an interior peace, in the depths of the spirit. It is a divine presence in us which gives us joy. It is the presence of Christ shining in our heart, illuminating it (2 Cor 4:6). “…justified by faith, we have peace with God through our
Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1). We can live in this peace of his kingdom over all the earth. “I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). This is why we take refuge in him in our tribulation in this world, and he restores our peace.

The Queen of this peace is Mary. If we live in peace with Christ, we also live with her in her peace and joy in the Lord.

How important it is for us to live in this kingdom of universal peace with the Prince of Peace! It is a kingdom of light which shines in us also. If we lose this peace, and if we take refuge in him, in his due time he will restore us again and will give us even more peace than before. In him, indeed, is our peace.

THE EUCHARIST, FOOD FOR OUR SOUL

21st Sunday of the Year
Joshua 24:1-2,15-17,18; Ps 33; Eph 5:21-32; Jn 6:60-69

“After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him” (Jn 6:66).

Jesus just finished explaining the eucharist, that is, that his disciples would eat his flesh and drink his blood. The result of his discourse was that “after this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him” (Jn 6:66). So it also is today. The eucharist causes divisions among those who believe in Christ. Not every Christian believes that we really eat Jesus’ flesh and drink his blood in the eucharist.

When I was younger and heard this passage, I always wondered why Jesus didn’t explain this matter more clearly, namely, that they were not to eat his flesh in the way they were thinking, but rather in eucharistic form, that is, his flesh was going to be sacramentalized in the form of bread; and they were going to drink his blood sacramentalized in the form of wine, and not in the way they were imagining.

But I no longer think like that. Do you really think that such an explanation would have helped them to accept his teaching? Do you really think that it is easier to believe that Jesus Christ is God, being his only Son made man, and that he came to earth in incarnate form as a man to expiate our sins and to unite us to God by means of his death, and that he would then rise from the dead so that we who believe in him might rise with him, made new by him, with our sins forgiven? Would it be easier to believe that he then wanted to feed us spiritually with his flesh and blood, which contain his divine person and divine life? Is it easier to believe that he had the power to sacramentalize his real human flesh in the form of bread which we could eat, with the result that we would have God’s life physically and sacramentally in us to transform us more and more into Christ, into his image? Truly, I now believe that this explanation is harder to believe, understand, and accept than the discourse that he actually gave.

The eucharist is a difficult doctrine to believe, and many Christians today, who believe in Jesus Christ for their salvation, do not believe that the eucharist is really his body and blood. Therefore, when Jesus explained something of this mystery, he lost many disciples. What might he have done in order not to have lost them? If he had not
spoken about the eucharist, he would not have lost these disciples; but Jesus did not choose this course of action. It was necessary to preach the whole truth of God step by step. It is the same with us his followers. We cannot be silent about the eucharist for fear of losing disciples, or for fear of offending those who do not believe that the eucharist is really the body and blood of Christ. So it is unavoidable that we will lose followers, that we will lose those who hear and read our sermons if we speak of the eucharist. But the truth will win out in the end, and we will be blessed for having given witness to it.

Our salvation from sin is in Jesus Christ. But there is more in the Gospel than that. The eucharist enables us to grow in holiness, in the life of God in our heart. We need this spiritual food. We cannot live and grow in Christ without this sacramental food. “If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (Jn 6:53). But “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (Jn 6:56). This is what we want. We want him to remain in us, and we in him. He is our peace. Through the eucharist he remains in us, and we in him, as he says; and he gives us the peace we long for. He himself is our peace.

Many today are interested in contemplative prayer, centering prayer, an intimate form of prayer without ideas or words, which fills us with divine love and heavenly peace. The eucharist is a great aid to advance in this type of prayer. We can have our best experiences of contemplative prayer if we practice it immediately after receiving Holy Communion. This has certainly been my experience.

We eat the divinity of Jesus Christ the Son of God when we receive Holy Communion. It is a true communion with God in our interior. It fills us with God. It fills us with his light and peace. It strengthens us for the whole Christian life and for all our work for the Lord. It even makes us want to suffer with and for Christ, to give our life for him.

We are regenerated by our faith in Jesus Christ; and the eucharist is the food of the new man, of the new creation, of the new creature which we now are. As a new-born baby cannot grow without food, so we who are born again in Jesus Christ cannot grow without the eucharist.

THE NEW JERUSALEM

Feast of St. Bartholomew, August 24
Rev 21:9-14; Ps 144; Jn 1:45-51

“And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal” (Rev 21:10-11).

This is the vision of the New Jerusalem, the city of gold and light, the city of splendor, diaphanous as crystal. It is the city of our spirit. It is our future, for it is the heavenly city to which we are headed, the city of those who are saved in Jesus Christ. But we can live in this city even now in spirit if we are saved in Christ and are contemplatives. It is a city of light and peace, the light and peace which we have in God through our faith. By faith we are justified and made resplendent with the splendor of
Christ himself, and the dwelling place of our spirit is with him in this city, diaphanous as crystal. We are illuminated by him like a rock crystal, pierced by a ray of sunlight at midday.

This city is overwhelmingly beautiful. “The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass” (Rev 21:18). “And the twelve gates were twelve pearls … and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass” (Rev 21:21). This is our ideal, to live in this city of splendor and light, “diaphanous as crystal” (Rev 21:11). The saints live there now much of their time, even in this life, for Christ illuminates them from within (2 Cor 4:6), and they walk in his light (Jn 8:12). It is Christ who is for us the light that shines in the darkness of this world (Jn 1:5). In his incarnation we have seen his glory, “glory as the only Son from the Father” (Jn 1:14). And because he illuminates us, we receive from his fullness grace upon grace (Jn 1:16). We walk in his light (Jn 8:12).

This city, this dwelling place of our spirit both now and in the future, is illuminated by God himself and by the Lamb (Rev 21, 23). Its splendor does not come from the sun, but from the Lord. God and the Lamb are our lights that shine in our hearts in this city, illuminating us from within with a light not of this world and putting us in a splendor which is not from here below. It is our contemplation which illuminates us, for that is when God shines most powerfully within us.

This is why we love solitude—to bask in this splendor and not lose it by talking. Our mornings can be luminous if we bask in this light in solitude. It is Jesus Christ who clothes us with his own splendor when we believe in him and live for him alone.

This city has great attraction, and “By its lights shall the nations walk” (Rev 21:24).

We can live more and more in this light, in this city of splendor, through our faith and through contemplation in silence and solitude far from the world and its distractions and noise. This is why many have sought out a solitary life in the desert or in the mountains—to live only for and with Christ and to walk in his light.

If we are citizens of this city, we can attract others too, to enjoy its light with us through their faith and life of prayer. Those who live in this city becomes lights for the rest, beacons shining in the darkness, showing the way (Phil 2:15; Mt 5:14-16).

A solitary life can be a luminous life much of the time if we live in Jesus Christ in silence and prayer, in fasting and simplicity, in poverty and service to others.

And when our life in this world comes to an end, if we are saved by Christ, we go to this heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, to live there in a far more complete way than now. And finally, when Christ comes in his glory, it will be in the New Jerusalem that we will all live together in splendor with our glorified bodies.

BE BLAMELESS IN HOLINESS

Thursday, 21st Week of the Year
1 Thess 3:7-13; Ps 89; Mt 24:42-51

“Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (Mt 24:42).
We have now arrived at that time of year when our attention begins to turn toward the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in glory. There will be many references to this in this final part of the liturgical year at the end of summer and in the days of autumn. This occurs during harvest time, and then when all nature is dying. Our thoughts then turn toward our death and the eternal life of the elect that follows. We also think at this time of harvest, of the final harvest of the earth and of the parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven in great power and glory.

Jesus tells us today, “Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (Mt 24:42). Truly, we know neither the day nor the hour of his coming, and so did Jesus wish it to be, so that we would always be expecting it and always be preparing ourselves, being ever vigilant. It is the same with the hour of our death. We do not know it, and so we must always be preparing ourselves for it.

We are, therefore, to live a vigilant, not a negligent life, using our time well in prayer, vigils, fasting, spiritual study, spiritual reading and writing, and work in the service of others. So does Christ wish us always to live, thinking that his parousia will occur in our own day. We are to live in constant hope of his glorious coming, preparing and sanctifying ourselves ever more each day.

In the first reading, St. Paul prays that God “may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thess 3:13). Jesus Christ justifies us through our faith, but we have to work for our sanctification. The second coming of the Lord inspires and motivates us to sanctify ourselves. It is our great desire that we be “blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thess 3:13). What a day of glory that will be, when Jesus Christ comes with all his saints in great light! We live for that day. We meditate on it, and as we picture it for ourselves, we are filled with holy desires and joy, longing for its coming. It moves us to live for him alone in this world.

Today is also the memorial of St. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine, and we read the conversation which St. Augustine had with her just before she died. They spoke of what the eternal life will be like which we will have with all the saints after this life, and he says that their hearts were filled with desire to enter into that joy. He says, moreover, that as they conversed, “the world and its pleasures lost all their attraction for us” (Breviary). And so it also is with us when we focus on the joys of heaven and on the glory which we will see at the coming of the Lord in great light with all his saints. We already begin to experience that glory. Let us, therefore, leave aside the pleasures of this world, and live for him alone in joyful expectation and eager preparation.
“But at midnight there was a cry, Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him” (Mt 25:6).

We are now in the time of expectation with the ten virgins. We are awaiting the coming of the bridegroom, who can come at any time, and we do not know the hour or the day of his coming. Therefore we have to be always vigilant like these virgins. And when at last he comes, if we are prepared, we will enter with him into the joy of the wedding, the consummation of all things.

But not all of these virgins were wise. Not all carried flasks of oil along with their lamps. The oil is our good works for our sanctification. In order for our justification by faith to be valid and real, it has to manifest itself in good works. If it does not, it is not true justification by faith. Five of these virgins were shut out of the wedding because they lacked oil, that is, preparation through their own good works. Their lack of preparation shows that they were not really justified; and so they were excluded.

Hence, we learn that we must do all that is necessary to grow in holiness through a life of good works. We must cooperate with the grace of God and sanctify ourselves, that is, live a good and holy life, not a life that is choked, divided, dissipated, and weighed down “by the cares and riches and pleasures of life” (Lk 8:14). “Watch therefore,” says the Lord, “for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Mt 25:13).

Now then is the time for vigilance. We can sleep—even the wise virgins slept—but we must be prepared as they were. When the bridegroom comes, if we are not prepared, there will be no time to buy oil. The door will be shut in our faces. Only now do we still have time to prepare ourselves. We will be prepared if we are always vigilant, and do not let ourselves be weighed down with dissipation and sleep.

“But take heed to yourselves,” said Jesus, “lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare; for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole earth” (Lk 21:34-35).

We will see that day of the coming of the bridegroom—whether we are in this life or the next—but only if we are prepared will we rejoice in it. Those who are dissipated will not enter into the joy of their master (Mt 25:23). That day will be a snare for them. They will be like the seeds planted amid thorns. “…as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature” (Lk 8:14). So “Take heed, watch and pray,” says the Lord; “for you do not know when the time will come” (Mk 13:33). We do not need to know the hour, but we do need to be prepared and vigilant at all times. “But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man” (Lk 21:36).
PERSECUTION AND MARTYRDOM

Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist, August 29
Jer 1:17-19; Ps 70; Mk 6:17-29

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:10).

Persecution for righteousness’ sake is a reality of the Christian life. All those who want to serve Jesus Christ and do the will of God will suffer persecution (2 Tim 3:12). Jesus was persecuted, John the Baptist, whose martyrdom we celebrate today, suffered persecution, and Jesus’ disciples were persecuted. It is impossible to live faithfully as a Christian and not suffer persecution (2 Tim 3:12). Those who live for God will always be few in this world, and the world will not accept them or their behavior.

But the good news is that persecution sanctifies us. We are blessed, Jesus tells us, if we suffer persecution. It assimilates us to Jesus Christ on the cross. Persecution helps us to renounce the world. It separates us from the world, and this separation sanctifies us. Being persecuted in this world, to where shall we turn for our happiness, but to God alone? We lose the happiness of the world and of this life in being persecuted. We were persecuted in the first place for living only for God and for doing his will. And so we lost the happiness of this world, with the result that we live more than ever for God alone, and so we grow in holiness. We become ever more like the anawim who have nothing but God, and who find their happiness only in him. So the kingdom of God is ours for having suffered persecution for our faith. Martyrdom itself sanctified all the martyrs, beginning with John the Baptist, and we honor them all as saints. There are saints, like Ignatius of Antioch, who thirsted for martyrdom to assimilate themselves to Christ and live only for him and for doing his will, to the point of losing this world and this life altogether.

A martyr is a person of courage. He lives for the faith and for the truth, and does not refuse to die for the truth. He does not refuse to suffer for his testimony to the truth. He even accepts being hated by all for the sake of Christ, for the truth, and for doing the will of God (Mt 10:22). He even rejoices when he is persecuted (Acts 5:41; 1 Peter 4:13; Mt 5:12). He is not afraid of his persecutors because his only concern is God and his will. He therefore accepts persecution and even rejoices in his heart when he is persecuted for doing the will of God. He knows that God is directing his life, and that his direction includes even this, and so he can therefore even rejoice in being persecuted for the sake of Christ and for doing his will. The more he is stripped of this world the better, for then he will cling all the more to God alone. Knowing all this, he loses his fear of being persecuted and lives more and more according to the truth and to the will of God, despite what the world thinks of him or does to him. He thus grows in the spirit of martyrdom and in holiness, conforming himself ever more to Christ and to the pattern of his life and death on the cross.
SANCTIFIED BY THE LAW

22nd Sunday of the Year
Dt 4:1-2,6-8; Ps 14; James 1:17-18,21-22,27; Mk 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

“And the Pharisees and scribes asked him, Why do your disciples not live according to the traditions of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?’” (Mk 7:5).

We see here that Jesus and his disciples do not follow the various traditions which the Pharisees added on to the law of Moses. We also see that as the Messiah, Jesus is superior to the Mosaic law and can and does abrogate its ceremonial aspect (not its moral part; not the Ten Commandments). He abrogated the Jewish dietary laws, which were part of the Mosaic law, when he said, “there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him” (Mk 7:15). And St. Mark tells us, “Thus he declared all foods clean” (Mk 7:19).

It is clear throughout the New Testament that it is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ which justify us and not our observance of the law, whether ceremonial or moral. We do not have the power to justify ourselves before God by our own good works according to the law. It is too difficult, and no one has ever been able to do so. What justifies us is the obedient life of Jesus Christ. His obedience is counted as justice for us. It is imputed to us as though it were our own obedience. And still more, his death on the cross is the punishment from God that we owe because of our sins. His suffering is also imputed to us as though it were we who had suffered it. In this way the law is fulfilled for us by Jesus Christ. He fulfills it for us both positively and negatively: positively, by his obedient life; and negatively, by his death, suffered in order to fulfill the punishment required by the law for our sins. So then, by believing in him, we are justified—that is, made righteous before God. And this is not through our observance of the law, but through his observance of the law in his life and in his death. So, therefore, we are justified, forgiven, and filled with grace not by our observance of the law, but by his observance of the law. Thus do we uphold the law (Rom 3:31) and its importance, and we also uphold faith in the works of Christ, who fulfilled the law for us.

When we say that we are justified by our faith, we do not mean that our faith is such a great virtue that God rewards and justifies us for having so much faith. Rather, we mean that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ justify us and fulfill the law for us. It is our faith which believes this, and in believing it, receives its fruit, which is our justification.

So, neither the ceremonial nor the moral law justifies us—that is, our observance of the law does not justify us. So then, what meaning does the moral law have for us if it does not justify us? Jesus did not abrogate the moral law, yet at the same time our observance of the moral law does not justify us. So what is its meaning for us? Its meaning is that it is involved in our sanctification, once we have been justified by Jesus fulfilling the moral law for us in his life, death, and resurrection. Then, once we are already justified, forgiven, and made resplendent before God by our faith in Jesus Christ, we are to advance and grow in holiness by our observance of the moral law. As Christians, Christ has freed us from the ceremonial law, that is, the washing of hands, pots, jars, not eating pork, and the like, but we still have to study and follow all the
details of the Ten Commandments (the moral law), not for our justification, but for our sanctification.

How important, then, is the moral law for a Christian! The following words are directed as much to us the new Israel, as they were to the original Israel: “And now, O Israel, give heed to the statutes and the ordinances which I teach you, and do them; that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, gives you” (Dt 4:1). “Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord! Blessed are those who keep his testimonies” (Ps 118:1-2). “Thou hast commanded thy precepts to be kept diligently. O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping thy statutes!” (Ps 118:4-5). “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22).

So we must observe the moral law, but we must also walk in the Spirit. The Spirit of God is our internal preceptor, guiding us in a more personal way in accordance with the will of God for each one of us as individuals. We do not all have the same vocation. Some are married, others are priests or religious, others are hermits. These do not all live the Ten Commandments in the same way, and there are many differences in their lives and styles of living. It is the Holy Spirit who will guide each one to know how he should live in accordance with his state in life. So, some will need much more solitude and silence than others, and will not be able to do what others can do. And this is in accordance with the will of God for them. Each also has his own personal vocation, or vocation within a vocation, and the Holy Spirit is their guide in all of this.

In summary, justified by faith and not by the works of the law, we are sanctified by the works of the law and guided by the Spirit.

THE LAST TRUMPET

Monday, 22nd Week of the Year
1 Thess 4:13-18; Ps 95; Lk 4:16-30

“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess 4:16-17).

Ever since the resurrection of Jesus Christ, those who die in Christ—after a period of purification in purgatory, if they need it—will be with the risen Christ in heaven and will see God with the beatific vision. “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thess 4:14). Christ “died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him” (1 Thess 5:10). “For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (Rom 14:9). St. Paul even says that it is better to die than to live, for then we will be with Christ. “I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil 1:23).
The Old Testament saints who died before the resurrection of Jesus Christ were justified by their faith in the coming Messiah (“And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness,” Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3), and after death went to paradise. In paradise, which was the highest level of Sheol, they awaited the resurrection of Christ to open the gates of heaven so that they could then enter into heaven itself and see God with the beatific vision. Hence Jesus tells us that when the poor beggar Lazarus died, he “was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom” (Lk 16:22). Abraham’s bosom was paradise, but was not heaven itself, and they did not see God there with the beatific vision until Christ’s resurrection. The thief on the cross was also told by Jesus, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 16:43). He would be with him that very day in paradise, to which Jesus descended after his death, the highest level of Sheol, and then, on Easter Sunday, would finally enter into the fullness of heaven to behold God directly in the beatific vision.

Our hope for the second coming of the Lord is as much for the dead as for those who are now alive. It is for everyone. This is our final hope, and when Christ comes, we will be together with him and with all the living and the dead who are in Christ.

We have two hopes: The hope of being with Christ in heaven after our death when we will see God, and the final hope of seeing him come in glory on the clouds of heaven, when we will receive our risen bodies to shine with Christ like the sun in the kingdom of our Father (Mt 13:43). We live now for these two hopes, but especially for the second one, for it will be more glorious. And we will see it, whether we be alive or dead.

How important it then is to sanctify ourselves now, to be prepared to receive him as we ought, with longing and great joy! What a holy life we should then live, motivated by this great hope! And we know, moreover, that our holy way of life even hastens the great day of his coming. “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God … Therefore, beloved, since you wait for these, be zealous to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace” (2 Peter 3:11-12,14).

THE LAST THINGS

Tuesday, 22nd Week of the Year
1 Thess 5:1-6,9-11; Ps 26; Lk 4:31-37

“For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober” (1 Thess 5:5-6).

We continue meditating on the last things on this late summer day, a theme that is important during this season. Yesterday, we focused on death, namely, that after purgatory all who die in the Lord after the resurrection of Jesus Christ enter into heaven and see God—they have the beatific vision. The Old Testament saints were justified by their faith in the Messiah who was to come (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3), and after their death entered into paradise, as did Abraham, the beggar Lazarus (Lk 16:22), and the thief who was crucified with Jesus (Lk 23:43). Then, after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who opened heaven, they entered into heaven itself and saw God with the beatific vision,
where they have ever since remained. Since we live after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, if we die in the Lord, we enter—after purgatory, if we need it—directly into the beatific vision of God in heaven. But we still await the parousia of Jesus Christ to be resurrected bodily and receive our glorified bodies. This will be the grand finale of everything, the final consummation of all things in glory, and the beginning of the new heavens and the new earth (Is 65:17). It is for this that we now await—as well as for the beatific vision of God after death—and St. Paul tells us that he can come at any time, and so we should always be prepared.

