

# JANUARY

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## WEDDING HOMILY

- 1) Jeremiah 31:31-32a, 33-34a
- 2) Hebrews 13:1-4a, 5-6b
- 3) John 15:9-12

FOCUS: The sacrament of matrimony is a living sacrament where the couple embraces the Lord's command to love one another as he has loved us.

We gather today to witness the making of a covenant between this bride and this groom. This is so much more than a promise, pledge or contract made by these two people. It is a covenant: a solemn and binding sacrificial agreement rooted in love and entered into with God as its center. Today, these two individuals administer the sacrament of holy matrimony to one another, and we witness it. Together, with God, they *become* sacrament to one another.

The Catholic Church defines sacrament as “an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.” In baptism, the outward sign is water. In the Holy Eucharist, it is the bread and wine. These visible signs represent the grace that we cannot see. In matrimony, the couple is the outward sign. Their public commitment to each other today, their strength as a couple, their love that is visible to others as they live out this blessed sacrament, are all signs of God's love for his people. This couple is a living sacrament – a sign of God's grace in this world.

The couple controls the efficacy and quality of this sign. God does not leave them alone in this task. He empowers them and joins with them as they live out this sacrament. Today, we all feel the joy-filled love on this happy occasion. It is easy to know that their love impacts us. It's such an uplifting experience to watch a bride walk down the aisle with her eyes on her groom. We all smile and feel touched when we witness the groom with his eyes glued to his bride as she comes near. Our hearts are warmed and our spirits are filled as we witness this love.

In today's Gospel, Jesus commands us, *Love one another as I love you*. These are words very familiar to all of his followers. They take on special meaning on this occasion as these two people pledge their love to each other for the rest of their lives. Today, their love manifests itself in joy and happiness. As their life together goes on, this love will show many faces. It will comfort in times of sorrow, and heal in times of pain. It will be challenged by anger and damaged by hurt. It will lift each other up, and may open its arms to new life. It will not always be based in a warm and fuzzy feeling, but will often be a decision to love through disappointment or disagreements. And through it all, God remains as its center, giving grace and supporting with his unconditional love.

Today, we commission this couple, and we remind all married couples, that they have committed themselves to live this sacrament daily; to marry each other every day – in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad. And as family and friends of this bride and this groom, we offer our love and support as they begin this journey together.

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## FUNERAL HOMILY

- 1) Daniel 12:1-3
- 2) 2 Timothy 2:8-13
- 3) John 5:24-29

FOCUS: Our life is one of transition, not of permanence. In accepting Christ and living the Gospel, we pass from death to life.

In languages all over the world, there are often different ways to express the same reality – different terms used, different images given. Each expression sheds light on an underlying belief.

Let us take the example of the death of a person. Many people, rather than saying a person has died, will use the words, “he or she passed away.” Others will use the expression, “he or she passed on.” Note the difference between the two. Passed away – the person is gone, is not with us anymore. Passed on – the person has moved on to the next stage, the next place or phase of his or her life.

This second expression, “passed on,” seems more consistent with the readings for today. The author Daniel speaks of those *who sleep in the dust of the earth*. Those who *sleep*. Sleep is not a permanent state. For most of us, it is the transition from one day to the next. So too, as Christians, we believe that those who have died have not entered into a permanent state of death, but rather have “passed on” – transitioned – to another state of life. For N, who has died, we mourn our loss, but celebrate that he/she has passed on to new life.

Even further, as people of faith, we are called to accept life itself, this life, as one of transition, not of permanence. Jesus says this directly in the Gospel, and applies it to all who hear his word and believe in the one who sent him. This person who believes, he says, *has eternal life and will not come to condemnation*. This person, Jesus says, *has passed from death to life*. This person makes the transition from death to life.

For Jesus, moreover, this transition does not simply take place at the moment of death. Rather, the present tense is used to emphasize that it is already occurring in this life: *Amen, amen I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life ... and has passed from death to life*.

The funeral we celebrate today reminds us that we are called, during this life, to pass from death to life. We are not called to stay here forever or to establish our lives around the mistaken notion that we will be here permanently. Rather, we are called to pour our hopes, our energy and our time into things that are lasting; we are called to make the transition now from death to life, to accept the Gospel and to live the Gospel.

**YEAR C  
WEEKDAYS I**

**TUESDAY, JANUARY 1, 2019**

(Lec. 18)

1) Numbers 6:22-27

2) Galatians 4:4-7

3) Luke 2:16-21

Gospel related: CCC 527, 2599

**SOLEMNITY OF MARY,  
THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD;  
THE OCTAVE DAY;  
OF CHRISTMAS  
(Holyday of Obligation)**

FOCUS: Mary is a Queen in every sense of the word.

Today's solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God, falls on the last day of the Octave of Christmas and the first day of the New Year. In that way, this feast marks the end of one thing and the beginning of something new. In the same way, Mary being chosen by God to become the Mother of Jesus marked the end of the reign of sin and the beginning of the life of grace.

Mary enjoys many titles: The Virgin Mary, the Blessed Mother, The Queen of Heaven, Mother of Perpetual Help, Refuge of Sinners, Our Lady of Grace, Fatima, Lourdes, Guadalupe, and so many others. Perhaps this title casting Mary as the Mother of God is the most special, as well as the most controversial.

For us who believe, this is no more and no less than a divinely revealed truth. Jesus is the great I AM. Jesus is God. Mary is the Mother of Jesus, who is God. This makes Mary the Mother of God. She is not a Goddess, but a Queen in every sense of the word. Saint Paul made it clear in his Letter to the Galatians, *God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law*. Jesus was not sent to us in a lightning bolt or hatched from an egg, he was born like we were – of a mother. The mother's role continues long after birth, nurturing that child through the many stages of life that lead to maturity and adulthood.

As the shepherds followed the light of the star to the holy manger at Bethlehem, *Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart*. As one year ends and a new one begins, let us bless the Lord for the many blessings he has given to us in years gone by, and ask him for divine assistance in the new year to come. With Mary, the Mother of God, let us continue to adore God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

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Wednesday, January 2, 2019  
(Lec. 205)

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

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

Gospel related: CCC 575, 613, 719

FOCUS: Jesus is the promised one of God. He is the one the prophets spoke of and whom John the Baptist announces is among us.

One of the earliest struggles of the young Church was coming to terms with the reality that Jesus was fully divine and fully human. Saint John takes on the issue of Jesus' divinity in our first reading. Saint Basil the Great, whose feast day we commemorate today along with Saint Gregory Nazianzen, takes on another side of that theological coin in the fourth century. In Saint Basil's time, some began to follow the belief that Jesus was more than man but less than God.

Central to our faith is the belief that the *Son of God* was born of the Virgin Mary, thus possessing two natures: divine and human. It is why we say in our creed, "consubstantial with the Father," i.e., fully divine; and "incarnate of the Virgin Mary," i.e., fully human.

This will always be hard for us to fully grasp this side of heaven. We accept in faith God's overwhelming love for us, and the Father's desire for us to make it safely home. God knew we would not, could not, ever accomplish this on our own, thus the Son had to come to show us the way home.

The Church, in her wisdom, puts this theological challenge in front of us in the middle of the Christmas Season. During these days of jubilation, as we celebrate "The Word Made Flesh," we are called to affirm our unwavering faith in whom Jesus is. Priests and Levites are sent to John the Baptist in our Gospel reading today full of questions. The Baptizer points them in another direction. This other direction will challenge their way of thinking. It will in the end be too much for them.

Following Jesus calls us to a new way of thinking. It calls us to shed our old ways of sin and put on new ways of loving anyone and everyone who comes our way.

As we continue to give and receive gifts this Christmastide, let us reflect on the gifts with which God has blessed each of us. Let us unwrap each one and exchange none, so that our faith community will continue to be the light of Christ dispersing the darkness that still exists in our world.

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Thursday, January 3, 2019  
(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: We are privileged to be called children of God.

See *what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God.* Love is at the heart of our relationship to God. The mutual love between God and us encourages us and gives us the grace to live as he commands. Therefore, if we accept that we are God's children, we will want to represent him well. We will not want to flaunt his laws or use his name as a curse word. Instead, we will want to direct others to this same relationship of love. It is natural for the children of God to happily serve others, be generous to a fault and forgive others, even their enemies.

