

January

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YEAR A CYCLE I

SUNDAY, JANUARY 1, 2017

(Lec. 18)

- 1) Numbers 6:22-27
- 2) Galatians 4:4-7
- 3) Luke 2:16-21

Gospel related: **CCC** 486, 525, 527, 2599

**THE OCTAVE DAY
OF THE NATIVITY
OF THE LORD;
SOLEMNITY OF MARY,
THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD**

FOCUS: The Spirit guides and strengthens us, that we might share Christ's light, love, and peace with others.

Today, we celebrate the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God. As we hear in Galatians: *God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law. As Catholics, we believe that our Savior, Jesus Christ, is both fully human and divine. Therefore, the Church confesses Mary to be truly the "Mother of God" (CCC 495).*

When the angel announced to Mary that God had chosen her to become the mother of Jesus, the Son of the Most High God, Mary had a choice. She could have said no. Instead, in humility and perfect fidelity, Mary responded "yes" to what God was asking of her. As a result of her freely given consent to the will of God and her cooperation with God's grace, the Blessed Virgin Mary conceived our Lord and Savior, Jesus, in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As today's second reading tells us, God sent his Son to be born of a human mother so that we all might become sons and daughters of God. As proof that we are God's children, *God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts.* However, it is up to us to open our hearts to the Holy Spirit, and to respond to the Holy Spirit's promptings.

Like Mary, we have a choice. We can allow the Holy Spirit within us to guide and direct us, or we can say no. We can choose to ignore the holy nudges we receive. If our lives are crowded with too much noise and activity, it's likely that we may fail to be attentive and responsive to the promptings of the Spirit stirring within us. That's why it's so important to take quiet time and listen to God so we may do his will and be faithful to his call for our lives.

We hear in today's Gospel that *Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.* Let's do the same.

On this first day of the new year, we review our goals and make resolutions to discipline ourselves by losing weight, exercising more, or other similar efforts. What if we take some quiet time to listen to what God's plan for us might be in the year ahead? What if we reflect on whatever we hear in the silence? What might happen if we choose to act on God's plan for us as the days, weeks and months of this new year unfold? Very simply, our lives will be changed so that more and more we will come to share Christ's light, love and peace with all those we encounter.

Let us pray to be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and the grace to respond and go where the Spirit leads us. *The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you! The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace!*

Monday, January 2, 2017
(Lec. 205)

- 1) 1 John 2:22-28
- 2) John 1:19-28

(OBL MEM
Saints Basil the Great
and Gregory Nazianzen,
Bishops and
Doctors of Church)

Gospel related: **CCC** 575, 613, 719

FOCUS: The outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit upon John the Baptist lead him to point to Christ as the Messiah.

The words of John the Baptist quoted in today's Gospel are familiar to many of us: *I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, "Make straight the way of the Lord."* This is an adaptation of the words of the prophet Isaiah. John the Baptist offers these words to explain that he should not be looked upon as the long-awaited Messiah. Rather, the Messiah is Jesus, the one to whom he humbly submits, acknowledging that he is not even worthy to untie his sandal strap! In this passage, we have yet another example of questioning by the priests and Levites who are not asking out of innocent wonder, but who are pushing against John's popularity.

Today, let's focus on John's humility. What we see is a perfect example of a right attitude with regard to our relationship to Jesus. Here we can see the truth in the popular statement: "He is God and I am not." John speaks of being unworthy, but we should be careful not to equate that with the idea that he is bad, or in some way "less than." John simply understands that Jesus is God, and he is careful not to allow others to elevate him in the place of Christ. Let's go a little deeper now, into the notion of unworthiness.

John the Baptist eventually gave his life because of his faith and fearless testimony to the Truth. He was a martyr. In courage, he spoke the truth to Herod about how it was wrong and unlawful for him to have taken his brother's wife and married her, and that got him killed. We naturally wonder how anyone who had such humility and courage could be considered unworthy! Worthiness is not something we earn by our actions, though. It is simply an acknowledgment of the greatness of God. In terms of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we would put it in the category of "fear of the Lord," or "wonder and awe."

Now let's put this all together. The words that frame the character of John the Baptist are humility, courage, fear of the Lord, wonder and awe. These gifts of the Holy Spirit seem to have inspired John as he testified that Jesus is the Messiah. John, who had his own following, did not put himself forward, but pointed to Christ. Similarly, through taking the time to reflect on how we stand before God, it is hard to see ourselves as anything other than unworthy. But how does God see us? As his beloved sons and daughters, created in his own image and likeness.

Let's spend some time over the next few days reflecting on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and what it means to be children of God who are created in his own image and likeness. Ask yourself, "How can I *make straight the way of the Lord*?"

Tuesday, January 3, 2017
(Lec. 206)

1 1 John 2:29 – 3:6
2) John 1:29-34

Gospel related: **CCC** 408, 438, 486, 523, 536, 608, 713, 719, 1137, 1286, 1505

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY
(Opt. Mem. the Most Holy
Name of Jesus)

FOCUS: As children of God, we are called to love him and our neighbor with whole and undivided hearts.

During the last two weeks, Christmas brought people together. Parishes came together for prayer. Families gathered for meals and gift-giving. Friends met to share news and holiday fun. Every year, we cook special meals and take pictures with those we love. We pray with gratitude for the passing year and in hope for new possibilities. The Christmas season is a special time.

Unfortunately, the Christmas season can also be a time of difficulty in many families and communities. There can be a lot of pressure for parents to put on the “perfect” Christmas. People get impatient with one another and pass judgment on who spent more money on gifts or more time in the kitchen. Even in parishes, regular Mass attendees may get cranky at losing their favorite pews to holiday visitors. Today’s readings provide a good examination of conscience about how we are to treat each other as Christians!

In the Gospel, John the Baptist gives a clear testimony as to the identity of Jesus: He is the Son of God. Our first reading reflects on what that means for us as Christians.

The first reading tells us that we are God's children, and that those who hope in this reality seek to make themselves pure as God is pure. It goes on to say, *No one who remains in him sins; no one who sins has seen him or known him.*

During this Christmas season, did we live as children of God, treating those around us as brothers and sisters in Christ? Or did we fall into occasional sin? Let us take a moment to search our hearts for moments of failure.

Before we receive Communion today, we are called to reflect on how we, as children of God, may fight amongst ourselves – both in our close families and friend groups, and throughout our human family. We ask God to give us the grace we need to help us purify ourselves of impatience, sin and division, and more closely follow Jesus’ example of peace, self-sacrifice and reconciliation.

As sons and daughters of God, let us begin this new year with hope and confidence, assured of our Father’s enduring love, and committed to loving others as he calls us to love.

Wednesday, January 4, 2017
(Lec. 207)

- 1) 1 John 3:7-10
- 2) John 1:35-42

Gospel related: **CCC** 608

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY
(OBL MEM
Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton,
Religious)

FOCUS: When we center our lives on Jesus, we become closer to him and he gives us a mission.

One of the main themes emphasized in today's Gospel is that of becoming more closely united to Jesus – growing in our love for him. This theme is clear as the two disciples of John the Baptist begin to believe that Jesus is the Lamb of God, the Chosen One of God who will redeem the world, and they begin to follow him. He recognizes their desire to be close to him, and asks them what they are seeking. It is an important question. The answer says a lot about where they stand with God and others. It is a question addressed to each one of us because we also ask God about our life's direction.

In their response to Jesus, they want to know where he stays. In this passage, it means much more than asking a question about his residence. It focuses on realizing that Jesus can be found anywhere. The only way they will find him is by having a personal experience of him in the places, the situations and the people who are a part of their lives. Jesus speaks the same message to us. He invites us to look for him and find him every day of our lives.