We want to be blameless for this great last day. Now is our time to actively purify and sanctify ourselves. In purgatory it will be God who purifies us, and we will be passive—only he will act then. But now we can act, so that we not be weighed down with gluttony and an endless quest for pleasure (Lk 21:34), but rather live soberly and simply, keeping watch as sons of light and of the day. “So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober” (1 Thess 5:5-6). We should live, therefore, in eager expectation of these glorious things. “Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13). We should live simply and soberly, in hope and joyful preparation, with our loins girded. We should hope fully in this. “The end of all things is at hand; therefore keep sane and sober for your prayers” (1 Peter 4:7). “Be sober, be watchful” (1 Peter 5:8). It is our Lord Jesus Christ “who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:8). It is our joy to prepare ourselves now for this great day, and to be prepared for it, even now. This word of Jesus should be ever with us: “what I say to you I say to all: Watch” (Mk 13:37).

FASTING IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Friday, 22nd Week of the Year
Col 1:15-20; Ps 99; Lk 5:33-39

“The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days” (Lk 5:33-35).

The liturgy knows our need of instruction in the basics of the Christian life, such as the importance of prayer and fasting, and so she again and again presents us with texts like this one, skipping over many others. Fasting is basic to the Christian life because it leads us along the path of seeking all our delight in the Lord, as today’s Invitatory says, “Come let us praise the Lord; in him is all our delight.”

Jesus has given us a new way of living in this world, loving him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mk 12:30), without dividing our heart among other delights. A Christian, therefore, fasts, and lives a life of prayer and fasting, living in simplicity and evangelical poverty. Jesus calls us to renounce all to obtain the buried treasure and the pearl of great price (Mt 13:44-46) and to be perfect (Mt 19, 21). He blesses more those who leave family and home and lands for him (Mt 19:29), those who lose their life in this world for him (Mk 8:35), those who even hate their life in this world for love of him (Jn 12:25), those who renounce all for him (Lk 14:33), as did St. Paul, considering all else as
refuse in order to gain Christ (Phil 3:7), and as did the first disciples (Lk 5:11,28), whom he made fishers of men (Mk 1:17-18). They left their nets, their boat, and even their father for love of him (Mk 1:19-20), to serve but one Lord only (Mt 6:24) and have but one treasure only (Mt 6:19-21). They are the blessed poor (Lk 6:20), the poor in spirit (Mt 5:3), while the rich with their pleasures have already had their consolation (Lk 6:24), like the rich glutton Dives in hell (Lk 16:25). These rich ones with their pleasures in this world are like a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle (Mt 19:24).

One form of fasting is not to use seasoning except salt, which is necessary for life, for the purpose of seasoning is to give pleasure, not nutrition. Another form is not to eat delicacies, things only designed to give pleasure, things made of white flour, from which the most nutritious part has been removed to give pleasure, and things made with sugar, which also serves not nutrition but pleasure. Another form of fasting is to eat but once a day, to be light for prayer in the morning. Still another way is not to eat meat. Most people in the world do not eat meat like Americans—two or three times per day!—which is extravagant in comparison with the rest of the world, is very expensive, and is far from necessary. Most people rarely eat meat, except when there is a special celebration. They otherwise eat simple, nutritious, basic foods, such as bread, rice, beans, vegetables, and fruit.

The Christian praises the Lord, because in him is all his delight, and he tries to make his whole life fit this pattern, renouncing other delights. Still another way to do this is to renounce pleasure trips, movies, restaurants, and visiting, as do monks. The desire of the Christian, in short, is to live a simple life of prayer and fasting.

RECONCILED BY THE BLOOD OF HIS CROSS

Saturday, 22nd Week of the Year
Col 1:21-23; Ps 53; Lk 6:1-5

“And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him” (Col 1:21-22).

This is the doctrine which we believe. This is the great gift which God has given us in his Son Jesus Christ. Christ reconciled us with God “in his body of flesh by his death” (Col 1:22), and he did so that we might be “holy and blameless and irreproachable before him” (Col 1:22). God reconciled the world to himself through his Son, “making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col 1:20). It is a reconciliation with God by means of the blood of his Son, poured out on the cross, made in his body of flesh by his death” (Col 1:22). The result of this reconciliation is that we are made “holy and blameless and irreproachable before him” (Col 1:22).

We see here that the justification which God has given us in Jesus Christ is real, not fictitious. He really makes us righteous, holy, blameless, and irreproachable. He makes us resplendent before him by means of the blood of the cross and the death of his Son. “In him we have redemption through his blood” (Eph 1:7). We would have died eternally in hell for our sins, if Christ had not reconciled us with the Father through his blood.
Christ “condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom 8:3), that is, in his own flesh by dying in our place to save us from the eternal death of hell. He did this for us, “in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom 8:4), and the justice of the law demands eternal death for our sins. He paid this debt for us by pouring out his blood on the cross, thus condemning sin in his flesh, reconciling us in his body of flesh, through his death, and “making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col 1:20). Thus he fulfilled the just requirements of the law for us (Rom 8:4).

This justification is communicated to us through our faith in the Son of God, and especially through the sacraments of reconciliation and the eucharist, which we are meant to use and experience regularly, the eucharist even every day, and penance as often as we need it. The result is that we are made “holy and blameless and irreproachable before him” (Col 1:22). This is what Christ does to us, and through our good life, we can sanctify ourselves still further. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:25-27).

THE NEW EARTH OF THE LAST DAY

23rd Sunday of the Year
Is 35:4-7; Ps 145; James 2:1-5; Mk 7:31-37
“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom” (Is 35:1).

Today, Jesus opens the ears and loosens the tongue of a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment (Mk 7:31-37). In doing this, he fulfills the first part of the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah, which says, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped” (Is 35:5).

Isaiah prophesied the Messianic times, which consist in two parts: 1) the first coming of the Messiah, and 2) his second and glorious coming at the end of the world with great signs in the sky and the coming of the new heavens and the new earth (Is 65:17). But he prophesied this all together, without dividing it into two distinct parts, separated by many centuries. Thus did the prophets prophesy. When we hear their beautiful prophecies, we should rejoice in the fulfillment of their first part in Jesus Christ, and still hope with eager expectation and longing for the fulfillment of their second part in his future second coming. The prophets also often make reference to events contemporary to themselves, which their prophecies promise to solve, but in a way that includes far more than these events. They prophesy as a solution the coming of the Messianic times, and the coming of God himself to destroy everything, and bring in a new earth, blessed with peace and happiness. This is what Isaiah is doing in today’s first reading.

In this time of late summer, it is liturgically correct to reflect on the end of the world, that is, on the second part of Isaiah’s prophecy, of which Jesus’ cure of the deaf mute is but the first part. We await the new heavens and the new earth, which we will one day see, after the great signs and portents in the heavens at the end of this present world. All of this we will see at the parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ, when he comes with great
power and glory on the clouds of heaven with all his saints. Isaiah prophesies the end of the present world and the splendor of the new creation in order to lift our spirits and place us in the enchantment of this eager and joyful expectation.

Isaiah first prophesies the destruction of the present heavens: “All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their hosts shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree” (Is 34:4). It will be a day of destruction. “For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising and the moon will not shed its light” (Is 13:10). The Apocalypse also prophesies this great day of the destruction of this present world. “…and the sun became black as sackcloth,” it says, “the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place” (Rev 6:12-14). This is the great day of the wrath of God, which Jesus also prophesied, saying, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Mt 24:29).

But after all this, God will come and renew the face of the earth. “Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy” (Is 35:4-6). We have already seen in Jesus Christ part of this in his first coming. We await his second coming in glory for the rest, when even the deserts will be transformed into green parks, with cedars and cypresses, which we will enjoy in our glorified bodies. On that day, “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon” (Is 35:1-2). On that great day, “They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God” (Is 35:2). It will be a day of glory, a day of splendor and joy in the Lord. This is the day for which we are now preparing, when the earth shall be renewed. “For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes” (Is 35:6-7). It shall be a new earth. “I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive; I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together” (Is 41:19).

Jesus, who opens our eyes and ears and saves us, says, “Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time will come” (Mk 13:33). We now live in joyful expectation and preparation for this new day and for this new world.
THE SPLENDID LIFE OF THE VIRGIN MARY

Birth of Mary, September 8
Micah 5:1-4; Ps 12; Mt 1:1-16,18-23

“Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means God with us” (Mt 1:23; Is 7:14).

Today we celebrate the birthday of the Virgin Mary, the human being who gave birth to the Son of God. We celebrate and rejoice in her beauty and holiness, which God gave her to fulfill in a worthy way her role as the Mother of God. The Church in her liturgy, especially in the divine office, has traditionally used the Canticle of Canticles to celebrate this most beautiful of all women. The Canticle is included in the Bible because it has always been interpreted—even by the Jews—as an allegory of the love between God and man, between God and his people, represented by the bride of the Canticle. The liturgy sees in Mary the supreme fulfillment of the bride of the Canticle of Canticles, in her love for her divine bridegroom. These are exceedingly beautiful images, and they help us to contemplate the mystery of the courtship between the Virgin Mary and God. Their nuptial relationship is our model too, if we want to be contemplatives, for being a contemplative means having an intimate, nuptial relationship with God, as did Mary.

The divine bridegroom, the spouse of our soul, and the bridegroom of the Virgin Mary, is like a cedar of Lebanon, full of the scent of the forest. “His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars” (Ct 5:15). She begins to resemble him, and so can use his words about herself: “I grew tall like a cedar in Lebanon, and like a cypress on the heights of Hermon” (Sir 24:13). And since she frequents these forests to be alone with him, she also begins to have the same forest scent as he does, and so he says to her, “the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon” (Ct 4:11).

The Canticle pictures her as a solitary, a hermit, who hides herself away with her beloved amid the aromatic trees of the forest. So he says to her, “Come with me from Lebanon, my bride; come with me from Lebanon. Depart from the peak of Amana, from the peak of Senir and Hermon, from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards” (Ct 4:8). To such lengths does she go, to such remote places and mountains peaks, amid snow leopards, presumably living in a cave in the snow, to have solitude and uninterrupted silence with the beloved of her soul.

The Canticle also pictures her living on a mountain of myrrh, a hill of frankincense, surrounded by aromatic trees, in a house with beams of cedar and rafters of pine and cypress, all fragrant woods, sleeping on a bed of flowers with her beloved like a bag of myrrh suspended between her breasts. And so he says, “Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will hie me to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense” (Ct 4:6). And she says, “Our couch is green; the beams of our house are cedar, our rafters are pine” (Ct 1:16-17).

She is all perfumed from contemplating her divine bridegroom. She even exhales perfume, as he does, and so uses his words to say, “Like cinnamon and acanthus, I have yielded a perfume, like choice myrrh, have breathed out a scent” (Sir 24:15 JB). Like him, she has a fragrance “like the smoke of incense in the tent” (Sir 24:15 JB), and like him, she is like “the rose bushes of Jericho” (Sir 24:14 JB).
His scent is communicated to her, and so in contemplating him in the desert, she is like a column of smoke, made up of aromatic powders, arising from the desert. And we exclaim in admiration, “What is this coming up from the desert like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of the merchant?” (Ct 3:6). It is the litter of Solomon, his palanquin, “of wood from Lebanon” (Ct 3:9). And so is she for him. Recognizing that it is her, we say, “Who is this coming up from the desert leaning on her beloved?” (Ct 8:5 JB). She has gone to the desert—not only to the mountains of leopards—for her contemplation, and she rises up from the desert, leaning on her beloved, all perfumed from her encounter with him.

He is also like “an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men” (Ct 2:3). Assimilating herself to him, she eats apples, for she is faint with love, and her breath then has the scent of apples. “Sustain me with raisins,” she says, “refresh me with apples; for I am sick with love” (Ct 2:5). And he says to her, “the scent of your breath [is] like apples” (Ct 7:8).

Not only do we honor the Blessed Virgin Mary today on her birthday, but we also want to imitate her in her courtship with her divine bridegroom. We too seek solitude amid the beauty of nature to contemplate him, and to be, like her, all perfumed from our encounter with him.

**BLESSED ARE THE POOR**

Wednesday, 23rd Week of the Year
Col 3:1-11; Ps144; Lk 6:20-26

“Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God…. But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6:20,24).

The Beatitudes present us with a whole way of life, a new way of living in this world. It is the way of the anawim of the Old Testament, the blessed poor who lived only for God. They are the true blessed ones. Jesus tells us that the rich who live a luxurious life are cursed, for they have had their consolation in the pleasures of the flesh and of the body, that is, in worldly pleasures. “But woe to you that are rich,” he says today, “for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6:24). He also said, “Truly, I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 19:23-24).

It is better to be among the poor of this world who live only for God. “Blessed are you poor,” he says today, “for yours is the kingdom of God” (Lk 6:20). And if we are not poor by birth, even so, we can still accept Jesus’ invitation to become poor by voluntarily renouncing the world and its pleasures for the sake of the kingdom of God. This is the call to perfection, the call to leave the pleasures of this world and renounce them for the sake of the kingdom of God.

To the rich young man, Jesus said, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mt 19:21). The rich glutton Dives, “who feasted sumptuously every day” (Lk 16:19), heard
in hell, where he went after his death, that he has already had his consolation in the luxurious life he led (Lk 16:25). “Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things,” Abraham said to him (Lk 16:25).

Now is the time to decide. Will you live in the future for God, or for yourself? Will you live a radical life of evangelical poverty, or will you continue living a life of worldly pleasure? Will you accept Jesus’ invitation to be one of the anawim who live only for him, or will you have your consolation here below in the pleasures of this world?

Jesus invites us to a new way of living, to be one of the poor of Yahweh, to accept evangelical poverty, and renounce the world and its pleasures, to have our consolation in him and in his kingdom, rather than here below. St. Paul invites us to live an already risen life in the risen Christ and to seek the things that are above, not those of this world. St. Paul tells us today, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:1-2). He also warns us not to be like many who “live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Phil 3:18-19).

**HYPOCRISY**

Friday, 23rd Week of the Year  
1 Tim 1:1-2,12-14; Ps15; Lk 6:39-42

“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye, when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother’s eye” (Lk 6:41-42).

Jesus was constantly the victim of this saying. The scribes and Pharisees were continually doing this to him, trying to remove the speck they thought they saw in his eye, while being totally unaware of the log in their own eye. The thing Jesus condemns here is not every kind of correction of other people, for wise fraternal correction is permitted (Mt 18:15-17). The problem is falsely correcting others when you yourself do not recognize your own much greater fault. For example, it is the duty and responsibility of a preacher to preach and instruct his congregation on how to live the Christian life well, mentioning in a general way various faults which we should try to avoid to be good Christians. But if members of his congregation, who are guilty of these faults, then begin to attack him for having mentioned their faults in a general way, these people are not acting correctly. They are trying to remove a speck they think they see in their preacher’s eye, without looking at the log in their own eye. It would be better if they first recognized and corrected their own faults, for then they would see better to be able to remove the speck from their preacher’s eye.

Another example is that people who feel called to begin to live a more austere life with much silence and solitude for prayer, contemplation, and to be recollected with God in their silent work, are often judged, criticized, and even at times rejected by their
fellows who do not understand their behavior or their reasons for living in this new way. It would be better if they would remove the log from their own eye first and themselves stop living in such a worldly way and stop judging by such worldly standards, before they try to correct someone else who is actually living a more advanced spiritual life than themselves. They imagine that they are seeing a fault in their brother, while being completely unaware of a much greater fault in themselves.

Finally, there is the example of a preacher who says many irrelevant things, accusing people of this and that, while he himself is not living a holy life, detached from the pleasures of this world. A preacher who has not renewed and reformed his own life is a contradiction in himself. He is trying to remove the speck from his brother’s eye, while not looking at the log in his own eye. It would be better if he would first reform his own life, for then he would be in a much better position to help others reform theirs. His first, best, and most important sermon will always be his own life, which his congregation sees. The witness of his own life will give power to his words. This is why the saints were always the best preachers and had the best results, even if they were not very eloquent, as for example the curé of Ars.

DO THE WILL OF GOD

Saturday, 23rd Week of the Year
1 Tim 1:15-17; Ps112; Lk 6:43-49

“For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit” (Lk 6:43-44).

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,” says St. Paul today. Christ redeemed us and paid the price of our ransom in his suffering and death on the cross. Thus did he free us from the penalty of eternal death for our sins and from our guilt, so that we might rise with him in his resurrection to a new and illumined life, full of the love of God, clothed in the splendor of the righteousness of Christ himself. He wants us now then to walk in the newness of life with the risen Christ (Rom 6:4) and live, in the newness of the Spirit (Rom 7:6), a new kind of life in this world, namely, one that is obedient to the will of God.

Redeemed by Jesus Christ, we should now obey God and do his will. This is why he redeemed us. We do not redeem ourselves. He alone paid the price of our redemption from eternal death by his blood poured out on the cross. And he alone justifies us, that is, only he made us righteous, forgiven, and resplendent before God, lights in the world for others. We do not justify ourselves by our own good works or by our observance of the moral law. Once justified, though, by the death of Jesus Christ, which justification we receive through faith, then we are henceforth to do the will of God. Only in this way will we remain righteous in his sight, and only in this way will we grow further in holiness. We must bear good fruit. Our fruits in doing the good works of obedience will show what kind of tree we are, whether good or bad.

“Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven,” says Jesus, “but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 7:21). Jesus asked,
“Who is my mother, and who are my brethren?” and added, “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister and mother” (Mt 12:48,50). How important it then is to do the will of God! Only those who do it will enter heaven and be close to Christ. A woman once said, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked! But he said, Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (Lk 11:27-28). Doing God’s will must be our way of life. Jesus said, “abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (Jn 15:9-10).

The will of God is that we live for him with all our heart and love our neighbor (Mk 12:30-31). How, then, can we purify our heart more of this world to better love God with all our heart, and how can we better love our neighbor and use our talents, time, work, and possessions, to better serve him? If we are not purified of the world and its pleasures, we will not love God with all our heart. And if we do not love God with all our heart, we will not be doing the will of God, but rather our own will. Mortification is, therefore, essential to doing the will of God. Then, instead of serving and entertaining ourselves, we will serve our neighbor with our talents, time, and possessions.

**THE GATE OF THE FEW**

24th Sunday of the Year
Is 50:5-9; Sal 114; James 2:14-18; Mk 8:27-35

“For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mk 8:35).

This is a scripture verse that has made saints. One can take from it a whole orientation of life. It has been a key verse in my own life, one that has guided me in the decisions I made at certain key points of my life. I chose, by meditating on this verse, the more difficult road of losing my life in this world for the love of Christ instead of the other possibility that lay before me at the time.

Jesus Christ invites us to follow him completely, leaving behind the world and other possibilities, because he invites us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. “If anyone would come after me,” he says in the previous verse, “let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mk 8:34). Then our key verse follows, for denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Jesus in this radical way is to lose our life in this world for Jesus’ sake and for the gospel’s sake. But Jesus promises those who choose this more difficult way, this way of life (Mt 7:13-14), that they will save their life with him, that is, with God. But those who do not want to lose their life like this in this world for the sake of Jesus Christ and the gospel will lose their life with God, which is the true life, the only life worth having, and worth living.

In reality, though, those who choose this true life are few. The majority will always prefer the comfortable way that leads to perdition. The way of life is for the few because it is the more difficult way. And it is precisely this more difficult way that Jesus invites us to choose today. “Enter by the narrow gate,” he says; “for the gate is wide and the
way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Mt 7:13-14).

Many choose the wide gate, for it is the gate of saving our life in this world. Yet it is the way that leads to perdition. It is the gate of those who will lose their life in the only sense that has meaning. Few are they who choose the narrow gate. For it is the gate of losing their life in this world. But those who do choose it will save their life in the only way that has meaning, for it is the gate that leads to life.

Which gate do you want to choose? Which gate have you chosen up till now in your life?

What does this gate that leads to life look like, this gate that few choose, the gate of losing your life in this world for the love of Christ and the gospel? It is the gate of loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength (Mk 12:30). It is the gate of those who observe the first and most important commandment of Jesus Christ. Those who love God with all their heart, those who keep this greatest commandment, watch over their heart lest it divide among other things and the pleasures of this world. They do as did the man who discovered a treasure hidden in a field, who “in his joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Mt 13:44). He lost his life in this world in selling all that he had to buy the field, but as a result he saved his life with God and obtained the hidden treasure, which is the kingdom of God, and the love of God in the heart.

He did not want to hear from Jesus what he said to the rich, “But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6:24), nor did he want to hear what the rich glutton Dives, “who feasted sumptuously every day” (Lk 16:19), heard in Hades when Abraham said to him, “Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things” (Lk 16:25). He has already had his consolation in his luxurious life in this world. He did not lose his life in this world, so he lost it with God. He chose the wide gate of the many, the gate of saving his life in the delights of this world, and so he lost his life in the only sense that has any meaning. He chose the gate of the many, which is the gate which leads to perdition. He refused the narrow gate of the few who love God with all their heart, the gate that leads to life, and he rather divided his heart with the delights of this world, and so he lost his life with God.