The commandments to love come straight out of Scripture, which is no surprise. But *how* we love is in accord with who God has created us to be. We see this exemplified in today's Gospel, with John the Baptist. Because John dedicated himself to doing God's will, he recognizes Jesus as the Messiah and the teacher for whom the world had been waiting.

Today, as we continue in our Christmas season, let us rejoice in today's readings that remind us of our own divine heritage. Let us look to the example of John the Baptist who listened to the Lord and was not afraid to act upon his will. We are children of God and we are called to live up to that privilege.

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Friday, January 4, 2019  
(Lec. 207)

1) 1 John 3:7-10

2) John 1:35-42

Gospel related: CCC 608, 719

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

(OBL MEM

USA: Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton,  
Religious)

FOCUS: Christ says, *Come, and you will see*. As his disciples, these are words we can repeat to invite others to faith.

Today's Gospel passage, which gives such a beautiful account of the call of the first disciples, invites us to step into this event and grow in awareness of our own life in faith. First, we must not miss the humility of John the Baptist. He was very popular and had a significant following of his own, but he never lost sight of who he was in connection with Jesus. He did not hesitate to point his disciples to Jesus, exclaiming, *Behold, the Lamb of God*, thus continuing to reveal his subservient role to the Son of God.

We are told that the two disciples listened to John and began to follow Jesus. One of these two men was Andrew, who went and told his brother Simon Peter that they had found the Messiah. As Andrew brought Simon to Jesus, our Lord changed Simon's name to Cephas.

This name change is significant as it adds wider meaning to who Peter is to become universally. The name Cephas, meaning "the Rock" in Aramaic, signifies Simon's new role as the foundation of the Church. Peter shaped the role that has continued to this day to be synonymous with Christ, the head of the Church. Here on earth, the Vicar of Christ, our pope, leads the Church in union with Jesus, with the mission of the Church to be an instrument through which others can come to know and love God.

All of us, to a significant degree, are called to take up the mission of the Church. As ordained priests and lay disciples, together we have the opportunity to join our voices and give testimony to our faith. God has done wondrous things in our lives, and we ought to share our story with others. Let us joyfully share in the one mission of the Church by telling the world about Christ. Let us become God's instruments who continue to say to others, *Behold, the Lamb of God!* while offering our Lord's invitation to *Come and see*.

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Saturday, January 5, 2019  
(Lec. 208)

- 1) 1 John 3:11-21
- 2) John 1:43-51

Gospel related: CCC 878

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY  
(OBL MEM  
USA: Saint John Neumann,  
Bishop)

FOCUS: Jesus' words, *Follow me*, are an invitation to share in God's love.

Saint John has a lot to say about love as the hallmark of the true Christian believer. His words today are very telling and instructive: *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 [and sisters]*. For John, love is not just a human emotion but a divine attribute. God is love, he tells us, and anyone who seeks to live in right relationship with God must be a person of love. But there is even more. That divine love has now come among us and is revealed to and is present with us in Jesus of Nazareth – so all who claim to belong to him must witness to that love in the practical daily events of their lives.

Jesus reveals the depth and breadth of this divine love in his self-giving. He laid down his life for us and thereby challenges us to lay our lives for others – to set aside our needs and desires and to be witnesses to God's love through our acts of compassion and truth. Hate cannot be part of the Christian life. It is the very antithesis of love. It was hate that caused Cain to murder his brother, Abel, and it is hate that lies at the heart of all sin.

Writing at a time of great persecution for the early Church, John encourages the community by reminding them that even if the world hates them, they always have the love of God to rely on, and the promise of life in Christ. This proclamation of love lies at the heart of the Gospel. So whenever we hear the words, *follow me*, as we hear in today's Gospel, we hear an invitation to share in God's love.

Today, we celebrate the life of Saint John Neumann, bishop of Philadelphia and first U.S. bishop to be canonized. Famous for his dedication to Catholic education through the parochial system and for his care of the poor, especially the many immigrants who poured into the United States from all parts of the world in the nineteenth century, Saint John Neumann personified this Gospel of love, and challenged his people to live lives of love – not just in word but in truth. May his example help us to do likewise.

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**SUNDAY, JANUARY 6, 2019**

(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**

**FOCUS:** The Magi help to make known God's presence in the world in a particular way.

As we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany today, we hear the familiar story of the Magi. The Magi – who help to make known God's presence in the world in a particular way. They are the first visible and tangible recipients of the mystery of which Saint Paul speaks. *A mystery now revealed ... by the Spirit: that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*

We are often so enamored by this familiar story of expectation, wonder, joy and faithful homage that we may forget something essential to the importance of the story: the Magi were not Jewish. They were Gentiles! They were not children of Abraham, people of the Covenant, or Israelites. They were "foreigners," most likely Persian, whose religious affiliation and actual occupation have not yet been settled by biblical scholarship.

Yet, they knew about Jesus. They knew about the coming of the Messiah. And they had the fearlessness to approach the Roman-appointed King of Judea – that is, Herod, then the current "king of the Jews," and ask him: *Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.* Asking such a question – essentially implying Herod's successor and perhaps even deposer – could have been inferred as a threat, if not outright treason. But that did not deter the Magi in their quest.

Their journey in faith, and their strength in following God's prompts and witnessing to his faithfulness, is a model for our own discipleship. With one exception: God is *already* made manifest to us – we do not have to seek him out; he seeks *us* out. And when we respond to his call, there are things we can count on – as if they were a star in the sky – to help us make our way to him: his word; his sacraments; his grace; and the gifts he has given us that we might in turn offer back to him. We are not alone in this endeavor.

As the Magi were a community of support for each other, so we too, gathered here, are a community of support and belief. We have come here because we have heard about the coming of the Messiah and we wish to offer our gifts to him. Gifts that will be returned to us in the gift of Christ's body and blood, making his presence just as substantially real to us as he was to the Magi. What a powerful, mysterious gift that transcends time!

May this and every encounter with Christ empower us and direct us to go forth and witness to the faithfulness of God's promises, and his enduring presence within and among us.

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Monday, January 7, 2019  
(Lec. 212)

- 1) 1 John 3:22–4:6
- 2) Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25

Gospel related: CCC 1503, 1720, 1989

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

FOCUS: If we love God, we must also love one another.

Today's Gospel takes us to the beginning of Jesus' ministry while here upon earth. The nation of Israel had long been waiting for the Messiah, after enduring centuries of being ruled by other nations. At the time of the Gospels, the Romans were currently holding Israel in captivity, and it may have seemed that God was never going to deliver them from foreign rule. Into this time in human history, Jesus came. He was born to our Blessed Mother, baptized by John the Baptist and began ministering to the people of Israel. The nation began to have hope once again.

Matthew's Gospel gives a synopsis of all that Jesus did as he traveled through Galilee during his ministry. People who had been suffering from paralysis, pain and demonic possession were being set free. *His fame spread to all of Syria ... and great crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan followed him.* There was a sense of a beginning of hope, though not everyone yet fully understood who Jesus was.

Today, we face the same challenges of illness, weakness, worry and fear. Like those who lived in Galilee, we can also experience God's love and the hope it brings. And like those of the community to whom John was writing in our first reading, we're told that we can know the Spirit of God when we acknowledge that Jesus has come in the flesh to save us. His sacrifice upon the cross fulfilled God's promise to redeem the world which had turned from him. This is what it means to fully understand who Jesus is.

We are warned that false teachers will try to tempt us to turn away from Jesus and to follow a different spirit. But we are encouraged to always remember that we belong to God. God's Spirit is greater within us than any other spirit of the world.

Saint John reminds us that we know God because of Jesus Christ. Through him, we are part of God's family – which is a privilege. And with that privilege, comes responsibility. We are told to love one another as God has loved us. That is today's challenge. Let's resolve today that we will walk out of church today showing the love of Christ to others. If we all do this, we can see hope come back to those who are hopeless. Joy can return. Peace can be found when people turn to Jesus.

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Tuesday, January 8, 2019  
(Lec. 213)

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

- 1) 1 John 4:7-10
  - 2) Mark 6:34-44
- Gospel related: CCC 472

FOCUS: God sent his son, Jesus, as a gift of love to the world.

Throughout this Christmas season, the readings have been describing the early days of Jesus' ministry to Israel. Today we heard Saint Mark's description about the feeding of the five thousand while on the mountainside. All four Gospels tell of this miracle, each one giving us a slightly different perspective of this momentous event.