The two disciples decide to follow Jesus and stay with him. This encounter makes them realize more fully that they had found the Messiah. They want to share this experience with others. One of the two men was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. He goes to his brother and shares the good news. When Andrew brings his brother to Jesus, it becomes evident that Simon Peter will have a special role in leading the Christian community. When we meet Jesus, we also become evangelizers by sharing the encounter with others.

Saint Elizabeth Seton, whom the Church honors today, offers us a wonderful example of someone who was close to Christ. In spite of feeling ostracized and left penniless by her family when she became a Catholic, she continued to draw closer to Christ. She founded a religious community and a school for poor children in Maryland. While Mother Seton died in 1921, the Sisters of Charity continue her work.

Thursday, January 5, 2017
(Lec. 208)
1) 1 John 3:11-21
2) John 1:43-51
Gospel related: CCC 878

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY
(OBL MEM
Saint John Neumann,
Bishop)

FOCUS: *The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.*

In the Gospel, Jesus asks Nathanael: *Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?* Jesus went on to say that Nathanael would see far greater things than this. And so he did.

So what did Nathanael, and all the disciples who followed Jesus, come to see? Jesus' disciples witnessed many miracles: he healed the sick, gave sight to the blind and raised people from the dead. We may wonder which of these signs was the greatest.

Our reading from the First Letter of John offers us some insight into what Jesus may have been talking about. It points out how Jesus revealed what love is when he laid down his life for us. Then it points to the power of that love in those who believe – in that we can become the compassion of Christ for others if we put our faith into action and not just *in word or speech*. Recall that we heard this:

The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him?

This reading underscores that Christ's saving and healing love is perhaps the greatest and most powerful force in the world for all those who open their hearts to receive it. For it is one thing to move mountains, and another to move people. Even though we have the power to refuse, Christ's love moves us to love others and be filled with God's compassion. Christ's love also frees us from the power of sin and darkness, so we may walk in the light of God's love. Yes, with God all things are possible.

So, yes, Jesus saw Nathanael under the fig tree. And after that encounter with Jesus, Nathanael's life was never to be the same. Today, Jesus can change us from selfish to selfless. He can change us from hoarders to givers, from haters to lovers, from those who see gloom everywhere to those who shine light. But in order for this to happen, we must open our hearts to Christ's saving and life-transforming love each day.

Friday, January 6, 2017

(Lec. 209)

1) 1 John 5:5-13

2) Mark 1:7-11

or Luke 3:23-28 or 3:23, 31-34, 36, 38

Gospel related: **CCC** 535

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

(Opt. Mem.

Saint André Bessette,

Religious)

FOCUS: We are secure in the promise of eternal life with God.

In today's reading from the First Letter of John, one verse seems to jump out: *I write these things to you so that you may know that you have eternal life, you who believe in the name of the Son of God.*

Now there are three parts to this beautiful verse. First, John tells the communities that he is writing these words down. This is not just something to share by word of mouth; it is a truth that needs to be put in writing. Writing adds permanence, making the words easy to pass to communities and generations; makes them *real* in a way that speaking cannot always do.

Second, John tells them that he wants them to know that they have eternal life. His words show love for the community. He wants to share the truth with them: They are no longer under the spell of death, but have eternal life. His words show pastoral care; he is bringing relief to the community, and striving to strengthen and encourage them.

Finally, John presents the simple fact of eternal life: it is there for those who believe in the name of the Son of God. This is not a surprise for the community, nor is it some kind of condition to be met. They already believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God who had been crucified, died, and was buried – and then rose from the dead. They are simply being reminded of the promise of eternal life they will come to share in if they stand strong in their faith in Jesus, and live according to his teachings.

Similarly, this statement applies to us today. These words invite us to share in the same fullness of truth that was present when they were first proclaimed. They demonstrate the love that we are to have for each other today as we proclaim and listen to this promise of eternal life. And finally, they encourage us as believers – to remember that no matter the hardships in this life, our faith in Jesus, the Son of God, will get us through this life ... and into the next.

I write these things to you so that you may know that you have eternal life, you who believe in the name of the Son of God.

Saturday, January 7, 2017
(Lec. 210)

- 1) 1 John 5:14-21
- 2) John 2:1-11

Gospel related: **CCC** 486, 495, 1335, 1613, 2618

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Raymond of Penyafort,
Priest)

FOCUS: Mary continues to intercede for us, the Church, as she did at the wedding feast of Cana.

There are many different dynamics at work in today's Gospel. Let's take a bit of time to identify them so we can come to see more clearly how today's Gospel applies to the reality of our daily lives. In first century Palestine, wedding banquets often went on for days. In the midst of such a celebration, a young couple runs out of wine. Mary takes this problem to Jesus. On the surface of things, we could see this as Mary simply wanting to spare those young people embarrassment. However, if we read it symbolically, we see that Mary is expressing the longing of Israel. For wine is a sign of divine life throughout the Old Testament. Therefore, running out of it describes the spiritual condition of Israel, which is alienation from God's grace.

In asking Jesus to act, Mary is speaking in a way that is similar to the great prophets. They continually called upon Yahweh to visit his people. So when Mary says to the waiters, *Do whatever he tells you*, she conveys the same message as every prophet of Israel. They were preparing for the Incarnation. All that preparation was also an introduction to Mary, a woman full of grace, who would say yes to the request to become the mother of God.

Since Mary is the one through whom Christ was born, and since the Church is the mystical body of Christ, Mary is the mother of the Church. She serves as the one through whom Jesus continues to be born. Therefore, she is our mediator and intercessor. At the conclusion of the Hail Mary, we petition Mary to pray for us "now and at the hour of our death." This indicates that throughout our life, Mary serves as the conduit through which the grace of Christ flows to us.

Whenever we are in need of help, we ask friends or family to assist us. When Mary is depicted in artwork, she is often portrayed as someone who gathers all life under her protective mantle. Therefore, when we pray, we should ask Mary to intercede for us. She is our spiritual mother, a woman who will never fail to help us.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 8, 2017

(Lec. 20)

1) Isaiah 60:1-6

2) Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

3) Matthew 2:1-12

Gospel related: **CCC** 439, 486, 528, 724

**THE EPIPHANY OF
THE LORD
- SOLEMNITY**

FOCUS: On this Epiphany, we come to know the Christ Child as a king and as one who will be martyred – a Savior for the Gentiles, a friend of sinners and the hope of our salvation.

An epiphany is an event where something hidden is revealed. In this case, lying in the manger in Bethlehem, God reveals his Son in the flesh – as a priest, a king, one who is to die, and who will become a Savior for all people, including the Gentiles.

The sixtieth chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah details the rededication of the Temple at Jerusalem following the exile to Assyria. Having been plunged into the darkness of slavery for the better part of a century, the Israelites now rejoice because *Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you*. Here, more than seven centuries before the coming of the Christ, we learn of events that will occur when he is born. Kings will come from great distances carrying gifts of gold and frankincense.

Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians reinforces the notion that God's salvation was intended for all people, not just the chosen ones with whom he made his covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures. Sounding strange coming from the lips of Paul, a former Pharisee who would have had no love for non-Pharisees, let alone people who were not Jewish – he now throws open wide the doors to heaven to everyone, stating firmly that the Gentiles are *co-heirs, members of the same body, and co-partners in the promise*. What God intends for one, he offers to all.

In Matthew's Gospel, the Magi follow the light of the star from the Far East and Africa to arrive in Bethlehem. First, they stop at Herod's palace in Jerusalem, where they show no respect to his kingship. Instead, they ask Herod, *Where is the newborn king of the Jews?* This question would have caused great offense since Herod the Great traveled to Rome and, at great expense, bribed the Roman Senate to give him that title. He felt he needed to be named "King of the Jews" if he wanted to be king *over* the Jews since he was not Jewish by blood. The Magi dismiss him and continue their journey. Whereas they showed no respect for Herod in his royal court, once they encounter the Christ Child they prostrate themselves, face down on the smelly ground in a barn, so immediate is their recognition that they are in the presence of greatness.