The gate of life is the more difficult, narrow gate, for it is not the gate of the seed sown amid thorns, for the thorns are the “riches and pleasures of life” (Lk 8:14). But to avoid the thorns, one has to renounce the pleasures of life which choke us so that we do not bear fruit for God, “for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature” (Lk 8:14). The majority do not want to renounce the pleasures of life, and so they do not bear fruit, but rather are choked by these same pleasures, and their heart is divided by them, and so they do not love God with all their heart. They have not lost their life in this world to save it with God, but rather have saved their life in this world, and so have lost it with God. They are the ones who prefer to be the first in this world rather than the first in the kingdom of God. But to be the first in the kingdom of God we have to renounce this world and be the last in this world, for “the last will be first, and the first last” (Mt 20:16).
“But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

Now, when the light is more and more being vanquished by darkness, we celebrate the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, “which drove away darkness and brought in the light” (St. Andrew of Crete, Breviary). As the cross is lifted up against the darkening sky, leaving sin and the world behind, so are we lifted up above the world and sin in being crucified with Christ, in order to gain the things that are above (see Ibid.).

We die to the world with Christ by means of the cross. As darkness increases each day, all of nature dies around us and is incredibly beautiful in its death with brilliant shades of every color in the leaves falling about us. So are we too our most beautiful as we die to this mortal world in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. The cross gives us life and beautifies us as we die on it to the world. St. Paul says that he is dead to the world—crucified to the world—and the world to him through the cross. But as we lose our life in this world for Christ, we save it for God (Mk 8:35). As we hate our life in this world, being crucified to the world with Christ, we save it for eternal life (Jn 12:25).

Through the cross, Christ died to this life and saved us. He then wants us to follow the same path, dying to the world with him, being crucified to the world with him. “I have been crucified with Christ,” says St. Paul (Gal 2:20). Christ taught us that we are to take this path when he said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23). This is the path of life, a beautiful and narrow path that few find (Mt 7:13-14). It is the path of “the world being crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

By the wood of the cross, Christ saved us from death, which is our punishment for sin. He suffered this punishment in our place, dying on the cross. Freed, then, from death by the cross, we are invited to take up the cross and die to the world, to live henceforth only for him who died for us (2 Cor 5:15). The cross is the path of life. It saves us from death and shows us the way to live as people saved by Christ. We are to live, dead with him to the world, and the world, dead—crucified—to us, that we might henceforth live only for him that died for us (2 Cor 5:15).

To die to the world is beautiful. We die to all that divides our heart from a pure and complete, undivided and nuptial love of God. In dying on the cross, Christ brought us eternal life and opened the gates of heaven. This, then, has become the beautiful path of the saints, who died to this world, to live only for God. We are invited to follow their example and take this path of life.
“Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim 4:12).

How important is the example of a pastor for his congregation! As St. Augustine says today, he can either kill or strengthen his sheep, just by the example of his own life (Breviary). The general orientation and attitude of a pastor has great influence on his flock. If he only has the idea that God created the world for our enjoyment, he will kill his sheep, for such teaching is but the first rung of the spiritual ladder. The higher rungs of the ladder of the spiritual life stress rather the renunciation of the world and its unnecessary pleasures. The goodness of creation teaches us the goodness of God, but there is also danger here, for in enjoying this goodness, it is easy to forget God, the source of this goodness, and divide our heart from an undivided love for God. It is impossible for those who abandon themselves to a life of pleasure in the good things of creation, to have a heart reserved only for the Lord. They are, rather, divided and, as a result, forgetful of God. They are distracted, not recollected—they do not keep custody over their minds and hearts—and so they cannot advance spiritually. If a pastor thinks and lives like this, his flock will not advance, it will not grow in spirituality and holiness, but rather will remain only on the first rung of the ladder of spiritual growth.

After learning of the goodness of God through the beauty of nature, to advance further, we are called to renounce the good things of this creation that are not necessary, for the sake of the better things of the new creation and of the kingdom of God. This is how a pastor should think and live if he wants to help his flock grow spiritually. He will help his sheep if, in the first place, he thinks correctly—has the right attitude—and if he, in the second place, lives correctly, namely, in accord with a correct way of thinking and if, in the first place, he teaches correctly about this matter. But if he thinks, lives, and teaches in this matter in a worldly way, ignorant of correct teaching, he will kill his sheep, instead of strengthening them.

Every pastor should study the New Testament and base his thinking, conduct, and teaching on its teaching, not on his own ideas or on worldly notions. Jesus teaches us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him (Mk 8:34). He teaches us to lose our life in this world, in order to save it (Mk 8:35); to hate our life in this world, in order to keep it (Jn 12:25); to sell all, in order to obtain the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price (Mt 13:44-46); to leave all, in order to be perfect (Mt 19:21); to renounce family, home, lands, etc., in order to gain the hundredfold reward (Mt 19:29); not to be like a camel, trying to get through the eye of a needle (Mt 19:24); to leave all (Lk 14:33), like the first disciples (Lk 5:11,28; Mk 1:17-18,20); not to live in delights, for those who do so have already had their reward (Lk 6:24; 16:25) and will be choked by these delights and not bear fruit (Lk 8:14). This is the teaching of Jesus that a pastor should know, believe, live, and teach, in order to strengthen, not kill, his flock.
“Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities” (Lk 8:1-2).

Here we see the life of Jesus and the reason for which he chose his disciples, namely, to preach and announce the kingdom of God everywhere. Jesus Christ is God’s salvation for man. The gospel announces this salvation, explains it, and invites all to repent and accept it, changing their lives. We continue, even to today, evangelizing in all places, especially where people have not yet heard the gospel, so that everyone might have the opportunity to hear of the salvation that God has sent into the world and believe in this message, in this gospel. There is nothing new that a preacher can say today, except to repeat the message of the New Testament, the *kerygma* of the Church, preached by the apostles after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet, the preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ can always reflect anew on the meaning of this one message of salvation.

It is a salvation which gives us new life, new happiness, and new hope. We live through the risen Christ. He is the giver of the Holy Spirit, which comes from the Father. The Father sends us this Spirit through Jesus Christ, and Christ sends him from the Father for our spiritual resurrection, so that we might live a new life, risen ahead of time in the risen Christ, so that we might be filled with his own Spirit, with God’s life in us. His death frees us from our past and future sins, so that we might walk with him now in the newness of life, in the newness of the Spirit, as new creatures, living ahead of time in the new creation. His resurrection is the beginning of the new heavens and the new earth, which have already begun to exist in the midst of history, in the midst of this old world. We rise with him in his resurrection to walk in his light, illumined by him, and fed in our spirits by his body and blood in the eucharist, to live a spiritual life, seeking the things that are above, and no more those of the earth (Col 3:1-2).

His death paid the price of our redemption and reconciled us with God, for it satisfied divine justice and the wrath of God against our sins. In his blood, our wounded hearts are healed, for God is reconciled to us through this blood and therefore he has left off his wrath against us.

This, then, is the message of the gospel, always the same, yet ever new, always a new experience, which renews us and rejoices our heart with the very happiness of God himself. We should, therefore, seek for ever new ways to preach and spread the gospel, by word of mouth, in writing, on a website, by e-mail, and by television.
“I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Tim 6:13-14).

This is an inspiring exhortation, given by Paul to Timothy, to guard himself “unstained and free from reproach” in his observance of the commandment “until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Tim 6:14). Timothy should live now in a state of purity, “unstained and free from reproach.” That is, he should be already prepared for the appearing of the Lord. We should live in the light of this appearing even now. We see that this hope is something living and imminent, something which colors and affects this present life. We should, therefore, live in the present, in the light of the appearing of the Lord, in joyful expectation and eager preparation. The appearing of the Lord is the motivation for the reformation of our present life. We should not wait until the last moment to begin our preparation, and we should not think that his appearing is very distant, or that we will not see it. No! A Christian lives in eager and joyful expectation that inspires him to make much preparation, even changing his whole style of life, abandoning and renouncing a worldly style, to rather live, during this short period of waiting, a sober, just, and pious life in this age, “awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:12-13). So, we should change our way of living in this world, to be prepared and properly disposed, “renouncing ungodliness and worldly desires” (Titus 2:12).

We should live in the spell of this mystery of the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a mystery which should affect our whole life, so that we live a life that is sober and pious, recollected and just, simple and detached from worldly pleasures, seeking rather the things that are above, and no longer those of the earth (Col 3:1-2).

The Lord is coming even now in our life, but to live in the spell of the mystery of his appearing and to experience it, we have to be divested of this world and of a worldly life, and be rather “unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Tim 6:14). If we live like this, in eager expectation, keeping the commandment, that is, the Christian life, we will live even now in the spell of his appearing. So, we must watch out for the thorns, which are the pleasures of this world, which will choke us so that we do not bear fruit.

Let us, therefore, not be like those who live amid thorns, for “as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature” (Lk 8:14). They are like the rich glutton, Dives, “who feasted sumptuously every day” (Lk 16:19), and when he died was tormented in hell. Let us, rather, be “unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Tim 6:14), always keeping the commandment.
“Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training . . . He became a reproof to our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange” (Wisdom 2:12,14-15).

This was the experience of Jesus Christ, and he predicts it today, saying, “The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise” (Mk 9:31). Jesus prophesied his passion in accord with the typology of the righteous man in the second chapter of the book of Wisdom. In his passion, Jesus fulfilled this Old Testament type, and thus he saved us. This persecution of the just man in the passion and death of Jesus Christ gave us new life. His suffering gave us joy in the depth of our spirit, freeing us from our sins by dying for them. He then gave us jubilation of spirit in his resurrection, and a life that is completely different and new, a life that is already risen ahead of time and even ascended with the risen and ascended Christ. It is a life that seeks the things that are above, and no longer those of the earth (Col 3:1-2).

The basis of this new life is the new reconciliation with God that God gives us through the death and resurrection of his only Son, Jesus Christ. In this death, our sins are erased; and in his resurrection, we have this new life that we are now living through our faith in him. It is our faith which communicates these effects to us. But our renewal comes not from our faith, but from the death of Jesus Christ that reconciled God with us, enabling him to forgive us. Without the death of Jesus Christ, God could not forgive us, for he is God, and God is just, and a just God cannot do such an unjust thing, namely, forgive gratuitously and without punishment people who are guilty of grave sins. But the death of his Son, which God himself planned, changed everything and reconciled God to us. This is God’s own plan, in his eternal love for us, to reconcile himself with us. He planned that his Son should undergo the just punishment necessary for a just God to be able to forgive us in a way that is worthy and appropriate for God, namely, in a just way. And this is what he does to us now, giving us, in the death of Jesus Christ, all this joy that we now experience in being completely—and justly—forgiven, renewed, reconciled with God, and even made participants in a new life, in the light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Renewed and reconciled with God through the death of his Son, we ourselves should now participate in this death, as St. Paul says, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the Church” (Col 1:24). His afflictions were his persecutions and the other sufferings of his life of faith. We have to be crucified together with Christ. “I have been crucified with Christ,” says St. Paul (Gal 2:20) and “if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him” (Rom 6:8) and “if we endure, we shall also reign with him” (2 Tim 2:12).
Thus, the experience of the righteous man in the book of Wisdom will become our experience too as Christians if we are faithful to Christ in our way of living. They will say to us too that we are inconvenient to them, that we oppose their actions and plans, and that we reproach them for their sins against the law. They will say that we are a reproof of their thoughts, that the very sight of us is a burden to them, that our manner of life is unlike that of others, and that our ways are strange (see Wisdom 2:12,14-15).

This is how our life will be as Christians if we are faithful. We will be criticized, persecuted, and rejected in this world. If we renounce the world and its false and worldly values, the world will reject us as people whose ways are strange and whose manner of life is unlike that of others (see Wisdom 2:15). Because we are not of the world, the world will hate us. “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you,” Jesus said (Jn 15:19). About his followers, Jesus said, “the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (Jn 17:14).

This, then, is our life—renewed, forgiven, and full of happiness for the reconciliation which we now have with God through the death of his Son. It is a life already risen with him ahead of time, which now seeks the things that are above and no longer the things of the earth (Col 3:1-2). It is, therefore, a life which the world can no longer understand or accept. It will, therefore, always be a life persecuted and rejected in this world. Thus, do we live the mystery of the passion of Jesus Christ. We are participants in his passion. We fulfill, like St. Paul, “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, that is the Church” (Col 1:24). We are crucified with Christ (Gal 2:20). We die with him (2 Tim 2:11) and follow him, carrying our cross (Lk 9:23). This is our glory, and it will bring us to the resurrection and the fullness of life.

LEAVING EVERYTHING, HE ROSE AND FOLLOWED HIM
Feast of St. Matthew, September 21
Eph 4:1-7,11-13; Ps 18; Mt 9:9-13

“As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office; and he said to him, Follow me. And he rose and followed him” (M 9:9).

The call of the apostles, together with their immediate and wholehearted response, leaving everything and following Jesus, is always an inspiration for us to do the same when Jesus Christ calls us. It is a radical call to leave all for Jesus Christ, and Matthew’s response is equally radical, “And he rose and followed him” (Mt 9:9). Just how radical this response was, we can see when St. Luke tells us that when Simon, James, and John were called in a similar way, after they had seen the great catch of fish they had made at the command of Jesus, “when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him” (Lk 5:11). And when describing the call of Levi (Matthew), St. Luke tells us, “And he left everything, and rose and followed him” (Lk 5:28).

This leaving everything should be radical. It changed the whole life and lifestyle of St. Matthew. He renounced his work, his means of livelihood, and the way he spent his time. His life completely changed. So it should also be with us. We too should change
our whole life and lifestyle upon following Jesus Christ. After responding to the call of Jesus Christ to be one of his disciples, we are no longer private individuals that can just wander around incognito wherever we want, doing whatever we want, with no one knowing who we are. Once we have been called by Jesus Christ, we are known as his disciples, we are marked men, and should live only for him from then on. Our whole life should be dedicated to him, not to ourselves, not to our entertainments. We should renounce worldly pleasures and a worldly life and lifestyle, as St. Matthew renounced his impure work as a tax collector for the Romans.

Matthew now invites all his contacts, other tax collectors and sinners, in order to bring them to Jesus. In the future, he will be a preacher of the kingdom of God, poor like the other apostles that had left their secular work to follow Jesus full-time.

And you, have you responded like this to the call of Jesus Christ? Have you given up a worldly lifestyle in order to live only for God and find all you joy only in him, giving up and renouncing a life of pleasure in the things here below? This is what Jesus Christ wants of you, a response as radical as that of the apostles. We have to renounce much, our freedom to wander about incognito in this world as private individuals, doing whatever we want, seeking the pleasures of life. We should rather leave everything, rise, and follow him (Lk 5:28).

A PEOPLE OF HOPE

Thursday, 25th Week of the Year
Haggai 1:1-8; Ps 149; Lk 9:7-9

“Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may appear in my glory, says the Lord” (Haggai 1:8).

Today we hear the voice of the prophet Haggai, telling the people newly returned from Babylon to rebuild the temple. He promises that the Lord will fill this temple with splendor. It will be the dwelling of the Lord in the midst of his people, and he will give peace in this place. The prophet says, “For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts” (Hag 2:6-7).

God wanted to live in glory with his people, in the midst of his people, and be their God, and they, his people. He wanted to give them peace and to have his sanctuary in their midst.

In the Breviary today we read a similar prophecy by Ezekiel that the Lord will reunite his people, and “My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. They shall dwell in the land where your fathers dwelt . . . and David my servant shall be their prince for ever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them . . . and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore” (Ez 37:24-26).
This prophecy was partially fulfilled in the first coming of Jesus Christ, and it will be completely fulfilled in his second coming. The prophet does not distinguish between these two comings of the Messiah. We only know that we now live in the days of Messianic fulfillment, and we look to the future with eager expectation for the complete fulfillment of these prophecies of peace when God will dwell on earth with his people and when his Messiah, his servant David, will reign over us.

This is, moreover, a prophecy which is gradually being fulfilled in the present—a little more each day—for those who live in the spell of this hope and do God’s will. The elect that dedicate themselves to doing God’s will are happy even now with the happiness of God. God recompenses them with his peace and happiness. He is in their midst. His sanctuary and his tabernacle are in their midst, and he makes a covenant of peace with them. David, his servant, reigns over them. Jesus Christ is this new David, the servant of the Lord. When he comes in the fullness of his glory, this prophecy will be completely fulfilled, but even now, each day brings us closer to this fulfillment. We should live in the spell of this hope by believing in Jesus Christ and doing God’s will in everything. So does his kingdom come, developing ever more each day in our midst.

WHY DID JESUS DIE ON THE CROSS?

Friday, 25th Week of the Year
Haggai 1:15 – 2:9; Ps 42; Lk 9:18-22

“The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Lk 9:22).

Today St. Peter confesses that Jesus is “The Christ of God” (Lk 9:20), and immediately Jesus predicts his passion, violent death at the hands of the Jewish authorities, and his resurrection. St. Peter was correct in recognizing that Jesus was the Messiah, but Jesus wanted them to have a correct idea of what kind of a Messiah he would be. He would be a Messiah that would be killed by the very Jews he came to save, and after three days, he would rise from the dead.

Why did he die like this, killed by the Jews? Only by dying could he rise and vanquish death for us, so that we could rise with him to a new and risen life, and one day rise with him in our bodies to live always with him in the world of the resurrection.

Only by dying, furthermore, could he descend into Hades, the dwelling place of the dead, and burst open the dungeon of Sheol that had unjustly swallowed him, for he did not bear the sin of Adam, nor did he have personal sins, and therefore should not have died, for death is the punishment of sin (Gen 2:17). Bursting open the dwelling of the dead, the victorious Christ freed all the captives that were destined for eternal life.

Christ also died on the cross in order to pour out his life as a sacrifice of love and self-donation to the Father, infinitely pleasing him for our salvation, and as a result, the Father poured out upon him and upon all who share a human nature with him and believe in him a Messianic effusion of the Holy Spirit, thus giving us salvation and a new life in the Spirit. In this way, he gave us the eucharist, which is the same sacrifice as Calvary, to
be our sacrifice, our perfect act of worship of the New Testament, which we can offer with him to the Father.

Jesus, the Messiah and only Son of God, was also crucified in order to vicariously suffer the punishment due to us for our sins so that God could justly forgive our sins. The fifty-third chapter of Isaiah was very important for the Christians of the New Testament to understand the meaning of the death of Jesus. This chapter prophesies his vicarious death, saying, “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed . . . and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all (Is 53:5-6 KJV). St. Peter, for example, cites this chapter, saying, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

From Christ’s death, comes our new life, forgiven for our sins and freed from their punishment to live in peace and in the freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:21). The cross of Christ is the means used by God to free us from the burden of our sins and from the depression which they cause us. In the cross of Christ, we are set free. He paid the penalty for our sins and gave us a new life in himself.

SING AND REJOICE, O DAUGHTER OF ZION

Saturday, 25th Week of the Year
Zechariah 2:5-9; Jer 31; Lk 9:43-45

“Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men” (Lk 9:44).

Today, Jesus predicts, for the second time, his passion and death. His death is the center of the gospel. It brought us salvation and new life. It is the salvation of the world. It burst open the dwelling place of the dead and opened the gates of heaven so that the Old Testament saints might enter into the presence of God. By his death, Jesus Christ is the vanquisher of death. Death is only for those who bear the sin of Adam and for sinners, as the punishment for sin (Gen 2:17). Christ did not die as a sinner or as one who bore the sin of Adam; rather, he died to destroy death itself. In dying and descending into Hades, he burst it open and destroyed it, for it had unjustly swallowed him, and he led the elect into heaven, into the presence of the Father. In Jesus Christ, therefore, we have hope to live eternally with God.

Christ paid our debt of death. We would have died eternally had he not paid our debt for us. He who should not have died, died not for his own sins, but for ours and for the sin of Adam that they might be forgiven. Our whole new life streams from him, the vanquisher of sin and death.

Because of the death of Christ, we have hope for the future. Zechariah speaks today of the future of Jerusalem, which is our future too. He says, “I will be to her a wall of fire round about, says the Lord, and I will be the glory within her . . . Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for lo, I come and I will dwell in the midst of you, says the Lord” (Zech 2:5,10-11).
This prophecy was fulfilled in the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, near Jerusalem, for in Christ, God dwelt in the midst of us, in the midst of Jerusalem—“and I will be the glory within her . . . Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for lo, I come and I will dwell in the midst of you” (Zech 2:5,10). Christ is the glory of God in the midst of us, the source of all our joy. Therefore we should rejoice in him, for he has come and now dwells in the midst of us. He is our Emmanuel, God-with-us.

But he is also our hope, and we long with joy for his second coming when he will dwell in the midst of us in a visible and manifest way, when his glory will be seen by all flesh together. “And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together” (Is 40:5). Although he is with us now as Emmanuel and we rejoice in his presence in the midst of us, we nonetheless still long for the complete fulfillment of this prophecy when he will be like “a wall of fire round about” and when he shall be the glory within us (Zech 2:5). That day is on its way, and we rejoice ahead of time in its light. We live in the joy of his coming, in the spell of his coming, and do his will to speed it (2 Peter 3:12).

EXPERIENCING GOD IN THE HEART

26th Sunday of the Year
Num 11:25-29; Ps 18; James 5:1-6; Mk 9:38-43,45,47-48

“And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire” (Mk 9:43).