Jesus has been ministering in many ways. He has been displaying the incredible love that God has for all people. Jesus has revealed that love by healing people from leprosy and other terrible diseases. He has encouraged them to follow God the Father. Israel is being ruled by the Romans, which has been disheartening and cruel. Jesus lets the people of Israel know that the Father has not abandoned them but has sent Jesus to them for this time – for their redemption.

In today's Gospel, we find Jesus and his disciples surrounded by a crowd of people who are intrigued and captivated by the love Jesus is displaying to them. They have been sitting there a very long time, and understandably are getting hungry and tired. His disciples want Jesus to send them all away so that they can find food. Surprisingly, Jesus tells the disciples to go ahead and feed them. This was a shocking thing to say since there were only five loaves of bread and two fish available, which certainly was not enough for this crowd.

Jesus receives the loaves and fish from them. He looks up to heaven and blesses the food. The food is multiplied and given to all the people present. The Gospel states, *They all ate and were satisfied*. God is demonstratively caring for his people.

This is also a glimpse of what is to come for all of us – the establishment of the Holy Eucharist in which we'll soon partake today. God is our provider. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. We are recipients of his infinite love. What a blessed gift God has given us!

How should we respond to this gift of love? First, we can respond by receiving his gift of love with gratitude. Second, in Saint John's epistle, we are reminded: *Let us love one another, because love is of God*. These are mighty words which bring forth powerful results. If we love God, we must model ourselves after Jesus' example by loving one another.

Today, let's challenge ourselves to love one another. As we receive Jesus in the Holy Eucharist in a few moments, let us ask him how we can demonstrate his love to others. He will show us his ways, and we can show others his love.

Wednesday, January 9, 2019  
(Lec. 214)

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

1) 1 John 4:11-18

2) Mark 6:45-52

Gospel related: CCC 2602 CSDC 453

FOCUS: When faced with challenges that fill us with fear, let us turn to the Lord with faith and hope.

In today's Gospel, we hear one of the stories of Jesus walking on water. Having just performed an astounding miracle – feeding the multitude with just a few loaves and fishes – he now comes to his disciples' rescue, saving them from the fearful tossing of the waves. The disciples' response, though, is not relief, or joy or gratitude. They are terrified. They are *completely astounded*, not sure what to make of all these miracles they have witnessed; *their hearts were hardened*.

Saint John addresses much of these same fears and lack of complete understanding as he writes to the early Christian community; a community still under Roman rule and therefore not free, yet growing in faith and hope for the promise of eternal life. They are, like the disciples in the boat, being tossed about by waves – in this case, waves of persecution and the danger of death. Yet they also have come to believe in the risen Christ who has already rescued them. John says, *God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him. In this is love brought to perfection among us, that we have confidence on the day of judgment because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear.*

And what is our response as Jesus' twenty-first-century disciples? It can be easy to say that, of course we get that these miracles are signs that Jesus is the Son of God – that Jesus is the Lord. Hearing about a rescue at sea, we might recall Old Testament stories in which the Lord God rescues his faithful just as Jesus does in this story.

And yet, when our own lives turn stormy, are we able to trust in the Lord, come what may? It is so easy to fall into a pit of worry and anxiety about the future that, when left unchecked, immobilizes us with fear.

Do we trust the Lord to do for us what he did for the disciples? What he did for others we read about in the Gospels?

The answer is absolutely yes! On our altar, perfect love is present to drive out fear. Through the power of that same Spirit God has given us, our gifts of bread and wine will become the very real presence of Jesus. This is a presence we will receive and touch and become one with – Jesus, that same Lord who will come to each one of us and restore our faith and hope.

Let us come to him with open and trusting hearts, confident that he truly is our Lord who *drives out fear*.

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Thursday, January 10, 2019

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

(Lec. 215)

1) 1 John 4:19–5:4

2) Luke 4:14-22a

Gospel related: CCC 436, 544, 695, 714, 1168, 1286, 2443 CSDC 28

FOCUS: Jesus, who is the Son of God, is indeed God's real presence in our world.

Today, as we celebrate God's love for us in the spirit of Christmas, Jesus helps us see how that love is real by his presence and ministry. In the first reading, John reminds us that we should love God because God first loved us. That divine love compelled God to create each one of us in God's image. Hence, to love our neighbors, who were created in God's image, is to love God. To do otherwise would be making liars of ourselves by declaring our love for God and yet hating our neighbors. Thus, not only would we be deceitful in our actions, we would be failing to love God and obey his commandments.

We love God when we follow his commandments. Love itself is keeping his commands, which are not burdensome, but in faith is a participation in God's conquering of the world. The One who exhibited perfect obedience is Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection conquered death for us all.

This is what the Gospel passage is showing us today, when Jesus reads the Scripture passage and then says, *Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing*. Jesus, who is the Son of God, is indeed God's real presence in our world. His birth at Christmas testifies to God's love for us. He is the fulfillment of the Scripture. Jesus, who is the Savior of the world, brings us glad tidings, heals the sick, feeds the hungry, reaches out to the outcast and forgives sinners. He shows us how much he loves God by his ministry of love to the people of God. God's love is indeed real and complete in Jesus.

My dear brothers and sisters, as we continue our Christmas season, let us give thanks to God for sending us God's son, Jesus, to let us see God's love for us. Let us also challenge ourselves to show our love for God by loving our neighbors.

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Friday, January 11, 2019  
(Lec. 216)

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

1) 1 John 5:5-13

2) Luke 5:12-16

Gospel related: CCC 2602

FOCUS: God's testimony is this: he gave us eternal life in his son, Jesus Christ.

In today's Gospel reading, by curing the man afflicted with leprosy, Jesus has healed him in more than one way. The most obvious sense is the physical one: he no longer has the visible aspects of the disease. But along with this physical transformation of a gruesome illness comes a social one: the man will be allowed back into society

At that time, lepers were ostracized and living at the outskirts of town. Because they were deemed "unclean" (a term which also had a spiritual connotation), it felt even immoral to interact with a leper. Once clean, the man could presumably return to his family and re-enter society to enjoy the companionship of friends, the satisfaction of work and worship at the synagogue and Temple. In fact, this is exactly what the leper asked for: *Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean*. He did not ask for healing, in and of itself, but to be made clean. He asked for social and communal redemption.

It is unclear exactly why Jesus orders the man not to tell anyone about his being made clean. There may be many reasons for Jesus to insist upon the man's silence, but one likely reason may be for the man's own good. A Jewish leper cannot be re-admitted to society without being declared clean again by the priests. By directing the man: *Go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed*, Jesus was ensuring that this would take place without interference, or disbelief on the part of the elders. Showing himself would *be proof for them*.

The leper made a bold and somewhat risky move in approaching Jesus – because of his illness. But his faith meant that he could not do otherwise. As John tells us in the first reading, *Whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony within himself ... And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever possesses the Son has life*. And though the Gospel passage in Luke does not say whether the man told anyone what had happened, it does tell us, *The report about him spread all the more, and great crowds assembled to listen to him and to be cured of their ailments*.

The crowds, then, like the leper, are approaching Jesus. Whether they all have the same certainty and faith as the leper is unknown to us. But surely, they exemplify what John speaks about in the first reading: *If we accept human testimony, the testimony of God is surely greater*. They opened themselves up to the message Jesus brought.

Let us think about how we, too, can approach the Lord in faith, and certainty – how we can appreciate how God has healed us or others physically or spiritually, or shone light into darkness. May our testimony point to God's greater testimony, and like Jesus, let us look for ways to bring others back into God's light – using our time in prayer to bear fruit by ministering to others. Whether we are receiving God's blessing or sharing God's blessings with others, let us give thanks to God in both public and private.

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Saturday, January 12, 2019  
(Lec. 217)

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

- 1) 1 John 5:14-21
- 2) John 3:22-30

Gospel related: CCC 523, 524, 796

**FOCUS:** Knowing we are children of God can give us the confidence of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist.

What is our idea of ourselves? Most of us probably describe who we are in a few ways: by our occupation, family relations or background. The two saints we hear from in today's readings would probably refer to themselves in a variety of ways as well. The Baptist might say that he is a Jewish prophet and the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. The Evangelist might say that he is a disciple of Jesus and Saint James' brother. Both regarded their faith as integral to who they were as people.