Then they open their treasures, two of which match perfectly with Isaiah's prophecy: gold for Jesus' kingship, frankincense in recognition that he is also a priest. The gift that stands out – the one that seems most unlikely at this impromptu baby shower, is the myrrh. This is a burial ointment, signifying that this child was born to give his life for others, as if the crib and the cross were cut from the same tree. One is never far from the other.

Monday, January 9, 2017
(Lec. 21)

**THE BAPTISM
OF THE LORD
- FEAST**

- 1) Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7
or Acts 10:34-38
- 2) Matthew 3:13-17

Gospel related: **CCC** 444, 535, 536, 608, 701, 713, 1223, 1224, 1286

FOCUS: Jesus begins his mission at his baptism, and invites us to join in it through our baptism.

Divine manifestations are privileged moments of God's presence. The birth of Jesus was one of those moments. The first people aside from Joseph and Mary who experienced such a wondrous sign were the shepherds, people who were considered social outcasts. A second manifestation was the Epiphany, which we celebrated yesterday. The Epiphany reveals that through Jesus, God comes among us – for everyone – and not just for a few people. Today, we celebrate a third divine manifestation: The Father gives Jesus his mission.

John the Baptist wonders why Jesus needs to be baptized. He knew that the people who came to him were being baptized as a sign of their desire for conversion from their sins. Why, then, would Jesus, the Son of God, need to be baptized? One reason is his desire for total solidarity with our humanity. While he was not a sinner, his baptism anticipates his death on the cross, when he takes on the sin of the world. The heavenly voice that speaks when Jesus comes up from the water makes a proclamation that Jesus is truly the Son of God – the promised Messiah who was to bring about the salvation of the world.

The second reading from the Acts of the Apostles reminds us of the important truth that God's gift of salvation is not offered to a select group of people. It is a gift offered to all people who place their faith and trust in Jesus. In the sacrament of baptism, the Church recognizes a person receiving the gift of faith in a personal and powerful way. Through this sacrament, a person dies with Christ to sin and is given new life in Christ by water in the Holy Spirit. As a member of Christ's body, the Church, the newly baptized is called to share the Gospel with others and help build up the kingdom of God.

Whether we were baptized as children or as adults, we have been given new life in Christ and are members of Christ's body, the Church. In response to this, we are called to be living witnesses of the Gospel message. The words of Isaiah in the first reading tell us how to act. We need to be bearers of justice in ways that help people who are hurting and downtrodden. Let us think about what we can do to live out our baptismal commitment more fully.

Tuesday, January 10, 2017
(Lec. 306)

- 1) Hebrews 2:5-12
- 2) Mark 1:21-28

Gospel related: **CCC** 438, 1673, 2173

TUESDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Do others recognize you as a disciple of Christ?

William Crawford worked as a janitor at the U.S. Air Force Academy, mopping, cleaning toilets, and generally keeping the quarters of 100-plus cadets spotlessly clean. Although polite, the young cadets paid little attention to the old man, who moved slowly, and kept to himself. He was an insignificant part of their world, while they were the future leaders of the country. That is, until the day one cadet found himself reading a history of the World War II Allied campaign in Italy and came across the story of a young private who had acted with “conspicuous gallantry” at the risk of his own life “above and beyond the call of duty.” The private’s name was William Crawford and he had been awarded his country’s highest military honor, the Medal of Honor, by the president of the United States.

The cadets thought they knew this man, if they thought of him at all. He was, after all, the one who cleaned up after them – no one special in their world. They could not look beyond the janitor to see the hero.

In many ways, the Jewish leaders at the synagogue were like these cadets. They thought they knew this person called Jesus, if they thought of him at all. He was from a town of no consequence. The son of a carpenter, he was no one special in their world. What could he possibly have to teach them? How could he speak with such authority and cast out demons?

It’s interesting to note that, while they were amazed and confused, the demon was not. Perhaps the enemy alone clearly sees the truth about the one who opposes him. Private Crawford’s enemies knew that a hero was among them; they experienced his courage. The unclean spirits knew that the Holy One of God was present; they experienced his power.

When we are among friends, it is easy to just float through life, not taking a stand, trying to fit in. If we go along looking and sounding like everyone else, how would anyone know who we are? Until we stand up, speak up, take a stand against what is evil in this world, and live out our faith in a visible way, how would anyone identify us as a disciple of Jesus? Sometimes we can only define ourselves by the enemies we make. Those opposed to us get a clearer sense of who we are because the lines are sharply drawn.

Do you see Christ in the ordinary people who surround your everyday life? Do others recognize you as a Christian because of the stands you take? Or do you simply blend into the background?

Wednesday, January 11, 2017
(Lec. 307)

- 1) Hebrews 2:14-18
- 2) Mark 1:29-39

Gospel related: **CCC** 2602

WEDNESDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: We are each called and given unique gifts and talents to continue Christ's saving mission and bring it toward fulfillment.

In the Gospel today, we hear a passage from the first chapter of Saint Mark. The Christmas season is over, and we begin ordinary time in the Church calendar. But ordinary time is anything but common, because it is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. We use the term "ordinary," from the Latin word *ordinalis*, which refers to numbers in a series. The numbered weeks of ordinary time take us through the life of Christ.

We are reminded in the Christmas season that Jesus shared in our humanity. The Son of God became one of us. In his humanity, he showed us how to live. As we heard in the first reading, *Because he himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested*. In other words, Jesus is there for us. In the Gospel, we see how Jesus cures with a healing touch. He brought the healing power of God's love to Simon's mother-in-law, and many others who were ill or possessed by demons.

Then, as we heard, Jesus rose before dawn to go off by himself and pray. However, Simon Peter and some of the other disciples caught up with Jesus and told him that people were looking for him. This brought Jesus to respond, *Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this reason I have come*. These words on the part of Jesus to his disciples made it clear that he couldn't stay put. Rather, Jesus needed to continue his ministry of preaching and healing in other towns and villages in order to reveal the depth of the Father's love for humankind – and to bring the Father's plan of salvation to fulfillment.

Through our baptism, we are given the grace to be Jesus' presence in the world. We are called to serve others, as Jesus did. This new year, this beginning of ordinary time in our Church calendar, is the time to re-commit ourselves to putting Jesus first in our lives. We have all been given gifts to continue and move forward Christ's saving mission. Let us pray daily, and be open to the Holy Spirit, so we will have the grace and strength we need to share the Gospel with others and help to build up the kingdom of God on earth.

Thursday, January 12, 2017
(Lec. 308)

- 1) Hebrews 3:7-14
- 2) Mark 1:40-45

Gospel related: **CCC** 1504, 2616

THURSDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Faith in God's goodness keeps our hearts from becoming hardened.

When we keep our hearts open to the love and mercy of God, incredible things can happen. Today's first reading reminds us of this, and the Gospel shows a practical application of it. Maybe we would not think that Jesus' curing a man's leprosy would apply to our lives, but everything Jesus did was meant to teach us and show us God's love.

The passage from Hebrews pulls us back to ancient times, at least a thousand years before Christ. It alludes to the exodus of the Israelites and their wandering in the desert for forty years. They were forced to wander because of their hardened hearts. They failed to remain faithful to the God who saved and cared for them. In effect, they wandered in the desert until they softened their hearts and opened themselves again to the mercy of God.

This first reading warns Christ's disciples not to grow weary and lose heart; not to harden their hearts and refuse to see all that God had done and was doing for them. Things looked grim as they waited for Christ's return. If they kept the faith, however, and did not fall prey to the *deceit of sin*, they would be rewarded with the salvation promised by Jesus.

We can apply this idea of faithfulness and trust in God's mercy to what we heard in today's Gospel. We can see in the leper a person who has kept his heart open to God's mercy. This man did not give up, but trusted God to cure him. He saw in Jesus the agent of God's kindness. How much he understood about Jesus and his mission is unclear. But his trust in Jesus as the living manifestation of God's love is evident. The man with leprosy put his faith on the line, confidently asking for Christ's help. And his faith was rewarded.