Here we see the importance of avoiding occasions of falling into sin or of getting lost and finding ourselves far from God. Whatever scandalizes us and is an occasion for falling away from God, we should cut off and sacrifice. It is better to enter into life maimed, lame, or with only one eye than to be thrown into hell with two hands, two feet, and two eyes. In other words, we should make sacrifices in this life and lose things, friends, opportunities, honors, etc. if these sacrifices are necessary to keep us from falling away from God. This is how a wise person will act. A foolish person, however, protects himself and refuses all sacrifices in this world, and in his foolishness, he falls continually. He is not careful about his life. Rather, he lives carelessly, negligently. He is not vigilant. A foolish person does not try to live soberly and piously in this age (Titus 2:12).

The world is full of things that cause us fall away from God and forget him. In the area of food, there are, for example, delicacies that harm our health and are eaten only for pleasure. These are occasions for forgetting God, for putting something into our heart that competes with God for our attention. This is why the Desert Fathers and strict monks, during the most fervent periods of their history, renounced such things. They made this sacrifice in order to live only for God in every aspect of their life. They wanted to keep the love of their heart only for him. So they cut off their hand and foot and plucked out their eye in order not to fall away from him.

Something else which is an occasion for falling away from God is television and movies that show every kind of image that fouls our mind, memory, and imagination and distracts us from God and from a sober, just, and pious life in this age (Titus 2:12). Such
movies cause us to fall away from a life that renounces ungodliness and worldly desires (Titus 2:12) and that lives in eager expectation and preparation for the appearing of our Lord, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13). St. Paul tells us that we are “to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Tim 6:14). How many movies scandalize us and are the occasion for falling away from God?

Imprudent friendships are another occasion for falling away from God. They are dangerous because the heart can fall in love and thus become divided and be in great anguish and agony. If one is celibate, he loses the benefit of his celibacy, which is having an undivided heart, reserved for the Lord alone. A person can lose all his peace on this dangerous road and be separated from God. A wise person will sacrifice imprudent friendships. It will be a difficult sacrifice, like the sacrifice of cutting off a hand, a foot, or plucking out an eye, but it is necessary in order to enter into life and protect the heart from this danger.

Another thing which is an occasion for falling away are useless trips, undertaken without need or purpose, but simply for the pleasure of wandering about, wasting time. This is also something that we have to sacrifice and cut off if we want to have an undivided heart in our relationship with God. This is why stability is one of the most important of monastic virtues and vows. The three ancient (and modern) monastic vows are: obedience, stability, and conversion of ways. Monks always live in same place and furthermore live there within a monastic enclosure or cloister in order not to go needlessly wandering about.

These then are some examples of the type of sacrifices that we have to make in order to keep ourselves from falling away from God and in order not to divide our heart among the good things of this creation, but rather keep it undivided, reserved for the Lord alone.

God is everywhere. He is also within our heart. Why then do so many people not experience him if he is in their heart? It is because they do not hide themselves with him in their heart, but rather are always outside, wandering about through the world and its pleasures. To experience God in the depth of our heart, we have to hide ourselves in our heart with him and leave the world and its pleasures, which distract us from him. We must sacrifice the pleasures and delights of the world and hide ourselves in silence and prayer.

Contemplative prayer is a whole way of life and includes every aspect of our life. It includes how we spend our time, and how we live in this world. It includes our whole lifestyle. It includes all the sacrifices that we have to make to be contemplatives. It includes cutting off our hand and foot and plucking out our eye that scandalize us. Contemplative prayer also includes hiding ourselves in silence with God, seated in darkness in the prayer of the heart. If we live in this way, we will experience God in the depth of our heart, and we will not have to wander about, looking for him outside.

So, “if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire” (Mk 9:43).
“Thus says the Lord God of hosts: Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness” (Zech 8:7-8).

This is God’s promise for the future of his people. Not only will the exiles return from Babylon, but from all parts of the earth—from the east and the west—and they shall come and return to Jerusalem. The Lord will restore Zion. “I will return to Zion,” he says, “and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain” (Zech 8:3).

Jerusalem shall be the dwelling place of the Lord on earth, in the midst of his people. I “will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem,” he says (Zech 8:3). He will dwell with us. He will be our Emmanuel, and therefore we shall have peace. God is the source of all peace, and with him dwelling with us in our midst, we will live in his peace. It will be a peace that will draw all peoples—not just Jews—to Jerusalem, to live with God. “Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of the Lord” (Zech 8:22).

On the day, “there shall be a sowing of peace; the vine shall yield its fruit, and the ground shall give its increase, and the heavens shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things” (Zech 8:12). We are now in the Messianic days, the days of the Messiah, the days of Jesus Christ dwelling with his people on earth. We have seen the beginning of this hope, and we now live in its fulfillment, awaiting the parousia of the Lord when he shall come with all his saints in great light and glory to fill every heart with his grace and splendor.

Then “the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk” (Joel 3:18). The sweetness of God shall be with his people, and God will fill them with peace. On that day, “many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 8:11). It will be a day of light and splendor, of happiness and peace. God will be with his people, and their hearts will rejoice in the Lord. Peace will reign on earth in the hearts of men, and the love of God will fill them. Let us, therefore, live in this peace. Let us love God with all our heart and serve our neighbor with love. Thus will we live in this Messianic blessing, this blessing of peace. We will live with God on earth, basking in his splendor and walking in his light. Let us live, therefore, in watchfulness for the Lord’s parousia in great light with all his saints when the mountains will drip sweet wine and the hills flow with milk.

We live now in hope for the Lord’s coming, but at the same time we are already living in the Messianic days, the days of the fulfillment of prophecy. May God’s peace fill our hearts which overflow with glad expectation for the coming of God to the earth to consummate all things in his glory!
BE PREPARED FOR THE FINAL TRUMPET

Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, Archangels, September 29
Dan 7:9-10,13-14; Ps 137; Jn 1:47-51

“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man” (Jn 1:51).

Today we celebrate the feast of the archangels. Angels are pure spirits without bodies that always serve and praise God. They constantly live in his presence and are sent to the earth as his messengers. When we die, we will see them in heaven with God, for God is surrounded by them, as we see in the beautiful vision of Daniel. Daniel says, “As I looked, thrones were placed and one that was ancient of days took his seat; his raiment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came forth from before him; and thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him” (Dan 7:9-10). These myriads that stand before him and serve him are angels. Angels will also be sent to us on the last day to call us to enter into the glory of God to contemplate him forever in splendor and light. We now await this great day of glory and light, and we diligently prepare for it.

We should, therefore, always be vigilant, always guarding ourselves from the world, always awaiting his coming, his parousia in great light with his angels, “For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each one for what he has done” (Mt 16:27). Justified by our faith and not by our works, we will be judged according to our works. Therefore, we must always be vigilant, for we do not know when he will come. We do not know when we will see him. We want to be prepared, awaiting his coming with eager expectation.

On that day, “the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mk 13:25-27).

So, we want to be in a constant state of preparation, for the Lord will come when we least expect him. We should, therefore, live in the spell of his coming and not lose ourselves in the worldliness of the world with its noise and distraction. We should reserve our heart for the Lord and guard it well, lest it become divided. We should even imagine the last trumpet of the archangel, calling the elect from the four winds, from the north and the south, from the east and the west, to enter into the Messianic banquet, where we will shine like the sun in the kingdom of our Father (Mt 13:43).

On that great day, “the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God” (1 Ts 4:16). May we be prepared for this now, watching and waiting and praying (Mk 13:33), always in a state worthy of that great day. Then “he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect” (Mt 24:31). Let us live now in such a way, that we will be among that number.
“See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 18:10).

Today we honor the guardian angels. We see in this scripture that each person has a guardian angel. Jesus speaks about the guardian angels of children, who “always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 18:10). We do not see angels because they do not have bodies, but each one of us has a guardian angel. Those who fear the Lord and take refuge in him have special angelic protection, for “The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them” (Ps 33:7). To him “who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, who abides in the shadow of the Almighty,” says the psalmist, “no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all you ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot” (Ps 90:1,10-13). The angels also present our prayer before God. “…and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God” (Rev 8:4). The angel Rafael told Tobit and Tobias, “when you and your daughter-in-law Sarah prayed, I brought a reminder of your prayer before the Holy One” (Tobit 12:12).

The angels were close to Jesus Christ. When he was born, “suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will” (Lk 2:13-14). In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said to his apostles, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Mt 26:53).

With all of this, we cannot doubt that the angels are especially present during the celebration of the eucharist when Jesus Christ is sacramentally present upon the altar and when the Christian community offers its prayer and official, public worship to God. We offer the holy Mass in the presence of innumerable angels, who venerate the body and blood of Jesus Christ, present on our altar, and “the angels of God [are] ascending and descending upon the Son of man” (Jn 1:51), presenting our prayers and supplications before the Father (Rev 8:4; Tobit 12:12). In the celebration of the Mass, we are in the presence of the holy angels, for in the eucharistic sacrifice, “you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering” (Heb 12:22). At this time we are not alone, even though we may be alone in celebrating the eucharist. We are in the presence of the holy angels, adoring God with us and presenting our petitions before him.
“For just as you have purposed to go astray from God, return with tenfold zeal to seek him. For he who brought these calamities upon you will bring you everlasting joy with your salvation” (Baruch 4:28-29).

The word of God is very clear when it teaches us that if we unloose God’s wrath by sinning, he will punish us; but if we fear him and remember his commandments and put them into practice, “the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting” (Bar 4:6-7; Ps 102:17-18). How we need to be reminded of this! If we have gone astray from God and from his will in something, and he has punished us; we should not despair, but rather be patient in our punishment and now, converted, seek him ten times more than before. If you do this, he promises that he “will bring you everlasting joy with your salvation” (Bar 4:29).

Sometimes, it is not fully clear to us exactly what God’s will for us is in a particular situation and, with a good intention; we can make a mistake and do the wrong thing. We discover that we made a mistake because we suddenly feel bad in our heart, feeling guilty, and losing our peace and joy of spirit. In this way, God teaches us his will with greater precision. At times, God does this to us even though we do not intend to offend or disobey him—that is, in situations when we are confused and uncertain as to what exactly his will for us is in some particular matter. And so through this painful experience, we learn and grow. It is like a child innocently touching a hot burner and getting burned learns not to do this in the future.

Baruch offers us consolation today in this kind of situation when we have made a mistake in something and hence feel bad, having lost our peace. “My children,” he says, “endure with patience the wrath that has come upon you from God … take courage, my children, and cry to God, for you will be remembered by him who brought this upon you” (Bar 4:25,27). He will forgive you if you “return with tenfold zeal to seek him” (Bar 4:28). So we should try ten times harder to seek him and, in the future, observe his will more precisely. If we do this, he will restore his peace and joy to our heart. Personified Jerusalem says to her sons, exiled for their sins, “I sent you out with sorrow and weeping, but God will give you back to me with joy and gladness for ever” (Bar 4:23). Your neighbors “soon will see your salvation by God, which will come to you with great glory and with the splendor of the Everlasting” (Bar 4:24).

Then, if we can remain in his will and not disobey him, we will live in the love and joy of God, for “the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments” (Ps 102:17-18). So it is, for “The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me” (Ps 17:20).
MARRIAGE AND CELIBACY IN GOD'S PLAN

27th Sunday of the Year
Gen 2:18-24; Ps 127; Heb 2:9-11; Mk 10:2-16

“But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one. So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder” (Mk 10:6-9).

This is God’s original plan for man and woman. This is why God created woman, saying, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18). The woman was created from Adam’s rib and is therefore, as Adam said, “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23). She was created after Adam, to be his helper, his assistant, one suitable for him, unlike the beasts of the field. She will live with the man, as one flesh with him, and will help him. The man is the head of his wife, and she is subject to him, just as Christ is the head of the Church, and the Church is subject to Christ. So does St. Paul teach us, saying, “Wives be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, his body … As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands” (Eph 5:22-24). Husbands, for their part, are to love their wives. “Husbands,” says St. Paul, “love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25).

This is the ideal, a good relationship of love between the spouses in which they behave well and live in faithfulness to each other and love. In such a situation, the wife will be happy to submit to her husband and be subject to him; and he will love and care for her. This is God’s plan for married people. It is what married people should try to live. Thus the wife will help her husband as an assistant appropriate for him. It is true that there are many problems in actual life, but this Biblical teaching orients us correctly so that we know what the ideal is in the eyes of God and then can try to live it, to the degree that this is possible.

But we also see here that St. Paul says that the relationship of the Church to Christ is like that of the wife to her husband. That is, our relationship with Christ is a nuptial relationship, and as such should be as exclusive as possible. We should love Christ as the only spouse of our soul. St. Paul says, “I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure virgin to her one husband” (2 Cor 11:2). Marriage is thus the model for our relationship with Christ.

Both married and single people should have this nuptial relationship with Christ, in which Christ is the only spouse of our soul. Married people do this together as a couple, and celibates do it as solitaries and can therefore have an even more exclusive nuptial relationship with Christ, as literally the only spouse of their soul. This is why celibacy for the kingdom of God is a higher calling than the vocation of marriage, as the Church has always taught—and still does teach. This is why St. Paul says, “the unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and he divided. And the unmarried woman or virgin is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and
spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her
husband” (1 Cor 7:32-34).

How beautiful also is this ideal of Jesus Christ and of the New Testament, the ideal of
those “who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt
19:12). It is another kind of marriage, a marriage with God, with Jesus Christ, in which
we reserve our heart for him alone and we guard it lest it become divided by the love for
another person or for a thing or for the pleasures of the world.

A celibate who falls in love with a woman has divided his heart and lost the
advantage of his celibacy, which is to have an even more radically undivided heart than
married people have, in his nuptial relationship with Jesus Christ. The ideal of celibacy
for the kingdom, of religious life, of priestly celibacy, is to have a nuptial relationship
with Jesus Christ that is radically exclusive, so that all the love of one’s heart can go only
to one’s only spouse, Christ. The celibate is not even divided by the love for a human
spouse in the sacrament of matrimony.

The celibate should also guard his heart from other divisions as well. If a celibate
dedicates himself to the pleasures of the world, he is divided. Hence a celibate should
live an austere and ascetical life, a life of simplicity and evangelical poverty, a life of
prayer and fasting. His delight is in prayer, the word of God, spiritual reading, lectio
divina, his spiritual studies, and his work for the Lord, his ministry. His delight is in
Jesus Christ, in his peace and love, in his light and splendor, in silence, in solitude, in
contemplation, and in love for his neighbor and service to him.

The celibate, therefore, should live apart from the world and its pleasures, noise,
superficiality, delicacies, and distraction. He wants to live recollected in Jesus Christ,
with the love of Christ burning in his heart, and thus be an example for others, someone
who uplifts and renews all things. People like this are oases in the desert, refreshment in
the heat, people who give life to all.

A RADICAL LIFE FOR GOD

Monday, 27th Week of the Year
Jonah 1:1-2:1,11; Jonah 2; Lk 10:25-37

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with
all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as your self” (Lk 10:27).

To love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength is the first and most
important commandment of Jesus Christ, as we clearly see in the gospels of St. Mark and
St. Matthew (Mk 12:30; Mt 22:36-37). This commandment should guide us in all that we
do, in our whole way of life; and the more radically we can follow it, the better, as God
guides us in our life. Hence, the Holy Spirit guides some to leave everything of this
world to follow Christ with all their heart and life as Jesus invited the rich young man to
do (Mt 19:21). This is the call to perfection, to a life of perfection in the service of God.
All are called to a life of perfection and to leave everything for the sake of Jesus Christ,
but some do so more radically than others, according to God’s guidance in their life.
The monastic life is the most radical way to observe this first commandment. The ideal of the monastic life is to live for God alone and leave the world and its pleasures behind. Monks therefore live within an enclosure (cloister), separate from the world and its pleasures, noise, and distraction. They live in silence and simplicity, without television, radio, or movies, and they live a life of continual fasting—that is, without meat or delicacies, eating but one full meal per day. This is the ideal. We see it in the Desert Fathers, in the life of St. Anthony of Egypt, and in the lives of St. Bernard and St. Bruno, for example. This is an ideal which challenges monks today if they have relaxed or forgotten the ideal of their life.

This is, furthermore, an ideal which can also inspire priests and religious. They live celibacy precisely because they want to live only for God in a radical way, with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength. They do not want to divide their heart with the love of a human spouse. They should not divide their heart with other unnecessary worldly pleasures either. They should furthermore live a life of prayer and fasting in the service of the Lord. They should be separate from the world and not lost in it. “...they are not of the world,” says Jesus, “even as I am not of the world” (Jn 17:14). They should not flick on the television the first thing in the morning, but rather reverence the first hours of the day, dedicating them to God in silence, prayer, vigils, the divine office, lectio divina, the celebration of the Mass, and contemplation after receiving Holy Communion. They should furthermore be recognizable, by their manner of dress, as distinct from the secular world, and thus give the witness of their way of life for the inspiration of the world. Then, they should dedicate themselves to their neighbor in charity by the offering of their life in service.

THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS SHALL RISE

Thursday, 27th Week of the Year
Mal 3:12-4:2; Ps 1; Lk 11:5-13

“But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall” (Mal 4:2).

This is a Messianic prophecy. In the days of the Messiah, those who fear the Lord and invoke his name with faith will receive what they ask for. The Sun of righteousness shall rise for them, “with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall” (Mal 4:2). Jesus tells us something similar today, saying, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Lk 11:13). He is the Messiah who rises for us like the Sun of righteousness and in his wings is the healing and salvation of our souls.

But what do we need to be healed from? From guilt and sadness of spirit, caused by having failed to fulfill our obligations and all that God wills of us. Christ came to heal us of this crippling sickness of the spirit. He came to destroy the reign of Satan and to free us from his power. St Mark tells us that Jesus “went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons” (Mk 1:39). And “The seventy returned with
joy, saying, Lord even the demons are subject to us in your name! And he said to them, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Lk 10:17-18). Christ is the stronger man who vanquishes the strong, fully armed man (Satan) who is guarding his palace. And Christ, the stronger man, takes away his armor, in which he trusted, and divides the spoil (Lk 11:21-22). Jesus interpreted his exorcistic action, saying, “if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Lk 11:20).

Christ is victorious over the powers of the devil, and he will give us the cure for our spirit that we long for and need. He gives it to us through his death and resurrection when we ask him. He died in our old nature so that, intimately united with him, we might die to our old man and old ways and rise with him, in a renewed nature, in the splendor of his resurrection, to walk in the newness of life (Rom 6:4) and live with him a risen life (Col 3:1-2) in the joy of the Holy Spirit. His death, furthermore, paid our debt of suffering in punishment for our sins, for he suffered alienation from God on the cross for us in order to free us from this suffering of alienation when we ask him with faith. He will give us this healing gift when we ask it of him through the merits of his death for us on the cross. Then we shall go forth leaping for joy and jubilation of spirit, like calves from the stall. So shall the Sun of righteousness rise for us, “with healing in its wings” (Mal 4:2). All we have to do is repent, change our ways, and ask him with faith; and then patiently await his response, which he will give us in his due time.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS IN THE MIDST OF YOU

Friday, 27th Week of the Year
Joel 1:13-15; 2:1-2; Ps 9; Lk 11:15-26

“But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Lk 11:20).

Jesus Christ is the vanquisher of Satan and his kingdom. His exorcisms demonstrate this. He casts out demons, the minions of Satan, and brings the kingdom of God into the world. In him, in his appearing and activity in the world, the reign of God breaks into the world for the salvation of man. It is by the power of God that he casts out demons, not by Beelzebul, for then Satan would be divided against himself. Jesus is the Messiah, and in him the reign of God is breaking into the world. The reign of God is a new state of peace in the world in which God, victorious in Christ over the powers of Satan, reigns in the hearts of men. He introduces a reign of light into the world and destroys the reign of sin and condemnation.

Christ frees us from the condemnation of the law by fulfilling the law for us in his obedient life and by suffering in his death the just punishment of the law for our sins, condemning sin in his own flesh (Rom 8:3). Having fulfilled the law for us, we are freed from the condemnation of the law to henceforth live in the freedom of the children of God, in peace with God, walking in the new light of Christ (Jn 8:12). Christ suffered our condemnation, so “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). Now, then, we walk according to the Spirit and no longer according to
the flesh. Now, justified by our faith in Jesus Christ, we keep the moral law for our sanctification, for we will be judged according to our works (Mt 16:27; Rom 2:6).

Jesus Christ has redeemed us so that we might walk in his light, in peace with God, freed from the attacks of our conscience. He vanquishes Satan and sin. His death destroys the kingdom of Satan, for Satan could not hold him since Christ was without sin and hence needed not die, for death is the punishment of sin (Gen 2:17). Christ casts out Satan, bursting his realm of the dead and freeing us from his power, so that we might live a new life in him, having risen with him in the power of his resurrection. His death destroyed our death and paid our punishment for sin, justifying us. In his resurrection, he clothed us with his justice and splendor, restoring our life and illuminating us with the light that streams from his resurrection. Freed from guilt by faith in him, we walk in his light (Jn 8:12). By being in Jesus Christ, we are in the reign of God, “for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Lk 17:21). “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed” (Lk 17:20). It is already in our midst.

