CONVERSATION with God

Daily Meditations
Volume 3 Part 2
Ordinary Time
Weeks 7 - 12

Francis Fernandez
In Conversation
with God
Meditations for each day of the year

Volume 3 Part 2
Ordinary Time: Weeks 7 – 12

SCEPTER
London
Scheduled Use of Volume 3 in *Ordinary Time*

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52.3 Charity gives friendship a deep Christian sense.

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SEVENTH SUNDAY: YEAR A

52. TREAT EVERYONE WELL

52.1 We must live charity at all times and in all circumstances.
You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and ‘a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you ... if anyone would go to law with you and take your tunic, let him take your cloak as well; and whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two ...[1] These words of Jesus in the Gospel of today’s Mass are an invitation to live charity beyond the criteria of men.

We should not be naive when dealing with people, but rather exercise prudence and justice (which might include demanding our rights). But neither should we regard any renunciation and sacrifice offered for the good of others as a mere excess of zeal, for it is by such actions that we become like Christ, who by his death on the cross gave us the example of a love that knew no human measure.

There is nothing in man more divine, more Christlike, than his meekness and patience in doing good.[2] Of all the virtues leading to salvation, Saint John Chrysostom suggests, let us seek mainly those that benefit our neighbour ... In the things of this world no one lives for himself; the craftsman, the soldier, the farmer, the merchant, all without exception contribute to the common good and to the good of their neighbour. This happens even more fully in the spiritual life, which is the true life. He who lives only for himself and despises his neighbour is useless, is not a man, does not belong to our lineage.[3]

Our Lord’s repeated calls for us to be charitable at all times, and especially in his New Commandment,[4] must stimulate us to follow His lead by finding concrete ways of being of help to others, such as by making those at our side happy, realizing that we can never be too extravagant in the practice of this virtue. Most of the time the practice of charity will consist in little details, something as simple as a smile, a word of encouragement, a kind gesture ... In the eyes of God all of this is very pleasing and draws us closer to Him. In our prayer today we should also consider areas where we can easily lack charity if we are not careful: rash judgements, negative criticism, neglect of others due to self-centredness, forgetfulness ... The Christian way of conduct is not the way of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but to do good always, even though occasionally such an attitude will not result in any human gain in this world – but at least we will have enriched our hearts.

Charity makes us understanding, ready to forgive, fit to live alongside everyone, so that those who think and act differently from us in social, political and even in religious matters will also have a claim on our respect and charity ... Love and courtesy of this kind should not, of course, make us indifferent to truth and goodness. Love, in fact, impels the followers of Christ to proclaim to all men the truth that saves. But we must distinguish between the error – which must always be rejected – and the one who is in error, for he never loses his dignity as a person even though he flounders amid false or inadequate religious ideas.[5] A disciple of Christ will never treat anyone badly. Error he will call error, but he will correct the person in error with kindliness. Otherwise he will not be able to help him, to sanctify him. [6] And that is the greatest manifestation of love.

52.2 Charity towards all – including those who do not like us. Our prayer for them.
The commandment of charity not only applies to those who show us love and kindness, but to
everyone without exception. You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour, and shall hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who persecute and calumniate you.

Should we ever need to, we must also practice charity with those who ill-treat us, those who spread falsehoods about us and injure our reputation, and those who actively seek to cause us harm. Our Lord gave us example on the Cross,[7] and the route of the Master was travelled by his disciples. [8] Jesus taught us to regard sin as the only true evil and to avoid considering anyone as our personal enemy, and the saints of all times have given heroic witness to these teachings. The various manifestations of charity do not conflict with the exercise of prudence in the just defence of one’s legitimate interests or those of others, or of the rights of the Church, or in the proclamation of the truth in the face of lies, or with a firm defence of the good. But a Christian should always have a big heart and show respect for all, even for those who act as enemies, not because they are brothers, as Saint Augustine points out, but because brothers they must become; one must show fraternal love towards him who is already a brother, and towards the one who acts as an enemy, so that he may become a brother.[9]

This way of acting presupposes a deep life of prayer and sets us clearly apart from pagans and from those who in fact do not want to live as Christ’s disciples. For if you love those that love you, what reward shall you have? Do not even the Publicans do that? And if you salute your brethren only, what are you doing more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do that? Our Christian Faith does not call for a merely correct human behaviour, but for heroic virtues manifested in ordinary living.

Assisted by grace, we will also show charity towards those who do not behave as children of God but rather offend Him, because, in the words of Saint Augustine, no sinner, as a sinner, is worthy of love; but every man, as a man, is lovable by God.[10] They all continue to be children of God, capable of conversion and of reaching eternal life. Trusting in everyone’s capacity to rectify his errors, charity will impel us to devote ourselves to prayer, to give good example and to do apostolate and practise fraternal correction. If at some time we suffer through particularly painful offences, injustices or calumnies, we should ask for Our Lady’s help. Very often we have contemplated her at the foot of the Cross, enduring the infamous things done to her Son; and many of those offences – let us not forget – came from us. We should be sorry, rather, because injustices offend Our Lord and may harm other people; our reaction shall be to offer atonement to Our Lord and to make reparation if possible.

52.3 Charity gives friendship a deep Christian sense.

A Christian must have a great heart. But since charity must be ordered, the Christian should practise this virtue primarily with those that God has placed close to him; nevertheless our respect and affection for others should be in no way exclusive or focused on only a small circle of friends. Our Lord does not want an apostolate with limited horizons.

That union with God which we try to make fruitful in our daily life, with the help of his grace, must bring us to recognize the attractively human dimension of our apostolate. A Christian’s dealings with his fellow men should mean a generous outpouring of supernatural affection and human politesse, overcoming his tendency to egotism and absorption in his own projects.

In our personal prayer we ask Our Lord that He enlarge our hearts; that He help us to offer our
sincere friendship to a wider circle of people; that He may move us to do apostolate with each one of
them, regardless of their response, even if we have often to submerge our own ego, or put aside our
personal ideas or preferences. It is part and parcel of a loyal friendship to make a positive effort, which we will maintain by means of our constant dealing with Jesus Christ, to understand the convictions of our friends, even though we may never come to share them or accept them[11] if they are irreconcilable with our Christian convictions.

Our Lord never fails to forgive our offences as long as we return to Him led by his grace. He has infinite patience with our miseries and errors. That is why He asks us to be patient in turn when circumstances render it difficult for our acquaintances or friends to get closer to God. Jesus himself taught us this doctrine explicitly in the Our Father. When others lack formation, are ignorant in doctrinal matters, display character defects, or even seem indifferent to such things, we should not let ourselves be put off. On the contrary, we should regard these failings as urgent calls, signal lights that reveal a greater need of spiritual help, which should be for us an invitation to intensify our concern for these others, rather than leave them alone.

Let us resolve to get close to those relatives, friends and acquaintances that are most in need, and let us ask Our Lady for the necessary graces to make this approach.
SEVENTH SUNDAY: YEAR B

53. HELPING TO DO GOOD

53.1 Helping the spiritual and material good of others.

Mankind has never been so eager to be free, to throw far away all forms of oppression and slavery. Christ appears in today’s Gospel as the only true liberator.[12] Four friends bring a paralytic whom they are eager to see rid of a disease that keeps him on a stretcher. After strenuous effort to carry him to Jesus, they listen to these words addressed by our Lord to their friend: My son, your sins are forgiven. It is unlikely that they expected to hear this kind of address from the Master to the invalid, but Christ lets us see that the worst of all oppressions – the most tragic of all slaveries from which man can suffer – is sin. It is not just one evil among the many other evils that afflict creatures, but the gravest, the only thing that is evil in absolute terms.

The men carrying the paralytic understand that Jesus has given their incapacitated friend the greatest good – freedom from his own sins. And we cannot forget what a great contribution to the common good it is to do everything possible to exile sin from the world. On many occasions the greatest favour, the greatest good we can do to a friend, to a brother, to parents, to children, is to help them see the beauty of divine mercy in the sacrament of penance. It is a good for the family, for the Church, for the whole of humanity, even though here on earth very few know about it.

Christ frees from sin with his divine power: Who can forgive sins except God? It was for this that He came on earth: God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.[13] After forgiving the paralytic his sins, Jesus also cured his physical infirmity. The man must have understood in that very instant that his great good fortune that day had been the first cure: to have felt his soul pierced through and through by divine mercy, and be able to look at Jesus with a clean heart.

The paralytic was healed body and soul. And his friends are an example for us today of how we should help others – through our friendship mainly, cooperating in apostolic initiatives, and fostering the good of society with all the means at our disposal: working for the common good, for a decent life and culture, offering positive solutions when faced with evil. We should do this in our own professional circumstances as well as in any other environment in which we happen to be involved (neighbourhood, parents’ association, parish ...); it is here that we can cooperate in the building up of good and avoid cooperation in anything that is evil.


Frequently in social life many become mere spectators in the face of serious problems that are affecting them, their children or their social environment. They have the mistaken notion that others should be the ones to take the initiative, to stop evil and do good. They content themselves with sterile complaint. A Christian cannot behave in this passive way, because he knows that he should be leaven within society. In the midst of human affairs, what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world.[14] Such is the place assigned by God to them and they cannot desert it.[15]

The positive obligation of cooperating in good should lead every Christian to bring Christ’s message to every human activity – professional work included – in the best way he or she can.[16] The
true Christian cannot simply avoid doing evil himself, being careless about the influence actions have on the behaviour of others. The friends of the paralytic do not limit themselves to not doing evil. They act. They help the sick man to get closer to Jesus. They help him in his desire to get well by paving the way for our Lord’s miracle: *Your sins are forgiven.*

Cooperating in good implies, of course, avoiding any cooperation with evil, not only in important decisions but also in the small ways that easily lie to hand: not wasting money – even only small amounts – on magazines, newspapers, books, shows and entertainment, which because of their sectarian, anti-Christian or immoral character, damage the soul; buying one’s newspaper at a particular news-stand (even if it means a longer walk) rather than from one where publications are sold attacking the Church or Christian morals; avoiding a pharmacy selling contraceptives; or not buying a certain product (possibly very good) which is advertised on an immoral or anti-Catholic programme on radio or television. And our action will be even more effective if we suggest a similar line of conduct to our friends. If lukewarm Christians were to stop buying certain magazines and publications, many of these would not survive. It is regrettable that, on many occasions, much of the immense damage caused is being subsidised by Christians who, besides, are always complaining about society’s moral ruin.

The Christian must cooperate in the common good by seeking and offering positive solutions to the perennial problems; he or she cannot limit himself or herself to simply not voting for a party or a programme which attacks Christian family values, or is against freedom in teaching, or favours legislation directed against life from its conception. There must be a constant, deep doctrinal apostolate, free from false prudence, and not afraid of going against the stream in issues which are vital for society itself and upon which there is complete disorientation or else a partial truth that often causes more confusion.

This amicable apostolate of doctrine, showing affection for everyone and spreading the teaching of Christ as widely as possible will make use of every opportunity (friends, trips, clients ...); it is the *leaven* that ferments society.

53.3 Protecting and fostering whatever is good. Spirit of cooperation. Noticing what is positive.

The work of re-Christianization is similar to the one undertaken by our first brethren in the faith, and makes use of the same means – good example in private and public life, prayer, friendship, nobility, personal prestige, sharing other people’s concerns, showing an authentic desire for their happiness, along with the conviction that there is no peace for the individual, the family, or society, in abstraction from God.

The first Christians found a social environment very far distant from the doctrine they had so very much at heart. Though they opposed the customs that vitiated even human dignity, they did not waste their best energies in complaining about and denouncing evil. On the contrary, they chose rather to distribute the treasure they possessed by spreading it with a joyful and fraternal testimony, serving society through innumerable initiatives in the areas of culture, social service, education, ransoming captives, etc. They could have spent their lives observing everything that was out of keeping with an upright life; thus they would never have given the true solution to the world at large. The truth is like a *mustard seed* but it contains a marvellous power.

You don’t have to be very clever to see evil; but a deep Christian spirit is required to discover the presence of God in all circumstances. Let us keep our eyes open to good, like the true friends in Saint
Mark’s narrative, and let us see, following Saint Paul’s advice, *how to conquer evil with an abundance of good*. [17]

On many occasions the Christian’s task will be to point out whatever is positive, since things well done encourage us to be better and bring us closer to God. Let us be quick to notice the virtues of those around us: a friend’s generosity, the industriousness of one of our colleagues, our neighbour’s readiness to help, our professor’s patience. If at times we cannot praise, let us hold our tongues. Or we will be of assistance with a kind correction and our prayer. Let us foster whatever good is born around us – sometimes with an encouraging word, at others with our help given in time and money. Faced with so much useless or harmful reading, let us spread news about good books being published, about magazines that will not be unworthy of a Christian home. Let us write a brief letter expressing our praise and thanks for a good show, a sound article. This takes little effort and is always fruitful.

God does not want his children to be naive when faced with life’s harsh events. But he asks them never to be bitter or resentful. God wants us to see whatever is good in people and social events; he does not want us to spend the best years of our lives denouncing or complaining, but rather giving generously from the treasure of our faith. Thus we can help to transform people and society. Let us not forget, either, that good is attractive and that it always engenders much more happiness than lukewarmness does. A large family, for instance, with its many demands and sacrifices, always brings about more happiness than another family which – out of pure selfishness – sought its well-being in a little bit more of material comfort. This joy that other people sense is also a way of cooperating in the good: at times it is the most fruitful one.

Mary the Virgin, who goes *cum festinatione* [18] – in haste – to help her cousin, teaches us always to seek to cooperate in the good, so that Jesus her son, through his grace, may continue to work miracles on earth for the good of all men and women.
54. MAGNANIMITY

54.1 The disposition to undertake great things for God and mankind always accompanies a holy life.

The First Reading from today’s Holy Mass tells us of David’s flight from King Saul across the wastelands of Ziph. One night when the king was sleeping in the midst of his men, David crept close to the camp accompanied by Abishai, the most faithful of his friends. They saw Saul sleeping, within the encampment, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head; and Abner and the army lay around him. Abishai whispered to David, God has given your enemy into your hand this day; now therefore let me pin him to the earth with one stroke of the spear, and I will not strike him twice. There could be no doubt that the death of the king would be the shortest route to freeing David once and for all from all the dangers he faced, and would raise him to the throne. But for the second time David chose the longer path, and preferred to preserve Saul’s life. David’s behaviour on this and other occasions shows the great soul of the man. His largeness of spirit won for him first the admiration and then the friendship of his bitterest enemy, and also of the people. Above all, it won him the friendship of God.

The Gospel of the Mass also invites us to be magnanimous, to have a big heart, like the heart of Christ. The Gospel exhorts us to bless those who curse us, to pray for those who persecute us. It calls upon us to do the good without expecting anything in return, to be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful, to pardon everyone, to be generous without measuring and calculating. Our Lord ends by telling us: Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over. And He admonishes us: for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.

The virtue of magnanimity, which is closely related to fortitude, consists in the soul’s willingness to undertake great things. Saint Thomas calls it the ornament of all the virtues. This disposition to take on important matters for God and for other people always accompanies a holy life. The serious effort to struggle for sanctity is in itself a first manifestation of magnanimity. A magnanimous person keeps his mind on high ideals. He is not daunted by obstacles, criticism, or contempt when it is necessary to endure them for a great cause. He is not prepared to let himself be intimidated by human respect or by a hostile environment. Rumour-mongers or back-biting mean little or nothing to him. He is much more interested in truth than in opinions, which are frequently falsehoods or half-truths at best.

The saints have always been great-souled people, magna anima, showing their largeness of spirit when they envisioned and initiated apostolic enterprises, then carried them through to completion. Their soul was seen to be great in their human relationships, in their evaluations of and dealings with other people: they looked upon others as children of God, as being capable of great ideals. We in turn should not be pusillanimous, short-sighted and small-minded, with a timid spirit. Magnanimity means greatness of spirit, a largeness of heart wherein many can find refuge. Magnanimity gives us the energy to break out of ourselves and be ready to undertake generous tasks that will be of benefit to all. Small-mindedness has no home in the magnanimous heart, nor has meanness, nor egoistic calculation, nor self-interested trickery. The magnanimous person devotes all his strength, unstintingly, to what is worthwhile. As a result, he is capable of giving himself. He is not content
with merely giving. He gives his very self. He thus comes to understand that the greatest expression of magnanimity consists in giving oneself to God.[25] There is no greater proof of magnanimity than this: total dedication to Christ, a dedication without measure, without conditions.

54.2 Magnanimity shows itself in many ways.

Greatness of soul proves itself also in a willingness to forgive, in matters large and small, whether it be people close to us in our lives or far from us. It is not Christian to go about the world with a list of grievances in one’s heart,[26] cherishing rancorous thoughts and memories that shrink the spirit and make us incapable of the human and divine ideals to which our Lord is calling us. In the same way that God is always ready to forgive everyone everything, our capacity to forgive must have no limits. The number of times does not matter. The seriousness of the wrongs done is irrelevant, as is the status of the persons who were supposedly guilty of the offences. Nothing makes us like unto God so much as being always ready to forgive.[27] On the Cross, Jesus did what he had taught: Father, forgive them, he prayed. And immediately he added the mitigating reason: for they know not what they do.[28] Those words show the greatness of soul of Christ’s sacred Humanity. And in today’s Gospel we read: Love your enemies ... pray for those who abuse you.[29] Jesus has always asked that same greatness of soul from those who are his own. The first martyr, Saint Stephen, died asking pardon for those who killed him.[30] Are we then not to pardon the comparatively trivial incidental things that happen to us each day? And if back-biting and serious defamation should be aimed at us, should we let slip that opportunity to offer something more valuable in return? It would be better still if we never reached the point of finding it necessary to forgive, imitating the saints in refusing to take offence in the first place.

Faced with something really worthwhile (noble ideals, apostolic tasks, and God above all), a great soul gives of his own without reserve: money, effort, time. He knows well and understands the words of our Lord: no matter how much he gives, he will receive more. Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be poured into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.[31] We should ask ourselves if we give what is ours with generosity. What is more, we should ask whether we give ourselves, whether we follow the path, the specific vocation our Lord asks of each one of us, with promptness and sure steps.

Furthermore, taking on great endeavours for the good of mankind, or alleviating the needs of many people, or to giving glory to God, can occasionally lead to the expenditure of large sums of money, and to putting one’s material goods at the service of those great works.[32] The magnanimous person does that if he can, without hesitation and misgivings. Living the virtue of prudence, he evaluates all the circumstances, but not with a fearful or shrinking soul. The great cathedrals are an example of ages in which, although there were far fewer human and economic resources than there are now, there was perhaps a livelier faith. From earliest times the Church has always sought the use of the fine arts, so that all things set apart for use in divine worship should be worthy, becoming, and beautiful.[33] Good Christians have given whatever they considered of greatest value, for worship, or to honour the Blessed Virgin. They have been generous in their donations and alms for the things of God and to alleviate the hardship of their brothers in greatest need. They have established works of medical and material help, founded and funded cultural and teaching institutions.

In a society which sets no bounds to its conspicuous consumption, we frequently see apostolic works and the people who have dedicated their entire lives to them deprived of the means to
continue, often subjected to privations, and re-organizations, and constantly questioned as to whether they should not cease their activities and close down. The greatness of soul our Lord asks of his own will lead us not only to be very generous with our own time and economic means, but also to assist others to feel moved themselves to help, according to their means, for the good of their fellow man. Generosity always leads people closer to God. On countless occasions this is the greatest favour we can do our friends – encourage and foster their generosity. This virtue enlarges their heart and rejuvenates them, making them younger, more capable of love.