We all have our desert moments, our times of sickness or disappointment or frustration. If we have not allowed our hearts to be hardened, we will be rewarded. If we continue to hope and trust in God's goodness and in the power of Jesus to provide for our needs, blessings will flow into our lives. Things may not work out just as we envisioned, but we will find that God's generosity cannot be outdone, and true blessings will be ours.

Friday, January 13, 2017
(Lec. 309)

- 1) Hebrews 4:1-5,11
- 2) Mark 2:1-12

FRIDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.

Saint Hilary, Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

Gospel related: **CCC** 430, 473, 574, 589, 1421, 1441, 1484, 1502, 1503, 2616

FOCUS: Jesus heals those who seek him.

“Church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners.” Perhaps you’ve heard this quote before or seen it on the marquee outside a place of worship. While the original source of these words is not easy to pinpoint, the message is clear – church is a place we can go to heal.

This expression was most likely inspired by Mark 2:17, where Jesus says: *Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.* At the hospital for sinners, Jesus is our on-call physician.

Today’s Gospel illustrates two ways that Jesus heals those who seek him. Upon seeing the faith of the paralytic and his friends who went to the extreme measure of lowering him through the roof, Jesus forgives the man of his sins. He heals him spiritually – something that only God can do. Then, to further reveal his authority, Jesus commands the man to pick up his mat and go home. He heals him physically of his paralysis.

Jesus offers the same healing to us today through the sacraments. In the anointing of the sick, we seek strength when we are ill or suffering. The sacrament of reconciliation heals us, in that we are assured that God loves us and our sins are forgiven.

To receive these sacraments, we simply must ask and have faith. Jesus heals the paralyzed man because of his faith and the faith of his friends who seek his help. He also knows the innermost thoughts of the scribes who lack faith.

Our reading from Hebrews emphasizes the need to be united in faith with those who listen to God so that we may receive the rest promised by him. It also notes how those who are not united in faith fail. What is this *rest*? It is eternal peace. How do we unite ourselves with others in faith? We join with others at Mass in worshipping God and being nourished by Jesus in word and sacrament.

In a 2013 interview, Pope Francis said, “The thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else.”

We’ve all been wounded by sin. Rather than deny it and continue to harm ourselves (or others), let us turn to the Church. Here Jesus waits for us – ready to heal.

Saturday, January 14, 2017

(Lec. 310)

1) Hebrews 4:12-16

2) Mark 2:13-17

Gospel related: CCC 545, 574, 1484, 1503

SATURDAY OF

FIRST WEEK

IN ORDINARY TIME

(Saturday in honor of BVM)

FOCUS: Jesus came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

As [Jesus] passed by, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed [Jesus]. There is no Levi in the Gospel lists of Jesus' Apostles. Scholars assume, therefore, that this Levi was Matthew, whose call is described in the ninth chapter of Matthew's Gospel.

He is identified as a tax collector. He was not the kind of tax collector we know today, a civil servant. In the Palestine of Jesus' day, the occupying Roman government entrusted the collection of taxes to tax farmers, who bid for the right to collect. In doing so, they enriched themselves by extorting more than was required. They were hated, therefore, for two reasons: for preying on people financially; and for serving the despised Roman rulers.

Jesus speaks just two words to Levi: *Follow me.* Without hesitation, Levi gets up and follows Jesus. Other disciples have already done the same, when, at Jesus' command, they abandoned the tools of their trade as fishermen, their boats and nets, to follow him. What motivated this immediate obedience? I think that if we could have questioned any of them, Levi included, they would have replied: "There was something about this man, Jesus, which made it impossible to say no."

As a parting gesture, Levi invites his friends to dinner at his house, with Jesus as the honored guest. As we would expect, many of those friends were Levi's fellow tax collectors. Others were simply *sinners*, as the Gospel reading calls them – Jews, like Levi, who did not keep God's law.

Observing these disreputable guests, the Pharisees, proud of their exact observance of God's law, ask Jesus' other disciples how their master could associate with such social outcasts. Jesus overhears and answers himself: *Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.*

What is the message for us? If we want Jesus' loving care, we need first to recognize and confess our need. And the first thing every one of us needs from Jesus is forgiveness.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 15, 2017

(Lec. 64)

- 1) Isaiah 49:3, 5-6
- 2) 1 Corinthians 1:1-3
- 3) John 1:29-34

Gospel related: **CCC** 408, 438, 486, 523, 536, 608, 713, 719, 1137, 1286, 1505

**SECOND SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME**

FOCUS: John the Baptist boldly points to Jesus as the Lamb of God – as the bearer of forgiveness.

References are an important part of any job application. We choose them with great care, often searching for people with authority and responsibility. We ask their permission to use their names and give them freedom to speak honestly about us. In addition to knowing us, they must be trustworthy and honorable – able to assess our strengths and weaknesses and to articulate them. A lot depends on their judgment. When John came to write his Gospel, he saw Jesus as God's candidate, and John the Baptist as the one giving the reference. The Baptist gives us a credible and trustworthy reference, boldly proclaiming the truth about Jesus as Savior. Today, we hear part of that holy reference.

First, John refers to Jesus as *the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world*. To the Jewish people and to an early Judeo-Christian Church listening to this Gospel, the image of the lamb would immediately evoke memories of the feast of Passover – that great celebration of liberation from slavery in Egypt. By referring to Jesus as the Lamb, John references him as the bearer of forgiveness, the liberator whose self-sacrifice brings reconciliation and deliverance from sin, and invites all to taste the freedom of God's children.

Second, John speaks of Jesus as the one who comes after him but ranks ahead because he existed before him. Clearly John has intimate and deeply spiritual knowledge, revealed by God, about who Jesus truly is. He knows that Jesus was born after him in time but that he existed before him – a clear reference to Jesus' divinity.

Finally, John refers to the event we celebrated last week: the baptism of Jesus. With complete conviction, he speaks from the heart as he recalls the voice of the Father and the anointing of the Spirit: *Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God*. That is one extraordinary reference!

How should we respond to this reference? Shouldn't it give us confidence that Jesus truly is who he claims to be? It's a reference that is confirmed over and over in the lives of the saints. Saint Paul gives his reference today when he describes Jesus as the sanctifier and Lord. But as with all references, they can only bring us so far. In many ways, they are really second-hand knowledge.

For it is only in the personal, intimate knowledge of Christ, found in the life of faith and service, that we truly witness to what we believe about Jesus. May our reference this week on behalf of Jesus be one that speaks from our hearts, and gives honest assessment of the difference he makes in our lives so that others might just be intrigued and might ask the question: How can I, too, encounter the Lamb of God?

Monday, January 16, 2017
(Lec. 311)

- 1) Hebrews 5:1-10
- 2) Mark 2:18-22

Gospel related: **CCC** 796

MONDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: We share in the priesthood of Christ.

In this oft-quoted section of the Letter to the Hebrews, the author compares Christ to other high priests who offer gifts and sacrifices before God to atone for sins. Other priests can *deal patiently with the ignorant and erring*, because they, too, are weak and prone to sinfulness. Jesus, however, was called by God to offer the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world – in total obedience to the will of his Father, he suffered and died for us and *became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is challenged about the fasting practices of his disciples. He responds that one does not fast while the bridegroom is still at the feast. Similarly, he cautions that one would not sew new cloth onto an old garment nor pour new wine into old wineskins – the patch would later shrink and tear the garment; the new wine would burst the old wineskins.

Jesus, the bridegroom, remains with us now. He continues to save his people. In his presence, we cannot live life as we once knew it or simply conform to society's rules. We cannot blindly accept cultural norms. We must share the Good News with a world in desperate need of hearing it.