THE HILLS SHALL FLOW WITH MILK

Saturday, 27th Week of the Year
Joel 3:12-21; Ps 96; Lk 11:27-28

“And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk” (Joel 3:18).

It is for these days that we now long and wait, and we have even begun to enjoy something of them already, ahead of time, in our life of faith. The life of faith shows itself in external works, in the way we live. It is a life of obedience to the will of God in every aspect of our life, in accord with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Each person has his own personal vocation, distinct from the rest, and if one obeys his personal guidance carefully, he will be blessed. For him, even the mountains will drip sweet wine and the hills flow with milk, for he lives in the spell of the Lord’s blessing.

Jesus says today, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it” (Lk 11:28). This was his answer to the woman who said, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked” (Lk 11:27). Even better than being Jesus’ mother is keeping the word of God. He said the same thing when they told him, “Your mother and your brethren are standing outside, desiring to see you. But he said to them, My mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8:20-21). We are like Jesus’ mother and brothers if we hear and do the word of God, for “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 7:21). “Every one then who hears these words of mind and does them,” Jesus says, “will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock” (Mt 7:24).

It is, at times, difficult to do the will of God, for we may be the only one who does it in a particular matter in our present environment and social pressure is against us and we have to swim against the current. But this is how we will give our witness, which is so needed by our contemporaries. When we give the witness required of us by God, he
recompenses us interiorly, and the mountains drip sweet wine and the hills flow with milk for us (Joel 3:18).

God recompenses us for our justice, as the psalmist says, “The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me. For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God … with the blameless man thou dost show thyself blameless” (Ps 17:20-21,25). God’s salvation and glory are near to those who fear him and do his will. They live in the spell of his presence, for “Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land” (Ps 84:9).

But we still long for the appearing of the glory of God, as we draw closer each day to the day of the Lord. We want to “keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ,” as St. Paul says in the Office of Readings today (1 Tim 6:14).

THE WORLDLINESS OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE, AND RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS

28th Sunday of the Year
Wisdom 7:7-11; Ps 89; Heb 4:12-13; Mk 10:17-30

“And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mk 10:21).

Here is the call to perfection. There is no one who can excuse himself and say that this does not apply to me. This text, in a certain sense, is for everyone. All are called to leave all and follow Jesus if they want to be perfect (Mt 19:21). But it is true that not all are called to do this in the same way. Yet, there are some who are called to follow Jesus Christ in this way, in this more literal and radical way. Among these are priests, religious, and especially monks. There are also many others who do not live in monasteries, are not ordained priests, and have not taken formal religious vows, but who nonetheless feel called to a more radical following of Jesus Christ in this way. So, in one way or another, this text applies to everyone, to every person who wants to follow Jesus, but it especially applies to priests and religious, to monks, and to those who feel called to a more radical kind of discipleship, to a life of detachment and divestment of self for sake of Jesus Christ.

Today we are suffering from a great falloff in priestly and religious vocations. Why has this come about? It may be because we are now economically more prosperous and more used to a luxurious life, a life filled with pleasures and delicacies. This has spoiled many. They have forgotten the virtues of a simple, austere, frugal life. Many have forgotten the beauty and spiritual importance of sacrifice, united to the sacrifice of Christ. They have forgotten the cross and its centrality in the Christian life. Many have forgotten that in dying, we live, that in dying to this world, we live for God. Many have also forgotten the beauty of a life dedicated to God, the beauty of a heart reserved for the Lord alone, without being divided by other loves, other things, and other pleasures. Many
have become worldly, people of the world, men of the world, connoisseurs of *la dolce vita*, experts in self-indulgence, persons whose lives are filled with diversions, vacations, entertainments, and recreations. Many have taken up a life of wandering about, tasting here and there the delights and pleasures of the world, wasting time, doing nothing of meaning or value in the eyes of God. They want to continuously distract themselves. Turning on the television is the first thing they do in the morning, instead of praying, meditating, doing *lectio divina*, and saying the divine office.

If this is our culture today, a pleasure culture, are we surprised that there are no priestly or religious vocations among our young people? In one sense, this falloff in religious vocations is a punishment from God for the worldliness of our contemporary culture. It is also the natural result to be expected from such a cultural orientation.

But in the midst of all this, we hear the voice of the gospel calling us to something more, calling us again to a life of perfection (Mt 19:21). “How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” Jesus says today (Mk 10:23). “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle,” he continues, “than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mk 10:25). The rich are those who are living a life of worldly pleasures. But those who leave the world for Christ will receive a hundred times more now in this time, with persecutions, and in the age to come, inherit eternal life (Mk 10:30). Those who are the first in this world, in their modern, prosperous, self-indulgent life, will be the last with God; while those who live a simple life and have renounced everything for the sake of Christ will be the first with God (Mk 10:31; 8:35; Jn 12:25).

How beautiful is this ideal which so many have forgotten—the ideal of the life of perfection, the ideal of leaving everything of this world for the sake of Jesus Christ! Those who live this way, who live the true ideal of the priesthood and religious or monastic life, know the spiritual beauty of this kind of life, reserving their hearts for the Lord alone and renouncing the unnecessary pleasures of this world. They have left a life of wandering about, looking for entertainments and diversions, and have rather discovered the importance of stability and of a quiet life of prayer, fasting, silence, concentration, solitude, spiritual reading and study, and silent, prayerful work. They have discovered a new life of serving but one Lord only (Mt 6:24) and of having but one treasure only, the Lord (Mt 6:19-21). They are trying to enter through the narrow gate of the few, not through the wide and easy gate of the many (Mt 7:13-14). They are losing their life in this world in order to truly find it (Mk 8:35; Jn 12:25). They renounce the pleasures, entertainments, and delicacies of this world in order to obtain the buried treasure and the pearl of great price (Mt 13:44-46). These are the blessed poor and poor in spirit that will inherit the kingdom of God (Lk 6:20; Mt 5:3), rather than the rich, who have already had their consolation (Lk 6:24; 16:25).

If we can rediscover these true, gospel values and live them, I believe that we will have also discovered the solution to the lack of priestly and religious vocations in our time. It is these values, lived by a community, which attract vocations, for this is the meaning of a priestly and religious vocation. But if our orders and societies of apostolic life do not live these values, how can we possibly expect to attract vocations?
“The men of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Lk 11:32).

Jesus condemns his generation because they are continually asking for a sign before they will believe in him. The citizens of Nineveh were better than they, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah. They were mere pagans, and yet they believed, while here is something greater than Jonah, and not even Jews believe. And what is it they should have believed? They should have believed that Jesus came from God to save them from their sins.

And you, who have seen his whole revelation, his death and resurrection, do you believe that he died for your sins, and that his death saves you from sin? If not, the men of Nineveh will condemn you too on the day of judgment.

Jesus Christ has brought us new life. He reconciled us with God, and through faith in him, God forgives our sins. Christ is the mediator between God and man. Through the sacrifice of his death on the cross, God can remain just and yet forgive our sins. His death manifests God’s justice, that is, that God is just even in forgiving our sins without imposing on us the just punishment for them. Christ died for us. He died our death, which we should have died in punishment for our sins. In doing so, he paid our just debt of suffering for our sins, showing that God is just, for he has required a just penalty for our sins. The result is that God forgives and justifies us and is just in doing so, for the just penalty has been paid by Jesus Christ. He was our substitute. He substituted for us with his vicarious sacrifice, which demonstrated that God is just. At the same time, this sacrifice justified us. Jesus Christ is the one “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins” (Rom 3:25). Even though he did not punish former sins, he is still just, because Christ suffered their just punishment for them.

Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He came into the world to do this. Those who believe in him, believe this. They believe that he has done this, and as a result they are forgiven and justified through his merits on the cross; and henceforth they have a new life in him. We die to sin in his death, and we rise, justified in his resurrection. Thus does he give a new life to all who believe this.

But there are still many who do not believe this even though they call themselves Christians. They are the ones who will be condemned at the judgment by the men of Nineveh. They have seen much more than the citizens of Nineveh and they call themselves Christians but they do not believe in the vicarious death of Jesus Christ on the cross. They do not believe that he substituted for us so that we might be freed from the condemnation of the law. They do not believe that we are made a new creation in his blood. Are you among this group?
“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law (Rom 3:21) … the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe (Rom 3:22) … since all have sinned (Rom 3:23) … they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Rom 3:24), whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins (Rom 3:25); it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:26) … For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law (Rom 3:28) … since God is one, he will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith (Rom 3:30). Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law” (Rom 3:31).

These sentences from the first reading, given here in literal translation, are the most important theological sentences ever written. St. Paul teaches us here that the justice which makes us just has been manifested apart from the law (Rom 3:21) and apart from our good works according to the law (Rom 3:28). This justifying justice of God comes “through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Rom 3:22). God sends us this justification because all have sinned (Rom 3:23) and have failed to become just through their own good works according to the law. God, therefore, justifies us now as a free gift through his grace, ransoming us through Jesus Christ (Rom 3:24). Jesus Christ is the means God used for this, the one who propitiated God by means of his blood.

Christ was a propitiatory sacrifice to placate the wrath of God against our sins. He propitiated God in that he suffered in our place the punishment due to us for our sins. It is the Triune God himself who initiated this means of propitiating his own righteous wrath in his love for us.

In his sacrifice, Jesus Christ manifests that God is truly just even through “he had passed over former [Old Testament] sins” (Rom 3:25) without adequately punishing them. But it is now clear that God was righteous in passing over Old Testament sins, because he now justly expiates them in the death of Christ. In Christ’s sacrifice, God proves “at the present time that he himself is righteous” (Rom 3:26) by now fully and adequately expiating all former sins in the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Hence Christ manifests that God is both “righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26). All are justified in this way, both Jews and Gentiles (Rom 3:30). Hence the law is not overthrown but upheld (Rom 3:31), for the law’s just penalty for sin was paid by Christ’s death on the cross.

We see that we are actually made just by God through our faith, not just declared to be just, for it is God who justifies. We are regenerated, born again, and made a new creation (2 Cor :17) by the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

God is the primary person reconciled and propitiated by this sacrifice that is offered to him. God is always a God of love. It is the Trinity itself who, in love, put forth this method of redeeming us. But God’s love does not cancel out his justice, which had to be propitiated in this way.
JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH RENEWS US INTERIORLY

Friday, 28th Week of the Year
Rom 4:1-8; Ps 31; Lk 12:1-7

“For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Rom 4:3).

Here we see that justification by faith and not by works according to the law was the method of salvation even before the birth of Christ, for Abraham was justified not by his works but by his faith—that is, by his faith in God and in God’s promise. “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Rom 4:3; Gen 15:6).

We see that we can only boast of Jesus Christ and not of our own works in this matter of being justified, because justification comes from him and not from us. This justification changes us interiorly and transforms us, forgiving our sins and clothing us with the glory of Christ. It gives us peace with God, peace of conscience. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1).

Justification comes from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and applies to us when we believe in him. It especially comes to us through the sacraments (baptism and penance). It gives an interior freedom from sin and from guilt. It erases our great suffering of guilt for our sins and imperfections. And since we continue to fall into imperfections, we have to be justified anew repeatedly, even daily, always asking God anew for forgiveness for our new imperfections and using the sacraments which Christ has given us for this purpose.

When God justifies us through the merits of Jesus Christ, our guilt is transferred to Christ, while his righteousness is imputed to us. His grace is infused in us. In his justification, God does not set aside his law, but rather declares that its requirements have been fulfilled for us in the death of Christ, who paid our debt for us. And so we can go forth absolved and freed from all sin and all sense of guilt.

Our faith is the medium through which we receive this gift of justification. We have to confess our sins and ask for this gift through the merits of Jesus Christ on the cross, especially in the sacrament of penance. It is the merits of Christ that justify us, not the virtue of our faith. Our faith is only the means by which we receive and accept what the merits of Christ have gained for us.

Once we have received justification, we can grow even more in it through our good works according to the law. This is the process of sanctification; and on the last day, we will be judged according to our works (Mt 16:27).

Through justification by faith, we walk in the splendor of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, at peace with God in our heart, as a new creature, a new man, one who has been born again.
YOU ARE LIGHTS IN THE WORLD—DO NOT BE ASHAMED

Saturday, 28th Week of the Year
Rom 4:13,16-18; Ps 104; Lk 12:8-12

“And I tell you, every one who acknowledges me before men, the Son of man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but he who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God” (Lk 12:8-9).

How important it is to confess Christ in the world and not be ashamed of him and of our faith in him in this world and before nonbelievers! God put us in the world for this, to be his witnesses. Christ sent us out to proclaim the gospel and give witness before men. “As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world,” Jesus said in prayer to his Father about his apostles (Jn 17:18). And to his disciples, he said, “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (Jn 10:21). During his ministry, Jesus “sent them [his disciples] out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal” (Lk 9:2).

We proclaim the gospel and preach Christ by our words and by the way we present ourselves and behave in the world, before those who observe us. There are many who, more than anything else, just want to blend in with their surroundings and with everyone else and live like everybody else. They do not want to be different or stand out in any way. They fear being different than the majority and do not want to swim against the current. They are often ashamed of their faith in public and do not want to be known or recognized as Christians or as priests or religious. They want to be anonymous. They disguise themselves, dressing like secular people, so as not to give witness to their faith and their consecration to God. They are embarrassed to be known as priests or religious in public places. But “whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mk 8:38).

It is not only with our words and sermons that we give witness to Christ. Our life, our type of consecration to God, and our way of living it out will always be our first and most important sermon and our best witness. We should not put our light under a basket, but on a stand that it might enlighten all that are in the house (Mt 5:15).

We should live as the Holy Spirit guides us; and if this guidance makes us different from others, we should not be ashamed of this difference or refuse to follow the Spirit’s guidance. Our difference will be our own particular witness that God has given us for the edification of others. Our ideal should not be just to blend in with the rest or to not stick out or stand out in any way, but rather to give witness to Jesus Christ. Thus you will be “blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil 2:15). This is your vocation—to be lights in the world. Do not be ashamed of it.
“For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).

Here we have the great text which presents Jesus Christ as the ransom for many. The first reading also speaks of this. It says, “It pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed … by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities” (Is 53:10-11 KJV). For this, God became incarnate in the world—that is, the Son of God, equal to the Father in divinity, assumed a human nature to be able to suffer “the wages of sin,” which is death (Rom 6:23). God said to Adam, “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:17). Truly, “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). It is precisely this death which God became incarnate in Jesus Christ to suffer for us in order to ransom us from it, for this death is the obstacle which separates us from God. This is a death which is spiritual as well as physical—the separation of the soul from God. It would also be an eternal death if God, in the person of his Son, had not died it for us and instead of us, freeing us from the eternal death of hell.

It was because we were involved in death because of our sins and because of Adam’s sin that God, in Jesus Christ, his Son, died it for us. Death (physical, spiritual, and eternal) is the punishment for sin (the sin of Adam and our personal sins). God himself, in Jesus Christ, died our death, which separates us from him, thus enabling us to enter into communion with him—since the great obstacle to this communion (death) has now been removed. This is why Jesus Christ came into the world. He did not come “to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).

The Father was pleased with his beloved Son as he died this death for us on the cross (Is 42:1). The Son bore our punishment, died our death, and thus freed us from the death of sin, giving us the freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:23). He was “an offering for sin” (Is 53:10). He expiated our sins on the cross by accepting responsibility for them and by paying their debt, suffering their penalty, which was to die for them.

We therefore should now live a new life, not only forgiven, but also changed and transformed, a life which renounces sin and lives in the love of God. Through the death of Jesus Christ, the Father justifies us, that is, makes us just and righteous, regenerated persons, born again through faith in him. We rise in his resurrection to walk in the newness of life (Rom 6:4), in the light that streams from the risen Christ. His death substituted before the Father for our death, which we would have died had he not died it for us; and his resurrection gave us a new life in the light (Jn 8:12; 1 Peter 2:9).

Jesus Christ is also our ransom in that he died without having to die, for he was without sin, and death is only for sinners and those who have original sin on their souls, such as infants, who have no personal sins, but still die because they have original sin. Christ had neither original sin nor personal sins, yet he nonetheless died. That is, he died unjustly. He should not have died. Satan had no rights over him and no right to hold him in Hades, the abode of the dead, and so when he descended into Hades, he burst it open.
and freed its captives, leading them with him to heaven (Eph 4:8,9; 1 Peter 3:19). He was the ransom God gave to Satan to burst Sheol open upon his arrival there. Christ therefore is the vanquisher of Satan, death, and the dwelling of the dead. He is Christus Victor.

The cross of Jesus Christ is, furthermore, for us who were ransomed by it, the model for our new way of life, dead and risen in Jesus Christ. We are now to live the mystery of the cross, offering ourselves to the Father with Jesus Christ by the sacrifice of ourselves. Hence, “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:43-45). We are to live intimately united with Christ and according to the very pattern of his life, which is a life crucified to the world and sacrificed to the Father in love, a life poured out in love. We normally do this by offering ourselves in the service of others, being the servants and slaves of all.

DEAD FOR OUR SINS, AND RISEN FOR OUR JUSTIFICATION

Jesus Christ “was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25).

This verse expresses the essence of the gospel, the proclamation of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. In Christ’s death is our new life, freed from sin and the pain of guilt. His death is the medicine that heals our guilty conscience, cleansing it, and giving us peace. This is the salvation that God sent to man after his sin, which separated him from God and put him into darkness, sadness, and depression, from which he could not extricate himself. Jesus Christ is the Savior whom God sent to us to free us from this pit into which we had fallen and become lost. Jesus Christ died for our transgressions (Rom 4:25) so that we might not remain in them, so that we do not stay lost, sunk in guilt and depression. He saves us from these transgressions and this guilty conscience through his death on the cross, by which he accepted our suffering of alienation from God and suffered it himself, abandoned by his Father. He died feeling abandoned by and alienated from his Father, crying out from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34). Thus did he take our sins away and free us from them by his death. He suffered vicariously for us, in this way freeing those who believe in him from their sins, for he paid our debt of suffering for them. He suffered our penalty in our place. Thus did he justify us—that is, thus did he make us righteous and holy.

Christ then rose from the dead to live a new and glorified life, in his glorified humanity, seated at the right hand of his Father. But being risen, he also remains with us so that we might rise with him to walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4). We, therefore, walk in his light, in the light and splendor that streams from his risen body. The light of his resurrection illuminates us. We rise with him for a new and risen life, in the midst of this old world, so that we might be witnesses to the new creation in Jesus Christ, dead and
risen; and so that we might shine as lights “in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation” (Phil 2:15).

Our justification comes from the vicarious death of Jesus Christ on the cross; and his resurrection is the sign that his death was successful—that is, that it was accepted by the Father, in place of our death, as due punishment for our sins. In this sense, his resurrection manifests that we are justified by his death. His resurrection shows that his death saved and justified us, and therefore we can say with St. Paul that he rose for our justification (Rom 4:25).

LIVING IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Thursday, 29th Week of the Year
Rom 6:19-23; Ps 1; Lk 12:49-53

“I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once yielded your members to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now yield your members to righteousness for sanctification” (Rom 6:19).

We are called to a new form of living in this world. We now live—because of our faith in Jesus Christ—for the reign of God. The prophecies of peace and unity are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and we now live, through faith, in the kingdom of God, the kingdom of God’s love, the reign of the peace of heaven, descended to the earth in Jesus Christ. It is a kingdom of universal peace over the whole earth, instituted by God himself in the coming of his Son into the world to renew it. Jesus Christ preached the kingdom of God and brought it into the world. This kingdom is in the midst of us and within us if we believe in Christ. Christ justifies and renews us, shining in our hearts, putting in us the great desire to walk in his splendor and in the magnificence of his heavenly peace over the whole earth. To do this, once justified by him, we must rise with him to a new and risen life, to live in a new way in this world, living in holiness, in the light, walking in his splendor, serving God in righteousness.

We must leave behind a life of sin and avoid even our imperfections which put us into darkness; and in every aspect of our life, present our members to serve righteousness and to love and serve our neighbor. “For this is the will of God, your sanctification … For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness” (1 Ts 4:3,7). We are called to holiness. This is what we should now be about, sanctifying ourselves in Jesus Christ, in his righteousness, walking in his light, avoiding all sin, and growing day by day in his great love. We are to live in his reign of universal peace on earth and spread his love to all we can reach.

This is to live in the kingdom of God on earth. It is to live with our loins girded and our lamps burning (Lk 12:35), hoping for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Living in the kingdom of God on earth is living in God’s peace, in his splendid light, in the light that streams from his resurrection, in hope for his coming in glory with all his holy ones. If we live in hope and eager expectation for this, sanctifying ourselves more each day, doing his will, and avoiding all sin, we are living in his kingdom. This is to live in another dimension, in the spell of his coming, in the universal peace of his kingdom. It is
to live in a new world, in a new creation, as new men, with God’s peace in our hearts. It is to live for the glory of God and the transformation of the world into the kingdom of his peace and light.