54.3 Magnanimity is one of the fruits of interior life.

Saint Teresa insisted that we should not shrink our desires, for His Majesty desires and loves courageous souls. Such souls set themselves great goals, the way the saints have done. The saints would never have reached such a level of sanctity, if they had not first taken the firm resolve to set their sights high, always counting on the help of God. The great Carmelite lamented the case of those good souls who, even if they lead a life of prayer, stay anchored to the ground like toads content with catching little lizards, instead of soaring toward God.[34]

Do not let your soul and spirit shrink, for you may lose many benefits ... Do not let your soul hide in a corner, because then instead of striving for sanctity you will simply come up with other imperfections, and many more of them.[35] Pusillanimity impedes progress in union with God. It consists in the voluntary incapacity to conceive or desire great things, and stays constricted in a feeble and low life.[36] Another symptom is the very poor opinion one tends to have of others, of what they can aspire to and one day become with divine aid, even though they may have been great sinners. A pusillanimous person is a man of closed horizons, resigned to just getting along. He has no high ambitions. Until he overcomes that defect, he will never dare to commit himself to God in a plan of life, or make any apostolic endeavours be effective, or dedicate himself. Everything will be too big for him, because he himself is shrunken.

Magnanimity is a fruit of one’s relationship with Jesus Christ. The disposition to undertake great enterprises, in one’s own surroundings for God’s sake, always accompanies an inner life filled with love, a nourishing and demanding interior life. This virtue is based on humility. It includes an unshakeable firmness of hope, an actually challenging assurance, and the perfect peace of a fearless heart which does not bow to any man – but to God alone.[37] An individual of great soul dares to do what is great because he knows that the gift of grace raises a person to undertakings beyond his natural capacities.[38] Then his actions acquire a divine effectiveness, because they depend on God, who is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.[39] Such a person will be daring in apostolate, because he is aware that although the Holy Spirit makes use of our human words as an instrument, it is the Spirit Himself who actually brings about the results.[40] A person of great soul has self-assurance, because all his effectiveness originates from God who gives the increase.[41] That is the source of his confidence.

The Virgin Mary will give us this greatness of soul which she herself has lived in her relationship with God and with us human beings, her children. Give and it will be given to you ... Let us not stop short or be withdrawn. Jesus is present to our lives.
55.1 Faith is a gift of God.

Jesus came to a place where his disciples awaited him. There also He came upon a father with his sick son, a group of scribes and a great crowd of people. Seeing Jesus, they were filled with joy and came out to meet him: All the crowd were greatly amazed, and ran up to him and greeted him — the way we should approach him in prayer and in the Tabernacle. Everybody had felt Our Lord’s absence. The father of the boy steps out from the crowd that surrounds Our Lord. Teacher, he says, I brought my son to you, for he has a dumb spirit ... I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.

The disciples, who had already performed some miracles in the name of the Lord, had tried to cure the boy, but had not been successful. Jesus later explained to them privately what they had been lacking in order to carry out the miracle. The father of the boy had insufficient faith. He possessed some faith, as can be seen in the way he was searching for a cure. Still, he did not have complete faith, that boundless trust for which Jesus asked and continues to ask. And the Lord, as He always does, moves the man to take a step forward. At first, this supplicant comes to Christ with humility, but vacillating, unsure of his ground: If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us. And Jesus, who knows ... what is troubling the man’s soul, helps him, saying: ‘If you can, believe: all things are possible to him who believes’ (Mark 9:23). What a good act of faith this is for us to pray many times!: Jesus, I believe, but grant firmness to my faith! Teach me to back up my faith with deeds, to weep for my sins, and to trust in your power and mercy!

Faith is a gift of God, and only He can increase it in the soul. He is the one who opens the heart of the believer so that it can receive supernatural light, and that is what we should be praying for. But at the same time, certain interior dispositions are necessary: they are dispositions of humility, of purity, of openness ... of love which opens the way to a greater and greater security.

If at some time our faith were to falter in the face of difficulties, in the apostolate ... or, if the faith of our friends, brothers and sisters or children were to waver or weaken, we should imitate this good father in the Gospel account. In the first place, he asks for more faith because this virtue is a gift. But at the same time it depends on us. To open the heart, comments Saint John Chrysostom, is a work proper to God ... but to be attentive is a work proper to man: the act in this case is a work both of God’s doing and of man’s. We should strive to imitate this poor father in his humility: he doesn’t have any merits of his own to present, and for that reason has recourse to Our Lord’s mercy: Have pity on us and help us. This is the sure method that every prayer of ours should follow – to have recourse in this way to God’s mercy and compassion. For our part, humility, purity of soul and openness of heart towards the truth will enable us to receive those gifts which Jesus never denies to souls who place no obstacles in the way of his granting them. If the seed of grace has not taken root in our soul, it is simply because that seed has not found fertile ground. Lord, increase my faith!, we ask in the intimacy of our prayer. Don’t allow my faith in you ever to be shaken!

55.2 The need for good dispositions in order to believe.

What did those people who met Jesus in the towns and villages of Galilee see in him? They saw
what their internal dispositions allowed them to see. Would that they could have seen Jesus through
the eyes of his Mother! What greatness would then have confronted them! And what pettiness and
narrow-mindedness they would have observed in many of the Pharisees, who were caught up in the
intricacies and nuances of the Law ...! They were not even able to discover in the miracles Our Lord
worked that the Messiah had come at last. A great number of them remained blind before the Light of
the world. Their knowledge of Sacred Scripture did not help them to see in Jesus the fulfilment of all
that had been foretold about the Messiah and his promised arrival. Many of his contemporaries
refused to believe in Jesus because they did not have an upright heart, because their works were not
motivated by the desire to please God, because they didn’t love God, or have a right intention in what
they did: *My teaching is not mine*, the Lord will say, *but his who sent me; if any man’s will is to do
His will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own
authority.*[45] They did not have the necessary dispositions; they were not seeking God’s glory, but
their own.[46] Not even miracles can supply for lack of the necessary internal dispositions. The real
reason behind the rejection of the Messiah, so long expected and so clearly heralded and announced,
is to be found in the fact that not only did they not possess God in their hearts as their Father, but
worse, they had for their father *the devil*, because neither their works nor their feelings nor their
intentions were good.[47]

God lets himself be seen by those who are able to see him because they have the eyes of their
soul open. Everyone has eyes, but the eyes of some are blinded as it were in darkness and they
cannot see the light of the sun. But the light of the sun does not cease to shine simply because
these sightless ones fail to see it; rather is this darkness due to their own inability to see.[48] What
care ought we to take of the frequent confession of our faults and sins, if this sacrament cleanses us
and disposes us to see the Lord more clearly already here on earth!

In our apostolate, we should be aware that often the great hindrance to many souls accepting the
Faith, recognising their vocation or leading a consistent Christian life, is provided by personal sins
unrepented of, disordered affections and a lack of correspondence with divine grace. *Man,
influenced by his prejudices or stirred up by his passions or bad will, is not only able to deny the
evidence of external signs plain to be seen before his very eyes, but can also resist and reject the
higher inspirations God infuses into his soul.*[49] If one is without the desire to believe and to do the
will of God in everything, whatever the cost, one will simply not accept even what is glaringly
evident. Thus, the person who lives shut up in his own egoism, who doesn’t seek the good but only his
comfort or pleasure, will have a difficult time believing or understanding a noble ideal. And, in the
case of a person who has already taken the step of giving himself to God, he will find within himself
a growing resistance to the specific demands of his vocation.

A sincere and contrite confession, well prepared, can then be seen as the great means to rediscover
the way of faith; it gives one the interior clarity necessary to see what God is asking of us. When a
person purifies and cleanses his heart in this way, he prepares the ground so that the seed of faith and
generosity can take root in his soul and grow and bear fruit. We do a great good to souls when we
help them approach the sacrament of pardon, and it is a common experience that many of the problems
and doubts which afflicted souls are cleared up with a good confession. The soul then sees with great
clarity its own restored cleanliness, and much better now are its dispositions of will.

55.3 Faith and prayer. Pray with more faith.
We can see that their failure to cure the possessed boy weighed on the hearts of the disciples, since when they returned from the recorded incident they asked the Lord privately: *Why could we not cast it out?* And the Lord gave them a reply that must be very useful for us in our apostolate. He said: *This kind of demon cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting.*

It is only with prayer that we will overcome the stubborn obstacles that balk our progress, manage to overcome temptations ourselves and help many of our friends to find Christ. Commenting on this passage of the gospel, the Venerable Bede explains that in teaching the apostles how to expel this particularly wicked demon, Our Lord shows us all how we should live, and how prayer is the sure way to overcome even the greatest of temptations. But prayer does not consist of only the words with which we invoke God’s mercy; it is also what we offer to God in sincere worship, moved by faith.[50] All our work and every deed should be a pledge to the Lord, and be therefore full of fruit.

We should reinforce our prayer with deeds of virtue, with work that is well done, with the effort to improve ourselves, in that very point in which we want our friend to improve. This attitude towards God also opens the way for an increased access of faith in the soul. *It is only in prayer, in the intimacy of a face-to-face and personal dialogue with God which opens up the mind and heart (cf Acts 16:14), that the man of faith can deepen his understanding of God’s will with respect to his own life,[51]* and to everything related to it.

Let us ask Our Lord frequently to increase our faith: let us ask for it in the apostolate when the fruits seem to be a long time in coming; let us ask for more faith with respect to ourselves and our personal defects, or to the defects of those around us, when it perhaps begins to look as if those defects are insuperable; let us ask for it when we see ourselves as miserably inadequate for doing all that God wants of us ... all these are reasons to cry out: *Lord, increase our faith!* Thus the apostles prayed when, in spite of having seen and heard Christ himself, they felt their confidence shaken. Jesus never refuses his help. Throughout the day that lies ahead and throughout every succeeding day, we will feel the need to say: *Lord, don’t leave me alone to rely on my own strength, because left to myself I can’t do anything!* The prayer of that good father we hear about inspires us to go to Jesus with our plea for a greater faith: *We too now, after this time of meditation, can speak the same words to him: ‘Lord, I do believe! I have been brought up to believe in you. I have decided to follow you closely. Repeatedly during my life I have implored your mercy. And repeatedly too I have thought it impossible that you could perform such marvels in the hearts of your children. Lord, I do believe, but help me to believe more and better!’*

Let us address this same plea to Our Lady, Mother of God and our Mother, and Teacher of faith: ‘Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.’[52]
56. THE LORD, KING OF KINGS

56.1 The Psalm of royalty and triumph of Christ.

For many generations the psalms have been a channel for the soul’s requests for God’s help, through which to thank him, praise him, and seek his pardon. Our Lord himself chose to use one of the psalms when He turned to his heavenly Father in the last moments of his life here on earth. They were the principal prayers of the Hebrew family, and our Lady and Saint Joseph must certainly have poured forth their immense piety in their familiar and well-remembered words. Jesus learned them by heart from his parents and made them his own, so it is not surprising that the Church makes use of them every day in the Holy Mass and that they constitute the principal part of the prayer – the Liturgy of the Hours – which the priest directs each day to God in the Church’s name.

The Fathers of the Church and ecclesiastical writers have commented repeatedly on the fact that Psalm 2 has always been considered among the messianic psalms, and it has continued throughout the ages to nourish the piety of many of the faithful. The first Christians turned to it to seek courage in the midst of adversities. The Acts of the Apostles has left us a testimony of their devotion to this prayer. It relates how Peter and John had been brought before the Sanhedrin for having cured a cripple who was begging for alms at the entrance to the Temple. When the apostles were miraculously freed, they returned to rejoin the other Christians, and all together they intoned a prayer to the Lord which has at its heart this same psalm that hymns the kingship of Christ. This was their prayer:

Sovereign Lord, who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them, who by the mouth of our father David, thy servant, didst say by the Holy Spirit, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth set themselves in array, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed."

The words the Psalmist directs to God as he contemplates the menacing situation of his own time are prophetic ones which were to be fulfilled in apostolic times, and repeatedly throughout the Church’s life as well as in our own day. We too could realistically say: Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? Why so much hatred and so much evil? Since the moment of original sin this struggle has never ceased: the powers of this world unite together against God and against all that is of God. It is enough to see how human dignity is trampled upon in so many places, to be aware of the calumnies, the defamation, the baleful influence of the powerful mass media at the service of evil; to know about the abortion of hundreds of thousands of immature human beings who have been denied any option of developing earthly life or of the supernatural life to which God himself had destined them; to witness so many attacks against the Church, against the Pope, and against all who want to be loyal to the faith.

But God is stronger. He is the Rock. It was to him that Peter and John and those united with them on that day in Jerusalem turned, and they were able to preach with full confidence his saving word. When they had finished their prayer, Saint Luke tells us, everyone felt strengthened and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. Meditating on this psalm can give us fortitude when we are faced with the obstacles that can arise in an environment very far from God. We can find in it the sense of our divine filiation and the joy of proclaiming everywhere
56.2 The rejection of God in the world.

‘Dirumpamus vincula eorum ...’ Let us, they said, burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us. It seems to repeat a general clamour. They break the mild yoke, they throw off their burden, a wonderful ‘burden’ of holiness and justice, of grace and love and peace. Love makes them angry; they deride the gentle goodness of a God who will not call his legions of angels to his help (cf John 18:36). But He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury. Divine retribution is not meted out in this life only. In spite of the apparent triumphs of many who declare themselves to be, or behave, as enemies of God, their greatest failure, if they do not repent, consists in never understanding or attaining true happiness. Their human, or subhuman satisfactions will be their bitter reward, can be the sad prize for whatever good they imagine they have managed to do in this world. For all that, some saints have affirmed that the path to hell is already a hell. But in spite of everything, our Lord is always ready to pardon, to grant them true peace and joy.

Saint Augustine commenting on these verses of the psalm points out that the wrath of God can also be understood as the mental blindness that afflicts those who spurn the divine law in this way. There is no misfortune comparable to ignorance of God, to the tragedy of living with one’s back to him, to the empty affirmation of one’s own life in error and in evil.

Nevertheless, in spite of so much shame, God is patient. He desires that all men be saved. The wrath of God, of which the psalm speaks, is no mere corrective ‘furor’; rather it is the necessary anger of correction, of a father with a son, of a doctor with a patient, of a teacher with a student. Even so, the time for taking advantage of God’s mercy is limited: for night comes, when no one can work. With death, the possibility of repentance ends.

Blessed John Paul II pointed out that the rejection of divine mercy is a conspicuous characteristic of our age. It is a very sad reality which moves us constantly to a conversion of heart, and to implore our Lord and ask him the reason for such widespread rebellion. For all to see there is the spectacle of multitudes who lock themselves away from divine mercy and the remission of their sins. They consider these to be not essential or not important for one’s life. It is an impenetrability of conscience, a state of mind that could be described as fixed by reason of a free choice. This is what Sacred Scripture calls ‘hardness of heart.’ In our own day this attitude of mind and heart is perhaps reflected in the notable loss of the sense of sin.

Those of us who wish to follow Christ closely have the duty of making reparation for the violent rejection of God by so many of our contemporaries, and we have to beg an abundance of grace and of mercy. Let us ask that this divine clemency be never exhausted, since it is for so many the last life-line, the only thing left for the drowning man to grasp, after having rejected every other aid to salvation.

56.3 Divine filiation.

To the profound questions that human freedom raises concerning the mystery of evil – the rebellion of the creature – Psalm 2 gives the solution, proclaiming the kingship of Christ and his dominion over evil that exists or can exist: ‘I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.’ ‘I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, ‘Your are my Son, today I have begotten you.’ The kindness of God our
Father has given us his Son for a king. When He threatens He becomes tender; when He says He is angry He gives us his love. ‘You are my Son’: this is addressed to Christ – and to you and me if we decide to become ‘alter Christus, ipse Christus’: another Christ, Christ himself.

Words cannot go so far as the heart, which is moved by God’s goodness. He says to us: ‘You are my son’... Not a stranger, not a well-treated servant, not a friend – that would be a lot already. A son! [68] This is our refuge: divine filiation. Here we find the necessary courage in the face of adversities – those of an environment which is at times hostile to Christian life, as well as the temptations our Lord may permit in order for us to reaffirm our faith and love.

We always find our Father God very near to us. His presence is like a pervasive fragrance which never loses the gentle insistence with which it enters everywhere – the same in the interior of the hearts that accept him as in the exterior, in natural objects, in the middle of a crowd, in all things God is there, waiting for us to discover him, to call to him, to take him into account... [69]

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. [70] Each day our Lord says, Ask of me, especially in the moments of thanksgiving after communion. Ask of me, Jesus invites us, His desire is to give himself to us, and for us to give ourselves to him.

Saint John Chrysostom comments on these words of the Psalm and teaches that what is promised to us is no longer just a land flowing with milk and honey, or a long life, or an abundance of children, or wheat, or wine, or flocks, but heaven and the good things of heaven – divine filiation and brotherhood with his only-begotten Son, a sharing in his inheritance and being glorified together with him and reigning with him for all eternity...[71]

You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel. Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling kiss his feet. [72] Christ has triumphed now and forever. With his death on the cross, He has won life for us. According to the testimony of the Fathers of the Church, the iron rod is the Holy Cross, which is made of wood, but has the strength of iron. [73] It is the sign of the Christian, with which he will conquer in every battle: the obstacles will be shattered like an earthen dish. The Cross in our mind, on our lips, in our heart, in all our works: this is the weapon of conquest – a sober and mortified life lived without fleeing from the lovable sacrifice that unites us with Christ.

The psalm ends with a call for us to remain faithful along the way and confident in our Lord. Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling kiss his feet, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. [74] We have placed all our confidence in God. We ask the holy guardian angels, those faithful servants of God, to help us live our vocation each day with greater fidelity and more love, serving the kingdom of his Son where He has called us.
57. UNITY AND VARIETY IN THE CHURCH’S APOSTOLATE

57.1 In the life of the Church there are many and very diverse forms of apostolate.

Christ’s disciples once came upon a man who was casting out devils in his name. We don’t know if this was someone who had already met Jesus; perhaps he had even been cured by our Lord or had witnessed one of his miracles and decided on his own responsibility to be a disciple. Whatever the case, Saint Mark gives us John’s reaction: Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us.

Our Lord took advantage of this opportunity to answer in a way that applies to all of us: Do not forbid him, he said, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is for us. This man had demonstrated his deep, living faith in Jesus with deeds. Christ accepts him as his follower and condemns a narrow-minded and exclusive attitude toward apostolate. He teaches us that the apostolic work done in his name can take many different forms.

The apostolate, through which the laity build up the Church, sanctify the world and persuade it to live in Christ, can take on many forms. The one thing necessary is to be with Christ, with his Church – to transmit his teaching and to love him with deeds. Our Christian spirit should lead us to be open to the most varied forms of apostolate, to make an effort to understand them all – no matter how different they may be from our own way of thinking or acting – and to rejoice in their variety. After all, the harvest is great, and the labourers in the Lord’s vineyard are few. Rejoice when you see others working in a good apostolate. And ask God to grant them abundant grace and correspondence to that grace.

Then, you, on your way. Convince yourself that, for you – yours is the only way.

It would be inconceivable – it would be impossible, in fact – for a Christian who is truly living his faith to develop an exclusivist mentality, as though anyone who did not conform to one’s own rules or ways of acting were to be considered as some kind of rival. Not everyone has to be involved in the same sort of apostolate. Any person, as long as he acts with a right intention, performs a useful task. We are all needed. There should be many ways in which Christ and his teaching can be made known.

Certainly, there is a unity that must be preserved in faith and in moral matters, in the sacraments, in obedience to the Hierarchy, in the common means of attaining holiness and in the great norms of discipline. But this precious unity is to be preserved with the well-known principle of Saint Augustine: ‘in necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas’ – unity in all that is necessary, freedom in all that is subject to opinion, and charity in everything. In other words, the unity that is needed is never the kind of uniformity that leads to an impoverishment of souls and of their apostolates. In the garden of the Church there has always been, and there will always be, a remarkable variety of beautiful flowers, each with its own aroma, its own size, shape and colour. All this rich diversity only serves to enhance the glory of God.