How, then, should we act, we who are disciples of Jesus, the great high priest? At our baptism, we, too, were called by God to serve him and his people. At our baptism, we were called to share in Christ's priestly, prophetic and royal ministry (CCC 1546-47). We, too, share in the common priesthood of Christ. We, too, have been called to offer prayers and supplications with and for the whole Church. We, too, join in a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

We, too, join in the sacrifice of the Mass, "where the sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated" (General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM] 27), offering not just gifts, but offering Christ's sacrifice not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him (GIRM 78). We, too, partake of that sacrifice when we share holy Communion. We, too, hear the prophetic word of God and are compelled and commissioned to share it. We, too, share in the kingship of Christ and must recognize that each follower of Christ – rich or poor, young or old, stranger or friend – has been raised to that same dignity.

Our chorus of praise, then, must be bold, genuine and unceasing until we join the rest of the angels and saints in singing God's praises for all eternity in heaven.

Tuesday, January 17, 2017
(Lec. 312)

- 1) Hebrews 6:10-20
- 2) Mark 2:23-28

TUESDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM
Saint Anthony, Abbot)

Gospel related: **CCC** 544, 581, 582 2167, 2173

FOCUS: Since God knows what we need, the Ten Commandments are for our good.

We hardly give it a second thought, but for a Jew living at the time when Jesus was here among us, what he said and did in today's Gospel account would have been a shocking violation of their religious beliefs and practices.

Let's think about the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. Let's think about all the commandments. Do they belong to us? Did we originate them, or do they come from God? It may not seem to be an important question, but in light of our culture's consumerist attitude, we often buy only what we want and neglect what we need. God wants us to "buy in" to his commandments.

What is our attitude toward the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy? By keeping Sunday special and attending Mass, are we giving anything to the God who has everything?

Why did God give us the commandments? What is the intention behind them? What is their purpose? God gave us his commandment to keep the Sabbath holy not because he needs our attention, but because we need God's grace and love. It saves us, heals us and sets us free. In short, this is a divine ordinance – a divine law based on what God knows we need. All of the Ten Commandments are for our good, not for God's. We need God.

Keeping the Sabbath holy and attending Mass weekly reminds of our need for God, and brings us to lift up our minds and hearts to him in worship and prayer. When we are nourished by Jesus in word and sacrament, we may grow in our faith and love for God and come to experience the joy, peace and fullness of life that God desires for us.

Today we are considering just one of the Ten Commandments. Perhaps we should ask ourselves some pointed questions about the other nine.

Wednesday, January 18, 2017
(Lec. 313)

- 1) Hebrews 7:1-3, 15-17
- 2) Mark 3:1-6

Gospel related: **CCC** 574, 591, 1859, 2173

WEDNESDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Jesus gives us a model for resolving conflict peacefully.

In today's first reading we hear about Melchizedek, the king of Salem and a priest. The phrase *king of Salem* also means king of Peace. Melchizedek prefigures Jesus, who we often call the Prince of Peace. Peace is important to Jesus; yet the very concept of peace is often misunderstood.

Some people think that peace means the absence of conflict. More accurately, peace is the nonviolent resolution of conflict. For those times when conflict is not present and, simultaneously, God's will is being done, we should be thankful. Sometimes, though, conflict is inevitable. Two or more people, each of whom our loving God has blessed with a free will, simply disagree on the best course of action.

How does Jesus prefer us to resolve conflicts if and when they arise? Today's Gospel reading gives us a clue. Notice that Jesus feels anger. In the face of injustice or hardness of heart toward God and the goodness he wants for us all, righteous anger is a natural and appropriate feeling. What does Jesus do with his feelings of righteous anger?

Jesus doesn't lash out with physical or verbal violence. He refrains from becoming aggressive, either with words or actions. Being assertive, though, is not identical to aggression. An assertive person stands up for what she or he perceives as right, with a calm yet firm resolve to move toward resolution of a conflict without compromising on any essential matter of principle. Sometimes, this means being a bit flexible on matters of preference – areas where two reasonable people can disagree.

Jesus in today's Gospel lets his actions speak more than his words. He heals the man's withered hand without hurting anyone who considers him, Jesus, to be an enemy. Jesus does not act in anger or with aggression. He proceeds peacefully in the face of conflict.

In a few minutes, we will encounter Jesus in the Eucharist. Before having an opportunity to receive Jesus in holy Communion, we express our desire for peace with those around us. A disciple of Jesus values peace, avoiding conflict when doing so aligns with God's holy and perfect will, and resolving conflict nonviolently if disagreements and disputes arise.

Let us ask Jesus to transform our hardness of heart, and to help us do good and save life rather than do evil. Also, may we have hearts that are open to God's grace so that he can mold and shape, and bless us with his peace.

Thursday, January 19, 2017
(Lec. 314)

1) Hebrews 7:25–8:6

2) Mark 3:7-12

Gospel related: **CCC** 1504

THURSDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Jesus our eternal high priest in heaven, continually intercedes for us.

What is Jesus doing today? In today's Gospel and throughout the Gospels, we hear much about what he did when he walked this earth two thousand years ago. But if Jesus is risen and alive, what is he doing?

At the beginning of our first reading, we hear that Jesus *lives forever to make intercession for [us]*. He is a priest, indeed the preeminent priest, and eternal high priest, who intercedes for us on our behalf at the right hand of the Father. Recall the many moments in the Gospels where Jesus prays to the Father on our behalf.

In particular, in chapter seventeen of John's Gospel we hear an extended prayer that sums up Jesus' work of intercession. He asks the Father to keep his followers from the evil one (15), and to keep them in the Father's name *so that they may be one just as we are* (11).

This is what Jesus is doing today. He is continually interceding on our behalf at the right hand of the Father to obtain the manifold graces and blessings needed so that we might persevere in faith, grow in holiness and one day be judged worthy of coming to enjoy eternal life in heaven. When we were baptized, when we celebrate the Eucharist, when we receive forgiveness, even when we humbly call on his name in prayer, we receive grace from the Creator of the universe because of him!

We also pray through Jesus because the Father to whom he prays wants to give us good gifts. Recall when he told us, *If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him?* (Mt 7:11)

So Jesus, our eternal high priest in heaven, continually intercedes for us. His good gifts – even the gifts of healing and deliverance that we hear testified to in today's Gospel – are not just a thing of the past. They are gifts of God's love available to us here and now.

As we come forward to receive Jesus himself in holy Communion, let us receive him with humble and grateful hearts. As we receive him into the deepest core of heart and soul, let us ask our eternal high priest with bold faith for what we need – healing, deliverance, hope and courage.

Friday, January 20, 2017
(Lec. 315)

- 1) Hebrews 8:6-13
- 2) Mark 3:13-19

FRIDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM. Saint Fabian,
Pope and Martyr;
Saint Sebastian, Martyr)

Gospel related: **CCC** 551, 552, 765, 787, 858, 1577, 1673

FOCUS: Living the new covenant of love necessitates ascending the mountain of prayer.

In sacred Scripture, mountains are holy places for encountering God. They are places for erecting temples and sanctuaries. Therefore, one of the more important titles for God is rock. This designation is seen in the initial verses of psalm eighteen when God is referred to as our fortress, our deliverer and our rock. Mountains convey to us that it is only when we spend time in prayer that God can reach into our hearts and our interior motivations.

Jesus goes up mountains at the more solemn moments in his life. In today's Gospel, the occasion is to choose his inner circle of followers. They would be called Apostles, a term coming from a Greek word that means "to go out on a mission." It is a mandate from Jesus to extend his messianic undertaking to others. Simon's name is changed to Peter; in Greek, the name means rock. It conveys his utter closeness to Christ.