THE MESSIANIC TIMES HAVE ARRIVED

Friday, 29th Week of the Year
Rom 7:18-25; Ps 118; Lk 12:54-59

“You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” (Lk 12:56).

Even in the Old Testament, Israel began to long and hope for something more than just an earthly and political salvation. They longed for a definitive in-break from heaven that would save Israel and renew the earth (Is 65:17). This Messianic time has now begun with the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. He is the Messiah and brought the kingdom of God into the world. His exorcisms and healing miracles were the signs of its arrival. “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons,” he said, “then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Mt 12:28). We now live in the time of the fulfillment of prophecy that a reign of peace would extend throughout the world. We live in the heavenly peace that has come upon the earth in the birth of Christ. This reign of God gives glory to God in the highest and on earth brings peace and good will to men, as the angels sang at Christ’s birth (Lk 2:14). We now live in this reign of peace and so should recognize its signs, as Jesus says today, saying, “You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” (Lk 12:56).

The kingdom’s signs were Jesus’ exorcisms and healings, as he noted in reference to John the Baptist when John sent to ask Jesus, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another? And Jesus answered them, Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me” (Mt 11:3-6).

The kingdom of God in this world has begun with the presence of Jesus Christ in our midst and will be complete at his second coming in glory on the clouds of heaven. We now live in between these two comings, hoping for the second coming with eager expectation and joyful preparation.

Jesus Christ justifies us by his death and illuminates us by his resurrection in order that we might walk in his splendor and light, giving glory to God in the highest and spreading his peace on earth to our neighbor (Lk 2:14). We live in the reign of God; and the kingdom of God—his reign—is within us, and in the midst of us. So “The kingdom of God cometh not with observation,” as Jesus said: “Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, Lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (Lk 17:20-21 KJV). It is a reign of heavenly peace on earth that transforms us and the earth into the new creation, which coexists with the old creation until the day of his coming, “For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of man be in his
day” (Lk 17:24). Now, then, is the time for living a new kind of life in this world while awaiting his coming in glory. We are to live as new men, justified by Jesus Christ, made resplendent with his light, as lights for the rest.

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

Saturday, 29th Week of the Year
Rom 8:1-11; Ps 23; Lk 13:1-9

“To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Rom 8:6).

We have a new way of living in Jesus Christ. We are no longer to live according to the flesh, occupying ourselves with the flesh and its desires, which is death; rather, our new life in Jesus Christ is a life of faith, in which we renounce the old way of life according to the flesh and live henceforth according to the Spirit of God.

It is God who freed us from the condemnation of the law for our sins. God sent “his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin” (Rom 8:3), as a sin offering, a sacrifice for sin, and thus “he condemned sin in the flesh” of Jesus Christ on the cross (Rom 8:3). He did this “in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:4). In other words, by suffering and dying on the cross, Jesus Christ condemned sin in his own flesh, thus fulfilling the just requirement of the law for us, which is death in payment for our sins.

But St. Paul then says that this just requirement of the law was fulfilled for us, “who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:4). This is our part, our cooperation with the work of Christ. Once freed by him from the law, from the punishment of the law for our sins, and from our sins by the death of Christ on the cross, we must then actively cooperate with this justification by renouncing our old way of living according to the desires and pleasures of the flesh and live now and henceforth in the Spirit, according to the new way of life in the Spirit.

The way of life according to the flesh is death. This means living for pleasure, living in the unnecessary pleasures of this world, which divide our heart from an undivided love, reserved for the Lord alone. If we continue living like this after being redeemed by Christ, we will live as enemies of God (Rom 8:7), for “those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom 8:8). That is, those who live according to the flesh cannot please God.

Today, Jesus calls us to conversion, saying, “unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Lk 3:3). We are like a tree. If we do not bear good fruit; that is, if we continue living as before—according to the flesh and its desires—we will be cut down (Lk 13:9). Now, then, is the time to repent and change your way of living. It is the time to renounce worldly pleasures and live henceforth for God alone with all your heart, with an undivided heart, a heart reserved for him alone.

This is the meaning of no longer living according to the flesh, but rather according to the Spirit, for we have been freed from the punishment of the law and from sin for this new way of living in the world.
“And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mk 10:47).

This blind beggar, Bartimaeus, who is begging Jesus to have mercy on him, is an example of us all. We are this blind beggar, begging Jesus for help. We know interiorly, as this beggar knew, that Jesus is the answer to our needs, that he is the solution to our problem. We know that he, and only he, can solve our great problem. We may have various problems, but we have one central problem in our life that is more important and serious than any other problem, and we know that Jesus, and only Jesus, can solve it. We furthermore know that he wants to solve it and will solve it if we but ask him. Therefore we are now sitting by the side of the road; and hearing that Jesus is near, we cry out to him in our desperation and need. And he hears us and grants our request.

What is our problem, and what is the solution that Jesus gives us? Our problem is the blindness of our spirit so that so often we cannot clearly see the light of day and the beauty of the world and of life, and we do not experience it in our heart, but are rather overcome with sadness and depression. We cannot always see the goodness of God, and we do not always feel his love, light, peace, and happiness in our spirit. How often do we lose our peace, our happiness, our joy in being alive? Very often. And why do we lose our peace and happiness so often? It is because of our imperfections, things that we know God wants of us, but try as we may, we continually fail to do what we know God wants us to do. Jesus calls us to be perfect (Mt 5:48; 19:21). Yet we fail again and again even when we are fully aware of what he is asking of us and are fully concentrating on doing it with all our strength. We fail so many times, and therefore we lose our peace.

As a result, we fall into a type of blindness of spirit, a depression of spirit. We fall into a kind of despair. We despair that we will be able to do the will of God. We see that we lack the power to successfully do his will.

Yet, as we grow spiritually, we see that our imperfections become smaller and smaller—we see that we are indeed making progress. We are no longer failing in great things, but rather in very tiny matters—not mortal sins or serious matters—yet even so, these small failures still depress us and rob us of our peace, putting us into a deep sadness of spirit, for we are now far more spiritually sensitive than we once were, and so smaller things now trouble us much more.

We know that we are making progress, but we also know that these small imperfections, which most people would not even notice or even recognize as imperfections, so small are they—we know that they overwhelm and depress us, even at times bringing us near to despair, for we do not see how we can extricate ourselves from this situation of repeatedly failing in what we know to be God’s will for us and repeatedly failing, as a consequence, into this pit of depression. We fail to be perfect, even though Jesus said, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Mt 5:48 KJV).
So what should we do? What is the solution to this problem of sadness, blindness, and depression? We are reduced to being like Bartimaeus, sitting beside the road, crying out with him, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mk 10:47).

And what did Jesus do? He called him, in front of everyone, and gave him what he requested. And what will he do for us? He will do the same. And how do we know this? We know this because it is written in the Bible, the inspired word of God. We also know this because in our own past experience, Jesus always treated us in this way whenever we asked him. He did not always cure us immediately, however, for it is good for us, in God’s plan, that we suffer a bit of this blindness for the sake of our purification and spiritual growth. But if we are Christians, we know that he cured us each time that we asked him.

So we do what Bartimaeus did, and we see that Jesus cures us through our faith in him. He cures our soul. He opens our eyes. He heals our spiritual blindness, he forgives our sins and imperfections and restores our peace and joy of spirit. Once again we are able to see the beauty of the world and of his love and the goodness of life, with him dwelling in our heart, illuminating it and filling us with his light and splendor. We walk in his light in the newness of life (Rom 6:4), in the light of his resurrection. We live a risen life with the risen Christ. Our sins and imperfections are forgiven through his death on the cross, where he suffered this depression for our sins to save us from it. And he now gives us new joy in our heart. Indeed, “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy” (Ps 125:5 KJV).

MORTIFY THE DEEDS OF THE BODY

Monday, 30th Week of the Year
Rom 8:12-17; Ps 67; Lk 13:10-17

“So then, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live” (Rom 8:12-13).

Jesus Christ frees us from our infirmity so that we can stand up straight, as he did today to the woman who was bent over for eighteen years (Lk 13:11-13). God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of sonship, making us adopted sons of God in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, and giving us the power to call God, “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15). This is the salvation of God which Jesus Christ brings us, making us children of God, having a new life, divine life, in us. Thus do we enter into the kingdom of God here on earth, the kingdom of heavenly peace over the whole face of the earth. In his kingdom, we live in a new dimension, in intimacy with God and in love for our neighbor. The kingdom of God begins now for those who are in Christ Jesus, saved and justified by him through faith. They live now, already, ahead of time, in a kingdom of brotherly love, in a new creation, as new creatures, new men, who have ceased to live according to their old man. They have put off their old man and have renewed themselves in the spirit of their mind and have put on the new man (Eph 4:22-24).
Being made new like this, God has given us a new way of living in the world as citizens of the new world, of the new creation, as new creatures. It is to live no longer for the pleasures of the flesh, but rather to mortify the deeds of the body, “for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live” (Rom 8:13).

What are the deeds of the body that we need to mortify? They are many! First of all, they are our passions and deceitful desires. Secondly, they are our desires for unnecessary pleasure in worldly things that divide our heart and waste our time and energy so that we no longer have an undivided heart in our love for God. “For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Gal 6:8). “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24). “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other” (Gal 5:16-17). So “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). Therefore, “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom 13:14). Hence, a Christian will live an austere and ascetic life, only for the Lord, and will renounce worldly pleasures. He will be happy to live in this new way, for it is kingdom living. It is the life of the new man, of the new creation, of the kingdom of God on earth, where all the love of one’s heart is focused on God and the service of one’s neighbor. It is to live now, already, ahead of time, in the heavenly peace of the kingdom of God on earth, giving glory to God on high (Lk 2:14).

CHRIST INTERCEDES FOR US WITH THE FATHER

Thursday, 30th Week of the Year
Rom 8:31-35,37-39; Ps 108; Lk 13:31-35

“If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all … who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us?” (Rom 8:31-32,34).

We have many enemies in this world and in this life, who are against us, who disturb us. But our greatest enemy of all is our own sin, which makes us feel guilty and robs us of our peace. But against all this, the Bible tells us today that Christ is for us, and God is for us. In fact, God did not even “spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32). He died and rose for us and is moreover now “at the right hand of God” where he “intercedes for us” (Rom 8:34).

Hence, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. He vanquishes even sin, our greatest enemy of all. He overcomes the pain in our heart caused by guilt, which darkens and saddens our spirit. We only need to invoke him with faith. This is why Christ came into the world. “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,” says St. Paul (1 Cor 15:3). He died instead of us and in our place to redeem us from the death of our spirit for having sinned. Therefore, “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom 8:31).
Even if we do have to suffer a little the attacks or annoyances of other people or have to suffer from our own guilt for having sinned or fallen into an imperfection that robs us of our peace—if we confide in the salvation of Jesus Christ, he will restore our peace and even increase it, so that it becomes greater than it was before.

Through his sacrifice on the cross, Christ propitiated the just wrath of God against us for our sins, and he now intercedes for us with the Father. And all this was at the initiative of the Father himself. The Letter to the Hebrews says that Christ “is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25). And in Romans 8:34, St. Paul says that Christ “intercedes for us.” Again, in Hebrews 9:24, the author says the same thing—namely, that “Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.”

We have an intercessor, constantly presenting himself for us before the Father, interceding for us. And how we need it! Jesus Christ is our great Savior and hope in our necessity, in our anguish. In him we have an advocate working for us with the Father to help us, as St. John affirms, “My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation (hilasmos) for our sins” (1 Jn 2:1-2). With him we have confidence before God, and we can live in hope.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS HERE

Friday, 30th Week of the Year
Rom 9:1-5; Ps 147; Lk 14:1-6

“Which of you, having an ass or an ox that has fallen into a well, will not immediately pull him out on a sabbath day?” (Lk 14:5).

The kingdom of God, which the Jews so long awaited, came at last upon the earth in the birth of Jesus Christ, bringing heavenly peace into the world for all who believe in him. All his miracles and healings are signs, indicating the arrival of the kingdom of God on earth. Today, Jesus heals a sick man on the sabbath. What better day could there be than the sabbath for doing this. It is the day dedicated to God.

The kingdom of God in Jesus Christ is the answer to all our needs. It brings us healing of our heart, so wounded by our sins and imperfections. No one considers himself more needful of this healing than the great saints who experienced themselves as great sinners. Jesus Christ calms the turbulence of our heart, heals our guilt, and gives us the peace that we so long for and need in this old world, so full of pits, into which we continually fall for lack of attention. How often do we inadvertently fall into these pits in our road without even realizing it at the time! But then, afterwards, we recognize that we have once again failed, and so we again feel guilty and far from the peace of God in our heart, the peace that we so long for and desire. So do we see our need for the salvation that God has sent into the world in his Son, Jesus Christ.

It is Christ that pulls us out of the pit of our depression. It is he that heals the pain in our heart and gives us the peace with God that we so desire. It is he, in short, that makes
us happy once again with the happiness of God. It is he that invites us to enter into and live in the kingdom of God, in the spell of his love, with him illuminating our heart, shining within us. It is he, and only he, that forgives our imperfections. Nothing of this world can satisfy our heart except him and the joy and happiness of his kingdom. He wants us to enter into his kingdom and live there, forgiven and reconciled with God. It is his death on the cross that achieves our reconciliation with God; for on the cross, he suffered all the alienation from God that we suffer when we fail to fulfill his will. He suffered this to free us from this suffering of heart, for he suffered what we should have suffered for our sins.

We can thus live in the kingdom of God, forgiven, cleansed, and reconciled with God. We can then share with our neighbor this salvation, this good news, preaching Christ to him, and showing him the way of life. We will then live in God’s kingdom of peace on earth, giving glory to God in the highest. The rest of our life should be spent in bringing this peace of the kingdom of God to others, sharing with them the riches we have discovered in Christ.

THE ETHICS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Saturday, 30th Week of the Year
Rom 11:1-2,11-12,25-29; Ps 93; Lk 14:1,7-11

“But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, Friend go up higher; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you” (Lk 14:10).

This is the new ethics of the kingdom of God. It is the opposite of the ethics of the world. In the world, one tries to promote oneself, to become famous for one’s own glory, honor, and prestige. But in the kingdom of God, one tries to say the truth that the world needs to hear but does not want to hear. In this way, one humbles oneself, saying and writing things that are not popular, things that the world in fact despises, but that are true and important, for they come from God’s revelation for the world’s salvation.

In the kingdom of God, one presents oneself humbly, dressed simply, not prestigiously according to the latest fashion of the world. If one is a priest or a religious, he will dress with all humility and simplicity as a priest or religious, something which is disdained by the world, for religious dress signifies the renunciation of the pleasures of the world and of human life for the sake of the kingdom of God and of the new creation.

In the kingdom of God, one eats simply and without adornment, only to sustain life, not for indulgence in the pleasures of the world. One eats austerely and ascetically, renouncing worldly delights so that the Lord be the only pleasure of our life, and so that our heart be undivided in our love for him. In the world, everything is the opposite of this, for there, one lives rather for pleasure, honor, prestige, popularity, and power.

In the kingdom of God, it is evangelical poverty that is honored, and one desires to live in silence and solitude, a life of prayer and fasting, not a life of show and ostentation. One tries to be honest, faithful, and a believer in God and in Jesus Christ, doing the will of God, and dedicating oneself to the conversion and salvation of the world.
In the world, everything is the reverse of this. There, one wants to be popular. One wants to please the majority, to say what the world wants to hear, and thus be loved by the world. Since the sons and daughters of the kingdom do not behave in this way, they are hated by the world, as was Christ, St. Paul, and the prophets. “If you were of the world,” Jesus said, “the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (Jn 15:19). In the world, one exalts oneself and will therefore be humbled by God. In the kingdom of God, one confesses one’s sins and imperfections in all humility and depends on God for his justification and forgiveness through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, and therefore is exalted by God. “For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk 14:11). Let us, therefore, live the life of the new man according to the ethics of the kingdom of God.

THE SAINTS ARE THOSE WHO ARE OBEDIENT AND PERSECUTED IN THIS WORLD

All Saints Day, November 1
Rev 7:2-4,9-14; Ps 23; 1 Jn 3:1-3; Mt 5:1-12

“If you were of the world,” Jesus said, “the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (Jn 15:19). In the world, one exalts oneself and will therefore be humbled by God. In the kingdom of God, one confesses one’s sins and imperfections in all humility and depends on God for his justification and forgiveness through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, and therefore is exalted by God. “For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk 14:11). Let us, therefore, live the life of the new man according to the ethics of the kingdom of God.

We want to follow and imitate the saints and share their reward in heaven. If this is your intention and if you follow through on it, your life will be like theirs. You will not be accepted by the world because your life will faithfully follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit will direct you in ways that are new and strange to the world. The world will say of you, “He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange” (Wisdom 2:14-15). This will be your vocation if you want to be one of God’s saints in this world. Indeed, a time will come when “you will be hated by all for my name’s sake,” said Jesus. “But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Mt 10:22). “They will put you out of the synagogues,” said Jesus; “indeed the hour is coming when
whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do this because 
they have not known the Father, nor me” (Jn 16:2-3). Such will be your life also in this 
world if you wish to be a saint. Such was the life of the saints. Such was the life of 
Jesus; and St. Paul, his faithful follower, had the same experience.

The world cannot understand the life of a saint. But this persecution sanctifies him all 
the more, so that he may have a splendid reward in heaven, dressed in white robes, with a 
palm branch in his hand. This is the daily cross of the saint; and Jesus said, “If anyone 
would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” 
(Lk 9:23).

The saint’s life is like this because he has renounced the world. He has chosen the 
way of evangelical poverty, renouncing the pleasures of the world like the man who 
discovered the hidden treasure and sold all he had in order to be able to buy the field 
containing the treasure and thus gain possession of the treasure. The treasure is the 
kingship of God, for the sake of which we must renounce everything else if we wish to 
obtain it.

So we renounce a life of indulgence and pleasure in order to obtain the kingdom of 
God. The world can neither understand nor accept such behavior. It looks at us as 
though we were crazy. We also renounce many worldly customs to be able to live in 
much silence and prayer, and the world cannot accept that either. Furthermore, we 
embrace the beatitudes, especially poverty, sacrificing worldly pleasures; and the world 
cannot understand or accept that. The saint, therefore, is persecuted in this world. He is 
rejected by the world. Yet he is doing the will of God, and so St. Peter asks us, “Now 
who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right? But even if you do suffer 
for righteousness’ sake,” he adds, “you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be 
troubled” (1 Peter 3:13-14).

This is how God has tested and purified his saints. “God tested them and found them 
worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt 
offering he accepted them. In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will 
run like sparks through the stubble” (Wisdom 3:5-7). “Then the righteous will shine like 
the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43). The saints are those who are wise— 
“And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who 
turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever” (Dan 12:3).

It is for this splendor that we now live, for then we shall see God as he is and be like 
him, and so we purify ourselves now, for he is pure (1 Jn 3:2-3). Hence, we are poor now 
and poor in spirit, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). But those who are of 
the world and live lives of indulgence and pleasure shall be told that they have already 
had their consolation (Lk 6:24; 16:25). The way of evangelical poverty is the way of the 
saints in this world. Their way is also the way of obedience to the will of God even if 
this causes them to be persecuted in this world. But “Blessed are those who are 
persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for there is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:10).
“I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (Jn 11:25-26).

We do not live only for this present life. We have been created for more than only this terrestrial life in this old world, in this present age. We have been created for the kingdom of God, to enter into this kingdom even now in the midst of this present, old age. This is why Jesus Christ came into the world. He came to bring us the kingdom of God, the Messianic age, the age of the fulfillment of prophecy. In the birth of Christ, the kingdom of God began, and all that believe in him enter into this kingdom of peace with God and reconciliation with their neighbor. In this kingdom, God renews our mind and spirit, forgives our sins, and justifies us, clothing us with the very splendor of Jesus Christ himself, with his righteousness, making us righteous and new.

Those who live in the kingdom of God do not die but live forever with God. Christ vanquished their death. His death canceled the death of our spirit for having sinned, reconciled us with God, paid our debt of death, and changed our physical death into a portal of everlasting life with him in heaven. “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life” (Rom 5:10). We have been reconciled with God and forgiven for our sins by the death of Christ, and we are now renewed and saved by his life living within us, filling us with the blessings of the kingdom of God here on earth, now in the midst of history, in the midst of this old world. We are made into a new creation in the midst of this present, old creation.

Today, we remember that through Jesus Christ we are destined for life in heaven and that on the last day we will see our Lord Jesus Christ coming on the clouds of heaven with great power and glory with all his saints. Our physical death is, in fact, the beginning for us of the glory of the last day, for in heaven we will be like God and will see him as he is (1 Jn 3:2). Today we pray for all the faithful departed, so that they may be purified of their sins and enter into the glory of heaven with God and all the angels and saints.