Today's Gospel passage comes from a section titled "Final Witness of the Baptist." This is the last recorded testimony before John's arrest. In this signature moment, John makes a few important points: he is not the Messiah, but rather came to herald his arrival; he rejoices at Jesus' arrival; and he knows that his mission is drawing to a close as Jesus' ministry begins. The identity of John the Baptist is wrapped up in his vocation: he was to prepare the way of the Lord. He "inaugurates the Gospel," beginning when he leapt in his mother's womb, and continuing by declaring Jesus to be the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Throughout his life, John the Baptist "bears witness to Christ in his preaching, by his Baptism of conversion, and through his martyrdom" (CCC 523).

John the Evangelist, who authored today's epistle, summarizes his self-understanding very simply: *We know that we belong to God*. That truth has incredible consequences, for we can have confidence that God hears our prayers and will answer anything we ask *according to his will*. Saint John sees the world starkly divided between those who follow God and those who follow the evil one. Knowing that he belongs to God, he can be confident that he has put his faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

All of us who have the grace of baptism are God's children, and when we know that is who we are, we can have the courage of these two saints. With that assurance, we can confidently pray to God like John the Evangelist, asking God even to give life to sinners. Like John the Baptist, we can fearlessly preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and rejoice in our smallness as the light of Christ shines through us, overtaking us.

May we all pray that we will more deeply understand ourselves as children of God, and may our prayer join Saint John the Baptist's: *He must increase; I must decrease*.

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## SUNDAY, JANUARY 13, 2019

(Lec. 21)

1) Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

2) Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7

3) Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Gospel related: CCC 536, 608, 696, 2600

## THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD - FEAST

FOCUS: We are God's beloved children.

Today's Gospel recalls a significant moment in Jesus' public ministry. There was Jesus, God made Man, who certainly did not need a ritual cleansing, submitting to a baptism by his cousin John. Unlike the other baptisms John must have performed that day, this baptism was a manifestation of Christ's "acceptance and inauguration of his mission as God's Suffering Servant" (CCC 536).

Can we imagine standing on the banks of the River Jordan and witnessing the baptism of Jesus? What a sight it must have been! The Holy Spirit descends like a dove. The waters are sanctified by Jesus and by his Spirit. Jesus is "sealed" or anointed by the very presence of the Spirit. As if that weren't enough, the heavens (once closed by Adam's sin) are now opened up and a voice calls out *You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased*. And what was Jesus doing? Interestingly, Jesus was praying – a habit that would mark all the decisive moments of his earthly ministry and our salvation (CCC 2600). Surely, this was yet another sign of his humble and trusting commitment to the will of the Father.

As spectacular as that scene must have been, we can relate to it – for a similar scene plays out every time one of God's children is baptized. As each infant, child or adult is brought to the waters of baptism, the Trinity is there. We do what Jesus commanded us to do – to baptize in his name and in the name of the Father and the Spirit. We encounter Christ, the indelible seal of the Spirit is conferred, and the Father is pleased with his beloved child. From that moment on, we get a glimpse of what heaven must be like.

As Saint Paul reminded Titus, *the grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age, as we await the blessed hope*. Christ redeemed us and claimed us as *a people as his own, eager to do what is good*. Similarly, Isaiah prophesied that our guilt would be expiated and that the Shepherd would gather the lambs in his arms. We belong to Christ!

Today, let us not just reflect on the baptism of the Lord. Let us reflect on our own baptism. Let us recall, with great awe and wonder, what happens to *us* when we are baptized: the cleansing water, the presence of the Trinity, the rejoicing in heaven, and the strength of the grace that still abides with us. Most important, let us be reminded of the great responsibility that comes along with that baptism. God claimed each one of us as his own, and gave each of us the grace to overcome the evil in the world.

So as we celebrate this Eucharist today, let us be transformed by our partaking of Christ's body and blood so as to go forth and fulfill that baptismal mission.

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Monday, January 14, 2019

(Lec. 305)

1) Hebrews 1:1-6

2) Mark 1:14-20

Gospel related: CCC 541, 787, 1423, 1427 CSDC 49

MONDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: This is the time of fulfillment, the kingdom of God is at hand.

Liturgically, today is a “first” day. It is the first Monday of Ordinary Time. But we shouldn’t confuse ordinary with commonplace. Ordinary actually refers to “ordered” time in the Church – a period when we can gradually get to know Jesus better.

During this time we are called to a conversion in Christ, whereby we journey with him through his ministry. Our first reading from Hebrews tells us that God spoke to his people first through the prophets, but is now speaking to us through his Son. As such, we start today with the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, as told by Mark in his Gospel.

Mark cuts to the chase. With his very first words, Jesus announces God’s intervention into history – the time of fulfillment. This is a turning point in salvation history. Through Jesus, God is fulfilling the promises he made through the prophets. Jesus announces that the kingdom of God *is at hand*. It still is today.

Then he asks us to repent and believe. By repenting, we not only ask for God’s forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation, but make a promise to turn away from sin – to change our lives. By believing in the Gospel, we say we trust Jesus. We come to follow Jesus. Like the Apostles, we drop our nets and walk with him.

The Church is not telling us to abandon our jobs as the Apostles did. But we are called to make everything else in our lives secondary to our discipleship. Each one of us is part of the body of Christ – the Church. As such, we become part of the Church’s mission of “proclaiming and communicating ... Jesus Christ” (CSDC 49). And by proclaiming, we become *fishers of men*.

We are all used to making commitments at the start of Lent to improve our spiritual lives. But why wait until then? Let us start today to make a determined effort to get to know Jesus intimately through daily Scripture reading. We can better *repent, and believe in the Gospel*, as Jesus directs us today, if we know the Gospel better. After all, this is the time of fulfillment, it is the first day of the rest of our eternal lives.

Tuesday, January 15, 2019  
(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: Let us put Christ's word into action and keep his message alive in our world.

In today's Gospel, Mark recounts events near the beginning of Jesus' ministry as he enters the synagogue and commences teaching. Mark does not tell us exactly what Jesus says, but he clearly reveals the reaction of the people who heard him. He writes, *The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority.*

In that same synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit who identifies Christ as the *Holy One of God*. Jesus orders the unclean spirit to leave and casts him out of the man. He publicly demonstrates that he has the power to defeat evil. Mark does not tell us what happened to the unclean spirit or the man, but instead shares the reaction of the people who were *amazed* by these events. His fame spreads throughout the region.

The ministry of Jesus took place in a world very different than the one in which we live today. He did not have television, twenty-four-hour news, the internet, social media or telephones to spread the word. And yet news of this man, Jesus, began to move throughout the land. His teaching was powerful. His miracles were astonishing. His message was amazing. The people were roused, and though they didn't all immediately embrace his Truth, the Spirit was beginning to stir in the land and move the hearts and minds of the people. So powerful is his message that it has been sustained for more than two thousand years, without the advantage of the kind of communication we have in the twenty-first century.

So here we are today with the benefit of knowing the whole story. We are graced with knowledge of the life of Jesus which those early followers did not have. We are aware that his fame increased as the story unfolded. We all know his message, his miracles, his death, his Resurrection and his promise of life eternal. And yet many still doubt. Many do not accept the gift of faith freely offered to us. We are reminded that the mission goes on and the work is not done. It is up to us to continue to live the truth and invite others to this life of faith which Jesus so lovingly offers to us.

Jesus has not abandoned us, and we are called to not abandon him in return. It is not enough to just believe. Let us continue his ministry by putting his word into action and keeping his message alive in our world.

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Wednesday, January 16, 2019  
(Lec. 307)

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

Gospel related: CCC 2602

WEDNESDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Jesus came to heal us, to conquer the effects of sin and preach the kingdom of God.

For what purpose did Jesus come?

Jesus tells us in today's Gospel why he came: to preach. We know that this does not mean just "speaking," but that he came to heal us, to conquer the effects of sin and to preach the kingdom of God.

In the Gospel, Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, who is then able to serve him. Her actions are an important reminder for us: if the Lord wills to heal us, it is our duty to use that gift to serve him. Saint Mark also tells us that Jesus cast out demons and *cured many who were sick with various diseases*.

Of course, Jesus didn't come only to heal physical illnesses, but also spiritual infirmities – he cast out demons regularly. Most important, he came to heal the covenant relationship between God and humanity, making humankind sons and daughters of God.