Whenever we are involved in an apostolic task, we must avoid the temptation to waste our time evaluating other people’s initiatives. Instead of devoting our attention to what others are doing, we should rather look into our own heart and see if we ourselves are truly committed to making the best possible use of the talents God has given us. For the sake of the souls that depend on our work, You.
on your way. Convince yourself that, for you – yours is the only way.

The wonder of Pentecost is the sanctification of every unique path: no one way has a monopoly, no one way is to be encouraged to the exclusion or the detriment of others.

Pentecost is an incalculable variety of tongues, of methods, of ways of meeting God, and not a forced uniformity.[81]

57.2 We need to bring the Church’s teaching to everyone.

Christ’s teaching should reach out to the whole world; in fact, in our time there are many parts of the world, once Christian, that are in need of a new evangelization. The Church’s mission is universal, embracing persons from every conceivable background, of different ages, cultures, ways of living. From the very beginning the Faith was accepted by the old and the young, the wealthy and the poor, the learned and the unlettered. The Apostles and their successors made sure that, in all necessary matters, unity might be maintained. But the Church did not try to impose a straitjacket of uniformity on all its converts. In the same way, the apostolate was carried out through a great variety of channels – some fulfilled the important task of defending Christianity with their writings, others preached in public in the market-places, while the majority of the new Christians carried out a personal work of apostolate in their families and among their neighbours, friends and fellow-workers. What they had in common was their mutual charity, their faithfulness to the doctrine they had received, the sacraments, and their obedience to their legitimate shepherds.

We can bring our Lord’s teaching to everyone, carefully separating away the thorns that would make the seed fruitless. We Christians, in the task entrusted to us by God, do not exclude anyone; we do not leave any soul out of our love for Christ. And so, St Josemaría Escrivá used to advise, you must develop firm, loyal, sincere friendships – Christian friendships – with all your fellow-workers, and, indeed, with all men, whatever their personal circumstances may be.[82] A Christian’s calling makes him one who is open to others, who is able to reach an understanding with the most diverse kinds of people, regardless of their age, their cultural background, their personality or their character.

Our friendship with Jesus, expressed in our prayer, leads us to have a big heart, with room for those who are close at hand and for people who are far away, without the slightest narrowness in our outlook. An exclusive and restrictive mentality does not reflect the presence and the love of Christ. Let us examine our behaviour in our prayer. Let us see whether we love and respect the different ways of living and acting that we see in the people we meet every day. Let us make sure that we accept, as part of the wealth of the Church’s life, the differences we encounter in other people – their different likes and dislikes, their varied ways of living or of expressing themselves, their unique ways of reacting or thinking, within the unity of our faith.

57.3 The unity of the Church does not mean uniformity.

The Church is like the human body made up of many members, all different and all closely united to one another.[83] This diversity does not threaten our unity; rather, it is its most fundamental condition.

We must pray to our Lord for the grace to understand this supernatural reality, and to act accordingly in our task of building up the Body of Christ so that there may always be unity in truth and in charity; so too, that at the same time we may acknowledge the variety that exists in the Church – in matters of spirituality, of theological study, of pastoral action, of apostolic initiative. The variety of
forms is a true richness and brings with it a real fulness; it is true catholicity. This is quite different from a false pluralism which would involve nothing more than the juxtaposition of radically opposed points of view.

The Holy Spirit acts where there is unity and true charity. He inspires each person to follow a specific path toward the fulness of his love. Whoever has received a particular supernatural gift, whoever has been called to follow a specific path, will contribute to building up the Church through his faithfulness to that calling, and along the path that God has marked out for him. It is there, and not anywhere else, that God comes out to meet him.

The unity that our Lord wants – ut omnes unum sint, that all may be one – does not constrain or inhibit anyone’s personality. Rather, it encourages its development. There are many different ways to live one’s spiritual life, and many different possibilities of theological thinking in matters that the Church leaves open to discussion. You were amazed that I should approve the lack of uniformity in the apostolate in which you work. And I said to you: Unity and variety. You all have to be different from one another, as the saints in heaven are different, each having his own personal and very special characteristics. But also you have to be as identical as the saints, who would not be saints if each of them had not identified himself with Christ.

Our Lord’s teaching leads us to respect the legitimate differences in character, taste, and opinion that should exist in temporal matters. We should rejoice in these differences and even encourage them. Anything that is not opposed to our Lord’s teaching or to one’s own vocation, anything that does not hinder it, should be characterised by complete freedom. Every individual has a right to that freedom with respect to his likes and dislikes, his work and his other occupations, his ideas on science or his views on politics. In our time and in any time in history, we Christians should be firmly united in Christ, in his love and in his teaching, and faithful to the calling that each has received. And we should be very different from each other in everything else – each with his own gifts and his own personality, striving to be salt and light, like burning coals aflame with the love of God – true disciples of Christ.
58. GETTING TO HEAVEN

58.1 The only thing that really matters in life is getting to Heaven.

Among all the achievements of our life only one is really crucial. It is attaining the goal – Heaven – set for us by God. We must be ready to give up everything, if necessary, to achieve this goal. We must also be ready to set aside anything that even gets in the way of our achieving it, no matter how valuable or appealing it may seem. Everything else has to be subjected to that one supreme objective in our life – possessing God. If anything becomes an obstacle rather than an aid to this end, then we must be prepared either to set things straight or to put the obstacle aside completely. Eternal salvation – our own or our neighbour’s – comes first. Our Lord tells us so in the Gospel of the Mass: \[ If \ thy \ hand \ is \ an \ occasion \ of \ sin \ to \ thee, \ cut \ it \ off! \] ... \[ And \ if \ thy \ foot \ is \ an \ occasion \ of \ sin \ to \ thee, \ cut \ it \ off! \] ... \[ And \ if \ thine \ eye \ is \ an \ occasion \ of \ sin \ to \ thee, \ pluck \ it \ out! \] ... It is better to enter into the kingdom of Heaven maimed, lame or lacking an eye, than being physically sound to be cast into hellfire, where their worm dies not, and the fire is not quenched. It is better to lose something as necessary as one’s hand, one’s foot or one’s eye than to lose Heaven, which is our supreme good, implying as it does the beatific vision of God for all eternity. How much truer this is, if, as is usually the case, what we need to put aside with no more than a bit of determination on our part is something that would otherwise not result in any significant harm to us.

By employing these very graphic images Our Lord teaches us that it is our positive duty not even to run the risk of offending him; we have the serious duty of avoiding or setting aside proximate occasions of sin, for he that loves the danger shall perish in it. Anything that entices and draws us closer to sin must be energetically excised from our lives. We cannot toy with our own salvation or with the salvation of our neighbour.

Often the obstacles we have to set aside will not be tremendously significant ones. In the life of a Christian who is striving to please God in all things, this will usually be the case. What will have to be set aside and cut out are our minor whims and preferences. We shall take prudent steps to correct small breaches of temperance where Our Lord asks us to mortify our taste or our appetite, to control our temper or our moods, to overcome any excessive concern we may have about our health or comfort... All of these more or less habitual failings need very much to be taken into account, even though they may not be more than venial sins. They slow our pace and can trip us up – or worse: they can gradually lead to or bring about more serious falls.

If our struggle is generous, if our goal in life is clear in our sight, we will be decisive not to say ruthless, in striving to correct these situations so that they cease to be obstacles and are turned into advantages. This is what Our Lord often did with his Apostles. From Peter’s hot-headed impetuosity He formed solid rock on which He would build his Church. From the vehement impatience of John and James (whom He dubbed sons of thunder) He fashioned the apostolic zeal of untiring preachers. From Thomas’s scepticism he moulded a strikingly articulate testimony to his divinity. What has been previously a crippling liability becomes a powerful asset.

58.2 Hell exists. We must practice a holy fear of God.

A Christian’s life ought to be a continual journeying toward Heaven. Everything should strengthen
our steps along this path – sorrows and joys, work and rest, successes and failures. In important financial matters or other great practical enterprises we naturally have to be alert, carefully studying even the smallest details, so it makes even more sense to do so in regard to the most significant of all undertakings – our salvation. At the end of our journey on this earth we will face but one choice: either Heaven (passing through Purgatory first if we require to be purified) or hell, that place of unquenchable fire which Our Lord so explicitly spoke about many times.

Christ would not have taken such pains to reveal the existence of hell with such clarity if it were not real, or if it were not really possible for men to end up there. He certainly would not have warned us so frequently, telling us: be watchful! The devil never relents in his attempt to win over any man or woman still journeying in this world towards his or her definitive goal. The devil never relinquishes his claim upon anyone, quite regardless of position or God-given mission.

The reality of eternal punishment for those who do evil and die in mortal sin had already been revealed in the Old Testament. And in the New Testament Jesus Christ spoke of the punishment prepared for the devil and his angels, for those wicked servants who do not fulfil their Lord’s will, for the foolish virgins who find themselves without the oil of good works when the Bridegroom arrives, for those who come to the marriage feast without the wedding garment, for those who offend their brothers seriously, or who choose not to help them in their material or spiritual need... The world is compared to a field in which both wheat and weeds are growing until the time when God takes up his sickle and clears his field. The wheat will be stored in his barns while the weeds will be burnt with unquenchable fire.

Hell was not some sort of symbol for use in preaching or in moral exhortation – in past moments of history – to a humanity which had yet to evolve. It is a stark reality revealed to us by Jesus Christ. It is, unfortunately, one so objectively real that Our Lord was moved to give us the spirited command – as we read in the Gospel of the Mass – to put away from us anything, no matter how important it might seem, rather than eventually find ourselves there forever. Hell is a truth of faith constantly affirmed by the Church’s Magisterium. The Second Vatican Council refers to it, in repeating the eschatological characteristics of the Church, we should ... watch constantly so that ... we may ... not, like the wicked and slothful servants (cf Matt 25:26) be ordered to depart into eternal fire (cf Matt 25:41), into the outer darkness where ‘men will weep and gnash their teeth’ (Matt 22:13 and 25:30).

Hell’s existence is a truth of faith, defined by the Magisterium of the Church. It would be a serious mistake not to meditate upon or to consider this transcendental topic from time to time or to ignore it in preaching, in teaching catechetics or in one’s personal apostolate. Nor can the Church omit, without serious mutilation of her essential message, as Blessed John Paul II warned, a constant catechesis on ... the four last things of man: death, judgement (universal and particular), hell and heaven. In a culture which tends to imprison man immanently in the earthly life, which he is more or less successful at getting through, the pastors of the Church are asked to provide a catechesis which will reveal and illustrate with the certainty of faith what comes after the present life beyond the mysterious gates of death, an eternity of joy in communion with God or the punishment of separation from him forever. Our Lord wants us to be motivated by love, but given our human weakness – the result of original sin and of our own personal sins – He has preferred to show us just where sin leads, so that we would have a further motive to reject sin – the holy fear of God which is the fear of being separated from our Supreme Good, our true Love. The saints have highly esteemed the personal revelations they have received from God regarding hell’s
existence as well as the magnitude and unending nature of its punishments. ... This vision was one of the most signal favours the Lord has bestowed upon me, writes Saint Teresa of Avila. It has been of the greatest benefit to me, both in taking from me all fear of the tribulations and disappointments of this life and also in strengthening me to put up with them and to give thanks to the Lord, who, as I now believe, has delivered me from such terrible and never-ending torments.[101]

Let us see in our prayer today if there is anything in our lives, small as it may be, that might be distancing us from our Lord and which we are not struggling against as we ought. Let us examine ourselves to see whether we do in fact flee from all proximate occasions of sin; whether we frequently ask the Blessed Virgin to grant us a profound dread of all sin, even venial sin, which causes such harm to the soul and separates us from her Son, our only unqualified Good.

58.3 We are to be instruments in the salvation of many people.

The consideration of our last end should lead us to be faithful in dealing with the little occurrences of each day so as to acquire Heaven through our daily tasks and the things that happen to us, and set aside whatever could present itself as an obstacle along our way. The consideration of our last end should also induce us to carry out an unremitting apostolate, helping those around us to find God so that they may serve him in this world and be happy with him forever in the next. This is the greatest expression of charity and respect for others that we can possibly have.

The first way to help others is to be aware of the consequences of our own actions and omissions in order to avoid becoming an occasion of scandal or an obstacle to them. The Gospel of the Mass also includes these words of Jesus: It were better for a man if a millstone were hung about his neck and he were thrown into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Shortly before this, Jesus had said: It is impossible that scandals should not come; but woe to him through whom they come![102] There are few words in the Gospel as strong as these, few sins as serious as those that bring about the ruin of a soul, for scandal destroys God’s greatest work – the Redemption, with the resultant loss of souls. Scandal kills our neighbour’s soul, robbing him of the life of grace, which is more precious than the life of the body. These little ones are for Jesus, primarily children. In them the innocence of God is reflected in an exceptional way. The little ones, however, are also the immense multitude of simple souls – those less spiritually formed – and, for this very reason, more easily scandalized.

Faced with so many daily causes of scandal in the world, Our Lord asks his followers to make atonement and reparation for so much evil. He wants us to be living examples as followers of his who attract others to become good Christians by appropriately, affectionately and prudently exercising fraternal correction, which helps others to amend their faults. It can also help them to remedy situations which are dangerous for their souls, motivating them to have recourse to the sacrament of Penance in which their straying steps can be redirected. The reality of hell’s existing, which faith teaches us, is a call to the apostolate, for us to be instruments in the salvation of many people.

Let us invoke the Blessed Virgin: Iter para tutum!,[103] prepare a safe way for us and for all men, a safe way that leads to a destination which is the eternal happiness of Heaven.
59. DEFENDING THE FAMILY

59.1 Jesus returns the dignity of matrimony to its original purity. The unity and indissolubility of marriage.

The Gospel of today’s Mass speaks of Jesus teaching a multitude of people who have come from all the villages round about. They are simple people who receive the word of God with enthusiasm. But among them are some Pharisees with twisted intentions who attempt to challenge Christ by confronting him with the law of Moses. They put the query whether it is lawful for a husband to divorce his wife. Jesus asks them, What did Moses command you? They said, Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to put her away. This was conceded by all, but what was in question was whether it was licit to divorce a wife for any reason, for an insignificant reason, or even without any cause at all.

Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Son of God, knew perfectly well the spirit of that Law. Moses had permitted divorce because of the hardness of heart of his people, and by means of it he had protected the dignity of the woman. Her condition had been so debased and underrated at that time that in many cases she was considered a slave without rights. The law prescribed a document (the certificate of divorce) by which the wife who was put away could again recover her freedom. This certificate was in fact a social advance for those times characterised by so many barbarous customs.

Christ returned the dignity of matrimony to its original purity, as God instituted it at the beginning of Creation. God made them male and female. For this reason a man may leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one. So they are no longer two, but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder.

This teaching struck his listeners as being extraordinarily demanding, so much so that, according to Saint Matthew, they told him, If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry. The conversation must have continued later because when the day was over they again asked him about it. Jesus declared once and for all, Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.

Our Lord shows how God in the beginning had established the unity and indissolubility of marriage. Saint John Chrysostom, commenting on this teaching, uses a clear and simple formula in stating that matrimony means one man with one woman for life. The Magisterium of the Church, which is the guardian and interpreter of the natural and divine Law, has constantly taught that matrimony was instituted by God as a perpetual and unbreakable bond. It was protected, confirmed and elevated not by human laws, but by the very author of nature, God himself, and by the restorer of that nature, Christ Our Lord. This law, therefore, cannot be subject to the variable choice of men, not even by the contrary judgement of the spouses themselves.

Matrimony is not simply a private contract. It cannot be broken by either party, or by agreement of both parties of the pact. No human reason, no matter how strong it might seem, is able to justify divorce, because that is contrary to divine and natural Law.

Blessed John Paul II exhorted Christian spouses to be faithful in living Christ’s teaching on the family, even though they may live in countries where the norms of Christian life do not receive due consideration or are actually violently attacked. We should frequently pray for the stability of the
family, starting with our own. We must strive always to be instruments of unity in bringing this about through our genuine service to others, our continuous cheerfulness, and an effective apostolate which brings those around us closer to God.

Do we pray each day for the person in our family who most needs it? Do we show more attention to the weakest member or to the one who feels that he or she is most at risk? Do we affectionately care for the one who is ill?

59.2 Apostolate of education on the nature of marriage. The example of spouses. Sanctity of the family.

When Our Lord explained the meaning of marriage He was not swayed by the fact that the attitude existing among the Jewish people at that time was totally contrary to his teachings. Nor can the Christian afford to be deflected in this matter by the difficulties and even by the derision occasioned in our social environment when he or she must uphold the values and the holiness of marriage. To defend the indissolubility of marriage is to do an immense good to all, to the whole of society.

Jesus went against the current of those times with his teaching concerning the institution of marriage. He returned it to its original dignity and raised it moreover to the supernatural order by establishing it as one of the seven sacraments which serves to sanctify spouses and family life.

In our own times the worth and essential properties of marriage are under attack, and even ridiculed by bitter satire in many quarters. It is the duty of Christians to defend this sacrament, as Christ did in his day, and to rebuild the social foundation so that the family, united and solid, becomes again the backbone of society as it is meant to.

The family must be the object of serious attention and support on the part of everyone who has a hand in public life. Educators, writers, politicians and legislators must keep in mind that a great part of social and even personal problems has its roots in the failure or the collapse of family life. To fight against juvenile delinquency or against the prostitution of women and at the same time to favour the discrediting or deterioration of the institution of the family is both senseless and contradictory.

The good of the family in all of its aspects has to be one of the fundamental concerns of the Christian's activity in public life. In all the different areas of social activity, matrimony and the family must be supported and fostered by economic, social, educational, political and cultural means, with all the help that is necessary and urgent if we are to continue developing our society's basic functions (see Familiaris consortio, 45).

It must be understood, however, that the role of families in social and political life cannot be merely passive. They themselves must be ‘the first to take steps to see that the laws and institutions of the State do not offend, but support and positively defend the rights and duties of the family.’ (ibid, 44). In this way true ‘family politics’ (ibid) will be promoted.[111]

The example and joy of Christian spouses have to pave the way for the apostolate they must do with their children and with the other families they come in contact with through friendship, social relations, joint tasks in the education of their children, and so forth. This cheerfulness, in the middle of the normal difficulties commonly experienced by any family, is born of the serious attempt to live a holy life, and of corresponding with the graces of the matrimonial vocation. Then the children will follow their own vocations and go on to do great good to society in a way that pleases God, themselves in turn using all the means available to them to maintain the atmosphere of a Christian
family, an atmosphere in which everyone lives the human and supernatural virtues – cheerfulness, cordiality, sobriety, industriousness, mutual respect, and so on.

59.3 Christian matrimony.

Human love, being raised to the supernatural order, is made deeper and richer because in the Christian sacrament divine love irradiates human love, transforming what is good and making it holy. God is the one who unites with a holy bond and sanctifies man and wife in matrimony. Therefore, *what God has joined together let no man put asunder*. Precisely because God unites a man and a woman with divine links, what were two bodies and two hearts are now *una caro*, one flesh, one sole body and one and the same heart, resembling the union of Christ with his Church.[112]

Matrimony is not merely a social institution, nor is it only a juridical state, civil and canonical. It is also a new life which is sacrificing and overflowing with love; it sanctifies the spouses and makes holy all those who form part of the family.

It is good for us to stop during our prayer with Our Lord to examine the different aspects of our daily conduct. Our family life should be warm and affectionate, free from arguments, criticisms or complaints. We should make ourselves available to play our part in taking care of the home and tending to the material needs of our children, our brothers and sisters or our parents. Our weekends and vacation time should be made good use of to avoid laziness and time-wasting pastimes. We should be serene in the face of difficulties, modestly simple in our manner of celebrating, sensible in an entirely Christian way while sanctifying holidays, preparing family excursions or planning vacations. There should be respect for the freedom and opinions of the others, along with appropriate and opportune advice. We have to be interested in our children’s (or younger siblings’) studies and human development. We should be ready to make sacrifices for those who require more loving attention and understanding.