Jesus' Apostles serve as the foundational pillars in proclaiming his message to everyone. His message centers on the new covenant that he established through his life, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. That covenant is highlighted in the first reading from Hebrews. Quoting extensively from the prophet Jeremiah, the reading speaks of a call to a new spirit in living the Mosaic covenant. This new covenant will be an interior, heartfelt one. It reaches into the depths of a person, and goes beyond exterior observances of the law.

In the new covenant, God's laws are internalized. They enable people to delight in doing his will. In establishing this covenant, God and his people enjoy an intimate relationship. Forgiveness of sins becomes an everlasting reality. By observing this new covenant, people will find and serve him in every area of their lives.

We see this dynamic in the lives of Saints Fabian and Sebastian, martyrs whom the Church honors today. They had internalized God's laws to the point of being willing to die for their faith.

Our own ability to acquire a new spirit of love for the new covenant rests in whether we are willing to ascend the mountain. We need to be alone in prayer and to find our security in God, our rock. When we pray, God reaches into our hearts and our interior motivations. He takes our old life and changes it into a new life so that we can be filled with the presence of Christ. This vibrancy can then flow out from us to others and manifest itself in a life filled with service.

Saturday, January 21, 2017
(Lec. 316)
1) Hebrews 9:2-3, 11-14
2) Mark 3:20-21

SATURDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM Saint Agnes,
Virgin and Martyr)

FOCUS: All who believe in Jesus are saved and redeemed by His blood.

The Letter to the Hebrews is thought to have been originally addressed to Jewish Christians who were in danger of losing their faith because they had become weary with the demands of being a Christian. There was a growing indifference to their calling. Therefore, one of Hebrews' main themes – the priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus – is designed to restore their lost fervor and strengthen them in their faith, even when they are not being persecuted.

Along these lines, today's reading from Hebrews begins by describing the Old Testament tabernacle and the various rituals that accompanied it, including blood sacrifice. Sacrificial blood is a very powerful theme in ancient Israelite worship because it was believed to wash away sin. Therefore, the author highlights it as the model for the sacrificial death of Jesus. Then the writer applies covenant, rituals and priestly ministry to the death of Jesus.

Since Christ accomplishes the forgiveness of sin through his sacrificial death on the cross, he is the mediator of the new covenant. The earlier blood sacrifices of the Old Testament never took away sin definitively because they had to be repeated every year. Once Jesus died on the cross, he took away sin once and for all. His blood became the source of everlasting life.

In today's Gospel, Jesus had just come down from the mountain. What was he doing on it? He was choosing his disciples. From that moment onward, he kept them very close to himself. They would discover the way of the cross and the cost of following him. Once he comes down from the mountain with his twelve companions, the many people who gather make it impossible for him to eat. Some even believe he is *out of his mind*. Yet his love and compassion for humanity, as well as his desire to do the will of his Father, kept moving him forward.

Saint Agnes, whom we honor today, was filled with love of God from a very early age. She made a vow of celibacy, and when the opportunity for martyrdom arose, she chose it even though she was only twelve years old. Red is the color of fire and blood. Liturgically, it is used today to celebrate this feast of her martyrdom. Even though we might not be called to shed our blood for the sake of our faith, we are called to lead lives of love for others.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 22, 2017

(Lec. 67)

- 1) Isaiah 8:23-9:3
- 2) 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17
- 3) Matthew 4:12-23 or 4:12-17

Gospel related: **CCC** 878, 1720, 1989

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: As Christ is one, so is his body, the Church.

Many biblical prophecies contain one message for the near future, and another that looks to a distant horizon. Isaiah's message is an example of this.

Isaiah was living in an age of darkness, following a civil war among the sons of Solomon that divided the people of Israel into two kingdoms: The northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. This darkness continued with the conquest and exile of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians. While occupied and in exile, the Israelites of the northern kingdom intermarried with the Gentiles and participated in their customs. This further alienated them from their southern kinspeople, who considered their behavior unholy and in violation of the Mosaic Law.

Isaiah longed for a new king who would bring healing and reunite the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. This would also have the effect of bringing the Twelve Tribes of Israel back together. Taking the longer view, Isaiah is preparing the children of God for the coming of the King of Kings, one who would save both Jew and Gentile. In Christ, *the people who walked in darkness would see a great light*.

Isaiah hoped for an end to division and discord, as did Paul the Apostle in writing to the Corinthians about the deep-seated divisions tearing apart their fragile and newly formed Christian community. Corinth was a Greek port city – people came there from all over the world. It was no small feat for Paul and Barnabas to bring these disparate people from so many varied walks of life together under the umbrella of the Gospel. Now, having been baptized, many were sliding into the superstitions and prejudices of their previous way of life. Paul reminds them that they are all one in Christ Jesus.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus appears to take on the appearance of a man fleeing justice following news of the arrest of his cousin, John the Baptist. But Jesus does not go into the Samaritan towns of the north as a means of hiding out or entering self-imposed exile. Rather, he is doing as he would later instruct his Apostles to do – shaking the dust of Jerusalem from his feet, because the people there were too hostile to the Gospel and to the one sent by God to preach it.

Matthew makes it clear that Jesus has come to fulfill the prophecy announced in the first reading – to bring salvation to the Gentiles. We also hear Jesus speak the essence of his mission and message: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*. These are the same words spoken by John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus and the saving mission Jesus was sent to accomplish.

Jesus calls the Apostles by name. How does he know them? He is God. They leave everything and follow him. How can they? Their ancestors had awaited this moment for centuries, and now they see the prophecy fulfilled in the man standing before them by the shores of Galilee.

Through both word and sacrament, Jesus calls us by name; he calls us to follow him. We pray that we might leave our nets and do whatever he tells us.

Monday, January 23, 2017
(Lec. 317)

- 1) Hebrews 9:15, 24-28
- 2) Mark 3:22-30

Gospel related: CCC 539, 548, 574, 1864

NOTE: Or for the Day of Prayer, any of the following readings: Gn 1:1—2:2 (41) or 2 Mc 7:1, 20-31 (vol. II, 499) or Is 49:1-6 (587) or Rom 11:33-36 (121) or Eph 1:3-14 (104) or Eph 3:14-21 (vol. III, 476) or Col 1:12-20 (162) or 1 Jn 3:11-21 (208)/Mt 18:1-5, 10, 12-14 (414) or Mk 9:30-37 (134) or Lk 1:39-56 (622) or Lk 17:11-19 (144) or Lk 23:35-43 (162) or Jn 1:1-5, 9-14, 16-18 (755) or Jn 6:24-35 (113), or the *Lectionary for Ritual Masses* (vol. IV), the Mass “For Peace and Justice,” nos. 887-891

DAY OF PRAYER for the
LEGAL PROTECTION
of UNBORN CHILDREN

FOCUS: Only good can overcome evil, and all good comes from God.

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark is a great example of how – once again – the religious leaders of Jesus’ time didn’t understand Jesus. They have seen him perform miracles and cast out demons. As we just heard, some of the scribes wrongly conclude and declare that Jesus is possessed by Beelzebul – and that it’s by the prince of demons that Jesus drives out demons.

This reaction by the scribes is not all that different from the reactions that arise in our day when someone does not understand another, or take the time to try to learn in order to erase that misunderstanding. We don’t always presume good, or goodwill, on the part of another whose experience we do not understand. And how easy it is to demonize the other because of it!

But Jesus doesn’t engage in a petty, angry or mean exchange. Instead, he summons the scribes and, like any good teacher, turns the question back to them. Knowing that *they* know their religion, and that they understand logic, he asks: How can Satan drive out Satan?

It wouldn’t make sense, because evil would never make itself weaker; it would never decrease itself. Evil not only *would* not drive out evil, it *could* not. For demons to be driven out, and for miracles to occur, *good* must be the driving force. And the highest good is God. As we have heard many times, “with God, all things are possible.”

So what does this exchange mean for us? Two things come to mind. First, if something in our lives is good, it comes from God. If it is something that moves us closer to God, then it is good, and it is from God.