We now live in the kingdom of God, in the final times, the Messianic times of the fulfillment of prophecy, reconciled with God and forgiven for our sins. “Therefore since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ … and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (Rom 5:1,2). We rejoice today in this hope. Living now in the new creation of the kingdom of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are filled with hope for the consummation of this glory in the parousia, and at the hour of our death.
THE GREAT BANQUET OF THE LORD

Tuesday, 31st Week of the Year
Rom 12:5-16; Ps 130; Lk 14:15-24

“A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many” (Lk 14:16).

Such is the kingdom of God. It is like a great banquet with many invited guests. The hour for the banquet to begin has finally arrived. The banquet takes place now, in the present. “…all is now ready,” his servants say to the invited guests (Lk 14:17). In St. Matthew’s version, the king, who gave a marriage feast for his son, sends out his servants to say, “Behold, I have made ready my dinner, my oxen and fat calves are killed, and everything is ready; come to the marriage feast (Mt 22:4). This great feast, which in the Old Testament was the image of the kingdom of God on the final day (Is 25:6-12), is now, for Jesus, something taking place in the midst of history in his own ministry. It is God’s free gift now offered to all who will accept it. Yet, because they were entangled in the world, those originally invited did accept the invitation.

Such is the kingdom of God. With the appearing of Jesus Christ, there is something new in the world, which is very small and seemingly insignificant, like a mustard seed, which many ignore, yet it is the kingdom of God, transforming the world, changing human hearts, filling them with the love of God and forgiving their sins. It is the kingdom of heavenly peace which is to come upon the whole earth, unto the ends of the earth, in which all give glory to God in the highest and live in peace with one another. It is the kingdom in which, through their contact with Jesus Christ, all have a pure, integral, and undivided heart, loving God with all their being—with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mk 12:30). Moreover, all who receive this kingdom dedicate themselves to the service of their neighbor in love and live in peace with one another. Hence, the kingdom of God on earth, even though it does not appear to be a great thing, is, nonetheless, this miraculous, transforming reality because of the presence among us of Jesus Christ, and it will one day be very great, as a tiny mustard seed will become a great bush.

We are the invited guests. Christ has invited us into his kingdom, to his great banquet, to his marriage feast, but how many have no interest in this invitation? How many are entangled in the affairs of the world, in worldly pleasures, in their business, in their quest for pleasure, money, honor, power, and prestige and so do not want to attend Lord’s great banquet? How many do not want to enter into the kingdom, be transformed by Christ, and live henceforth for God alone with all the love of their heart, leaving all else to love God with an undivided heart, reserved for him alone and no longer divided among other things?

Those who accept this invitation will be transformed, justified, made resplendent before God, and will one day enter into the fullness of this great banquet, whether at the hour of their death or at the parousia of the Lord on the clouds of heaven in great power and glory. Let us now participate in this banquet in order to be counted worthy to taste his banquet in the fullness of his kingdom.
“The master commended the dishonest steward for his prudence; for the sons of this world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light” (Lk 16:8).

This is the parable of the unjust steward that called in his master’s debtors and said to the first one, “How much do you owe my master? He said, A hundred measures of oil. And he said to him, Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty” (Lk 16:6). He did this to make friends for himself among his master’s debtors so that when he would be dismissed from his stewardship, they would help him. His master had already decided to take his stewardship from him for having previously squandered his goods. The master himself, who had been cheated of his goods by this final transaction, nonetheless had to praise his dishonest steward for his shrewdness in using these same goods to make friends for himself that would afterwards help him in return.

We are not to follow all the details of this parable, which simply go to make up the story, but only this central point of how to use material goods—unrighteous mammon, as Jesus calls it—to make friends for ourselves who will help us afterwards. This is the moral that Jesus draws out of the parable for us, saying, “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations” (Lk 16:9). The other details have no moral. Only this central point is the teaching of the parable—namely, that we should use unrighteous mammon wisely in order to make friends for ourselves that will receive us in heaven and help us spiritually.

If the difference that the steward cut off from the bills of his master’s debtors was his own personal interest, then the moral is even more striking; for in that case, the steward deprived himself of his own interest in order to help others with his own money, thus gaining friends for himself that would later help him.

Jesus is teaching us here that this is how we are to use our money and material goods—namely, for the good of others. The sons of light are to dedicate their lives to the service of others in order to illuminate, convert, and save them. In doing so, they are to use their own personal money and material goods as well as their words and example. This is the correct use of unrighteous mammon. This is what we are to do rather than use our money for our own pleasure, vacations, entertainment, diversions, delicacies, and similar things, such as elegant clothing, succulent and extravagant food, pleasure trips, etc. As the sons of light, our money should not be used in this way, nor should it just be piled up in a bank account but rather used for the spiritual good of others, or for the material good of the poor. Such should be the life of the sons of light with regard to material goods.
“No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Lk 16:13).

What are the two masters that the majority tries to serve? They are mammon (the riches and pleasures of this world) on the one hand, and God on the other. This is why few know God well, and few unite themselves intimately with him. It is because they are divided between their pleasures and God. They follow the unnecessary desires of the flesh, and yet still think that they can also follow the guidance of the Spirit. Unfortunately for them, this is not possible. Jesus Christ himself teaches us this today; namely, that we cannot serve two masters, God and mammon. Mammon includes the unnecessary desires of the flesh for the pleasures of the world, and it is these desires that divide and dissipate our affective energy in two directions—that of God, and that of the world. Being divided like this, we squander much affective energy on the desires of the flesh and therefore have little left for God. We are, in effect, warring against ourselves, our worldly desires canceling out our godly ones—if we are trying to follow both—and so we remain where we began, making little progress in our journey towards God. This is why Jesus teaches us that “whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:33).

We therefore have to live a life of renunciation of the world in order to be a true disciple. We have to glory in the cross and in a life crucified to the world, in the sense of renouncing the world and its pleasures, if we want to serve only one master, God. With St. Paul, we have to glory only in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, “by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14). We have to be crucified to the world if we want to unite ourselves to God and grow in holiness and in a contemplative life. We cannot have them both—the world on the one hand, and God on the other. We cannot divide ourselves between the world and God, trying to serve both, trying to serve two masters. This is impossible although the majority still tries to do so, and so never arrives at its goal, holiness and a contemplative life. It is true that he who loves his life in this word loses it, “and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:25). He who loves his life in this world, following the pleasures of the flesh, is trying to serve two masters, and he does not succeed.

This is the ascetical-mystical life. Asceticism leads to mysticism. It is the renunciation of the world and of the desires of the flesh that brings us to a life of intimacy with God. A life that serves God alone—that is, that serves only one master—is a life that renounces the unnecessary desires of the flesh and lives in the Spirit. It is the ascetical life that brings us to our goal, which is the mystical life.
“And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny” (Mk 12:42).

Jesus praises this poor widow who gave two copper coins, worth a penny, because she “put in everything she had, her whole living” (Mk 12:44). In this sense, he says that she gave more than all the rest (Mk 12:43), and “Many rich people put in large sums” (Mk 12:41). The virtue of this poor widow is that she gave all that she had to God by putting all the money she had into the temple treasury. And Jesus “called his disciples to him” (Mk 12:43) and pointed her out to them, praising her as a good example to follow, a model of generosity and renunciation of self, an example of someone who has given herself completely to God. So should his disciples also do, for, as he said on another occasion, “whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:33).

It is one thing to be generous in almsgiving, but it is quite another thing to do what this poor widow did. She gave everything; she gave her whole self to God in putting her penny into the temple treasury. This is what Jesus praised. This is the example he would like his disciples to follow.

The Bible has much to say about this kind of generosity. “He who sows sparingly,” said St. Paul, “will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Cor 9:6), “for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7). “…give, and it will be given to you,” said Jesus; “good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Lk 6:38). Proverbs says, “A liberal man will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered” (Pro 11:25). What we are to do is to give and to serve others with our talents and money. “The wicked borrows, and cannot pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives” (Ps 36:21). We are to be generous with our money and give. The prophet Isaiah says, “if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday” (Is 58:10).

We are here on earth in order to love God with all our heart and serve our neighbor with our talents, money, and resources. But we can be afraid to do this. We may fear that we will have stripped ourselves of too much if we do this, or we may not want to use our money for the good of our neighbor. But Jesus praises those who are generous with their money. Our money is not given to us for the purpose of piling it up in the bank but to use for the good of others, to illuminate them, to convert them to Christ and to a new and holy way of life. God gave us our resources, including money, to use for our apostolate, for the spreading of the gospel of salvation.

The wife of the famous, nineteenth-century, British preacher, Charles Spurgeon, had a great many of her husband’s individual sermons printed and mailed to poor pastors and missionaries all over the world, at her own expense. These sermons were, in this way, used many times over in all parts of the world. She spent much money in doing this but thereby enriched the faith and lives of many. We should use our own personal money to
extend and expand our apostolate, and we should not sow sparingly. Generosity should be our ideal. We are not here to see how big a bank account we can build up, but rather to use our money for doing good, for the conversion, renewal, and illumination of many.

All can live this way, even a poor widow who has only a penny. The example of a true widow can inspire many. Have you ever known such a person? I know a monk who recounted to me what he learned from his grandmother, an elderly widow. He described her as completely occupied with her many different prayer books, and whenever he visited her, she would always show him her various prayer books and point out to him the verses and lines that especially touched her. I imagine that she was a person completely dedicated to God in every aspect of her life. Left alone in this world, she lived for God alone with all her time, heart, and interest.

I imagine that she was like the widow Ana that saw and recognized the child Jesus when he was presented in the temple. She lived “as a widow till she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day” (Lk 2:37). She was one of the few who recognized Jesus as the Messiah in his infancy. “And coming up at that very hour she gave thanks to God, and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Lk 2:38). She “did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day” (Lk 2:37). She lived a life a prayer and fasting, a contemplative life, separate from the world, within the temple. She gave herself completely to God and lived for him alone. She did not live for the pleasures of the world.

So should we all live, detached from everything else, living only for God, day and night, using our money and talents for the good and illumination of others.

WE SHOULD RESPECT OUR BODY

Dedication of the Lateran Basilica, November 9
1 Cor 3:9-11,16-17; Ps 45; Jn 2:13-22

“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are” (1 Cor 3:16-17).

Today we celebrate the dedication of the Lateran Basilica, the Pope’s cathedral. The Bible says that we are the temple of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit. If our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, we should respect our body and not use it in a bad or disrespectful way. Gluttony, drunkenness, and fornication are examples of the wrong use of our body. These sins destroy God’s temple, they desecrate it; and if we destroy God’s temple like this, God will destroy us, as St. Paul says, “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and that temple are you” (1 Cor 3:17). He will punish us for having desecrated his dwelling, his temple. Not only is our soul holy, but our body also is holy, and we have to guard it well and not use it simply as a receptacle for worldly pleasure, for the pleasures of the table, and for the other pleasures of the world, which distract us from God. We are to respect our body as a temple,
keeping it pure and clean, free from sin, free from worldliness, as something sacred, reserved for God.

Since our bodies are sacred, we should also dress with dignity and modesty, not in an immodest way. If we are priests or religious, we should behave accordingly, even to our way of dressing, not being ashamed or embarrassed to be known as priests or religious in public places, not trying to hide or disguise our identity, to go about incognito and anonymously, but rather we should be what we are and look like what we are. This helps us as much as it helps those who see us. Our dress is an external expression of who and what we are and helps us to be what God wants us to be. It is also a way of bearing witness to Christ in a world that is every day more secularized, that every day more needs our witness. We are not to be part of the current tendency of secularization. We should rather resist this tendency, this shame of being known for who and what we are, this desire to be anonymous, to flee from giving witness to Jesus Christ in a world so forgetful of God and of the Christian faith.

As temples of God in the world, we should appear as temples and be decorated by a holy life, not disfigured by living according to the flesh. We should rather live in the Spirit a life of simplicity and holiness, an austere life that embraces evangelical poverty, eating simple, basic, and healthy foods, not delicacies and extravagant food, and we should eat with moderation, respecting our body as God’s holy temple. Thus we are to live not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit “if the Spirit of God really dwells in you” (Rom 8:9).

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS WITHIN YOU

Thursday, 32nd Week of the Year
Wisdom 7:22-8:1; Ps 118; Lk 17:20-25

“And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, Lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (Lk 17:20-21 KJV).

This is the great text where Jesus says that the kingdom of God is already here, within us. Although its final consummation will be in the future when Jesus Christ will come again with great power and glory on the clouds of heaven, nonetheless, the kingdom of God, which the Jews expected at the end of the world and at the end of history, has already invaded this old world, in the midst of history, in the person of Jesus Christ. Now, therefore, we can enter into the kingdom of God and experience its blessings in the midst of history. Even while this old world continues to exist, the new world of the kingdom of God has already begun with the birth of Christ. The kingdom and the power of Satan have been decisively defeated in the midst of history in Jesus Christ and in those who are born again in him, forgiven for all their sins, justified, and made resplendent before God. They are transformed, made new men, a new creation, and illuminated by him.
They still live in the midst of this old world, in the midst of the sons of this age, but they have now become the sons of light and of the day (1 Thess 5:5). As the weeds grow together with the wheat unto the harvest, so the sons of the kingdom of God live now mixed together with the sons of this age until the Son of Man returns in his glory in manifest form, which every eye shall see (Mt 13:24-30).

The presence of the kingdom of God is invisible to the sons of this age. For them, it is like leaven hidden in a lump of dough. It is not seen, but it is at work, transforming the whole lump. The kingdom of God is not a theological abstraction, but an event and an experience. It came with the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. It gives new life to those who enter it. They experience the complete and radical forgiveness of all their sins through the vicarious, sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross, and they rise with him to a new and risen life, to walk in the light that streams from his resurrection.

Living thus in the kingdom of God, at peace with God, giving glory to God in the highest, and loving their fellow man, the sons of the kingdom now live in eager expectation for the second coming of Christ in the full manifestation of the kingdom of God in power and glory, which every eye shall see. That final day will fulfill all their desires. Then we shall see “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived.” We shall see and hear “what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9). Then Christ will return in all his glory, “For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of man be in his day” (Lk 17:24). But we live now, already, in the blessings of that great day of glory. We live in the kingdom of God, which is within us and among us.

HOW TO AWAIT THE COMING OF THE LORD

Friday, 32nd Week of the Year
Wisdom 13:1-9; Ps 18; Lk 17:26-37

“As it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of man. They ate, they drank, they married, they were given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all” (Lk 17:26-27).

We have now arrived at the last days of the liturgical year when we meditate on the end of the world and the second coming of Christ on the clouds of heaven in great power and glory. It will be a day in which all will see his glory in a manifest way. It is true that for those who believe in Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has already come, and they already live in it; but even so, we still hope for its final consummation so that this kingdom, which is now invisible and hidden in this old world, might become visible over the whole face of the earth, and so that sin, which continues to wound and sadden even the sons of the kingdom, might be completely destroyed and removed. This is our hope now in this vale of tears where Satan, although defeated by Christ, still continues to wound the sons of the kingdom of God, filling them with anxiety and sadness. When we do not perfectly fulfill the will of God, when we disobey him in something, falling thus into sin or into some imperfection, our heart sinks within us, and we become sad and depressed. Our conscience attacks us, and we are no longer at peace with God. We
therefore long for his peace and forgiveness, his justification and salvation. So we confess our sins and imperfections and long for the glorious life that will come after this present life.

The days of the second coming of Christ will be like the days of Noah: they ate and drank and married, etc. until “the flood came and destroyed them all” (Lk 17:27). They had forgotten God and so were destroyed. They lived a purely secular life, a pagan life.

How many live that way today? Many imitate the style of the world around them in their manner of living although perhaps they also try to serve God; but they are really serving two lords, the lord of pleasure, who is the god of this world, and the true God. But, as Jesus has taught us, this is impossible (Mt 6:24). One simply cannot serve two masters like this. The service of the one cancels out that of the other, and so we remain with nothing more than a sense of futility and failure, which depresses us and gives us anxiety, and we are no longer at peace with God in our heart.

What is the cure for this sickness? It is to confess our sins and imperfections and then wait until we feel forgiven through the merits of Jesus Christ on the cross. Then we have to change our way of living. That is, we have to stop living a worldly life with a worldly style in general—which is a life of pleasure—and begin a new way of living that embraces evangelical poverty, simplicity, and austerity. This will be a life lived for God alone, a life which renounces the pleasures of the world and obeys God and his will in every aspect of our life. Then we will be prepared to receive Christ well when he comes, and we will be in peace with God in our heart now.

WHILE GENTLE SILENCE ENVELOPED ALL THINGS

Saturday, 32\textsuperscript{nd} Week of the Year
Wisdom 18:14-16; 19:6-9; Ps 104; Lk 18:1-8

“For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, thy all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed” (Wisdom 18:14-15).

This beautiful verse speaks of the salvation that God wrought for his people by means of his word. First of all, God saved his people from slavery in Egypt through the plague of death, striking down all the firstborn of the Egyptians, thus forcing them to allow the Israelites to depart from their midst. God brought this salvation to fulfillment when in the fullness of time “while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone … [the] all-powerful word leapt down from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed” (Wisdom 18:14-15), and in the darkness of the night, on the plains of Bethlehem, on the edge of the desert, became man in the womb of the Virgin Mary and was laid in a manger and adored by shepherds and Magi. He came this time not to exterminate the firstborn of sinners but to save “the land that was doomed” because of its sins.

The Egyptians were condemned for their sin of not letting the Israelites leave their land; but in the fullness of time, the word of God became flesh not to kill the firstborn of sinners but to save them. This time, “thy all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the
royal throne,” O God, “into the midst of the land that was doomed” (Wis 18:15) to bring into the world the kingdom of God, in which all would give glory to God in the highest and on earth live with their neighbor in the heavenly peace that the word made flesh came to bring to earth. Now in Christ, our sins are forgiven, our peace with God is restored, and we can live in his kingdom on earth, praising him and loving our neighbor with the love of Christ.

In today’s gospel, Jesus asks us, “will not God vindicate his elect who cry out to him day and night? Will he long delay over them?” (Lk 18:7). If you feel far from this vindication, this justice, this forgiveness, this heavenly peace, continue asking God for it day and night, and he will give it to you without delay. It is for this that God’s “all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was condemned” (Wis 18:15). He came to bring us this peace from heaven, this peace with God, his great peace in our heart. This is the meaning of living in the kingdom of God, which came into the world in birth of Christ when “gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was ... half gone” (Wis 18:14). At his birth the angels sang over the plains of Bethlehem, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Lk 2:14 KJV), for he brought this kingdom of heavenly peace to the earth.

WE WILL ALL BE TRANSFORMED AT THE LAST TRUMPET

33rd Sunday of the Year
Dan 12:1-3; Ps 15; Heb 10:11-14,18; Mk 13:24-32

“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light” Mk 13:24).

Today is the Thirty-third Sunday of the year, the day on which we remember the end of the world and the second coming of Christ with great glory and power on the clouds of heaven to consummate all things and bring the kingdom of God to its ultimate glory in a manifest way that every eye shall see. It will be the culmination of all creation and the final act of God’s salvation. We will enter into the beginnings of this final glory at our death, for we shall then see God as he is and Jesus Christ in his glory, seated at the right hand of the Father (1 Jn 3:2). But his parousia at the end of the world will unite together all the people who have ever lived on the face of the earth, and we will rise with glorified bodies, like that of Jesus Christ after his resurrection. Then the glory that we shall see and in which we shall participate will be without end and incomparable.

We should, therefore, be watchful now, for we know neither the day nor the hour of his coming. We must be always prepared, always vigilant, always praying and purifying ourselves for this great day of the return of the Son of Man at the sound of the last trumpet. If we meditate on this splendor now, it will help us to live in a constant state of watchfulness and be always prepared.

This is the purpose of this discourse of Jesus, seated on the Mount of Olives, facing the temple—namely, to exhort his disciples to a state of continual watchfulness. “Take heed, watch and pray,” he says; “for you do not know when the time will come” (Mk
13:33). We should be like servants awaiting the return of their master. “Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch” (Mk 13:35-37).

How then will a vigilant person live, a person in love with the coming of the Lord? He will live like a child of the kingdom of God. He will live now in the kingdom of God, forgiven by Jesus Christ for all his sins and at peace with God in his heart. He will be very careful always to do the will of God, no matter how difficult it may be. He knows that he now lives in the Messianic times, in the prophesied time of salvation. He knows that he lives in the new age of salvation, the age of the fulfillment of prophecy. He will therefore live the life of the new man, of one regenerated by Jesus Christ. He lives in his glory, in his grace, loving God with all his heart and dedicaing himself to the conversion, renewal, and salvation of his neighbor. He gives glory to God in the highest and on earth lives with his neighbor in the peace that Christ brought to the world at his birth.