If parents care for each other with a human and supernatural love they will be examples to whom their children will look for answers to many of the questions that modern life presents them with. Christian ideals and noble human desires will be maintained if the home atmosphere is cheerful and the practice of the natural virtues is given an important place. Then the family will become a privileged place in which is carried out the *constant renewal of the Church*,[113] and the new evangelization of the world to which the present Pope calls us.

Let us ask the Blessed Virgin, Mother of Fair Love, to obtain for us abundant grace from her Son Jesus Christ, for our own family and for all Christian families on earth.
SEVENTH WEEK: SATURDAY

60. WITH THE SIMPLICITY OF CHILDREN

60.1 Spiritual childhood and simplicity.

On various occasions the Gospel relates how children approached Jesus, who welcomed them, blessed them and held them up as an example to his disciples. Today he shows us again the importance of becoming like one of these little ones in order to enter the Kingdom: Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it. And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them.[114]

In these children whom Jesus embraces and blesses are represented not only all the world’s children, but all men; Our Lord is indicating how all men should ‘receive’ the Kingdom of God.

Jesus provides a lively illustration of the essential teaching about divine sonship: God is our Father and we his children; our behaviour as Christians is summarized in knowing how to bring to life the relationship that a good child has with a good father. This spirit of divine sonship implies a sense of being utterly dependent on our Heavenly Father and a facility for abandoning ourselves confidently to his loveable Providence, just as a child entrusts everything to its father; the relationship presupposes the humility to acknowledge that we can do nothing by ourselves; and it implies simplicity and sincerity, qualities that prompt us to let ourselves be seen by others as we really are.[115]

To become childlike while remaining adult can be costly: it requires courage and strength of will, as well as great abandonment to God. Spiritual childhood is not spiritual immaturity or foolishness or softness; it is a sane and robust way which, due to its ‘difficult easiness’, the soul must embark upon and then continue, led by the hand of God.[116] The Christian who has taken the decision to live spiritual childhood practises charity more easily, because the child is a creature who does not hold grudges, who is ignorant of duplicity or fraud, who dares not deceive. The Christian, like the small child, does not grow angry if he is insulted, does not seek revenge if he is treated badly. More than that, the Lord even requires him to pray for his enemies, to give his shirt and coat to those who would wear them, to present the other cheek to those who strike him (cf Matt 5:40).[117] A child easily forgets and does not store up grievances. A child has no real sorrows.

Spiritual childhood always preserves the freshness of love in a soul, because its simplicity keeps it from dwelling on adverse experiences. You have become younger! You notice, in fact, that getting to know God better has made you regain in a short time the simple and happy age of your youth, including the security and joy – without being at all ‘childish’ – of spiritual childhood ... You look around and you realize that the same thing has happened to others: the years since their first conscious encounter with the Lord have gone by and, having reached maturity, they are strengthened with a permanently youthful happiness. Although they are no longer young, they are young at heart and happy!

This patent reality of the interior life attracts, confirms and wins over souls. Give thanks for it daily ‘ad Deum qui laetificat iuventutem’ – to God who fills your youth with joy.[118] Our Lord truly gives joy to our perennial youth, both at the beginning of life and during the years of maturity or old age. God is always our greatest joy in life as long as we live in his presence like children – small children who are always in need.
60.2 Manifestations of piety and Christian naturalness.

This spirit of divine sonship in the Christian soul gives rise to simple devotions, to countless little deeds honouring our Father God, for a soul full of love is unable to remain inactive. Since he has required all his strength to become childlike, the Christian can give small devotions their true meaning. Each of us must have ‘the piety of children, but the doctrine of theologians’, as St Josemaría Escrivá used to say. A solid grounding in Christian doctrine helps to give meaning to a mere glance we make at a picture of Our Lady, or to a kiss we give a crucifix; it helps us, moreover, to turn such a glance or kiss into an act of love so that we do not remain indifferent, for example, before a scene from the Way of the Cross. This denotes a solid and deep-rooted piety, real love, which has a need to express itself in just such ways. Then God looks upon us benignly, as a father gazes at his child whom he loves more than all the business ventures in the world.

A simple and deep faith always finds expression in particular acts of piety, whether collective or personal, which are valid for human and divine reasons. Some of them have become the pious customs of Christian people, passed on from generation to generation in the intimacy of the home and within the heart of the Church. So, along with the desire to improve our knowledge of Christian doctrine more and more – as much as our personal circumstances permit – we must also have the determination to live the simple details of piety which we have discovered on our own, or which people of various nations for generations have found useful and natural in their desire to express their love for God; with such expressions of piety they pleased God, because they in practising these devotions had become like children. From the beginning of the Church it was customary, for example, to adorn altars and images of the saints with flowers, to kiss the crucifix or the rosary, to bless oneself with holy water ...

Out of failure to appreciate the love that inspires these simple, pious customs of the Christian people, in certain parts of the world they are rejected by some who mistakenly consider them to be peculiar to a ‘childish Christianity’. Apparently such disapproving critics have forgotten those words of Our Lord: whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it; they are unwilling to recognize that, in God’s sight, we are all like little and needy children, and that in human life love is frequently expressed in small, unimportant ways. When observed by an outsider with detached and critical objectivity, but without understanding and love, these tokens of affection may well seem meaningless. Nevertheless, how often was our Lord’s heart moved by the prayer of children and of those who became like them!

The Acts of the Apostles have left us a clear record of how the first Christians used many lamps to light up the rooms where they celebrated the Holy Eucharist, and of how they liked to leave small oil-lamps burning above the graves of their martyrs. Saint Jerome eulogizes a good priest in these words: _He adorned both the basilicas and the halls of the martyrs with sketches of flowers, foliage and vine tendrils, so that everything attractive in the church, whether made so by its position or by its appearance, bore witness to the labour and zeal of the presbyter._ These little external manifestations of piety are fitting, appropriate to the purpose for which they are used, and come naturally to us as human beings. Our human nature employs the help of visible things to address God and adequately express its needs and desires.

At times simplicity will be shown in daring: when we are recollected in prayer or simply walking down the street we can tell Our Lord things which, out of embarrassment, we would not dare say in
front of others, since they belong to the intimacy of our interior life. Nevertheless, it is necessary that we know how – and be daring enough – to tell him outright that we love him, even that we want him to have us love him ‘madly’, and that we are ready, if he so desires, to be more fully nailed to the Cross and to offer him our life once more ... This daring of the life of childhood should issue in specific resolutions.

60.3 In order to be simple.

Simplicity is one of the principal manifestations of spiritual childhood. It is the result of having become defenceless before God, like a vulnerable and trusting child before its father. Either to disguise or to make a false show of our defects and mistakes is completely out of place when we are in front of God. We should also be simple when opening our soul to receive personal spiritual guidance, revealing what is good, bad or doubtful in our life.

We are living the virtue of simplicity when we maintain an upright intention in our love for Our Lord. This will lead us in everything we do to seek the glory of God and the good of souls with a strong, decisive will. If a person is truly seeking God he does not become entangled in a confusion of motivations or complicated from within; he does not look for unusual things to accomplish: he simply does what he should, and tries to do it well, facing God. He says what is on his mind clearly: he does not express himself in half-truths or habitually resort to mental reservations. He is not naive, but neither is he suspicious; he is prudent, but not distrustful. To summarize, he lives the teaching of the Master: be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.[122]

By following this route, my friend, you will arrive at great intimacy with our Lord; you will learn to call Jesus by his name and will come to love recollection. Frivolity, superficiality and lukewarmness will disappear from your life. You will be a friend of God; and in your recollection, in your intimacy with him, you will love to consider those words of Scripture: ‘God went to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend’ (Ex 33:11).[123] Our prayer will be expressed throughout the course of the day in acts of love, of reparation and thanksgiving, in aspirations to the Blessed Virgin, to Saint Joseph, to the Guardian Angel ...

Our Lady shows us how to get to know the Son of God, her Son, without resorting to complex formulas. It is easy for us to imagine her preparing a meal, sweeping the house, taking care of the clothes ... and in the midst of these tasks turning to Jesus with immense love and confidence, with delicate respect – knowing well that he was the Son of the Most High! To him she revealed her needs, or those of others – They have no wine!, she will tell him at the wedding of those friends or relatives of hers in Cana; she took care of him, doing him the little acts of service that are expected of a mother by her child in their daily life together; she gazed at him, thought about him ... all this was perfect prayer.

We need to show God our love. Frequently we will express it in the Holy Mass, through the prayers the Church gives us in the Liturgy, through a momentary visit made in the bustle of daily activity, or by lighting a candle or placing some flowers at the foot of a statue of Mary, Mother of God and our Mother. Today let us ask her to give us a heart that is simple and full of love, so that we can converse with her Son – and also learn from children, who go to their parents and the ones they love with such overwhelming confidence.
61. TODAY’S TASK

61.1 Living the present to the full, without anxiety. Divine filiation. Trust and abandonment in God.

Our Lord counsels us in the Gospel of the Mass: *Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day.*

Yesterday is over. We do not know whether we will see tomorrow, since no one has been given knowledge of the future. All that remains to us from yesterday’s toil are reasons, many reasons, for giving thanks: we thank God for his bountiful outpouring of graces and blessings; we owe gratitude also to our fellow men. We will have added, too, we hope, even if just a little, to our *treasure* in heaven. From the day that is gone we draw motives for contrition and penance for our sins, our errors and omissions. Of yesterday we can say, in the words of the entrance antiphon of today’s Mass: *The Lord has been my strength; He has led me into freedom. He saved me because He loves me.*

*Tomorrow “as yet is not.” If it comes, it will be more wonderful than we could ever dream, because our Father God has prepared it to sanctify us: Deus meus es tu, in manibus tuis sortes meae: My times are in thy hand.* There are no grounds, objectively speaking, for letting worry and concern for tomorrow weigh us down: we will be given the graces we need in order to contend with anything that crops up. We will be victorious!

What matters is *today*. Today is the day we need in which to love, to grow in holiness, through those countless little occurrences that go to make up the texture of our life. Some things will be naturally pleasant, others perhaps less gratifying, but each one of them can be made to shine for God and for eternity, a gem which we will have wrought and polished with human perfection and supernatural meaning.

We cannot dally with wishful thinking. Sometimes our fanciful imagination improves upon the reality of past events and enslaves us by idealising a future reassuringly free from effort; or it may, on the contrary, show us a dark horizon, a prospect that makes us apprehensive. *He who observes the wind will not sow; and he who regards the clouds will not reap.* It is an invitation to get on with carrying out the duty of the moment without stopping to see whether a better opportunity may perhaps arise. It is easy also, in our apostolate, for us to postpone a project for a more suitable occasion. What would have become of the Apostles’ preaching if they had waited and looked for more favourable circumstances? What would have happened, in any successful work of apostolate, if Christ’s followers had stood down in the off-chance of better conditions? *Hic et nunc: here and now is where I must love God with all my heart... and with deeds.*

Humanly and supernaturally, holiness and efficacy consist mainly in *living each day as if it were the only day in our life*: each day is the one we must fill with love for God; every day is one we must finish, leaving it brimful of good works. We cannot let a single chance of doing good slip through our hands. *Today does not come round again, ever,* and God expects us to fill it with love and with little acts of service towards others. Our Guardian Angel should rejoice when he offers our day to our Father God.
Fruitless worry. We will always be given enough help to remain faithful.

Do not be anxious... Fruitless worry does not cancel out the misfortune we dread, but foolishly goes out to meet it. We shoulder a burden without yet having received the grace God would give to enable us to carry it. Worry magnifies the difficulties and diminishes our ability to fulfil the duty of the present moment. Above all, we fail to trust in the Providence God exercises over every situation in life. In the First Reading of today’s Mass our Lord asks us in the words of the prophet Isaiah: Can a woman forget her child at the breast, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.[129] Today, in all that happens, our Father God will think of us with love.

And Jesus has reminded us so often already! Take heart, He says, it is I; have no fear.[130] We cannot carry at the same time the cares of today and the worries of tomorrow. We always have sufficient help to be faithful today, to live this particular day with peace and joy. Tomorrow will bring new graces, and its burden will be no heavier than today’s has been. Each day has its toil, its cross and its own joy. Every day of our life is watched over by our Father God, who loves us so much. We can live only in the present. Anxieties almost always arise because we fail to put all our effort into the here and now, because we fail to repose all our trust in God’s Providence; the anxieties vanish when we repeat sincerely: Volo quidquid vis, volo quia vis, volo quomodo vis, volo quamdiu vis: Lord, I want what you want, because you want it, as you want it, as long as you want it.[131] Then comes the gaudium cum pace, the joy and peace.[132]

Sometimes we may be tempted to want to control the future, forgetting that our life is in God’s hands. Don’t let us be like the impatient child who skips through the pages of his book to find out how the story ends. God gives us our days, one after another, for us to fill them with holiness. In the Old Testament, we read of the Jews in the desert: they gathered the manna that God gave them as daily food. Some of them, wanting to lay up some supplies of it for the future, in case of shortage, took more than they needed and stored it. The next day they found it rotten and inedible. They had lacked trust in Yahweh their God, who watched over them with fatherly love. We should certainly provide prudently for the future, but not like those people during the wanderings in the desert who relied on their own efforts alone.

Ours should be a hopeful happiness, as we take up our daily task, concentrating our mind, our heart and all our energies upon it. This trust in God – holy abandonment – does not lessen our responsibility in acting, and in foreseeing what to do in each case. Nor does it mean that we should not bother about being prudent. It is in stark contrast, nonetheless, with a lack of confidence in God and with a pointless concern about things that have not yet taken place.[133] Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, our Lord repeats to us. Let us make good use of today.

Seeing God in our work. Mortifying the imagination in order to live in the present: hic et nunc.

God knows what it is we need. Let us seek first the Kingdom of God and his justice, and all the other things will be given us as well.[134]Let us have a firm and general determination to serve God wholeheartedly, all our life long. Let us not ask to know any more than that there is a tomorrow about which we need not be unduly concerned. Let our concern be, rather, for the good we can do today. ‘Tomorrow’ will soon become ‘today’, and then we will give it our attention. We need to gather our provision of manna for today, and no more. We should never doubt that God will send
another shower of manna on the following day, and the next one, and the next one, as long as the
days of our pilgrimage last. God will not fail us.

When we live in the present, we give our attention to real things and to people. This means that we
mortify our fancy and waste no time on inopportune and fruitless recollections. Imagination can
withdraw us into another world, far away from the only world designed to be the scene of our
sanctification. Very often our imagination can occasion a squandering of precious time, and make us
miss many real opportunities of doing good. Lack of inner mortification, of our imagination and of our
curiosity, is one of the great enemies of our sanctification.

If we live in the present, we will succeed in rejecting unreal fears of imagined future dangers
which our fantasy enlarges and distorts. At times, too, the conjectured crosses our imagination depicts
put us out of touch with reality. Then we suffer uselessly, instead of joyfully accepting the little
crosses God offers his children to carry each day, crosses that can fill them with peace and joy.

If we live the present moment to the full, for Love, we unfailingly perceive those apparently
obscure details in which we can be faithful. Hic et nunc: here and now, we should fulfil punctually
the timetable we have set ourselves in advance. Here and now we need to be generous with God,
with a horror of slipping into lukewarmness. Here and now God is expecting us to conquer ourselves
in this or that minor detail that can prove so hard for us to do or to omit doing. He wants us to
advance in those points of struggle which constitute the matter of our particular examination of
conscience.

Let us ask the Holy Trinity to grant us the grace to live the present moment of each day with a heart
full of Love, as if it were the last possible offering of our life upon earth.
EIGHTH SUNDAY: YEAR B

62. GOD’S LOVE FOR MEN

62.1 God loves us with an infinite love, without our meriting his love in any way.

In a multitude of different ways Sacred Scripture tells us of the infinite love God has for every human being. In the First Reading of today’s Mass[136] the prophet Hosea uses beautiful imagery to express the unlimited bounty of God’s love for his children, from whom He requires that they correspond with it. Thus says the Lord: behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. And I will betroth her to me forever; I will betroth her to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy ... The continual apostasies of the Chosen People are an image of our own backsliding and falls: and yet God went on winning them back through mercy and love, just as day after day – now also in these moments of prayer – He comes seeking me and you.

Elsewhere He assures us that though a mother should forget the child of her womb He will never forget us, because, He says, I have graven you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me;[137] and he who touches you touches the apple of my eye.[138] Truly the God of our faith is not a distant being who contemplates with indifference the fate of men – their desires, their struggles, their sufferings. He is a Father who loves his children[139] with a very different love from ours. Our love, even when purified from its dross, is always attracted by the good, real or apparent, in things ... Divine love, however, is a love that creates and infuses goodness into creatures[140] with total disinterest. He really loves us.

The love of God is gratuitous, since created things can give him nothing which He does not already possess in absolute degree. The reason for his love is his infinite goodness and the desire to share it. God did not merely create us. Such was his love that He raised us to the supernatural order, making us sharers in his own life and happiness, far in excess of the capabilities of created beings. We in no way deserved it: In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us.[141] And it was Christ who revealed to us, in all its depth, the love of God for men.

Reminding us of that love, the Holy Spirit moves us to a total and trusting abandonment to God; Commit your way to the Lord, trust in him and He will act.[142] And in another place; Cast your burden upon the Lord and he will sustain you.[143] Saint Peter exhorts: Cast all your anxieties on him, for He cares about you.[144] This is the advice Saint Catherine of Siena heard from our Lord: Daughter, forget yourself and think of me, as I will think constantly of you. Do we have such confidence in the love God has for us?

My Lord Jesus, grant that I may experience the gift of grace and cooperate with it in such a way as to empty my heart so that you, my Friend, my Brother, my King, my God, my Love ... may fill it! [145]

62.2 The great evil of indifference to God’s love.

God’s kindness towards men is much greater than anything we can imagine. He has made us his children, with a genuine, true filiation, as the Apostle Saint John teaches us: See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.[146] This is the greatest proof
of God’s love for men. He shows us the tenderness and selflessness of a father, and He himself compares himself to a mother who can never forget her child. This child so dearly loved is every man and woman. When we were lost through sin, He sent his Son to save us. His life, sacrificed for us, would redeem us from our fallen state, from sin, and death, and hell. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. This same love leads him to give himself to us entirely, in an habitual manner. So He dwells in the soul in grace, and speaks to us in our heart.

How sad it is to see in answer to so much love, the cold indifference men show God, and especially to see how busily they fabricate a world where man becomes the measure of all things. Misinterpreting the passage of Sacred Scripture, he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen, some people say that only man deserves to be loved. God, in their book, is a stranger, remote and inaccessible. This is a new and blasphemous humanism, masquerading as defender of the dignity of man while seeking to have the Creator supplanted by his creature. Such an untrue humanism destroys the very possibility of truly loving God or man. By its giving a finite and limited creature – the human individual – an absolute value, everything comes to be of only a secondary and utilitarian interest ... The exclusion of God – the only Being lovable in himself and for himself – never leads to a greater love for anyone or anything else. And as certain unfortunate consequences denote, it can only lead to hatred, the condition and atmosphere proper to hell itself. Without God, love for creatures dies or is fatally corrupted.

The Responsorial Psalm is man’s true response to the love of God, always compassionate and merciful:

My soul, give thanks to the Lord,
All my being, bless his holy name.
My soul, give thanks to the Lord.
And never forget all his blessings.

When we fail to correspond with this deep love, when we are unfaithful, God rightly complains: It is not an enemy who taunts me: then I could bear it ... but it is you ... my companion, my familiar friend.