Second, our response to those who do not understand our faith, even when they criticize us, should be like that of Jesus. He shared the truth respectfully and confidently with the scribes; we are called to do the same with those who question our beliefs. Our words may not always succeed in convincing our challengers, but our behavior will testify to our belief in the goodness of God.

Tuesday, January 24, 2017
(Lec. 318)
1) Hebrews 10:1-10
2) Mark 3:31-35

TUESDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM
Saint Francis De Sales,
Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

Gospel related: **CCC** 500

FOCUS: Prayer is essential to growing in faith and holiness of life.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says, *For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.* By our baptism, we are all claimed as children of God, and therefore all called to do the will of God. This was one of the important messages shared by Saint Francis de Sales, whose feast day we celebrate today.

Saint Francis was ordained a priest in 1593 and patiently preached, at first very unsuccessfully, during the time of the reformation in France and Switzerland. His patient and persistent nature eventually won the hearts of his listeners, and he is said to have converted more than 40,000 people back to Catholicism.

Saint Francis de Sales was especially dedicated to providing spiritual direction to lay people at a time when it was thought that the way of holiness was reserved for clergy, monks and nuns. His gentle message to ordinary people stressed that committing themselves to excellence in their specific vocation was a path to holiness. However, his message encouraged his listeners to "have patience with all things, but first of all with yourself." He knew that the demands of the world made it more difficult to stay focused on living a holy life.

Saint Francis also emphasized that the key to loving God was prayer. His message can be helpful for us today as we seek to do God's will. As we strive to fulfill our responsibilities at work, with our families and our communities, it's important that we take time for prayer. In prayer, we renew our awareness of God's great love for us, and are strengthened by God's grace to share his love with others. Reminded of this love, we are more open to treating others with kindness, charity and patience.

Wednesday, January 25, 2017
(Lec. 519)

- 1) Acts 22:3-16 or
Acts 9:1-22
- 2) Mark 16:15-18

Gospel related: **CCC** 161, 183, 434, 670, 699, 888, 977, 1223, 1253, 1256, 1257, 1507, 1673

**THE CONVERSION
OF SAINT PAUL
the APOSTLE
- FEAST**

FOCUS: Let us, like Saint Paul, answer the call to bring the light of the Gospel to others.

Today's readings describe the work of the Church that we call *mission*. What is this work? Jesus identifies it in the Gospel we heard today as he sends the Apostles into the world to *proclaim the Gospel to every creature*. This work of the Apostles in the first century continues to be our mission today. The question for many, though, is: What does that look like? If there was once the idea that the work of the Church was only for those ordained or in leadership, that is certainly not the case today. Each of us, by our baptism, is initiated into this work.

It is not unusual, however, to hear people say they do not know enough to talk about their faith with others. We may feel that we are not good at expressing ourselves, or that we lack formal education in speaking about the teachings of the Church. But that should not prevent us from being witnesses. It is by our witness – not just our words, but our actions – that we participate in the proclamation of the Gospel.

What are we proclaiming? We are proclaiming the Good News that Jesus came for all, and we are all saved by him. When we practice our faith openly, it cannot help but draw others to Christ – those who see something in us.

Of course, we each have a responsibility to learn as much as we can about what it means to live a Christian life. But we can each begin to participate in the Church's mission, right now, today, wherever we are. Saint Paul is a good model for us in how to respond to a call to missionary work.

Missionary work does not mean going off to a foreign country. While some are called to that work, those of us whose work is right here can be missionaries to those around us. Our "missionary field" may be our job or our family, or anyone whom we sense needs to hear about Jesus.

The Bible is full of examples – such as Saint Paul – of God calling unlikely missionaries. We cannot excuse ourselves from this work because we do not "know enough." Often witness and experience, rather than academic arguments, have the most profound impact on others.

Saint Paul, whose feast we celebrate today, is a model for us. Although he began his life persecuting Christians, he ended up being the greatest missionary of all time after his conversion.

When we leave here today, let's watch for opportunities to speak of Jesus. It can be as simple as saying, "Have a blessed day," or perhaps expressing gratitude for the gifts we have been given by God.

Thursday, January 26, 2017
(Lec. 520)

1) 2 Timothy 1:1-8
or Titus 1:1-5

(Lec. 320)

2) Mark 4:21-25

THURSDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM

Saints Timothy and Titus,
Bishops)

FOCUS: Our belief in Jesus must be a brilliant flame of love that we openly share every day.

The nights are long for us in the winter, and those of us with fireplaces might be making use of them to combat both the cold and the darkness. If we have some expertise when it comes to fires, we can keep a hot ash going at all times, and whenever we need some heat and warmth, we throw on fresh logs and in no time at all have a roaring blaze. We do, however, need to take the time to create the appropriate environment that will allow for not just a brief flare-up giving temporary relief, but for a bed of white hot heat that will burst into flame at a moment's notice.

Such is the reminder of Saint Paul to Timothy regarding his faith in the Lord. Timothy came from an environment of faith – from his grandmother Lois to his mother Eunice who, according to the Acts of the Apostles, was a believing Jewish woman (Acts 16: 1,3). He also had the spiritual fuel of his missionary trips with Saint Paul, journeying with him to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. With Paul in prison in Rome after their tearful parting, Timothy perhaps needed to be reminded of the glowing ash of his faith in the Lord – needed to have some fresh timber to combat the hardship he faced from proclaiming the Gospel.

But the warmth and light that came from stirring his faith into flame was not just for Timothy's benefit; it was for the benefit of the community he was called to lead. And so the spirit of power, love and self-control that we are given as Christians is for the benefit of those with whom we interact every day.

The lamp of light that is our faith must not be placed under a bushel basket or hidden under a bed – it must be placed on a lampstand for all the world to see. Our belief in Jesus is not a private devotion to be practiced in secret, but a way of life to be proclaimed to the world by how we live every minute of our lives. And when we come to the table of the Lord, to give praise and thanksgiving and partake in the bread of life, we receive the fuel we need to stir the ashes of our faith into a brilliant flame of care for our sisters and brothers. Let us, as exhorted by Paul to Timothy, never be ashamed of our testimony of faith in our God, and let us share with all we meet the burning flame of genuine love.

Friday, January 27, 2017
(Lec. 321)

- 1) Hebrews 10:32-39
- 2) Mark 4:26-34

FRIDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Angela Merici,
Virgin)

Gospel related: **CCC** 546

FOCUS: Nurturing our faith in God helps us persevere in spite of challenges.

The author of Hebrews encourages his listeners to persevere. He reminds them that the insults and abuse they suffered in the past didn't defeat them. They endured because they trusted God's plan – even in the midst of hardship.

We all face challenges. Sometimes it feels like the pain will never end. When we don't understand why it hurts so much or lasts so long, it can be tempting to give up on God. But God never abandons us, no matter how alone we might feel. If God can bring good out of the cross, he can bring good out of our pain, too – even when we don't see how.

When we're going through tough times, it might help to remember past challenges that we've survived – often not by our own strength. We can trust that the same God who brought us through them is with us now. And so we persevere.

Perseverance is not a do-it-yourself project, but it's not a passport to inactivity, either. In today's Gospel, we hear about a man planting seeds. No doubt the man prepared the soil before planting. He probably watered and weeded the ground to nurture the seeds' growth, but the gradual process of the growth itself happened *he knows not how*.

Our spiritual growth is like that, too. We don't control the process, but by actively calling to mind how God has helped us at times when we felt helpless, we nurture the growth of our faith – a faith that will help us persevere when trouble comes.

Saturday, January 28, 2017
(Lec. 322)

- 1) Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19
- 2) Mark 4:35-41

SATURDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM

Saint Thomas Aquinas,
Priest and Doctor of the Church)

FOCUS: *Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen.*

Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen. This opening line of the reading from Hebrews beautifully captures what it means to have faith – to believe strongly in something even when it seems to go against reason.