But there is still more. He awaits his own death with hope and joy, knowing that it will be for him the portal into the fullness of life. And still more, he lives in a state of perpetual preparation and eager expectation for the final consummation of the kingdom of God, in which he already now lives ahead of time. He knows that the glory in which he now lives is an anticipation of the final glory of the end of the world and of the second coming of Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven. Living now already in this anticipation and foretaste of the final glory, he longs for this ultimate manifestation of splendor and wants to be prepared for it and not be found sleeping when it comes. He therefore lives in constant watchfulness, a life of prayer and fasting, of simplicity and austerity, focusing on God alone, avoiding worldly distractions that break this beautiful spell of the kingdom of God in which he lives.

Then, on that great day, “the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mk 13:25-27).

On that great day of the coming of the Son of Man, “All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves shall fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree” (Is 34:4).

On that great day, it shall be like this: “there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place” (Rev 6:12-14).

Then we shall hear the last trumpet, and “we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor 15:51-52).
"And he cried, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Lk 18:38).

Today Jesus heals a blind man, who calls him by a Messianic title, "Son of David." It was the hope of Israel that there would one day come a new David, one of his lineage, who would bring the kingdom of God to the whole earth. This would be the kingdom of the last day, which would destroy every other kingdom, fill the whole earth, and remain forever (Dan 2:35). And "of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore" (Is 9:7). When this king comes, he will open the eyes of the blind (Is 35:5; 61:1). It was Jesus himself who told us that his opening of the eyes of the blind indicates that the kingdom of God has come upon the earth in him. In the synagogue in Nazareth, he read the text of Isaiah 61:1, which speaks of that great day of salvation: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed." Then he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21). When John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus to ask him, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Jesus was at that time opening the eyes of the blind (Lk 7:20-21), and he said, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and … the poor have the good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me" (Lk 7:22-23).

Jesus’ cure of the blind indicates, as he says, that he is the one who was to come. Blessed, he says, is he who is not scandalized by the fact that the longed-for kingdom of God has come to the earth in such a humble form. It is like a mustard seed, very small, but it will later become very great.

In Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God, which was expected to come at the end of the world, has already come. It has invaded this old world, and those who are born again in him live in it already, ahead of time. They live now in this kingdom of forgiveness of sins and heavenly peace. Yet this kingdom came before the end of the world. In fact, it came in the middle of history, in the midst of this old world, to renew it. The Jews never expected such a thing! They expected the kingdom of God to come on the last day. But God has sent it to us now, and we are invited to live in it now. This is why the angel Gabriel said to Mary, "the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Lk 1:32-33). His kingdom is here now in Jesus and in those connected with him. We are to live in it now, giving glory to God in the highest and living in the heavenly peace which he brought to the earth at his birth (Lk 2:14).
REJECTING COWARDLY CONFORMISM

Thursday, 33rd Week of the Year
1 Macc 2:15-29; Ps 49; Lk 19:41-44

“We will not obey the king’s words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left” (1 Macc 2:22).

The days were evil. There was great persecution in Israel. The king wanted all his subjects to accept his new law that everyone should abandon his own religion and religious laws and now follow the pagan religion of the king. Many Jews obeyed him, but Mattathias and his sons refused to obey the king. Mattathias said, “Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to do his commandments, departing each one from the religion of his fathers, yet I and my sons and my brothers will live by the covenant of our fathers. Far be it from us to desert the law and the ordinances. We will not obey the king’s words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left” (1 Macc 2:19-22). After saying this, Mattathias, in conformity with the law (Dt 13:9), killed a Jew who was offering pagan sacrifice, and fled with his sons to the mountains (1 Macc 2:28). One of his sons, “Judas Maccabeus, with about nine others, got away to the wilderness, and kept himself and his companions alive in the mountains as wild animals do; they continued to live on what grew wild, so that they might not share in the defilement” (2 Macc 5:27).

So we see that the life of faith and fidelity to revelation and to the will of God is, in this world, a matter of warfare, of persecution, of giving witness, and of battling against the enemies of faith. We are no longer to use physical force against our persecutors; but yes, we should try to convert them with the sword of the word as did Jesus and St. Paul. We are, in fact, engaged in spiritual warfare against the forces of evil, against secularizing forces that are trying to destroy the Church and Christian faith. We are not to bow down to or accept their worldly and destructive customs and ways. We should rather always obey the will of God even if doing so causes us to be persecuted. We can always take refuge in the desert like Mattathias or in another city. Jesus prepared us for this, saying, “you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes” (Mt 10:22-23).

In imitation of Mattathias and his sons, we are not to be conformed to this present age. St. Paul tells us, “Do not be conformed to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:2). We are not to follow the secularized ways and customs of the world around us, the secularized lifestyle of a world dedicated to its own pleasure. It would be better to flee from the world altogether and live in the desert as monks do, as did Mattathias and his sons. We are not to be conformed to this age but rather transformed ourselves, giving witness to our faith in the world. We are to reject cowardly conformism and rather imitate the courage of the Maccabees.
“And he went into the temple, and began to cast out them that sold therein, and them that bought; saying unto them, It is written, My house is the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves” (Lk 19:45-46 KJV).

Today both readings speak about the purification of the temple. The temple is a sacred place, and we should behave differently in it than we do in other places. Our church building is our temple. It is a place of silence and respect, not a place to greet friends and converse with them, as many do today.

St. Paul says that we are a temple of God, and our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. He says, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are” (1 Cor 3:16-17). And “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?” (1 Cor 6:19).

If we are temples of God and are therefore holy and if our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, it is therefore important how we live. We are not to live in just any sort of way. We are not to imitate the secular lifestyles that we see all around us. As we should behave in a different and special way inside a church in which the Blessed Sacrament is present, so should we also behave all the time in a special way since we have been bought and redeemed by Jesus Christ and are now therefore temples of the Holy Spirit. Every aspect of our life should be changed by this fact: our way of eating, what we eat; our time, how we use it; our daily schedule, what time we get up, what we do in the morning, and how we use our free time; our way of dressing, that it be simple and modest, and if we are priests or religious, that it be appropriate to our state in life and not be a worldly disguise in imitation of the secular world around us, which needs our witness. Our new lifestyle also includes our trips, knowing that to gad about without a serious and necessary reason is not only a waste of time but also a great distraction to our spirit. This is why contemplatives live within an enclosure (cloister); namely, to concentrate on the one thing necessary. This is why they have chosen to live in the desert, or in the mountains, or in a monastery; namely, to reduce the distractions of the world in order to focus on God and love him with an integral, undivided, and less distracted heart.

If we are a temple of God and of the Holy Spirit, we also need times and places of silence, not speaking indiscriminately at just any old time or place, but rather reserving certain times and places for guarding silence. Monks are a good example of this. They have times and places in which they do not speak, and with good reason. In the matter of food again, fasting is also important if we are a temple of the Holy Spirit. Our food should be simple, plain, and unadorned, not spiced and doctorered up for pleasure. It should rather be wholesome and healthy so that we can focus on God with an undivided heart, and not be distracted and divided by the pleasures of the world.
“The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Lk 20:34-35).

This is the case of the woman who had seven husbands, one after the other, all brothers. Jesus teaches us here that in the age of the resurrection, she will have no difficulty about knowing which of them will be her husband, for in the age of the resurrection, they do not marry but rather are like angels. He teaches us here that marriage is only for this present age, not for the age to come, the age of the resurrection. “…those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead,” he says, “neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die any more, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection” (Lk 20:35-36).

So will it be in the age of the resurrection. But this new age has already begun with the resurrection of Jesus Christ for all those who have risen in him (Col 3:1-2). Through our faith in Christ, we live now, in the midst of this old world, in the blessings of the age to come. In him, we have a foretaste of the blessings of the age to come. This is why there are celibates now. They live already, in the midst of this present age, the form of life of the age to come. They are therefore eschatological signs, signs in the midst of this old age of the form of life of the new age. Celibates try to live now ahead of time the angelic life. I call it the *angelic life* because it is the form of life of the angels, who do not marry, and because Jesus says that all who reach that new age will be “equal to angels” in that they do not marry (Lk 20:36).

Those who reach that age will have a completely undivided heart, reserved exclusively for the Lord, and this will exclude marriage, for their heart will have but one spouse only, Christ, and their love for him will not be divided even by the love of a human spouse. Those who are celibate now in this old age are therefore a mirror for the whole Church, showing it its future form of life, for in the age to come, all will be celibate.

Those who are now celibate should try to live this eschatological and angelic life with purity and an undivided heart, not dividing their heart by the love of a woman, but rather reserving it uniquely and exclusively for the Lord alone with all their love. Nor should they divide their heart with the pleasures of the world and of the table if they want to live an angelic life and give witness in this age to the age to come. The witness they give is the witness of an undivided heart. It is the witness of the angelic life of the future, anticipated now in the midst of this old age, for Jesus Christ has brought into this present age the blessings of the age to come, the blessings of the kingdom of God. Those who live in him live already in that kingdom.
“Pilate said to him, So you are a king? Jesus answered, You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world” (Jn 18:37).

Today is the Solemnity of Christ the King, and it is the last Sunday of the year. More than anything else, we remember today that on the last day, at the end of the world, Jesus Christ will come again in all his glory on the clouds of heaven as king of the universe. It will be the day of the last judgment of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; Mt 25:31-33). “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him” (Rev 1:7). We live now for that great day. It will be the fulfillment of all our desires. Then our salvation shall be complete. Our death will be for us the beginning of this great day; for then, if we are saved, we shall see God as he is (1 Jn 3:2). We even live now in the light reflected from that day of glory. The light of that day illuminates us now in this old world. We should long for that day and prepare ourselves for it now by living only for God and his service and the love of our neighbor.

If we live like this, we will live in the kingdom of God now, with Christ as our king, because in living like this, we will be the true poor in spirit, the blessed poor of Yahweh that have nothing in this world except God; and Jesus told us, “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Lk 6:20). It is the poor, who have only God in this world, and who live only and uniquely for him, who enter into the kingdom of God now, and who will afterwards see the king in his glory. But for those who do not embrace evangelical poverty, who do not live only for God, who have not made themselves poor in this world for the love of God in order to love him with an undivided heart, it will be very difficult to enter into the kingdom of God. “How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” Jesus said (Mk 10:23). “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mk 10:25). If we want to live in the Kingdom of God now, we have to embrace evangelical poverty and live for God alone with all our heart, dedicating ourselves to his praises and the salvation of our neighbor.

The kingdom of God entered into the world at the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem when the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Lk 2:14 KJV). Jesus said, “if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Mt 12:28). His exorcisms indicate that the kingdom of God has arrived in him. He also said, “The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, Lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (Lk 17:20-21 KJV). We cannot calculate the day on which the kingdom of God will come in its fullness, and, in fact, the kingdom of God is already here in the midst of us and within those who believe in Jesus Christ. Something new began in the world with the coming of Jesus Christ. “The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached” (Lk 16:16). Those who receive Jesus Christ receive the kingdom of God and Christ as king. Since the time of John the Baptist, the kingdom of God has come into the world. It is a greater thing to
be in the kingdom of God than to be the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. This is what Jesus has taught us, saying, “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Mt 11:11). What a great thing it then is to belong to the kingdom of God and to live in it now! It is the Father who “has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col 1:13). We can live in that kingdom now through faith and a life of obedience to the will of God.

In Jesus Christ the prophecies are fulfilled—prophecies about a kingdom of peace over the whole earth. If we live in Jesus Christ, we can live in that kingdom of universal peace now. He forgives our sins and puts us in peace with the Father. He puts heavenly peace into our hearts. He destroys war on earth and is humble and poor. The prophet Zechariah says, “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass … I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth” (Zech 9:9-10)—a universal reign of peace on earth.

We live now in the time of the fulfillment of this prophecy. We can live in the kingdom of God on earth now, the kingdom of peace with God and our neighbor, the heavenly peace which Jesus Christ brought into the world. We also await the ultimate fulfillment of this kingdom on the last day when there “will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then … they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Mt 24:30-31).

We should live now in constant preparation for the day when Jesus Christ will return in a manifest way as king of the universe. We prepare ourselves for this day of glory by living in the kingdom of God now, giving glory to God in the highest and bringing peace on earth to our neighbor. In this way, we will live in the peace which Jesus Christ brought into the world. We will live for him alone as the poor of his kingdom, for to them is the kingdom of God.

SHE PUT IN ALL SHE HAD

Monday, Last Week of the Year
Dan 1:1-6,8-20; Dan 3; Lk 21:1-4

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all the living that she had” (Lk 21:3-4).

We have finally arrived at the last week of the year when we meditate on the signs that will accompany the end of the present age and the parousia of the Son of Man in great power and glory on the clouds of heaven to introduce the new age, which already began at his first coming for us who believe in him. This great discourse about the end took place on the Mount of Olives, opposite the temple (Mk 13:3). But first, Jesus was
with his disciples in the temple, watching the rich putting their gifts into the treasury. Then he saw this “poor widow put in two copper coins” and pointed out that “she has put in more than all of them,” for “she out of her poverty put in all the living that she had.”

As we await the end of the age and the consummation of the new age, which has already begun in the midst of this old age with the birth of Christ, we should imitate this poor widow and offer all we have to God, sacrificing all else for him. In other words, as this poor widow lived only for God, we too are to live uniquely for God in this old age, for we have been born again in Jesus Christ and now belong to the new age, which has already begun in the middle of history, in the middle of this old age. Since the kingdom of God has already begun for us that are in Jesus Christ, we should live in a radically different way from those that are still sons of this old age, dominated by Satan and sin. The difference consists in—following the example of this poor widow—renouncing all else for the love of God and making him the only happiness of our life. We should make ourselves poor for the love of him, eliminating from our heart all our desires for the pleasures of this old world, in order to be new men, a new creation, persons of the new age, living already, ahead of time, in the kingdom of God that has already begun for us.

The new man is like this poor widow. He lives only for God. He has nothing but God. He has but one treasure only, the Lord; and only one master, the Lord. He has sold all else to obtain the pearl of great price, which is the kingdom of God. He thus lives in the heavenly peace that came into the world at the birth of Christ. This is the universal peace, given by God to the whole earth, in which those who believe in Jesus live. They, therefore, have an undivided heart in their love of him and, like this widow, put all the living that they have into the temple treasury. They do not want to divide their heart with the pleasures of this world. Rather, they want to reserve their heart only for the Lord, the only spouse of their heart. Hence they rejoice in the Lord, having an exclusive, nuptial relationship with him. They live already, ahead of time, in the new age, which will be consummated when the Son of Man returns on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

THE COMING OF THE SON OF MAN

Thursday, Last Week of the Year
Dan 6:12-28; Dan 3; Lk 21:20-28

“And then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (Lk 21:27).

This is the great day that we all hope and long for, the day on which the Son of Man will come on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. He will come with all his holy ones, and on that day there will be great light (Zech 14:5,7). This coming of Christ in glory will be like a flash of lightning in the night sky. “For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of man be in his day” (Lk 17:24). There will also be great tribulations, wars, and suffering, but it is this great hope that strengthens and enables us to endure all that is coming upon the world. The Jews have already seen the destruction of Jerusalem and their nation by the Romans in 70 AD,
but there will be more suffering in the future, until even the stars fall from the sky, for on the last days, “there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Lk 21:25-26).

In “those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven … then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven … and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Mt 24:29-31).

At the end of the year, we meditate on the last things, the end of the world and the end of this age. And Jesus tells us that we should prepare ourselves now for all this, for no one—including himself—knows when all this will happen. This is the secret of the Father, not revealed to us, so that we might always be prepared, always preparing ourselves. We should be living in a state of constant vigilance and preparation, always watching and praying, and living a life worthy of that great day. “Take heed, watch and pray,” Jesus said; “for you do not know when the time will come … And what I say to you I say to all: Watch” (Mk 13:33,37).

We should therefore live in hope. Christians are a people of hope. They long for the future, the consummation of the kingdom of God, which has already begun, and in which they now live, enjoying ahead of time the blessings of the reign of God on earth. The actual presence of the kingdom of God in our midst and within us (17:20-21) motivates us to prepare ourselves with eager expectation for its consummation in glory on the last day. “For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each one according to his deeds” (Mt 16:27). May our deeds be good for this great day of recompense, and may we be prepared!

THE NEARNESS OF THE COMING OF THE LORD

Friday, Last Week of the Year
Dan 7:2-14; Dan 3; Lk 21:29-33

“So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (Lk 21:31).

The kingdom of God, which is already here (Lk 17:20-21; Mt 12:28), will come with power and great glory when the Son of Man returns on the clouds of heaven. Before this happens, there will be prodigious signs in the heavens and on earth. When we see that many of these signs have already taken place, then we will know that he is near, at hand, on the point of coming. Then Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all has taken place” (Lk 21:32). What he seems to be referring to by “all has taken place” are the prodigious signs that will precede his coming, for this is what he just previously said when he said, “when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (Lk 21:31). In this sentence, the “these things” that are taking place do not include his coming, for “these things” are the signs of his coming.
When they take place, you will know that his coming is soon to follow. Jesus said that many will still be living when these things (that is, these prodigious signs) take place, and this is in fact what happened. Before all his listeners had died, the greatest sign of all (the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Jewish nation) took place.

The point for us is that since many of these signs have already taken place, the coming of the kingdom with power and great glory is now very near. We are to understand, therefore, that we are now living in the last days. With God, a thousand years are as a single day (2 Peter 3:8; Ps 89:4). With God, only two days have passed since Jesus spoke these words! The meaning is that the Christian, the person of faith, should understand that he is truly living in the last days, and he should think that the Son of Man is about to appear at any moment. This should be the attitude, general orientation, and way of thinking and living of the Christian, and we should live accordingly, always prepared and vigilant.

Jesus did not give us more precise information about the time of his coming because he himself—as he admits—did not know when he would return in glory (Mk 13:32). This knowledge was hidden from him. The Father did not want it to be revealed to us, in order that we would always be prepared, always be preparing ourselves. He himself openly admitted this, saying, “But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mk 13:32).

The conclusion is that a Christian should always live in a state of joyful preparation and eager expectation. We should be on alert—in a state of alert—at all times for the coming of the Lord in glory. So should we live, always prepared and watchful, not negligent. This is what Jesus taught us: “Watch therefore,” he says, “—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch” (Mk 13:35-37).

WE ARE NOT TO LIVE ACCORDING TO THE FLESH

Saturday, Last Week of the Year
Dan 7:15-27; Dan 3; Lk 21:34-36

“But take heed to yourselves lest your heart be weighed down with gluttony and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare” (Lk 21:34).

Living in the last days, awaiting the coming of the Lord, being always on alert—in a constant state of alert—means living in a certain way, not according to the flesh and its desires for pleasure, which only divide the heart from a pure love of God, reserved for the Lord alone. We are rather to live according to the Spirit in all purity, simplicity, and plainness. Living in a constant state of preparation for the coming of the Lord means to live detached from the pleasures of the world, for they are like thorns which choke the seed, preventing it from bearing fruit (Lk 8:14). We are rather to serve but one Master only, the Lord, not two masters—God and also mammon, that is, the riches and pleasures of the world (Mt 6:24). It is impossible to serve two masters, although many try. This
only divides the heart. We are rather to have but one treasure only, the Lord (Mt 6:19-21), because where your treasure is, there also will your heart be (Mt 6:21). This is why it will be difficult for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. “Truly, I say to you,” Jesus said, “it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 19:23-24). This is because the rich are usually surrounded by pleasures and are divided by them. Those who try to save their life in this worldly way, filling themselves with the delights of the world, lose their life with God. It is rather he who loses his life in this world, sacrificing all for Christ, who will truly save his life with God (Mk 8:35). So “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:25). We lose our life in this world to save it with Christ by living only for Jesus Christ, renouncing all the rest, sacrificing it for the sake of Christ.

Those who feel themselves secure in this world are actually in great danger, for “When people say, There is peace and security, then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape” (1 Thess 5:3). “…those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom 8:8). We are all in the flesh in the sense that we have bodies, but St. Paul’s meaning is that we should live in the Spirit and not in the flesh, that is, we should follow the guidance of the Spirit of God and not the desires of the flesh for unnecessary pleasure, which only divide the heart. “…for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live” (Rom 8:13).

“Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening till wine enflames them! They have lyre and harp, timbrel and flute and wine at their feasts; but they do not regard the deeds of the Lord, or see the work of his hands. Therefore my people go into exile for want of knowledge” (Is 5:11-13). This is to be in the flesh or to live according to the flesh, and St. Paul clearly says, “walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would … And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires … For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Gal 5:16-17,25; 6:8). The words of the Bible are clear for those who read them with a pure heart and an open mind and want to follow them. Clearly more than only adultery, fornication, and gluttony is meant by life in the flesh, but the antiascetical attempt to exclude these meanings from St. Paul’s words is surely misguided.

There are then two ways of life: life according to the flesh on the one hand, and life in the Spirit (or according to the Spirit) on the other hand. We are invited to life in the Spirit and to crucify ourselves to the world. “But far be it from me to glory,” says St. Paul, “except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14). We are to die with Christ to the life of the old man and rise with him to the life of the new man, which is life in the Spirit (Eph 4:22-24; Rom 6:4). Thus shall we be prepared for the coming of the Son of Man. Thus shall we live worthily in these last days, awaiting the coming of the Lord.