Saint John of the Cross writes: Lord, you want the fire of our love to burn until we are set alight, until all that we are is consumed in its flame, so that we become transformed into you, our God. You blow upon that flame with the graces which your life has won for us, and you enkindle it with the death you endured for us. Let us ask ourselves in the intimacy of our prayer: Does my love for God burn in that way? Is it shown in my generously corresponding with what God asks of me, with my vocation? Is my whole life an answer to the commitment of love that binds me to God? Be convinced, my child, that God has a right to ask of us: Are you thinking about me? Are you aware of me? Do you look to me as your support? Do you seek me as the Light of your life, as your shield ... as your all?

62.3 God loves us with a personal, individual love: He has showered blessings upon us. And Love is repaid by love.

God decided, in his infinite wisdom to make us sharers in his love and his truth. Although we were capable of loving him naturally, with our own strength, he knew that only if He gave us his Love itself would we be able to attain to intimate union with him. Through the Incarnation of his only-begotten
Son He restored the order that had been destroyed, uniting the divine with the human. He raised us to the dignity of being his children and thus revealed the fulness of his love for us. Finally, because we are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts,[156] him who is the Paraclete, the greatest gift He could grant us.

God loves us with a personal and individual love. He loves each one of us as a unique person, He has filled us with blessings. Often He has spoken to our heart, and perhaps has told us clearly, ‘meus es tu’, you are mine.[157] He has never stopped loving us, helping us, protecting us, talking to us, not even when our response has been monstrous ingratitude or serious sin. Perhaps we have received even more attention from God in these unregenerate times, as we read in the First Reading of the Mass.

Let us consider now how we should correspond with that love. Let us examine our duties, in the fulfilment of which He waits for us, as in the loving attention we give to our practices of piety. How goes our apostolate of friendship with our companions? Do we give ourselves generously, even in the smallest details which our vocation to holiness demands...? Do we perhaps allow lukewarmness to infiltrate through the interstices of a superficial examination which limits itself to the mere external and more or less mechanical carrying out of our obligations?

Let us remember that frequently contemplating the extent of God’s love for us does great good to the soul. Saint Teresa reminds us that we should remember with what love He has bestowed all these favours upon us, and how enormous is the love God has revealed to us ... for love begets love. And though we may be only beginners, and very wicked at that, let us strive ever to bear this in mind and awaken our own love.[158] And we must be truly convinced of this spiritual reality. When we contemplate the love of God, love is roused in us and awakens us to a greater love. Speaking of the love of Christ, Blessed John Paul II encouraged us to correspondence with it in the well-known popular phrase: love is repaid by love.[159] If we contemplate the love God has for us, it will also lead us to ask him for more love, as a great mystic wrote daringly:

Reveal thy presence,
And let the vision and thy beauty kill me.
Behold the malady of love is incurable except in thy presence, and before thy face.[160]
63. TRIUMPH OVER DEATH

63.1 Death, the consequence of sin. On leaving this life we will take with us only the merit of our good actions and the penalty for our sins.

Saint Paul teaches us in the Second Reading of the Mass[161] that when the risen and glorious body clothes itself in immortality, death will be finally conquered. Then we will be able to ask: O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? The sting of death is sin ... It was sin that brought death into the world. When God created man, besides the supernatural gifts of grace He gave him other gifts which perfected nature in its own order. Among them was the gift of bodily immortality, which our first parents were to transmit, along with life, to their descendants. Original sin carried with it the loss of friendship with God and the consequent loss of that gift of immortality. Death, the wages of sin,[162] entered a world which had been created as a place for living beings. Revelation teaches us that God did not make death, and He does not delight in the death of the living.[163]

Through sin, death came to all: ‘The just and the unjust likewise die, the good and the evil, the clean and the unclean, he who offers sacrifices and he who does not. The same end befalls the saint and the sinner; it befalls him who swears and him who refrains from swearing. Men and animals are all likewise reduced to dust and ashes’. [164] Everything material comes to an end, each thing in its own time. The physical world and all it contains is directed towards a final consummation, as we are too.

At death, man loses everything he possessed in his lifetime. As with the rich man in the parable, God will say to the one who has thought only of himself, of his well-being and his comfort: Fool! ... the things you have prepared, whose will they be?[165] Each one will bring with him only the merits of his good works and the weight of his sins. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth. ‘Blessed indeed’, says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them!’[166] The opportunity to acquire merit for eternal life lends with death. Of this, our Lord warns: Night comes, when no one can work.[167] At death, our will stays fixed forever on good or on evil, remaining in friendship with God or rejecting his mercy for all eternity.

Meditation on our last end can move us, while we are still on earth, to react against lukewarmness, against any reluctance to commit ourselves entirely to God’s service, and to develop our relationship with him. It can wean us from attachment to earthly things, which we must soon leave behind us in any case, encourage us to sanctify our work and enable us to understand that this life is a period, a short one, in which we can gain merit in the sight of God.

Let us remember today that our earthly bodies are no more than perishable clay. We know, nevertheless, that we have been created for eternity, that our souls can never die, and that our bodies will one day rise again glorious, if we have died in God’s friendship, to be united once more to our souls. And this fills us with joy and peace and moves us to live as children of God in the world.

63.2 The Christian meaning of death.

With the Resurrection of Christ, death has been finally conquered. Man is no longer a slave to death, but has death now under his dominion, if he so chooses,[168] for we achieve this sovereignty to the extent that we are united to him who holds the keys of death.[169] Sin is the true death, the dreadful
separation – the soul separated from God – compared with which the other separation, that of soul and body, is of far less importance. And this latter separation is, moreover, provisional. *He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.*[170] In Christ, death has lost its power, its sting. Death has been overthrown. This truth of our faith may seem a paradox, when all around us we see man afflicted by the dread of imminent dissolution, the certainty of dying, recoiling in fear from the torment of pain and sorrow. It is true that sorrow and death disconcert the human spirit. They continue to be a baffling enigma for those who do not believe in God. But by faith we know these evils will be overcome, that the victory has been won already in the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ our Redeemer.[171]

Materialism, while denying the immortality of the soul, has adopted various arguments throughout history to explain the desire for eternity which God seems to have placed in the human heart. So this false philosophy offers men the consolation of somehow surviving, in the results of the actions of their mortal life and in the memory and affection of those who are still alive. It is undoubtedly a good thing that those who come after us should remember us, but our Lord tells us more: *Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*[172] This is the holy fear of God, which can serve so well at times to keep us from sin.

The moment of death is a difficult one for every creature. But ever since the Redemption wrought by Christ that moment has for us a completely different significance. It is no longer simply the harsh price which every man must pay for sin, as a just punishment for his guilt. It is, above all else, the culmination of our abandonment into the hands of our Redeemer, the departure from this world to the Father,[173] the passage to a new life of eternal happiness. If we are faithful to Christ, we will be able to say with the Psalmist: *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me.*[174] Serenity and optimism at the prospect of death are born of a firm hope in Jesus Christ, who was willing to assume our human nature entirely, with all its weaknesses except sin.[175] He did so in order that through death He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.[176] And so Saint Augustine teaches that our inheritance is the death of Christ,[177] since through it we can attain Life.

Uncertainty as to our last end should lead us to trust in God’s mercy and to be very faithful to the vocation we have received from him. We should spend our life in his service and in the service of his Church, wherever we may be. We should remember always, and particularly when that last moment comes, that God is a loving Father, full of tenderness towards his children. It is our Father God who will welcome us! It is Christ who says to us: *Come, ye blessed of my Father ...!*

Friendship with Jesus Christ, the Christian meaning of life, the knowledge that we are children of God, will allow us to look at and accept death with serenity. It will be the meeting of a son with his Father whom he has sought to serve throughout his life. *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil, for thou art with me.*

63.3 The fruits of meditating on our last end.

The Church recommends meditation on what it calls the Last Things, because we can derive incalculable benefit from considering them. The knowledge that life is short does not lessen our involvement in the affairs God has entrusted to us: family, work, worthy interests, noble ideals ... Thinking on the inescapable fact of our mortality and its consequences helps us to be detached from
earthly things, to give them their due importance and to sanctify all our temporal affairs. It is our path to Heaven. Whenever we suffer the death of a friend, or of someone in our family, or someone we love, it can be a good occasion, among others, to consider the inescapable truths of our last end.

Our Lord will come when least we expect him, *like a thief in the night.*[178] He should find us ready, vigilant, detached from earthly things. The great mistake we could make is to allow ourselves to become enslaved to the things of this world, which we have to leave so soon. We have to have our feet on the ground: we are in the midst of the world, as befits our Christian calling since God has placed us here, but we cannot forget that we are travellers whose eyes are fixed on Christ and on his Kingdom which will one day be ours. We should live every day in the knowledge that we are pilgrims who are travelling – very quickly – to our encounter with God. Every morning we take another step towards God, every evening we find ourselves nearer to him. We should live, therefore, as though God were about to summon us at any moment. The fact that God has hidden from us the exact time of our earthly life’s termination helps us to live each day as if it were our very last, always prepared for the event and ready to move to a new dwelling-place.[179] In any case, that day *cannot be far off;*[180] any day could be our last. This very day thousands of people have died in all sorts of diverse circumstances. Possibly many of them were taken by surprise, never imagining that they would have no more time in which to acquire merit.

Each day of our life is a blank sheet which we can fill in with an account of wonderful things, or with blots and errors. And we do not know how many pages are left before we come to the end of that book which God will one day read in our presence.

Friendship with Jesus, love for our Mother Mary, the Christian meaning we have tried to give our life, will enable us to look forward with serenity to our definitive meeting with God. Saint Joseph, the patron of a happy death, had at his side the welcome and welcoming company of Jesus and Mary when the time came for him to leave this world. He can teach us to prepare, day by day, for this ineffable encounter with our Father God.

Saint Paul takes leave of the first Christians of Corinth with the consoling words with which the *first reading* of today’s Mass ends. We ourselves can take them as being directed to each of us individually: *My beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.*[181] O Mother of ours – we finish our prayer addressing the most Blessed Virgin – win for us from your Son the grace of always having in mind the goal of Heaven in all that we do. In this way we will work diligently, our eyes set on eternity. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.
64. THE RICH YOUNG MAN

64.1 God calls everyone. If we are to follow Christ we must be detached from earthly things.

The Gospel of the Mass[182] tells us that Jesus was leaving one town on his way to another when a young man came running up and stopped in front of him. The three evangelists who mention this incident say that the young man was well-to-do. He fell at the feet of Christ and asked him a question which is of fundamental importance to everybody. *Good Teacher,* he says to him, *what must I do to inherit eternal life?* Jesus is standing, surrounded by his disciples who are watching the scene. The young man is kneeling. It is an open conversation, and our Lord begins by answering in general terms: *You know the commandments,* and proceeds to list them: *Do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal* ... The young man replies: *Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth ... What do I still lack?*[183] We have all asked that question at some time or other, on experiencing the strong attraction of those things which, though noble in themselves, are incapable of satisfying the heart. We have seen the years of our life passing without knowing how to quench that hidden thirst which could not be satisfied. For each of us, Christ has a personal reply – for us the only valid one.

Jesus knew there was a fund of generosity, a great capacity for self-giving, in that young man’s heart. Therefore He looked lovingly upon him with a special love, and invited him to follow him unconditionally, without any attachments. He stood there looking at him as only Christ can look, gazing into the depths of his soul. *He looks with love upon every human being.* The Gospel confirms this at every step. *One can also say that this ‘loving look’ of Christ, contains, as it were, a summary and synthesis of the entire Good News ... Man needs this ‘loving look’. He needs to know that he is loved, ‘loved eternally’, and specially chosen from eternity (cf Eph 1:4). At the same time, this eternal love of divine election accompanies man during life, just as Christ’s look of love did here.*[184] God sees us in this way, now and always, with a deep love, a love of predilection.

The Master said to him, with a particular tenderness: *You lack one thing.* Only one! With what expectancy must that young man have waited for the Master’s answer! Without a doubt, it was the most important one he was to hear in his whole life. *Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor ... and come, follow me.* It was an invitation to give himself entirely to our Lord. The young man had not expected this. God’s plans do not always coincide with ours, with those we forge in our imagination, in our dreams. God’s plans, in one way or another, always demand detachment from everything that enchains. If we are to follow Christ, our soul must be free. That young man’s wealth constituted the one big hindrance to his accepting Jesus’ demand, the greatest demand of his life.

God calls everyone: sick and healthy; people with outstanding talents and those of lesser ability; those who are rich and those who are poor; the young, the old and the middle-aged. Each man, each woman, should be able to discover the particular path to which God calls him or her. And he calls us all to holiness, to generosity, to detachment, to self-giving. To every one of us He speaks in the depth of our heart: *Come, follow me.* We cannot give a lukewarm response to Christ’s invitation. He has no use for disciples who are ‘half-hearted’, who place conditions on their discipleship.

This young man sees his vocation all at once: it is a call to total commitment. His meeting with Jesus reveals to him the meaning and the fundamental purpose of his life. And before Jesus too, his
true availability stands revealed. He had thought that he was fulfilling God’s will because he had been carrying out the precepts of the Law. When Christ invites him to a complete commitment he manifests a too-firm attachment to his possessions and a qualified love for the Will of God. Today, too, this same scene is repeated: You say of that friend of yours that he frequents the sacraments, that he is clean-living and a good student. But that he won’t ‘respond’; if you speak to him of sacrifice and apostolate, he becomes sad and goes away.

Don’t worry. It’s not a failure of your zeal. It is, to the letter, the scene related by the Evangelist: ‘If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor’ (sacrifice), ‘and then come, follow me’ (apostolate).

The young man also ‘abiit tristis’, went away sad; he was not willing to respond to grace.[185] He went away sorrowful, because true happiness is possible only when there is generosity and detachment. Then life is full of joy, in an absolute readiness to accept God’s will: it shows itself in little things and at very definite moments of our life. Let us ask our Lord today to help us with his grace so that He can always count on us for what He wants us to do. We will set no conditions, serving him freely, the way He wants to be served. ‘Lord, I have no other desire in life than to seek you, love you and serve you ... All the other objectives of my life are directed towards that goal. I no longer love anything that separates me from you,’ we tell Jesus in our conversation with him.

64.2 The response to vocation.

The sadness of the young man makes us reflect. We could be tempted to think that having many possessions, owning plenty of the goods of this world, can bring happiness. We see instead in the case of the young man in the Gospel that his many possessions had become an obstacle to his accepting the call of Jesus to follow him. He was not ready to say ‘yes’ to Jesus, and ‘no’ to self, to say ‘yes’ to love and ‘no’ to escapism. Real love is demanding ... For it was Jesus – our Jesus himself – who said: ‘You are my friends if you do what I command you’ (John 15:14). Love demands effort and a personal commitment to the Will of God. It means discipline and sacrifice, but it also means joy and human fulfilment ... Open your hearts to the Christ of the Gospels – to his love and his truth and his joy. Do not go away sad.[186]

God’s call to us to follow him closely demands a positive response at all times, because in his many invitations He asks of us a docile and generous life-long correspondence. Therefore we should stand frequently in God’s presence – face to face with him, without anonymity – and ask him, as did the young man, What do I still lack? What does my Christian vocation require of me today, in my circumstances? What paths do you want me to follow? Let us be honest. Whoever really wants to find them succeeds in knowing clearly the paths that lead to God. So it is that the Christian discovers, in the things of everyday life, how his vocation should unfold in the undramatic daily texture of divine promptings and inspirations ... of significant moments, of specific ‘calls’ to carry out, for the sake of God’s love, lesser or greater tasks in the world of men. In his ongoing conversation with God a man can hear that divine voice asking him to make definite and radical decisions ... The word of God can reach us in a hurricane or in a gentle breeze (1 Kings 19:22).[187] But in order to follow his word, we should be free from all fetters: only Christ matters. Everything else has to be in him and for him.

64.3 Poverty and detachment in daily life.
The young man in the Gospels stood up, avoiding the Master’s look and invitation to a life full of love. And he went away – all could see it – with sadness in his face. I think our instinct is that the refusal then made was made once for all. Our Lord watched him go with regret; the Holy Spirit reveals to us the motive for that particular rejection of grace: He had great possessions and he was very much attached to them.

After this incident the group continued on its way. But before they did, or perhaps just as they were starting off, Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!’ They were amazed at his words. And our Lord repeated what He had said, even more emphatically: It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. We should pay attention to Jesus’ teaching and apply it to our own lives. We cannot reconcile a love for God which means following him closely with attachment to material goods. Those two loves cannot be contained in the same heart. Man can direct to God the material things he uses as a means to his final end – which is God – for a means is precisely what they are. But he can also, unfortunately, place all his hopes of fulfilment and happiness in material ‘riches’, in the unbridled desire to hold on to favourite goods, to seek out greater luxury, to enjoy maximum comfort, to foster ambition and give rein to avarice ...

Today can provide a good occasion for examining ourselves courageously in the intimacy of our prayer. What is the true motivation of my actions? What is my heart really set upon? Have I really tried to be detached from earthly goods, or on the contrary, do I suffer and complain when I am short of something I could be doing with? How quick am I to react against the slightest incitement to self-seeking and ease, promoted very often by the advertisements of the consumer society? Am I sparing in my personal needs, do I put curbs on my extravagance, do I avoid frivolous and unnecessary purchases? Sometimes we can create false ‘necessities’ which we could well forgo if we wanted to, if we were determined to do our best not to give in to the whims and caprices which so easily solicit our greed. Do I really look after the material things of my home and the implements and goods I use? Have I the clear realisation that I am only a steward over these things, and will one day have to give an account of them to their true owner, God our Lord? Do I cheerfully accept whatever inconveniences me and the lack of means at my disposal? Am I generous in giving alms to those who are in much worse circumstances? Do I contribute to the support of good causes, depriving myself of things I would like to have ...? Only in this way will we live with the joy and freedom necessary if we are to be disciples of our Lord in the midst of the world.

Our highest ideal is to follow Christ closely. We don’t want to go away as that young man did, his soul filled with sadness because he was unable to renounce some possessions of little worth in exchange for the immense riches of Jesus Christ.
65.1 Practical detachment from material goods is necessary if we are to follow Christ.

After their meeting with the rich young man which formed the basis of yesterday’s meditation, Jesus and his disciples resume their journey towards Jerusalem. The sad departure of that young fellow who was so unbreakably tied to his property is engraved on their minds, as are the Lord’s uncompromising words about those who, through a disorderly love of earthly goods, are not able (or do not want) to follow him. Now, along the way, probably in order to break the silence caused by what has just happened, Peter says to Jesus: *Lo, we have left everything and followed you.*[189] Saint Matthew clarifies Peter’s meaning: *What then shall we have?*[190] What reward will we receive?

Saint Augustine comments on this passage of the Gospel of today’s Mass, appealing to us in these words: I ask you, Christian soul: if you were told, as was that rich man, ‘You also, go, sell all that you possess and you will have treasure in heaven, and come and follow Christ; would you go away sad as he did?[191]

Like the Apostles, we have left everything our Lord has asked us to leave, each one according to his own vocation. Moreover, we are firmly determined to break any bond that prevents us from hastening to Christ and following him. Today we can renew our resolution to make him the centre of our existence, with a practical detachment from the things we have and use, so that we can say with Saint Paul: *Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*[192] Certainly he who knows the riches of Christ the Lord will despise all things when they are compared with them; to him, wealth, riches, power, will appear as dross. Nothing can be compared to, or stand in competition with, that inestimable treasure.[193] Nothing has any value in comparison with the treasure that is Christ.