Today's first reading reminds us of the ways Abraham demonstrates his faith. He obeys God when he sets out to a new land with no idea where he's going. He believes God when God says Sarah, who is advanced in age, will conceive. He trusts God when he prepares to sacrifice his son Isaac. What Abraham must feel at this point is unimaginable! But Abraham had faith that God had the power to *raise even from the dead*. While none of us would want God to ask this of us, we strive to have faith this strong.

Today's Gospel reveals the fear, chaos and uncertainty that can occur when we lack faith. At this point in the Gospel, the Apostles don't fully realize who Jesus is. They are terrified by the choppy waters, and awestruck by Jesus' command over nature. It leaves them asking: Who is this?

This passage also reminds us that even though Jesus knows what we need, he wants us to come to him for help – he wants us to pray. Being a Christian does not mean a free pass on problems; but during the storms of our lives, he is with us even when he appears to be sleeping.

Today, we celebrate the memorial of Saint Thomas Aquinas. His momentous work, *Summa Theologiae*, was written more than seven hundred years ago and continues to be a powerful argument for faith today.

Rather than dismissing reason as irrelevant to faith, Saint Thomas proves that the two go hand in hand. During an address to the general audience in 2010, Pope Emeritus Benedict summarized an important lesson from Saint Thomas' work. He said, "To those who object that faith is foolishness because it leads to belief in something that does not come within the experience of the senses, Saint Thomas gives a very articulate answer and recalls that this is an inconsistent doubt, for human intelligence is limited and cannot know everything."

We cannot know everything. That is why the best nourishment for our faith is to stay close to Christ – to maintain a personal relationship with him. Listen to his word in the Gospels. Speak to him in prayer. Show your love for him by loving one another. Trust in the resurrection – the way he shows his love for us. This is one of the crowning truths of our faith.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 29, 2017

(Lec. 70)

- 1) Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13
- 2) 1 Corinthians 1:26-31
- 3) Matthew 5:1-12a

Gospel related: **CCC** 520, 544, 581, 764, 1716, 1720, 2305, 2330, 2518, 2546, 2763

**FOURTH SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME**

FOCUS: The beatitudes are ideals to be written on our hearts and expressed in our actions.

It is no accident that Jesus presented his beatitudes on a mountain. God delivered the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Those commandments were laws written on stone tablets. Jesus' beatitudes are ideals that are to be written on human hearts. Jesus did not overturn the laws of Moses. But with the beatitudes, Jesus wanted to shift the focus from external laws to be obeyed to laws of love to be lived in the kingdom he came to reveal.

The beatitudes turn this world's standards upside down. Happiness in being poor in spirit? "Nonsense!" the worldly tell us. The road to happiness is found in aggressiveness, ambition and success in competition.

Happiness, Jesus tells us, is given to us by God. We don't win it, achieve it, merit it or buy it. Everyone can have it. When it comes to happiness, everyone can be a winner. Happiness and fulfillment, Jesus teaches, will come to people with open hands, humble hearts and receptive spirits. The kingdom is God's gift; it's not ours to fashion as we wish.

Blessedness for the sorrowing? The poor? The meek? The persecuted? You won't find them on TV talk shows.

Who are the meek? They are those who have harnessed their talents and abilities to serve God's interests, not their own interests. They find happiness in serving others.

The hungry and thirsty? They continually seek a better, deeper, and richer relationship with God. They hunger for a better world in which we care for each other. The merciful? They are centered on others. They are willing to forgive and to seek reconciliation.

Now in contrast, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was a famous German philosopher from the nineteenth century who was instrumental in shaping the Nazi philosophy that the fittest should rise to the top, and those at the bottom should be dismissed from living. He also believed that God was dead.

Nietzsche's view is still the rallying cry of many atheists who proclaim that God does not exist, or is irrelevant to our world today. This modern perspective dismisses Christian practice and belief. But Saint Paul reminds us that when we put our faith in Christ, we cannot be deterred. As we heard in today's reading:

God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something.

The Christian belief is that Christ is our redemption and our justification, and that living a life modeled on the beatitudes leads to happiness and fulfillment. That belief is now two thousand years old, and is still strongly held by more than two billion people. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche is very much dead, and God is quite alive in this world because of those who believe in Jesus Christ and strive to live the message of the beatitudes.

Monday, January 30, 2017
(Lec. 323)
1) Hebrews 11:32-40
2) Mark 5:1-20

MONDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Jesus alone is the one who saves us and sets us free.

Today's Gospel, which is vivid and rich with details and imagery, begins with Jesus and his disciples arriving in the territory of the Gerasenes after having just crossed the sea. These details are significant because the territory of the Gerasenes was a pagan region, and it shows that Jesus came to save and deliver *all* people from the power of sin and evil. Jesus and his disciples, after disembarking from their boat, immediately encounter a man who was being tortured and oppressed by a host of demons. Moved by love and compassion, Jesus frees the man of the demons by expelling them into a herd of swine.

This action on the part of Jesus reminds us that the power of sin and evil in the world is great, and that he is the only person who can set us free from bondage to this sin. The Gerasene man, a non-Jew, is extremely grateful for his healing, and wants to follow Jesus. But Jesus commands him to return home and *announce to them all that the Lord in his pity has done for you*. This miracle shows Jesus' concern once again for an outcast, and anticipates his upcoming mission to the Gentiles. Jesus' saving power was indeed intended for all God's people.

Similar to the man oppressed by a host of demons, we each have wounds from the past and habitual patterns of sin in our lives that can and do hold us back from living more fully as disciples of Jesus. The challenge is not to be ashamed of hurts and failings, but rather to bring them to Jesus, who will then act in God's time to bring us healing. As we are set free of the things which have held us back, we will be able to commit and give ourselves all the more fully to doing what Jesus calls us to do. And when the opportunity presents itself, let's share with others the joy we have found in Jesus.

Tuesday, January 31, 2017
(Lec. 324)

- 1) Hebrews 12:1-4
- 2) Mark 5:21-43

TUESDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM
Saint John Bosco, Priest)

Gospel related: **CCC** 548, 994, 1504, 2616

FOCUS: Jesus leads us to the finish line.

Today's first reading from Hebrews speaks of our journey of faith in terms of running a race. It exhorts us to persevere and reach the finish line. The reading reminds us to let go of every burden or sin that might weigh us down, and to keep our eyes firmly fixed upon Jesus. It is Jesus who guides us along the path to life and gives us the strength we need to persevere in faith.

One obstacle that stands in our way is suffering. Although suffering is an intrinsic part of life and all too common, it has the ability to divert our gaze away from Jesus and lead us to stray from the path of life. Suffering may challenge our faith; it might get us off-track. In today's Gospel, Jesus responds to the suffering of two individuals who seek his healing in different ways.

First, we meet Jairus, a synagogue official who sought Jesus to heal his daughter, who was at the point of death. The second is a woman who had been afflicted with hemorrhages for twelve years. She sought help from doctors but their assistance brought her no relief. Her condition grew worse and worse.

Despite their suffering, both Jairus and the woman afflicted with hemorrhages had faith that Jesus could help them. They both knew he was a source of healing, and they persevered. One spoke his request while the other offered hers in silence. Jesus heard both of them, just as he hears our prayers today. These are just two examples of Jesus' compassion for human suffering while he was on this earth.

Saint John Bosco, whose feast we celebrate today, experienced poverty and hardship as a child. This inspired him to eventually provide care for both 'body and soul' of street children and boys he encountered in the prisons of Turin, Italy in the 1800s. His efforts to provide lodging and education for the boys were met with suspicion and attempts on his life. He persevered and inspired many he served, and later founded the Society of Saint Frances de Sales, better known as the Salesians.

Many of the children Saint John Bosco encountered in life went on to dedicate their lives to helping the poor, just as he had. With their eyes on Jesus, they persevered through their hardship and suffering and are a model for us today.