The effects of the Fall include suffering and death (CCC 418), and Scripture tells us that *God did not make death ... by the envy of the devil, death entered the world* (Wisdom 1:13; 2:24). This is what Saint Paul refers to in his Letter to the Hebrews. And since Jesus was both God and man, his passion and resurrection conquered death forever. Jesus, the great high priest, was tested through his suffering and ultimately chose to follow the will of his Father.

Some ancient Jews believed, wrongly, that "death marks the end of a person's relations with God" (NABRE footnote b, Heb. 2:5-18). With that in mind, it is easy to see how some may be enslaved by the fear of death. However, Jesus' glorious resurrection gives us hope not only that he has conquered death, but also that there is life with God for eternity.

Finally, Jesus said he came to preach. Through his many parables and sermons, Jesus taught his followers about the kingdom of God.

It is no wonder that Simon Peter tells Jesus, *Everyone is looking for you*. If there was a holy man who came to heal, to conquer death and to proclaim the kingdom of God, surely we would run to him! Thankfully, we don't have to look for this holy Son of Man. He is here, present: in the tabernacle, in the word and soon upon this altar, and he is waiting to heal each of us, to help us conquer sin and its effects, and to teach us about himself.

\* \* \*

Thursday, January 17, 2019  
(Lec. 308)

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

THURSDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME  
(OBL MEM  
Saint Anthony,  
Abbot)

Gospel related: CCC 1504, 2616

FOCUS: Jesus wills what is best for us.

Jesus' encounter with the leper in today's Gospel is good news for all of us – not only for the leper. In a very telling and poignant response to the leper's plea for help – *If you wish, you can make me clean* – Jesus proclaims to him his will and the will of God the Father. *I do will it. Be made clean.* Jesus is not only promising to heal the leper from a dreaded disease, but he also is restoring him to his community. He firmly proclaims that he actually wills the leper's healing. He – and the Father – will what is best for the leper and for all people.

We are warned in the first reading not to harden our hearts to God. The Israelites who wandered in the desert for forty years, after their miraculous escape from slavery in Egypt, began to take for granted the gifts God gave them every day to sustain them. They tested God, demanding more and forgetting that the daily gifts from God were, indeed, wonderful works – just as great as the Red Sea that separated and allowed them to pass through on dry land. God continued to will what was best for his chosen people – but they failed to understand and to recognize his generous gifts.

And how often are we guilty of the same hardened heart – especially when we don't get exactly what we pray for? How often do we, like the Israelites who roamed in the desert, forget that God is leading us on our journey, knows our needs and provides for them? How often do we forget that God, like Jesus, knows and wills the best for us? Perhaps the greatest gifts we can give to God, who has given us so much, are gratitude for the daily gifts that bring wonder and that sustain our lives, and trust that God wants only what's best for us.

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Friday, January 18, 2019  
(Lec. 309)

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

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

FRIDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Let us, with vibrant faith, enter into God's rest.

Today's Scriptures offer us a tale of cautionary hope, and visible faith. We hear in Hebrews that the community has done well in "not failing to enter into his rest." But the author reminds them to remain on guard against disbelief, for their ancestors, too, *received the Good News ... but the word that they heard did not profit them*. So belief in the Good News must be active and ongoing – it must be vibrant.

Visible, active and ongoing faith is at the heart of our Gospel today: the story of the paralytic healed by Jesus. It is good to ask, "Whose faith is it that saves him and makes him whole?" Mark the Evangelist does not say that it is only the man's faith. Instead, he writes that, *Jesus saw their faith*. The paralytic's *friends* are the ones who brought him to the house where Jesus was. When they could not enter, because of the crowds, they climbed onto the roof. They were the ones who made a hole large enough to fit him. They carried him up onto the roof and they were the ones to lower him into Jesus' midst. How great and awesome must their faith in Jesus have been for them to do all those things for the sake of their friend?

Here were people who heard the Good News and believed. And they acted upon that vibrant faith in order to bring healing to their friend. How many people do we know who are in need of Jesus' healing? They could be the ones who are addressed in our first reading – those who have heard God's word but did not believe. Or maybe they are friends or loved ones who have turned away from God. Perhaps we can carry them on a mat of prayer before the Lord for their healing and salvation. We might even speak the Good News ourselves, such that they seek out the Lord in response to his call.

We who gather here have the gift of faith – and it is one meant to be shared. So let us place ourselves before the Lord, and partake of his body and blood so that we may find rest in him, and bring others to it as well.

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Saturday, January 19, 2019  
(Lec. 310)

- 1) Hebrews 4:12-16
- 2) Mark 2:13-17

SATURDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME  
(Saturday in honor of  
BVM)

Gospel related: CCC 545, 574, 1484, 1503

FOCUS: Jesus came to call sinners.

As the first week of Ordinary Time concludes, Jesus continues to call new disciples and expound upon his mission. Earlier this week, we heard Jesus call Simon, Andrew, James and John, to follow him. These four men were fishermen and pious Jews. Levi's calling today is much different. He is a tax collector who is judged by his fellow Jews as a sinner. And, Jesus not only invites Levi to follow him, he chooses to go to Levi's home for a meal.

Here Jesus seems to be in his element surrounded with tax collectors and sinners. However, the scribes are horrified when they see who Jesus has chosen to dine with. They could not understand why Jesus, a pious Jew, would make himself ritually unclean by associating with such blatant sinners. As Jesus explains to them, *I did not come to call the righteous but sinners*. In this short reply, Jesus is pointing to an essential element of his purpose: to call sinners to repentance and back to union with God.

As all four Gospels illustrate, Jesus is never picky about the company he keeps. He continually consorts with those judged by religious leaders as unworthy, such as tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers and Samaritans. In doing this, he demonstrates that "there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents" (CCC 545). Jesus' ministry of forgiveness and healing is open to even those who oppose him, such as the scribes and Pharisees. If only they would accept it.

Whenever we gather for the Eucharist, we begin by acknowledging we are sinners. We believe, as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews proposed, that we can *confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy*. Unless we acknowledge that we are in need of healing, however, we will be no different than the scribes in Mark's Gospel.

The word of God is *sharper than any two-edged sword*, so this offer of healing comes with a call to follow Jesus by imitating his lifestyle. For us sinners, it means repenting and believing in him, and then sharing that belief with others. Seeking out those who need to hear the Good News. Sitting with those who need healing. Challenging ourselves to live what we profess. Today, in the Eucharist, this is exactly what Jesus does with us.

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**SUNDAY, JANUARY 20, 2019**

(Lec. 66)

1) Isaiah 62:1-5

2) 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

3) John 2:1-11

Gospel related: CCC 486, 495, 1335, 1613

**SECOND SUNDAY  
IN ORDINARY TIME**

FOCUS: Jesus let his glory be seen and his disciples believed in him.

Weddings are joyous occasions which express our desire for a full and happy life.

The image of a wedding is frequently used throughout the Old Testament to describe God's relationship with his chosen – Israel. Though often unfaithful, God always took her back, forgave her and turned her sadness into joy. As she awaited the coming of the Messiah, Israel's hopes were expressed in terms of a wedding – a time of great rejoicing and celebration. Like abundant wine, God's blessings would be poured out on his people in full measure.

As we hear the account of the miracle at Cana, it is hard not to notice the shadow of the cross. Like all of Jesus' signs and miracles, this points to the greatest of all his signs: when he will be lifted up in obedience to the Father, for the salvation of humanity. This will be how the new covenant- marriage between God and his people will be brought about. Here Jesus speaks about his *hour* – a reference to that time when his truest identity and glory will be revealed.

Significantly also, Jesus' mother is present at the wedding. In addressing her as *woman*, a title he will also use from the cross, Jesus is referring back to another woman, through whom sin first entered the world. Here now, through *this* woman – Mary, his mother – the healing of that sin will begin in her Son.

For Christians, the cross is the ultimate blessing, as it is the source of eternal life. So the 120-180 gallons of wine is indicative of the inexhaustible riches of God poured out on the faithful believer. Just as a wedding is a sign of who we are and what we hope for, so the miracle of Cana is a sign of what God offers us if we put our faith and trust in him.