‘We have left everything.’ What have you left, Peter? An old boat and a net. He, however, could answer: ‘I have left the whole world, since I have kept nothing for myself’ ... They left everything ... and they followed him who made the world, and they believed his promises,[194] as we want to do too. We can rightly say we have left everything when nothing gets in the way of our love for Christ. Our Lord demands the virtue of poverty from all his disciples, at all times and in every situation where the circumstances of their lives find them placed. We have considered this repeatedly, for it is an essential part of following him. He also asks us for a real and practical austerity in the possession and use of material goods, and to live thus supposes great generosity, much sacrifice and unceasing effort,[195] said the Servant of God Paul VI. It is essential for us to learn to practise this virtue in the conditions of everyday life. We should eliminate all useless expenditure, avoiding what can be called impulse spending. We will require to use our time well and generously in the affairs of God. We must be generous also in supporting works of charity, taking good care of clothes, furniture, household utensils and so on ...

Some have received a more specific calling to apostolate in the exercise of their profession in the midst of the world. Like the twelve, God may ask them for a total detachment from possessions, riches, leisure time and family, so as to be more fully available in service to the Church and to souls.

65.2 Jesus rewards with unlimited generosity those who follow him.
We have left everything ... How often it has been our experience that with whole-hearted response to the demands of our Christian vocation, every new act of generosity and practical detachment frees us more and more from a great burden. We become like the soldier who rids himself of excess baggage in order to have greater freedom of movement in battle. In this way we enjoy a kind of dominion over the things around us in order to serve God better. We are no longer enslaved by them and we experience joyfully that sense of liberation to which Saint Paul referred: we are in the world as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.[196] Charity more easily finds room in the heart of the Christian who has thus stripped himself of the self’s impediments and with charity he is indeed as one who possesses all things: All are yours; and you are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s.[197]

Peter reminds Jesus that, unlike the young man they have just met, they have given up everything for him. Simon has no regrets. But he seems to need the Master’s reassurance that they have profited by the exchange, that it is worth while being with him, even though they now own nothing. The Apostle shows himself to be very human, but at the same time his question expresses the trust he has in Christ. Jesus was filled with tenderness towards those men who, in spite of their defects, followed him faithfully. Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold – now, in this time – houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life ... Try to find on earth anyone who repays so generously.[198] Jesus is not to be outdone in generosity. Not even a glass of cold water – an alms, a service, any good action – given or done for Christ’s sake will go unrewarded.[199] Let us be sincere when we examine the level of our detachment, the scale of our poverty. Can we really affirm, before God, that we have left everything?

If we have, Jesus will not fail to confirm us on our path. How can He forget fidelity that has been shown, day after day, only for love, when He takes account of even the least of our actions? He multiplied loaves and fishes for a multitude that followed him for just a few days, perhaps without much rectitude of intention. What will He not do for those who have left everything to follow him always? If those who follow him need special assistance to keep going, how can Jesus ever forget? What can our Father God refuse us if, seeing our lack of means, we ask him for them? If the return of a son who had betrayed him is enough for him to prepare a banquet, what will He have in store for us, who have tried to remain always at his side?[200]

The words of Christ reassured those who went with him that day on the road to Jerusalem. And those words re-echo for those who, throughout the centuries, having given everything to God, seek again in the teaching of our Lord increased firmness of faith and help in self-giving. Christ’s promise goes far beyond all the happiness this world can offer. But He wants us to be happy also here on earth. His followers obtain, already in this life, a joy and peace which far outweigh all human consolation and happiness. And to this joy and peace, which is a foretaste of heaven, we must add eternal happiness when this short life is over. Life is a blink. It lasts only a couple of hours; our reward is boundless, and even if there were no reward at all but to follow the counsels given us by the Lord, to imitate His Majesty in any degree would bring us a recompense immeasurable.[201]

65.3 It is always worth while to follow Christ: the hundredfold here on earth and eternal life with God in heaven!

‘Man and beast thou savest, O Lord,’ – says the Psalmist – ‘how precious is thy steadfast love,
O God’ (Ps 36:6-7). If God grants to all such a precious gift as his love, my brothers – to the good and to the wicked, to men and to animals, what will He not reserve for those who are faithful to him?[202] It is worth while following our Lord, to be faithful to him in every moment, to give up everything for his sake, to set no limit to our generosity where He is concerned. He says to us in the words of Saint John Chrysostom: The gold that you plan to lend, give it to me, for I will give you better interest and better security. That body that you plan to enlist in someone’s militia, enlist it in mine, because I will outbid everybody in pay and reward ... His love is great. If you wish to make him a loan, he is ready to receive it at lavish interest. If you wish to sow, he buys you the seed. If you wish to build, he says: build on my property! Why run after the things of men, who are poor beggars and are worth nothing? Run after God, who in exchange for little things will give you far greater.[203]

We should not forget that, to the reward He promises, our Lord adds persecutions. Persecutions also are a reward for the disciples of Christ. It is the disciple’s glory to imitate his Master, to suffer with him in order that he may also be glorified with him.[204] These trials can come in the most diverse forms: bloody persecution, slander, prejudice, job discrimination, mockery ... we should, when they come, grasp the fact that we can turn them to good, which is part of our reward, since God allows us to share in his Cross and be more closely united to him.

Christ has promised eternal happiness to those who are faithful to him. They will hear the voice of the Lord whom they served on earth, telling them: Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.[205] All we renounce in order to follow Christ more closely, or the little we suffer for him, is rewarded on hearing these words of welcome as we enter into eternity. Jesus himself leads us into heaven.

Although we follow Christ for love, a moment may come when everything is suddenly somehow more difficult. Then is the time for us to utter some aspiration that will help us to think of the prize: It is worth while, let us remind ourselves; it is worth while, it is worth while. So our hope will be strengthened and our way become more assured.

If we truly possess Jesus Christ, nothing else will seem to count. We are told of Saint Thomas Aquinas that one day our Lord said to him: You have written well of me, Thomas. What reward do you desire? Lord – the Saint replied – none other than yourself. Neither do we want anything else. With Jesus, close to him, we will go through life full of joy.

May our Lady obtain for us, through her powerful intercession, firm dispositions of detachment and generosity. In this way, just as she did, we will create all around us a joyful attitude of love for Christian poverty.
66. LEARNING TO SERVE

66.1 The example of Christ. ‘To serve is to rule.’

The Gospel of the Mass[206] records the petition of the sons of Zebedee that they might be given the first places in the new Kingdom. When the other disciples discovered this ambition of theirs, they were indignant with the two brothers. It was not, in all likelihood, the unusual character of the request that annoyed them. It was probably rather because they all felt that each one of them had an equal or better claim than James or John to fill such a top position. Jesus knew the ambition of those who were to be the foundation stones of his Church. He tells them that they cannot behave like those princelings who oppress and lord it over their subjects. The authority of the Church will be very different from this: quite the opposite, in fact. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. This is a new kind of lordship, a new way of ‘being great’. And our Lord shows them the grounds for this new dignity, and the reason for it: for the Son of Man also came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The life of Christ is a constant exemplary help to man, his doctrine a constant invitation to serve others. Christ is the example to be followed by those who wield authority in his Church, and by all Christians. Although he is God, the Judge who is to come to judge the world, he does not impose himself. He serves, for the sake of love, even to the point of giving his life for all.[207] This is his way of being first. And this is the way the Apostles came to understand it, especially after the coming of the Holy Spirit. Later, Saint Peter will exhort priests to tend the flock of God that is their charge ... not as domineering overlords ... but as living examples.[208] So too does Saint Paul, who writes: Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more.[209]

But our Lord speaks not only to his Apostles, but to his disciples and to his followers throughout the centuries. He teaches us that there is a special dignity to be found in helping and in offering assistance to man, in imitation of the Master. This dignity is expressed in our readiness to serve, in keeping with the example of Christ, who ‘came not to be served but to serve’. If, in the light of this attitude of Christ’s, ‘being a king’ is truly possible only by ‘being a servant’, then ‘being a servant’ also demands so much spiritual maturity that it must really be described as equivalent to ‘being a king’. In order to be able to serve others worthily and effectively we must be able to master ourselves, and possess the virtues that make this mastery possible,[210] virtues like humility of heart, generosity, fortitude, cheerfulness ... which enable us to put our life at the service of God, to make ourselves available for our family, our friends and the whole of society.

66.2 Different services we can render the Church, society, and those around us.

The life of Jesus is an untiring service of men, a service which includes serving them in a material way. He attends to them, teaches them, consoles them ... and finally gives his life for them. Can we who wish to be his disciples, then, fail to develop in ourselves the same disposition of heart which inspires us to give unstintingly to those around us?

On the night before his Passion, Christ wanted to give us a particularly significant example of how in such matters we should behave. As they were celebrating the Paschal supper our Lord rose, laid aside his outer garment, and girded himself with a towel. Then He poured water into a basin and...
began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.[211] He carried out the task of a servant. Once again He preaches by example, by what He did. In the presence of the disciples, who are arguing out of pride and vanity, Jesus bows down and gladly carries on with the task of a servant... This tactfulness of our Lord moves us deeply. He does not say: ‘If I do this, how much more ought you to do it?’ He puts himself at their level, and in so doing he lovingly chides those men for their lack of generosity.

As He did with the first twelve, so does He also with us. Our Lord can and does whisper in our ear, time and again, ‘exemplum dedi vobis’ (John 13:15), I have given you an example of humility. I have become a slave, so that you too may learn to serve all men with a meek and humble heart. [212] We serve God when we try to do our ordinary duties with perfection. We serve Him when we try to proclaim the teaching of the Church, with courage and clarity, to a world which is confused, ignorant, and often in error on key points, even, of the natural law. In such a situation, which is recognisably that of a large part of twentieth-century society, true of a large part of society, the best service we can render the Church and mankind is to give doctrine.[213]

We cannot look upon the practice of our profession simply as a means of earning our living and of developing our personality in an honourable manner. No. It has to be seen as a service to society, a means of contributing to progress and to building a humane, just and reasonable world. Some professions obviously provide a direct service to others and give an immediate opportunity of practising a series of virtues which make the heart more generous and humble. The thought of Christ giving his attention freely to those who approached him, of his washing the feet of the disciples ... must be a powerful spur to the concern which, in the fulfilment of our duty, we show towards those who are entrusted to our service.

Frequent meditation upon our Lord’s words, I have not come to be served, but to serve, will help us to tackle without reluctance those more unpleasant tasks which are frequently the most necessary. So we will serve the way He did. Family life is an excellent place in which to show this spirit of service, in countless details which may often pass unnoticed; these are details, however, that help us to live in an harmonious fashion where Christ is present. These small services – in which we strive to outdo one another – ensure also a constant practice of charity. Through them we avoid falling back into mediocrity. We grow in a life of union with God when these things are done for him. God is calling us through the needs of other people, particularly the sick, the aged, and those who in any way are seriously impoverished. These services are particularly pleasing to God when they are carried out with such humility and human tact that they are scarcely noticed and do not clamour for reward.

66.3 Serve with joy and be competent in your profession.

We cannot imagine our Lord looking strained or irritated, or reluctant, when the multitudes surge round him or when He washes the feet of his disciples. He serves joyfully, cheerfully, agreeably. And that is how we should carry out those duties that are a service to God, to society and to our neighbour. Serve the Lord with gladness,[214] the Holy Spirit tells us through the Psalmist. More than that, the Lord promises joy, and even worldly happiness, to those who serve other people. After he has washed the feet of his disciples, Jesus says: If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.[215] This is, perhaps, the supreme quality of a heart that gives itself to God and which looks for opportunities – at times not very big ones – to give itself to others. When we serve someone with a smile and a pleasant manner it is as if our action has acquired an enhanced value, apart from its being
all the more appreciated. And when a chance or the duty arises of offering a service which is likely to be disagreeable or even repugnant, do it with a special joy and with the humility you would manifest if you were indeed the servant of everyone. You will draw great treasure of virtue and of grace from acting in such circumstances in this way. Sometimes we can find this kind of thing hard, and then we will pray: Jesus, keep me smiling!

We need to be competent in our work, at the tasks we have to perform, if we want to serve properly. Without this competence the greatest good-will would be of little value: ‘If you want to be useful, serve’. For, in the first place, in order to do things properly, you must know ‘how’ to do them. I cannot see where is the integrity of a person who does not strive to attain the highest skills of his profession and to carry out properly the tasks entrusted to his care. It’s not enough to want to do good; we must know how to do it, and to do it well. And, if our desire is an authentic one, it will show itself in the effort we make to use the right methods, finishing things as well as they can be finished, achieving human perfection.

We have to give others this attention and service without expecting anything in exchange, giving it generously, knowing that all service ennobles and enriches the heart. And, in any case, let us remember that Christ is a ‘good paymaster’ and that, when we imitate him, He notices even the accompanying gesture, the smile, the smallest piece of service we have rendered. He looks at us with warm approval and we feel ourselves well rewarded.

Let us make certain today, in the presence of God, whether we have the proper disposition of service in the practice of our profession. Do we really serve society in it? In our home? In our workplace? Do we always, everywhere, imitate the Lord who did not come to be served, but to serve? This spirit of service should be evident particularly if we have a post of responsibility, a position of authority, a duty of formation. Let us look at ourselves and see whether we manage to avoid, habitually, accepting services from others which do not derive from our position, when we could well be doing those tasks ourselves. Our attitude has to be totally different from the attitude of people who take advantage of their authority or their prestige or their age in order to ask – or worse, to demand – attentions and services which would be intolerable even from a purely human point of view.

We have recourse to Saint Joseph, that faithful and prudent servant who was always ready to protect the Holy Family with countless sacrifices. He gave unstinting, unbounded service to Jesus and Mary. Let us ask him to help us to have that same disposition of soul with regard to our own family, with the people with whom we live, no matter what position in life we hold, with our professional colleagues or our friends ... with those who ask us in passing for some piece of information or a small favour. With the help of the holy Patriarch, we will see Jesus and Mary in them. That way it will be easy for us to serve them.
67. THE FAITH OF BARTIMAEUS

67.1 Bartimaeus’ prayer overcomes all obstacles. Difficulties of those who try to draw nearer to Christ when He is passing by.

Saint Mark tells us in the Gospel of today’s Mass that as Jesus was leaving Jericho on his way to Jerusalem, He passed near Bartimaeus (that is, the son of Timaeus), a blind beggar, who was sitting by the roadside.

Bartimaeus is a man who dwells in darkness, a man who lives in perpetual night. He cannot, like other sick people, get to Jesus in order to be cured. And he has heard the news that there is a prophet from Nazareth who restores sight to the blind. We, also, comments Saint Augustine, have our hearts blindfolded, and Jesus passes so that we may cry out to him.

The blind man, when he heard the noise of the multitude, asked what the excitement was; surely he was used to distinguishing sounds – the sound of people going to work in the fields, the noise of caravans making their way through on their way to far-off lands. But one day ... he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth who was passing by. Bartimaeus heard the sound of an approaching crowd at an hour that was perhaps unusual, and he asked – because these were not the sounds he was used to; it was the sound of a different throng – ‘What’s happening? ’ And they tell him: It is Jesus of Nazareth.

When he heard this name, his heart filled with faith. Here was Jesus. It was the chance of a lifetime. And he began to shout as loud as he could: Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! In his soul, faith had become prayer. It happened to you, didn’t it, when you sensed that Jesus was passing your way. Your heart beat faster and you too began to cry out, prompted by an intimate longing.

Difficulties soon arise for the man who searches in darkness for Christ, who is passing by. Many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. Saint Augustine comments on this phrase of the Gospel, pointing out that when someone decides to cry out to God, or to follow him, he often finds that others are intent on stopping him. When I begin to do these things, my relations, my neighbours and friends begin to complain. Those who love secrecy confront me. Are you crazy? Don’t be so vociferous. Aren’t the rest of us Christians? This is ridiculous, it is madness! And many such things do they shout so that we, the blind, do not cry out. Then your friends, the need to do ‘the done thing’, the easy life, your surroundings, all conspired to tell you: ‘Keep quiet, don’t cry out. Who are you to be calling Jesus? Don’t bother him.’

Bartimaeus doesn’t pay the slightest attention. Jesus is his great hope, and he doesn’t know if their paths will ever cross again. And instead of keeping quiet, he cries out all the louder: Son of David, have mercy on me. Why do you pay attention to the reproaches of the crowd and not walk in the footsteps of Jesus who is passing by? They will insult you, they will attack you, they will push you back, but you, keep on shouting until Jesus hears your cries. If a person is constant in what God commands, not giving any heed to the opinions of the crowd and not paying too much attention to those who follow Christ only in appearance, preferring the sight that Jesus can restore to the noise of those who try to shout him down, no power can hold that person back, and Jesus will stop and heal him.
And indeed, when we persevere with fervour in our prayer, we detain Jesus who is passing by. The blind man’s prayer is heard. He has achieved his desire, in spite of external difficulties, in spite of the pressure of his surroundings, and despite his own blindness which has prevented him from knowing exactly where Jesus is. For Jesus has remained silent, apparently indifferent to his petition.

Don’t you too feel the same urge to cry out? You who also are waiting at the side of the road, at the side of this highway of life that is so short? You who need more light, you who need more grace to make up your mind to seek holiness? Don’t you feel an urgent need to cry out, ‘Jesus, son of David, have pity on me!’ What a beautiful aspiration for you to repeat again and again!

67.2 Faith and detachment in order to follow Jesus. Our prayer should be personal, direct, without anonymity, like the prayer of Bartimaeus.

Our Lord, who had heard him right from the beginning, let him persevere in his prayer. He does the same with you. Jesus hears our cries from the very first, but He waits. He wants us to be convinced that we need him. He wants us to beseech him, to persist, like the blind man waiting by the side of the road out of Jericho.

The group pauses. Jesus calls Bartimaeus: ‘Take heart’, they said, ‘rise, He is calling you.’ And throwing off his mantle he sprang up and came to Jesus. He threw aside his cloak! I don’t know if you have ever lived through a war, but many years ago I had occasion to visit a battlefield shortly after an engagement. There, strewn all over the ground, were greatcoats, water bottles, haversacks stuffed with family souvenirs, letters, photographs of loved ones... which belonged, moreover, not to the vanquished, but to the victors! All these items had become superfluous in the bid to race forward and leap over the enemy defences. And this is what happened to Bartimaeus, as he raced towards Christ.

Never forget that Christ cannot be reached without sacrifice. We have to get rid of everything that gets in the way; greatcoat, haversack, water bottle.

Now Bartimaeus is standing before Jesus. The people gather around to see what will happen. Our Lord asks him: What do you want me to do for you? He, who could restore sight – did He really not know what the blind man wanted? Jesus wants us to ask him. He knows our needs before we do, and He wants to remedy them.

The blind man replies immediately, ‘Lord, that I may see’. He does not ask the Lord for gold, but for sight. He has little use for anything except to be able to see, because although a blind man can have many other things, without his sight he cannot see what he has got. Let us imitate, therefore, what we have just heard. Let us imitate his great faith, his persevering prayer, his fortitude in not being discouraged by the adverse reaction to his first attempts to get to Christ. Would that, realizing our blindness, we were seated by the roadside of the Scriptures, and hearing that Jesus is passing by, that we could make him stop beside us with the force of our prayer ..., which should be like that of Bartimaeus: personal, direct, without anonymity. We call Jesus by his name and we speak to him in a direct and straightforward way.

67.3 Following Christ on the way, also in times of darkness. Public profession of Faith.

The story of Bartimaeus is our own story, since we also are blind in many matters. Jesus passes near us. Perhaps the moment has come for us to leave the ditch by the roadside and accompany him.
The words of Bartimaeus: *Lord, that I may see*, can serve us as a simple aspiration that we can repeat frequently. This is particularly so when we need light in our apostolate, in questions that we cannot solve, but above all in matters related to faith and vocation. *When darkness surrounds us and our soul is blind and restless, we have to go to the Light, like Bartimaeus. Repeat, shout, cry out ever more strongly, ‘Domine, ut videam!’ – Lord, that I may see. And daylight will dawn upon you, and you will be able to enjoy the brightness He grants you.*[233] In those dark moments, when perhaps our feelings of enthusiasm are beginning to diminish compared with those first days of following Christ, when our prayer is perhaps more arid and our faith seems to weaken, precisely then is when we need prayer most. When we do not see clearly the reason for making a small mortification and our effort in apostolate seems in vain, then prayer is our greatest ally. Instead of cutting short or abandoning our conversation with God because of the greater effort it is going to take, it is the very moment to demonstrate our loyalty, our fidelity, to redouble our endeavour to please him.