Through the death and resurrection of his Son, God offers us more than we could ever hope. In addition to the gifts of the Spirit as listed by Paul in Corinthians, God offers us the fullness of life and love. It is through faith that the water of our daily lives with all its challenges and achievements can be transformed into something far superior, full bodied and with a deep quality and bouquet. Through faith our lives gain a new depth and meaning if we simply do as Mary says: *Do whatever [Jesus] tells you.*

\* \* \*

Monday, January 21, 2019  
(Lec. 311)

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

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

Gospel related: CCC 796

FOCUS: Christ *became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.*

Today, the Church celebrates the memorial of Saint Agnes, Virgin and Martyr. Born in Rome in 291 A.D. to a wealthy Christian family, she died when she was very young, at age twelve or thirteen. Agnes had committed herself to Christ, “her only spouse,” and so she refused to marry. Tradition holds that there were several suitors interested in her wealth and her beauty, and her refusal did not sit well with them. Ultimately she was persecuted and killed for being Christian, and for remaining faithful to Christ.

When we celebrate a memorial for someone who is martyred, we are not so much celebrating that he or she died for Christ – as if the death itself were all that mattered. We are celebrating that this person, with the help of God’s grace, remained steadfast in his or her commitment and obedience to Christ while fully alive ... even unto death. Even if doing so meant *choosing death* over renouncing their faith. And herein lies the message for us: we know that it is possible, and therefore we are encouraged in our human ability and with the help of God’s grace, to remain faithful and obedient to our loving God.

Usually, the choices we make to stay faithful are “little deaths,” sacrifices – not our mortal demise – that place obedience to God’s commands, our life of discipleship, above vices and temptations. It is about our choice – and God’s grace in helping us make it.

And so it is in today’s Gospel. The people are curious: *Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?* They think that the disciples have chosen the bodily comfort of being sated over the commands of God. But the disciples have done just the opposite: they have chosen to be with Jesus, to celebrate his presence among them even if they as yet do not fully understand it. And no one fasts during a celebration. Jesus, the embodiment of God’s grace among them, enabled them to choose this path – and demonstrated to the others what one with true obedience to God looks like.

We heard in the first reading that Christ *offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence ... and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.* The once and for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ is the gateway to our redemption – and therefore the one thing we should honor above all other things. Since we were given free will by God, we can choose to aim for this gateway, honoring and obeying God’s commands, or not. With our belief and the help of God’s grace, we will have no difficulty choosing to profess our faith above all things, and living a life that will be as celebrated in heaven as that of Saint Agnes.

So as we prepare to celebrate Jesus’ perfect obedience and give thanks for him as the source of eternal salvation for us, let us pray that our will and our faith will be strengthened and transformed by the graces we receive, so as to give glory and honor to God before all things.

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Note: Heb 6:10-20/Mk 2:23-28 (312) or, for the Day of Prayer, any readings from the *Lectionary for Mass Supplement*, the Mass “For Giving Thanks to God for the Gift of Human Life,” nos. 947A-947E, or the *Lectionary for Mass* (vol. IV), the Mass “For Peace and Justice,” nos. 887-891

Tuesday, January 22, 2019

(Lec. 312)

1) Hebrews 6:10-20

2) Mark 2:23-28

TUESDAY OF  
SECOND WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME  
(USA: Day of Prayer  
for the Legal Protection  
of Unborn Children)

Gospel related: CCC 544, 581, 582, 2167, 2173 CSDC 261

FOCUS: The Sabbath was made for us.

Today's Gospel account has the ever-watchful Pharisees questioning the disciples' actions of making a path through a field of grain while picking the heads of grain. It's the Sabbath. Work is forbidden on the Sabbath, and the rule-following Pharisees take issue and want to point out the error of the disciples' ways. They can't work in the field and pick grain. They can't even work to feed their hungry bodies. But Jesus himself is not concerned. Jesus knows his followers are hungry. Jesus is quick to correct the Pharisees, explaining more about the Sabbath rules and, by this explanation, telling them more about God.

Mark uses this fairly basic story to express two essential truths: the importance of the Sabbath, and the way God properly views this day of rest.

The catechism tells us, “On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are to refrain from engaging in work or activities that hinder the worship owed to God, the joy proper to the Lord's Day ... The charity of truth seeks holy leisure; the necessity of charity accepts just work” (CCC 2185). This has both social and religious connotations. Socially, it was a way to ensure that slaves and other enforced laborers had a prescribed day of rest. Religiously, it was a way to promote activities that focused on the saving aspect of God, and his covenant with Israel (and us).

The Pharisees are correct in that Sabbath – for us, Sunday – is a day to honor God and avoid unnecessary work. But isn't this what the disciples are doing? Are they not honoring God? Jesus is aware of the Sabbath rules. But their daily actions as disciples of Jesus give the greatest honor to God. By accompanying Jesus, they are working to build God's kingdom.

Jesus wants the Pharisees to see the bigger truth that the Sabbath was made for us, not us for the Sabbath. Pharasaic laws have no place in restricting what God has done – that is, giving the Sabbath to humanity as a “sign of the irrevocable covenant” (CCC 2171), during which we devote activities to God, including worship and confession. This does not necessarily preclude work, but only work that has as its only purpose that which benefits our ends and interests. The disciples were focused on God, in the person of Jesus, and picking the grain was not for their monetary benefit – frowned upon – but for their physical benefit in order to maintain their strength to stay with Jesus. A perfectly legitimate reason for doing what they did.

It is not unlike what we will do today, on the Sabbath. We are here, some of us “working,” as it were – but all for the purpose of worshipping God, and being fed in order to sustain that worship. Here we can rest from the worldly concerns, and relax into the hope and promises of God that supersede any earthly desires or challenges. So as we partake of the Eucharist soon, which nourishes and transforms us, let us be mindful of the Sabbath – and the eternity – that was made for us.

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Wednesday, January 23, 2019  
(Lec. 313)

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

WEDNESDAY OF  
SECOND WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME  
(Opt. Mem.)

USA: Saint Vincent,  
Deacon and Martyr;  
USA: Saint Marianne Cope,  
Virgin)

Gospel related: CCC 574, 591, 1859, 2173 CSDC 261

FOCUS: We are all called to holiness.

The Pharisees in today's Gospel were so caught up in catching Jesus breaking the Sabbath rules in order to accuse him, that they placed a higher value on the rule than on the purpose behind the rule. In this situation, they would argue, it was more important to uphold the law than to do good or even save a life.

But Jesus did not hesitate. He had the man with the withered hand come up to him in front of everyone there in the synagogue, and he healed that hand. In as much as Jesus restored this man back to physical wellness, he also most likely restored his dignity and his ability to work. Jesus also demonstrated, though it was not yet completely revealed or understood, who he was and what he had come to do: the Son of God come to restore our relationship with the Father. He was, indeed, holiness personified.

Feeling anger at those who challenged him and yet remained silent, but above all, *grieved at their hardness of heart*, Jesus clearly knew the cost of his actions. We do, too, for Mark tells us that *the Pharisees went out and immediately took counsel with the Herodians against him to put him to death*. Jesus challenged them, and they retaliated. Jesus challenges us, too – to do more, to *be* more – and we have the choice as to how to respond.

The truth is, whether acting on small day-to-day deeds or making major life-changing decisions, we cannot claim to be a disciple of Jesus if we don't see and respond to the needs of those around us with the eyes of our heart. As the U.S. bishops note in a pastoral letter on stewardship, disciples are those who "make a conscious, firm decision, carried out in action, to be followers of Jesus Christ no matter the cost to themselves."

So holiness is not just a "state," or description. It is a conscious choice of a way of being. It means recognizing the importance of what Pope Francis calls, "evangelizing gestures." And we are *all* called to that heroic holiness. Today, with our presence here, we testify to the desire for that holiness: we come to be fed by word and sacrament. Let us pray that with the help of God's grace and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we have the fortitude to turn that desire into practice. That every withered hand that reaches out to us may be restored to its function, and dignity.

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Thursday, January 24, 2019  
(Lec. 314)

- 1) Hebrews 7:25–8:6
- 2) Mark 3:7-12

THURSDAY OF  
SECOND WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME  
(OBL MEM)

Saint Francis de Sales,  
Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

Gospel related: CCC 1504

FOCUS: Jesus Christ, as Son of God, is our perfect priest and mediator before the Father.

No person in history other than Jesus has ever been able to credibly claim to be the Son of God. There have been many pretenders and cultists who have made such claims, only to disappear from memory shortly after their death. The empty tomb on that first Easter, the blood of the martyrs, and above all, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass provide eternal testimony to this fundamental truth of our faith. In today's Gospel, even the unclean spirits had this very proclamation of Jesus' identity bursting from them.

In the Nicene Creed, we declare that Jesus is consubstantial with the Father. This statement elaborates upon the perfect unity, in both their substance and essence, of the Father and the Son. There is nothing to separate one from the other. No one else, no matter how meritorious, not even Abraham or Moses, has ever possessed this oneness with God.

It is because of this identity of Jesus as the Son of God in perfect unity with the Father that he may offer the perfect sacrifice for the sins of all humankind. This is the point that today's first reading is describing. The primary role of the priest has been the offering of ritual sacrifices to God for the expiation of sin. No priest in history could offer a perfect sacrifice to God for this purpose, as they, too, came before God marked by sin. Only a man in perfect unity with the Father as Jesus is could rebuild the connection between God and man that had been destroyed by sin. This is what Jesus did in his sacrifice on the cross.

By this sacrifice, the pathway to salvation has been opened. In Jesus, we have the perfect advocate before the Father. If we were to stand before God on our own merits, not one of us could withstand the scrutiny. With Jesus as our priest, we can be assured that God will be merciful with us when our time for judgement arrives, provided we have embraced the opportunity that Jesus has given us by living the life of faith.

As we approach the altar where we remember and celebrate Jesus' perfect sacrifice, let us always be mindful of the gift we have been given, and hold gratitude in our hearts for Jesus Christ, our eternal High Priest.

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Friday, January 25, 2019  
(Lec. 519)

- 1) Acts 22:3-16 or 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: Repentance and conversion allow us to faithfully proclaim the Gospel.

Today we celebrate the conversion of Saint Paul, who ruthlessly persecuted the earliest Christians. The readings provide stark language to describe his activity. He was *educated strictly in [the] ancestral law ... zealous for God and persecuted this Way [Christianity] to death ... binding both men and women and delivering them to prison*. He even sought particular information as to whom to persecute in Christian communities, and *set out for Damascus to bring [them] back to Jerusalem in chains for punishment*.

It must have been a dark, fearful time for those early Christians, to have a man pursue them with such hostile persistence. It would, under such circumstances, seem to be beyond the realm of hope that Paul could have a change of heart; to make a complete turnabout, and become a believer. But that is exactly what happened, as Scripture tells us.

Paul, on the way to seize more Christians, is surrounded by a great light. Falling to the ground, he hears a voice and this conversation takes place:

*"Why are you persecuting me?"*

*"Who are you sir?"* Paul asks.

*"I am Jesus the Nazorean, whom you are persecuting."*

As believers, it can, at times, be difficult to believe. We face terrible fears in our own life; we see suffering in others' lives as well. We see cruelty; we witness injustice and discrimination. Wars dominate regions and headlines, and the poor and vulnerable are exploited. It can be hard to believe that in such darkness, light may shine, that good can come from bad, redemption from so much suffering. Yet the whole of the Christian message is that it can, and that it does. That God has intervened in human history and that there is hope.

This hope, however, depends on repentance and conversion. Ours, first of all, wherever it may be necessary. And that of others – much like with Paul – so that suffering is alleviated and the innocent are protected.

It is for us to ask Christ, as Paul did, *What shall I do?* and to be ready to do as he instructs. And what he instructs is found in today's Gospel: *Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature*. The Gospel, the Good News, the hope that no one is beyond redemption – even as Paul was not – as long as he or she repents and believes. What a gift!

So as we prepare to celebrate this sacred mystery, this eternal gift, let us resolve to convert our own hearts as necessary, so that we may leave here and offer this same gift to others. Let us be able to offer this gift with pure hearts and living faith, in the hope that others, too, will share in its redemptive blessings.

Saturday, January 26, 2019  
(Lec. 520)

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

(Lec. 316)

2) Mark 3:20-21

SATURDAY OF  
SECOND WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME  
(OBL MEM

Saints Timothy and Titus,  
Bishops)

FOCUS: A resilient faith in Jesus Christ guides us through adversity.

Many of us are familiar with the expression: “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” In both of our readings today, we hear about some challenges to having faith. Timothy struggles with Paul’s imprisonment but is admonished by Paul in his letter to have the faith of his grandmother and mother. Jesus, according to Mark’s account, has his relatives trying to seize him, thinking *he is out of his mind*.

None of us has to think back very far to the latest adversity to cross our path. Someone lost a job, a loved one dies, a child turns away from God, and the list goes on. How we choose to respond to adversity when it crosses our paths says a lot about the depth of our faith.

As strong as our faith is, there is usually someone in our life whose faith we admire for being deeper or stronger than our own. Like Paul encourages Timothy to do, we can look to those folks, and emulate them. We can ask them to pray for us, and to offer us guidance in ways that help us increase our faith.

The closer we come to, and the deeper we go in our love relationship with Jesus, the more easily we are guided through adversity. We have greater strength, and the peace to face any challenge before us. And this is why the crowds surrounded Jesus – because they believed in him. Others did not understand, and said he was out of his mind

We know we will face adversity. But we believe in the Good News, and the Good News of Jesus Christ will triumph over any challenges we face. In faith we know this to be true.

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**SUNDAY, JANUARY 27, 2019**

(Lec.69)

- 1) Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10
- 2) 1 Corinthians 12:12-30  
or 12:12-14, 27
- 3) Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

Gospel related: CCC 436, 544, 695, 714, 1168, 2443 CSDC 28

**THIRD SUNDAY  
IN ORDINARY TIME**

FOCUS: We are one body, one spirit in Christ.

We, as the body of Christ, celebrate our faith just as millions of people before us have done for two thousand years. We hear our salvation story proclaimed to us in the Scriptures, and we celebrate the Eucharist. We remember that the body of Christ includes all of those who came before us, and all those across the world right now who profess the same creed. It will continue to include all who are baptized into the faith and who strive to follow the commandment of the Lord to love one another. For as Saint Paul says today, *in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.*

One faith, one baptism, one body. But infinite individuality: with unique gifts, charisms and missions all for the sake of the body. All with a purpose designed and graced by God. All with honor and dignity for the sake of the Gospel. And all of this is possible because of God's laws and promises: the law as a means of signifying that God is *for* us. God will work for us, he will fight for us, he will take care of us and we will delight in his laws if we will only trust in him. And God's promises that adhering to the laws will bring full, lasting and eternal joy.

This is what the community of Nehemiah heard and understood when Ezra read to them, as told in our first reading today. They wept first with lament at their failures, and then with joy in their understanding of God's love for them, and his promises of redemption. And in our Gospel we see that promise fulfilled, as the scene echoes that of Nehemiah: Jesus reads to the community from the scrolls of Scripture, *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.* Then he finishes with these words: *Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.*

This is the God to whom we belong. This is the Christ who fulfills the law of love and embodies the promise of eternal life. As others before us had their purpose: Ezra and Nehemiah to lead others out of exile, Paul to evangelize the Gospel, and Luke to make record of Jesus' ministry, so do each and every one of us have our own specific, unique contribution to make to the body of Christ. All while mindful that, as Paul says, *If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy.*

We are one body, one spirit in Christ. May the grace of the sacrament we celebrate today strengthen each one of us, and the entire body as a whole, for the good of the world and the glory of God.

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Monday, January 28, 2019  
(Lec. 317)

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

MONDAY OF  
THIRD WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME  
(OBL MEM

Saint Thomas Aquinas,  
Priest and Doctor of the Church)

Gospel related: CCC 539, 548, 574, 1864

FOCUS: By knowledge and by love we are bound to God.

Today, we celebrate the memorial of one of the greatest minds of the Catholic Church, Saint Thomas Aquinas. He is one of only thirty-six saints known as “Doctors of the Church.” They are not medical doctors, but saints whose writings and teachings are of such profound importance that they apply to Christians in any era. Aquinas applied the scientific method of “questioning” to matters of theology. His writings show that faith and reason are not only compatible, but that they must be used together to obtain true knowledge of God.

Please understand, in this context, we are not speaking about doubting. We speak of questioning for the purpose of understanding, of gaining knowledge, of using our reason to grasp the truth about God. And within this truth, we find and share – in faith and love – the salvation promised to us.