Jesus said to him: *Go your way; your faith has made you well. And immediately he received his sight.* The first thing that Bartimaeus sees in this world is the face of Christ. He would never forget it. *And he followed him on the way.*

This is all we know about Bartimaeus: that *he followed him on the way.* From Saint Luke we know that *he followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.*[234] For the rest of his life, Bartimaeus would remember the mercy Jesus showed him. His witness was to bring faith to many people.

We also have received many graces, as great as or greater than that received by the blind man of Jericho. And our Lord is hoping also that our life and our conduct will help many to find Jesus in the world of today.

And he followed him on the way, glorifying God. This is a summary of what our own life may be if we have the living and operative faith of Bartimaeus.

We end our prayer with the words of the hymn *Adoro te devote*:

*Jesu, quem velatum nunc aspicio,*  
*oro, fiat illud quod tam sitio;*  
*ut te revelata cernens facie,*  
*visu sim beatus tuae gloriae.*

*Jesu! whom for the present veiled I see,*  
*What I so thirst for, oh, vouchsafe to me:*  
*That I may see Thy countenance unfolding,*  
*And may be blest Thy glory in beholding. Amen.*
EIGHTH WEEK: FRIDAY

68. LOVE MEANS DEEDS: APOSTOLATE

68.1 Jesus curses the fig tree which sprouted only leaves. Every moment, every circumstance is an opportunity to produce fruits of holiness and apostolate.

Jesus left Bethany on his way to Jerusalem, a few miles away, and He felt hungry, Saint Mark tells us in the Gospel of today’s Mass. This is one of many occasions when the blessed humanity of Christ can be seen. He wanted to draw near to us and share in the limitations and necessities of our human nature, so that we in turn would learn to sanctify them. The Gospel tells us that Jesus saw a fig tree some distance away and went to see if he could find any fruit on it. But he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said: May no one ever eat fruit from you again. They returned later that day from Jerusalem to Bethany, where Jesus probably spent the night in that hospitable house where he was always welcome – the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. And on the following day, as they again journeyed up to the holy city, they all saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.

Jesus knew that it was not the season for figs. He knew too that there were none on the fig tree. He wished, however, to teach his disciples, in a way they would never forget, how God had come to the Jewish people, hungry for fruits of holiness and good works. All he had found were mere lifeless observances: worthless leaves. On that occasion too the Apostles learned that every moment presents a good opportunity for giving results. We cannot wait for special circumstances in order to sanctify ourselves. God comes to us looking for good deeds in moments of sickness, in our ordinary everyday occupations, both when we are overworked and when everything is going well and all is ordered and peaceful. He visits us as much in our tiredness as in our rest, in success and failure, in financial ruin – if God allows it – and in times of prosperity. It is precisely those circumstances which can and should produce fruit – all different, perhaps, but unique and wonderful. We should find God in all circumstances because He gives us the graces we need. You also, says the Venerable Bede, ought to guard against becoming a fruitless tree, in order to offer Jesus, who has become poor, the fruit which He needs. He wants us to love him always with deeds, at every moment, everywhere, in every conceivable situation. Are we doing our best to give fruit now, at the time, at the age and in the circumstances in which we find ourselves? Are we waiting till there arrives a more favourable time for bringing our friends to God?

68.2 Love means deeds, not sweet words. Interior life is expressed in deeds.

Jesus here uses strong language: May no one ever eat fruit from you again! He says. Jesus curses the fig tree because he finds on it only leaves, no more than the appearance of fertility, mere foliage. It is a striking gesture which will engrave his teaching on the minds of his disciples, as on ours. The interior life of the Christian, if it is genuine, is accompanied by fruits, practical deeds of service to others. The danger of deeds done without interior life has been emphasised, St Josemaría Escrivá reminds us, but we should also underline the danger of an interior life – if such could exist – without deeds.

‘Love means deeds, not sweet words’: I cannot recall without emotion that affectionate reproach – a divine utterance – which God engraved many years ago with burning clarity on the soul of a
poor priest as he was distributing Holy Communion to some nuns, while saying silently to Jesus in his heart: ‘I love you more than these do’.

We have to get moving, my children; we have to be up and doing – with courage and energy, with the joy of living, because ‘perfect love casts out fear’ (cf 1 John 4:18). With daring. Without shyness ...

Don’t forget that where there’s a will there’s a way. ‘Deus non denegat gratiam’: God does not deny his help to the person who does all he can.[237] We need to live by faith and use the means within our reach in every situation. We cannot sit with arms folded waiting for the ideal moment, which perhaps will never come, in order to start doing apostolate. We cannot wait for everything to be just right in order to work for God. We have to show by our present actions the love we have in our heart. We will see how God will multiply and bless our efforts, puny though they may be, in answer to his demands. And we will be filled with gratitude and admiration.

If it is genuine, our interior life – our conversation with God in prayer and the Sacraments – is seen in the practical fulfilment of our resolutions: apostolate with friends and relations; spiritual or material works of mercy, depending on the circumstances: teaching the ignorant (classes of formation or catechism, opportune advice to someone who is hesitant or ill-informed); working to give a Christian outlook to the educational system; visiting the sick and the aged who live in almost total isolation, bringing them the consolation of companionship ...

Always, in all circumstances, in very varied ways, interior life should continually overflow in works of mercy, in deeds of apostolate. Interior life which is not expressed in deeds is a mere wraith; it fades away and dies. As our intimacy with Christ increases, it is logical that our work, our character, our readiness to undergo sacrifice will all improve. So also will our way of dealing with others in daily life, aided by the virtues of social harmony – understanding, cordiality, optimism, order, friendliness ... These are the fruits our Lord hopes to find each day when he comes to inspect our behaviour. Love, if it is to grow, if it is to survive, needs to express itself in deeds.

68.3 Love of God shows itself in an apostolate that is cheerful and enterprising.

Jesus finds only leaves ... Having an interior life means living with God’s vision, seeing our apostolic task from his viewpoint. Apostolic fruit cannot be lasting when a Christian falls prey to activism, which is the tendency to be ‘doing things’, to rush around, without the support of a deep prayer life. In the end, the furious activity turns out to be sterile and ineffective, and is often the sign of a lack of rectitude of intention. It is a purely human activity without any supernatural perspective. It is perhaps the consequence of ambition, of a desire to attract attention, which can infect everything we do, even the most sublime of undertakings.. So there is good reason for stressing the danger of activism – of multiplying deeds which, though good in themselves, have no interior life to support them. Saint Bernard, and many authors after him, called such works accursed occupations.[238]

But the lack of real fruit in our apostolate can arise also from passivity, from the absence of deeds of love. And if activism is bad and sterile, passivity is deadly, for it can lead us to think that we love God because we perform works of piety: it is true that these pious exercises are carried out, but not perfectly, since they do not move us to good actions. Such barren pious practices are like the useless and sterile foliage on the fig tree, because true interior life will inevitably lead to a vigorous apostolate: in every situation it impels us to act with courage, daring and initiative. It means that we joyfully shed all human respect, go ahead imbued ‘with the joy of living’, with the joy that an ever-
youthful love ensures. Today, as we converse with our Lord in these moments of prayer, we can examine ourselves as to whether there is fruit in our life, now, this very moment. Do I have initiative, as an overflow of my interior life, of my prayer? Or do I think, on the contrary, that in my surroundings – in my class, in the factory, in the office – I can do nothing, that it’s impossible to do anything more for God? Do I give my time, do I help effectively in apostolic tasks ... or do I ‘only pray’? Do I try to justify myself, saying that between my work, my family and my devotional practices ‘I haven’t got any time’? If that were the case, it would also mean that the circumstances of work and family life had ceased to be an occasion for apostolate.

Love means deeds ... Genuine love of God is seen in an apostolate carried out with tenacity. And if our Lord were to find us passive, content to perform pious practices without the accompaniment of a cheerful and constant apostolate, then perhaps he might say to us in our heart: More deeds, please, and fewer excuses. Any one day affords many ways to make Christ known, if our love is true. Interior life without a deep apostolic zeal withers away and dies: it is no more than a phantom. On the following morning as they passed by, the Evangelist notes, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots, completely. This is a graphic image of those who do not produce the fruit which God expects, whether through a fondness for comfort or laziness, or a lack of spirit of sacrifice. The life of an apostle, as that of every Christian should be, is the opposite of the dried-up fig tree: it is brimful of life, of cheerful enthusiasm for the apostolic task, of love expressed in action, cheerfulness, an action which may be silent but which is constant ...

Let us examine our life and see whether we can present to God the ripe fruit He is looking for, practical results attained by a willing spirit of sacrifice. He approaches us with a hunger and a thirst for souls. In spiritual direction we learn to distinguish between what could be activism (where we need to pray more) and what could be lack of initiative (where we have to ‘get moving’ more). The Blessed Virgin Mary will teach us to react so that our interior life, our desire to love God, will never become a producer of useless and worthless foliage.
69. THE RIGHT AND THE DUTY TO DO APOSTOLATE

69.1 The right and duty of every Christian to be an apostle derives from union with Christ.

The chief priests and the scribes came to Jesus as he was walking in the porches of the Temple. They asked him: By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?[239] Perhaps because they were not ready to listen, our Lord in the end left their questions unanswered.

But we know that Christ is sovereign Lord of the universe, and that in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... all things were created through him and for him ... to reconcile to himself all things ... making peace by the blood of his cross.[240] Nothing in the universe remains outside Christ’s sovereignty and peaceful sway. All power has been given to me ... He holds the fulness of power in heaven and on earth, including the power to evangelise and bring salvation to all men and all nations.

He himself has called us to share in his mission, to intervene in the lives of others, so that they learn to be happy on earth and to reach heaven, for which they have been created. We have received the command to extend his kingdom, a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace.[241] We are Christ who passes near those who live in the world.[242] From him we must learn how, in the very fabric of society, to serve and help everyone. We need no other title than that of our Christian vocation in order to spend our lives in the service of others. This title we received in Baptism, and it is motive in itself. The laity derive the right and duty to the apostolate from their union with Christ the head; incorporated into Christ’s Mystical Body through Baptism, and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself.[243] Our charge and mission come from Christ.

We have the right to intervene in the lives of others, because the life of Christ is shared by all. And if one member falls ill, or becomes weak, or perhaps dies, the whole body is affected: Christ suffers, and so also do the healthy members of his mystical body, since all men are one in Christ.[244] All of us, so different from one another, are united in Christ, and charity then becomes part of life. The right to influence other people’s lives becomes a joyful duty for every Christian without exception, no matter how unusual his personal circumstances. He, Jesus, doesn’t ask our permission to ‘complicate’ our lives. He just enters them, and that’s that! We should make use of the occasions that arise, as well as creating others ourselves, so as to draw those souls to God. We may suggest a good book for them to read, or give them some advice, or talk clearly to them about the need to go to Confession, or perhaps serve them in some way.

69.2 We should reject the excuses which prevent our ‘getting involved’ in the lives of others.

At times, people who witness our behaviour may say to us: but what right do you have to interfere in the lives of others? Who gave you permission to talk about Christ, his doctrine, his sweet demands? Or perhaps it is we ourselves who feel tempted to wonder: Who’s asking me to get involved here? Then we would have to reply: ‘Christ himself is telling me, is begging me.’ ‘The harvest is plentiful enough, but the labourers are few. You must ask the Lord to whom the harvest
belongs to send labourers out for the harvesting’ (Matt 9:37-38). Don’t take the easy way out. Don’t say, ‘I’m no good at this sort of thing; there are others who can do it; it isn’t my line’. No, for this sort of thing, there is no one else ... Christ’s plea is addressed to each and every Christian. No one can consider himself excused, for whatever reason, whether it be his age, his health, or his occupation. There are no excuses whatsoever. Either we carry out a fruitful apostolate, or our faith will prove barren.[246] The Church encourages and in fact requires us to make Christ known. No pretexts or excuses will avail us in the joyful task which is ours all life long. Young people should become the first to carry on the apostolate directly to other young persons, concentrating their apostolic efforts within their own circle ... Children also have their own work to do. According to their ability, they are true living witnesses of Christ among their companions.[247] Young people, children, the aged, the sick, the unemployed, those who are successful in life ... all of us should be apostles who make Christ known with the testimony of word and example. What good loudspeakers God could have in the world. He tells all of us: Go into all the world and preach the gospel.[248] It is God who sends us!

Love for Christ leads us to love those around us. Our vocation impels us to think of others, not to fear sacrifices which require love with deeds, since there is no sign or mark that more distinguishes the Christian and lover of Christ than concern for one’s brethren and zeal for the salvation of souls.[249] Therefore, the intensity of the desire to make the Master known is the indicator which measures the sincerity of life of the disciple and the degree of his commitment. If at any time we found that we felt no concern for souls, this would be because our charity had grown cold. If their estrangement from God left us unmoved and their spiritual needs did not provoke a reaction in our own soul, we have almost certainly grown cold. The apostolate is not something extra added on to the normal activity of the Christian. It is the Christian life itself, which has, as a natural manifestation of itself, an apostolic concern for our family, our colleagues, our friends ...

69.3 Jesus sends us now, as in the beginning he sent his disciples.

By what authority are you doing these things? the Pharisees ask Jesus. This is not the right moment to reveal the origin of his power. Later, he will reveal it to his disciples: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.[250] Jesus’ authority was not given him by men. Rather, God the Father appointed him heir of all things (cf Heb 1:2), that he might be teacher, king and priest of all, the head of the new and universal people of the sons of God.[251]

The Church and each of her members share in this power. It is a task for every Christian to carry out the work of Christ in the world. This applies especially to those who, in addition to the vocation they have received in Baptism, have had a special call from our Lord to follow him more closely. Jesus is urging us on, because men are called to eternal life: they are called to salvation. Do you realise this? Do you realise ... that all men are called to live with God, and that without him they lose the key to the ‘mystery’ of themselves?

This call to salvation comes directly to us from Christ, who has for man the ‘words of eternal life’ (John 6:8). He directs himself to every individual person living on earth, in particular to those who suffer, in body or soul.[252]

Jesus sends us, as He sent those disciples to the neighbouring village in search of the tethered donkey on which no man had yet ridden. He commanded them to untie it and bring it to him, because it was to be on this donkey that He would make his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He charged them that
if anyone asked them what they were doing, they should say that the Lord had need of it.[253] They act for our Lord and in his name. They don’t do what they are doing on their own initiative, nor do they do it in order to obtain any personal benefit for themselves. The two disciples went and found the donkey, just as our Lord had told them. As they untied it, its owners said to them: ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ And they said, ‘The Lord has need of it’. [254] And those disciples, whose names we do not know, but who must have been faithful friends of the Master, carried out their mission. They did what has to be done in all apostolate: they brought it to Jesus.[255] When Saint Ambrose explains this passage, he stresses three points: the Master’s command, the divine power with which it was carried out, and the exemplary life and intimacy with the Master of those who performed it.[256] St Josemaría Escrivá, adds to this commentary the following: Saint Ambrose has some words that fit the children of God marvellously well. He is speaking of the ass’s colt, tethered to its dam, which Jesus needed for his triumph. ‘Only an order of the Lord could untie it’, he says. ‘It was set loose by the hands of the Apostles. To do such a deed, one needs a special way of living and a special grace. You too must be an apostle, to set free those who are captive.’

Let me comment on this text for you once more. How often, at a word from Jesus, will we have to loosen souls from their bonds, because He needs them for his triumph! May our hands be apostles’ hands, and our actions, and our lives also. Then God will give us an apostle’s grace, too, to break the fetters of those who are fast bound,[257] of all those who continue in chains and for whom our Lord is waiting.
70. BUILT UPON ROCK

70.1 Holiness means carrying out the Will of God, whether in things of importance or in things that may seem trivial.

Our Lord shows a special love for those who put their heart into serving him in everything, every day, thereby expressing in deeds the words and desires of their conversation with God. This is true prayer. For Jesus declares, in the Gospel of today’s Mass: Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the Will of my Father. On that occasion He was speaking to many who had turned prayer into a mere recital of words and formulae totally unrelated to their hypocritical and malicious behaviour. Our conversation with Christ has got to be different. Your prayer should be that of a child of God, and not that of the Pharisaical hypocrites who will hear from Jesus’ lips these words: ‘Not every one that says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.’

Your prayer, your clamour of ‘Lord, Lord’ should be linked with a thousand different ways throughout the day to a desire and an effective effort to fulfil the Will of God.

Even if we could work wonders and miracles, such as prophesying in his name or casting out devils – if it were possible to do such things without his help – it would not be enough if we did not strive to fulfil his lovable Will. The greatest sacrifice would be useless, we would run our race in vain. By contrast, in Sacred Scripture we see how God loves and blesses the man who seeks to be identified in everything he does with the divine Will: I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my Will. And Saint John writes: The world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the Will of God abides for ever. Jesus himself declares that his food is to do the Will of his Father and to accomplish his business. This is what matters; this is what the sanctification of our duties means: doing his Will, becoming what He wants us to be. We have to rid ourselves more and more of our self-interested attitudes and our selfishness, being completely at one with what God wants for us.

The path that leads to heaven, and to happiness here on earth, is obedience to the divine will, and not simply repeating his name. Prayer must be backed up by deeds, by a firm desire to carry out God’s Will, which is revealed to us in so many different ways. It would be a terrible thing, says Saint Teresa, if God were to be telling us plainly to go about his business in a certain way and we would not do it, but instead stood gazing at him because that gave us greater pleasure. What a pity if God wanted to lead us by one path, and we were to stick stubbornly to our own! To carry out God’s Will: here we have a programme for a lifetime.

You might have thought occasionally, with holy envy, about the adolescent Apostle, John, ‘quem diligebat Jesus’ – whom Jesus loved.

Wouldn’t you like to deserve to be called ‘the one who loves the Will of God’? Then take the necessary steps, day after day. These steps normally consist in fulfilling the small duties of the daily round and asking many times a day: Am I doing at this moment what I ought to be doing? They include accepting the difficulties of ordinary life, struggling tenaciously to follow the advice received in spiritual direction, and rectifying our intention as often as is necessary. And such repeated rectification of intention is indeed necessary, because our tendency is to follow our own will, to opt...
rather for whatever is more desirable, more pleasant and less arduous.

Lord, I want to do only what you want me to do, the way you want me to do it. I don’t want to do my own will, following my silly whims, but your divine Will. Lord, I wish that my life were to be just that: the fulfilment of your Will in everything, so that I could say, as you said, in big things and in small: my food, what gives meaning to my life, is to do the will of my Father God.

70.2 We want what God wants. We abandon ourselves to his care.

The firm purpose of giving all glory to God endows us with a special strength in difficulties and troubles: in sickness, in the face of slander, or confronted with financial problems...

In the same Gospel of the Mass Christ speaks to us of two houses, built at the same time, and apparently identical with each other. But the great difference between them became obvious when the testing time arrived: the rains came, and the floods and the gales. One of them stood firm because it had solid foundations: the other fell because it was built upon sand: its ruin was catastrophic and complete. Our Lord calls the man who built the first house, the one that stood firm, a wise man. The builder of the second house, He tells us, is a fool.