Jesus, of course, was a master of the question, often flipping the script on those trying to corner him. Today’s Gospel reading is a good example. He confronts the scribes who are spreading falsehoods about him being possessed by demons by asking the question, Aquinas-like, *How can Satan drive out Satan?* In a few short sentences, Jesus shows how it defies logic that anyone would purposely work against himself. In this reading, Mark tells us that “Jesus is the devil’s conqueror: he ‘binds the strong man’ to take back his plunder” (CCC 539). In short, Satan can’t drive out Satan, but God can.

Both Saint Thomas Aquinas and Jesus placed a high value on “the question.” We do, too, if one were to go by a recent survey of favorite TV game shows. *Jeopardy* is number one – the show where the “question *is* the answer.” The contestant who answers with the most correct questions on the show reaps great rewards. So it is with us in our spiritual lives. Those who seek to understand and to direct questions to the answers God has provided – that is, revelation – will indeed obtain great faith, and great understanding. By knowledge and by love are we bound to God, says Aquinas.

For each of us, the best questions will vary. But it is worth looking at the types of questions we are asking God now. If we find they are more “me-centered,” along the lines of “Why are you doing this to me?” we might think of forming more God-centered questions such as, “How can I be a better servant to you?” In this way, Scripture and sacrament help us – for through better knowledge of God and his plan for us, we come to understand our place *in* that plan. It doesn’t mean we can’t pray for our needs or the needs of those we love, but it might mean that we need to look more closely for the path the Lord has lighted for us. We are not all blessed with the gifts of Saint Thomas Aquinas, but by not being afraid to ask of God what he wants, we will allow his answers to guide us where we need to go.

So in faith, love and knowledge of the salvation God has promised us, let us prepare to partake of the Eucharist – the One who is the answer to every question, and the one about whom we pray to know more and more fully every day.

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Tuesday, January 29, 2019  
(Lec. 318)

1) Hebrews 10:1-10

2) Mark 3:31-35

Gospel related: CCC 500

TUESDAY OF  
THIRD WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Jesus invites us to join him as family by embracing the call to do the will of the Father.

*Here am I Lord; I come to do your will.*

Who do we imagine is saying these words? Is it the prophets of the Old Testament? Is it the disciples who followed Jesus? Is it us, in our prayers or in well-known hymns? Ideally, it is all of the above. But the truth is that the most important example of this is Jesus, who humbles himself and pledges obedience to the Father's will – even accepting the suffering and death that comes with that promise.

In the first reading, the author references the history of the Hebrew people who offered animal sacrifices to repent for their sins, as the law dictates. When Jesus walked among the people, however, he showed that these were insufficient and, instead, offered himself as the perfect sacrifice. Obedient to God's will, even unto death.

Mark's Gospel continues the theme of doing God's will. Some of us may find this passage puzzling. At first glance, it almost seems that Jesus is rejecting his mother and relatives when he doesn't stop and immediately invite them in to his gathering. We know, however, that Jesus' love for his mother was deep. After all, one of the last things he did in the midst of his suffering on the cross was to assure that his mother would be taken care of by turning her care over to his beloved Apostle.

So, clearly, this is not a story of rejection. Instead, it is a glorious invitation. When Jesus says, *Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother*, he extends the former covenant beyond the Israelite nation and reaches out to all of us. This not only invites us to join him as family, it also makes a statement that the message of the kingdom has supreme importance, rating even above these earthly attachments. The Apostles were willing to leave home and loved ones to follow Jesus and share in his ministry. Jesus calls all of us as well to join him as family in dedicating our lives to the kingdom by doing the will of God.

We may ask how we are to know what the will of God looks like. The most comprehensive road map is contained in the pages of the Bible. Reading and studying these sacred words, engaging in prayer and availing ourselves of the grace of the sacraments provide us with the best opportunity for a clear understanding of God's will.

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Wednesday, January 30, 2019  
(Lec. 319)

- 1) Hebrews 10:11-18
- 2) Mark 4:1-20

Gospel related: CCC 546, 2707

WEDNESDAY OF  
THIRD WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Let us prepare our hearts, like a gardener prepares the soil, to be open to God's word.

Anyone who has ever planted a garden is familiar with the process of preparing the soil. For beautiful plants to yield plenty of blooms, fruit or vegetables, the soil should be weed-free, rich in nutrients, hold the right amount of water and encourage plants to put down deep roots. The work begins before the gardener ever plants the first seed, and continues throughout the growing season.

Once a gardener selects a location, he or she must uproot the other plants and till to make room for the new plants, add organic matter or fertilizer, and carefully tend the garden by weeding, watering and pruning.

What does this have to do with our lives as Christians?

Jesus' parable tells of a sower sowing seed, representing the word of God. The seeds fall on all types of ground: beaten-down pathways, rocky soil, thorny spaces and rich soil. There are many sowers in our lives: teachers and catechists, of course, but also our Christian brothers and sisters. Jesus himself speaks to our hearts if we are quiet and listen.

It is our responsibility, however, to prepare our hearts to be open to hearing God's word.

If our hearts are hardened, like a trampled-down path, making it easy for Satan to prevent God's word from really penetrating, then we can soften our hearts through acts of charity.

If they are like rocky ground, where our lives are full of distractions. then faith cannot put down deep roots there; we must remove the rocks. We can deepen our faith by making it a cornerstone of our lives, even during difficult times. A commitment to daily prayer is a good start.

If the thorns of *worldly anxiety, the lure of riches and the craving for other things* envelop our hearts, then we can look to saints for examples of overcoming these temptations. We can pray the Litany of Humility, or go to confession and experience the sacrament of reconciliation.

We can ensure that our hearts are like rich soil, so that the word of God can produce great fruit. In addition to confession, prayer and charity, we can nourish our souls with the great gift of the Eucharist. Spend time with Jesus in Adoration. Surround ourselves with reminders of God's love. Read Scripture. These are not "quick fixes" but rather, like a gardener tends to the soil, we must make habits of caring for our spiritual well-being. We can be assured the Lord, who has written his law in our hearts, will help us.

With the grace of God, our hearts will be open to hear God's word and the nudging of the Holy Spirit, and our faith can put down deep roots. By nourishing our faith, it will continue to grow and bear fruit for the kingdom of God. So come, let us receive him with enriched hearts, so we may bear great fruit.

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Thursday, January 31, 2019  
(Lec. 320)

- 1) Hebrews 10:19-25
- 2) Mark 4:21-25

THURSDAY OF  
THIRD WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME  
(OBL MEM  
Saint John Bosco,  
Priest)

FOCUS: Let us be generous in our commitment to one another, and encourage one another.

Some of us may be familiar with the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." This sentiment rings true in so many ways, since children are influenced by so many people in addition to their family: their friends and classmates, teachers and other adults in their lives, and the culture around them. Good parents are aware of the influences upon their children, and try to ensure that they are surrounded by caring people who will help the parents lead them on the right path through life.

In much the same way, it takes a good community to keep all of us Catholic Christians honest in our struggles to follow Jesus faithfully. We find that community in our parish churches, and in the relationships and accountability with one another that we develop in smaller faith-based groups. Both of today's readings challenge us in our Christian lives to be faithful to the Gospel, remaining sincere and trustful in our relationship to God and to others, and serving as a lamp to light the way to others. At times during our lives, we might find this call to be very difficult to respond to and to remain faithful to. At other times, we might see our brothers and sisters in Christ struggling with *their* calling, struggling to remain faithful in a time when those around them seem to be urging them to listen to a different voice, to take an easier road.

It is in these times that we need to rely on our fellow Christians – or be a voice of encouragement to them in their time of temptation and need. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews says it well: *We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another.* This is more than an exhortation to be physically present. It is an encouragement to engage with one another beyond the rubrics and rites so that our journey is not an isolated one. Since many lamps are easier to see than a single lamp, and many ears are better to hear with than just one, so as we face the challenges outside these walls we can *rouse one another to love and good works.* Staying in community with other active members of our parish will keep us challenged and spiritually honest – and able to challenge one another when necessary.

Staying faithful to our Christian calling and our communal commitment is not easy, but Jesus reminds us that if we are generous in caring for one another, God will be generous in bestowing the graces we need to be faithful: *The measure with which you measure will be measured out to you, and still more will be given to you.* As Christ in the Eucharist we are about to share was generous to the point of giving his life for us, let us be generous in our commitment to one another, knowing that God will in turn lavish upon us the strength and grace we need.

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