The first house resisted the wintry blasts and the rising flood-waters so well, not because of its architecturally pleasing design, or even because its roof was soundly put together, but thanks to its foundation on bedrock. That house lasted, it gave secure shelter to its owner and was a model of good construction. Just so is the person who builds on the rock of desires put into practice by fulfilling God’s Will in the small things of every day, in more important matters, and also in times of real trouble when they come. So we see sick people, weakened in body by their disease, bear their pain joyfully and lovingly, greatly strengthened by seeing in their condition the hand of God’s Providence, which always blesses those who love him, although in mysterious and very different ways. So too the person who has to put up with slander and calumny, or who faces financial ruin and sees the inevitable effects on his family, or who suffers the death of a loved one still in the prime of life, or who experiences job discrimination because of religious bigotry... The house – the life of the Christian who follows Christ in his deeds – does not fall, because it is built upon total abandonment to the Will of his Father God. This abandonment does not prevent him from defending himself when justice is at issue. He also demands the rights to which he is entitled as a worker, or to have access to the means to remedy his legitimate grievances. But all this is done with serenity, without anguish of mind and without bitterness or rancour.

In our prayer today we will tell our Lord that we want to abandon ourselves in his arms; there we will be absolutely safe. Desire nothing for yourself, either good or bad: want only what God wants. When you are with Jesus you will find that what is bitter becomes sweet, and what is rough turns smooth.

Jesus, I put myself trustingly in your arms, hiding my head on your loving breast, my heart touching yours: I want what you want, in everything.[268]

70.3 Doing and loving God’s Will in all aspects of life, in big matters as in small.

If we are to stand firm in difficult moments we need to accept cheerfully the little setbacks that occur even in relatively untroubled times, at work, in family life ... in all the close-woven fabric of daily life. We need to carry out, faithfully and selflessly, our duties of state, whether it be those of study, of care for the family, or of whatever else our state in life involves. So the foundations go down
deeper, and the whole building is strengthened. Fidelity in little, hardly noticeable things, enables us to be faithful in the big things,[269] to be strong when it matters most.

If we are faithful in carrying out God’s Will in small things we will acquire the habit of seeing his Providence at work in everything that happens to us. Small things may be daily duties or the advice we receive in spiritual guidance, in the acceptance of those almost inescapable difficulties that can crop up on any ordinary day. We will see God’s hand in health and in sickness, in moments of dryness and in moments of consolation, in peace and in temptation, in toil and at rest. And this will fill us with peace. We will learn to brush aside human respect with ease, because what matters to us will be doing whatever it is he wants us to do. So we will enjoy great freedom in acting always accountable to God,[270] confidently, boldly, with daring, unafraid to speak openly about Him.

This same fidelity in small things for the love of God, seeing in them, not the littleness itself – which is typical of mediocre souls – but the grandeur of God’s will, we ought to respect greatly, even in the smallest things.[271]

A broad, solid and unshakeable foundation can act as a basis for other flimsier and less substantial buildings; it is not exclusively a support for its own structure. When our interior life is grounded on prayer and action, it becomes for many a source of refuge where they find the strength they need when their energies begin to flag, because their difficulties and trials may be great and hard to endure.

Let us never lose sight of Jesus, even momentarily. When you are troubled ... and also in the hour of success, say again and again, ‘Lord, don’t let go of me, don’t leave me; help me as you would a clumsy child; always lead me by the hand!’[272] And with him, carrying out what He indicates to us is best for us, we shall reach the end of the road, where we will see him face to face. Together with Jesus, we will find his Mother Mary who is also our Mother. We turn to her now, at the end of our prayer, so that our conversation with Jesus may never be idle chatter. May she grant us a single-mindedness of purpose in life: to fulfil the most holy Will of her Son in all that we do. Lord, don’t let go of me! Don’t leave me! Help me as you would a clumsy child. Always lead me by the hand!
71. KEEPING SUNDAYS AND HOLYDAYS OF OBLIGATION HOLY

71.1 Christian feastdays.

As we read in the First Reading of today’s Mass,[273] it was God himself who instituted the feastdays of the Chosen People and who encouraged the observance of them. Observe the sabbath day; keep it holy as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work ... As well as the Sabbath, the Jews had other principal feastdays – Passover, Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles ... – days on which they renewed the Covenant and gave thanks for benefits they had received. The Sabbath which followed six days of working at their own occupations was the day dedicated to God, the Master of time, in recognition of his sovereignty over all things. The observance of these days was to be one of the features that distinguished the Jewish people from the Gentiles.

In Our Lord’s day many abuses of a rigorist nature had crept in, which gave rise to confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees such as the one we read about in today’s Gospel.[274] The disciples were passing through a cornfield on a Sabbath day: As they made their way his disciples began to pluck ears of grain. And the Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’ ... Christ reminds them that the prescriptions as to the Sabbath rest did not have an absolute value and that He, the Messiah, is Lord of the Sabbath.

Jesus Christ had great regard for the Sabbath and the other great Jewish festivals even though He knew that with his coming all those dispensations would be abolished and replaced by the Christian feastdays. Saint Luke, for example, has left it in writing for us that the Holy Family went up every year to Jerusalem for the Passover.[275] Jesus continues to celebrate this anniversary each year with his disciples. We can see too how, with his presence, He sanctifies the happiness of a wedding feast.[276] In his preaching He frequently makes use of examples drawn from domestic festivities – the king who celebrates his son’s wedding,[277] the banquet for the son who had left his father’s house and who returns home ...[278] The Gospels are imbued with a festive joy, which is a sign that the bridegroom, the Messiah, is already amongst his friends.[279]

Our Lord himself wanted us to celebrate important feasts, when, leaving aside our usual occupations, we can turn to him with greater calmness and attention. We can dedicate more time on these days to our families, and give our body and soul the necessary rest.[280] The Holy Mass is the centre of the Christian life.[281] Without the Mass nothing else would have any meaning. Everything would be like a body without a soul – like a corpse. Truly, Sunday is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.[282] And it is in the Holy Mass that we always find the Fountain of happiness and of never-ending joy and peace.

71.2 The Lord’s Day.

Our Lord’s resurrection took place on the first day of the week. This is testified to by all the evangelists. On the same day, in the evening, He appeared to his disciples who had gathered together in the Cenacle, and showed them his hands and his side with the tangible signs of the Passion.[283] And eight days later, that is to say on the next first day of the week, Jesus appeared again in similar
circumstances. It is possible that Our Lord wanted to point out to us that that first day was about to become a very special day. At least that is how the first Christians understood it. From the very beginning they began to gather together to celebrate it in such a way that they called it the Lord’s Day, *Domenica dies*. The *Acts of the Apostles* and the Epi-

slices of Saint Paul show how our first brothers in the Faith gathered together on the Lord’s Day to break bread and to pray, and the same has been done up to our own day. A document dating from the first centuries admonished the Christians of the time: *Do not place your temporal affairs above the Word of God but, rather, abandoning everything on the Lord’s Day in order to hear the Word of God, hasten diligently to your churches, for in this do you show your praise of God. If not, what excuse before God will those people have who do not gather on the Lord’s Day to hear the word of God and to feed on the divine food which remains eternally.*

For us, *Sunday* has to be a very special and much-loved feastday, the more so because in many places it seems to be losing the religious meaning it has always had. Saint Jerome wrote as follows: *God made every day. There are days that can belong to the Jews, to heretics or to pagans. But ‘the Lord’s day’, the day of the Resurrection, is the day that belongs to Christians – our day. It is called ‘the Lord’s day’ because after He had risen on the first day of the Jewish week, He went up to the Father and reigns together with him. If the pagans call it the ‘Day of the Sun’ we will gladly accept this expression. On this day the ‘Light of the world’ rose, the ‘Sun of Justice’ shone.*

From the start, this day has been celebrated in a very special way, without any interruption. The Second Vatican Council teaches that, by a tradition handed down from the Apostles, which took its origin from the very day of Christ’s Resurrection, the Church celebrates the Paschal Mystery every seventh day, which day is appropriately called the Lord’s Day, or Sunday ...

*The Lord’s Day is the original name of the feastday, and it should be proposed as such to the faithful, and taught to them, so that it may become in fact a day of joy and of freedom from work.*

We begin to live this day well, and all the feastdays in fact, when we try to recapture the new-born faith and joy of those men and women who, on the first Sunday in the life of the Church encountered the risen Christ. We will try to imitate Peter and John on their way to the Sepulchre, and Mary Magdalene who recognises Jesus when He calls her by her name. We will try also to imitate the two disciples as they travel to Emmaus ... for it is the Lord himself we are going to meet. Our first brothers in the Faith taught us to celebrate this feast and to realise that observing Sunday and attending the Mass with special attention and piety are inseparable, owing to the intimate and profound relationship both have with the Paschal Mystery. This is why from the very beginning the celebration of the Holy Eucharist has constituted the focal centre of this great day. Today we can ask ourselves in our prayer whether every Sunday we try to give more time and care to the fulfilment of our customary norms of piety, whether we reflect more deeply on the meaning of our divine filiation, whether we make a real effort to seek the presence of God.

### 71.3 Apostolate as to the nature of Holydays of Obligation and Sundays. The sabbath rest.

Faced with the re-evangelization of the world, it is particularly urgent that we carry out an effective apostolate, which can go deep into the way families think about the sanctification of holy days, about the meaning of Sunday and the Christian way of living it. We can see that people become lukewarm in their spiritual lives because they do not know how to focus their weekend leisure. *It is
your duty to be concerned about turning Sunday once again into the day of the Lord, and making
the holy Mass once again the centre of the Christian life. The Lord’s Day must be a day when we
rest in God, a day of adoration, of supplication and thanksgiving. It should be a day when we beg
God for forgiveness for the sins we have committed during the week just past, and ask him for the
graces of spiritual light and strength for the coming week. We will then resume our work with
greater cheerfulness and the desire to do it with perfection.

We shall be able to teach many people to consider this commandment of the Church not only as a
primary duty, but also as a right, a need, a privilege, a piece of good fortune which a lively and
intelligent believer cannot give up except for grave reasons.

It is not just a matter of a generic consecration of our time to God, as this stipulation is already
contained in the first Commandment of the Decalogue. What is proper to this precept is the setting
aside of a particular day for the praise and service of the Lord, in the particular way He wishes to be
praised and served during it. God can decree that man put aside a day each week for proper and
due worship of the divinity. He should direct his mind to heavenly things, setting aside daily
business. He should explore the depths of his conscience in order to know how necessary and
inviolable are his relations with God.

The Sunday rest and that of other feastdays can never become for us simply more ‘leisure’ time
spent in more or less empty idleness, which can perhaps be excused in those who do not know God.
Rest means recuperation: to gain strength, form ideals and make plans. In other words it means a
change of occupation, so that you can come back later with a new impetus to your daily job. It
means rest dedicated to God. Even though we see a great change in customs, a Christian must
always understand that today, as always, Sunday rest has a moral and religious dimension of giving
worship to God.

Feastdays provide an opportunity for us to give more time to those people God has entrusted to us
– our family and friends. We should make use of this increased leisure to pay more attention to the
people around us; for parents it means the opportunity – which they may not have during the week – of
talking to their children, or of carrying out some work of mercy – such as visiting a sick relative, a
neighbour, or someone who is alone and friendless.

Every day, but especially on Sundays, we need to know how to fill the hours of the day usefully,
doing everything as well as we can, and living little details of order, punctuality, and good humour.

The joy that filled Our Lady on Easter Sunday will be ours if we know how to place Our Lord at
the centre of our lives, dedicating Sundays and feastdays to him with special generosity.
72. DEVOTION TO THE SAINTS

72.1 They are our intercessors before God and our great allies in any difficulty.

The Gospel of today’s Mass[299] presents to us the figure of a Centurion who is the model of many virtues – faith, humility, trust in God. The liturgy has preserved his words in the Holy Mass: Lord I am not worthy to have you come under my roof ... Jesus was amazed at the attitude of this man, and after granting his request – the healing of one of his servants – He turned and said to the multitude that followed him, ‘I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.’

This centurion is an example for us too of a man who knows how to ask for things. First he sent some elders to intercede for him. When they came to Jesus, they besought him earnestly, saying, ‘He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he built us our synagogue.’ Later, he sends more friends to Jesus when He is close to his house to tell him not to take the trouble to go in, because a simple word from him will be sufficient to cure the sick servant. Jesus had been delighted to hear the Jews speak on behalf of this Gentile: He is worthy to have you do this for him....

In Scripture we find many testimonies to this effective intercession. When Yahweh proposed to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham begged him: Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ... And the Lord said, ‘If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake’. But as there were not fifty righteous men, Abraham went on reducing the number: And if there were forty? ... thirty? ... twenty? ... ten? ...[300] God accepts his intercession each time because Abraham was the friend of God.[301]

The saints who already enjoy eternal bliss are the special friends of God, because they loved him above all things and they served him with an heroic life. They are our great allies and intercessors – they always heed our prayers and present them to God, guaranteeing their worth by the merits they obtained here on earth, and by their union with the Blessed Trinity. God gives them honour and glory through the miracles wrought through their intercession and the graces they obtain for us for our material and spiritual needs, for in this life they merited before God that their prayers should be heard after their death.[302]

Devotion to the saints is part of the Catholic faith and has been a living tradition in the Church from the very beginning. The Second Vatican Council tells us that it is most fitting, therefore, that we love those friends and co-heirs of Jesus Christ, who are also our brothers and outstanding benefactors, and that we give due thanks to God for them, ‘humbly invoking them and having recourse to their prayers, their aid and help in obtaining from God through his Son, Jesus Christ, Our Lord, our only Redeemer and Saviour, the benefits we need.’[303] We have friends in Heaven. Let us turn today – and every day – to their intercession. They will help us to do our everyday work with rectitude of intention, to surmount whatever we find hardest and to do apostolate.

72.2 Cult of the saints. The dies natalis.

From the very earliest days of the Church veneration grew up for Our Lady, the Mother of God and our Mother, for the guardian angels and for the apostles and martyrs. Countless testimonies have been
handed down to us of the devotion the first Christians had to them. Already in the Acts of the martyrdom of Saint Polycarp – who was a disciple of Saint John the Apostle – we are told that the Christians piously buried his mortal remains so that they could celebrate his birthday (the day of his martyrdom) each year in that very place. Saint Cyprian recommended the clergy in Carthage to make a note of the day on which the martyrs died so as to be able to celebrate their anniversary. This celebration took place beside the tomb. Each church remembered its martyrs. The compilation of these accounts soon gave way to the first calendars of saints. Many strove for the privilege of being buried close to a martyr; their tombs constituted a local glory; they symbolised protection and were places where many special graces were obtained. They soon became centres of pilgrimage. Later, especially when martyrdom became less frequent, there were added to these, others who had chosen to imitate more closely the poverty and virginity of Christ, and still others whom the outstanding practice of the Christian virtues and the wonderful graces of God recommended to the pious devotion and imitation of the faithful.[304] They are the treasure of the Church and a great help in our daily struggle, in the fulfilment of our work, and in our efforts to carry out our resolutions to do better and to make our desires of bringing souls to Christ a reality.

The saints intercede for us in Heaven; they obtain for us graces and favours, for – comments Saint Jerome – if when they were on earth and having had reasons for being concerned about themselves, they had prayed for others, how much more will they do so after receiving their crown, their victory, their triumph![305] We venerate their memory and try to honour them on earth. We should not be satisfied with simply invoking them as intercessors on our behalf: the Church wants us to give them the cult they deserve in recognition of their sanctity and of their being eminently favoured members of the Mystical Body of Christ, who possess for ever eternal bliss. In them we praise God: we honour his servants, so that this honour may redound in favour of the Lord.[306] Our intimacy with the blessed in Heaven in no way diminishes the worship of adoration given to God the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit; on the contrary, it greatly enriches it.[307]

As well as giving them external veneration, we should speak to them in the depths of our hearts, without the use of words, but with the affection born of friendship and trust. We must speak in their ear, as to a friend who helps us at all times but more especially when we have some difficulty. Often we will turn to the saint or the martyr commemorated by the Church that day, and whose feast frequently coincides with the day of his death, his dies natalis, and on which he heard those most blessed words of the Lord: Come, O blessed of my Father ...,[308] see what I have prepared for you; it is the anniversary of that day when for the first time they contemplated the ineffable glory of God, which they can never lose. There is great benefit to be gained from our having special devotion to those saints who, because of our particular circumstances, seem to us to be closer to our lives. We then experience how our community with the saints joins us to Christ, from whom as from its fountain and head issues all grace and the life of the People of God itself.[309]

72.3 Veneration and regard for relics. Images. Our Lady, a special intercessor in our needs.

It is a manifestation of piety to have great esteem and veneration for the bodies of the saints and for the objects they used when on earth. They are precious remembrances that we look after with great devotion, just as we do the objects that belonged to people who were very close to us and whom we loved very much. The first Christians preserved the relics of the martyrs as treasures of inestimable worth.[310] In memory of them we must worthily venerate everything they have left to us, and above
all their bodies, which were temples and instruments of the Holy Spirit, who dwelt and worked in them, and which will become one with the Body of Christ, after their glorious resurrection. This is why God himself honours these relics in a fitting manner, performing miracles through them.^[311]

We also give honour to their images because in these we venerate the saints they represent, and they move us to love them and imitate their virtues. God has on occasion glorified these images and relics through miracles. He frequently grants special favours and graces to those who piously venerate them. Saint Teresa wrote for us that she was ‘a great friend of images’. How unfortunate are those who through their own fault lose this benefit!, she said, referring perhaps to those who, influenced by Protestant doctrines at that time, used to attack the images of saints.

We must love and seek the intercession of our Mother Mary in a special way. She who is the Mediatrix of all graces, in whom the angels rejoice, the righteous find grace and sinners receive forgiveness for ever^[312] She protects us always and helps us at every moment. She has not failed to carry to her Son a single one of our supplications. Her images are a constant reminder to us to be faithful in our daily occupations.

Holding fast to our Lady’s hand, let us finish our prayer by invoking God in the words of the liturgy; Almighty and eternal God, you have willed to give us a supreme proof of your love by the glorification of your saints; grant to us now that we may be helped by their intercession and moved by their example to faithfully imitate your Son Jesus Christ^[313]
73. THE CORNERSTONE

73.1 Jesus Christ is the cornerstone on whom we must build our lives. Our being disciples of Christ influences the whole of our existence.

In the parable of the vinedressers who commit murder,[314] Jesus sums up the whole history of salvation. He compares Israel to a choice vineyard which God surrounds with a hedge and furnishes with a wine press. He builds a watchtower in which He places a guard to protect the vineyard from thieves and wild animals. God did not fail to provide all the means possible for caring for the vineyard of his heart – his people – as had already been prophesied.[315] The vinedressers in the parable are the leaders of the people of Israel; the owner is God, and the vineyard is Israel, the People of God.

The owner sends his servants time and again to collect his due of fruit from the vineyard, but each time they are badly treated. This was the mission of the prophets. Finally he sent his Son, the Beloved, thinking that they would respect him. We are shown here the difference between Jesus – the Son – and the prophets, who were servants. The parable refers to Christ’s transcendent and unique Sonship, and clearly expresses the divinity of Jesus Christ. The vinedressers took him and killed him, and cast him out of the vineyard, an explicit reference to the crucifixion, which took place outside the walls of Jerusalem.[316] Our Lord, who discretely mentions himself in the parable, must have spoken with great sorrow, as He sees how He is to be rejected by those very people to whom He has come to bring salvation. They do not want him. Jesus ends with these words of one of the Psalms:[317]The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner.

The leaders of Israel understood the clearly Messianic meaning of the parable and realised that it was directed against them. So they tried to arrest him, but once again they feared the people.

Saint Peter was to remember Jesus’ words when he came before the Sanhedrin, and the prophecy contained in the parable had already been fulfilled: Be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified ... This is the stone that was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner.[318] Jesus Christ makes himself the keystone which is the foundation and support of the whole building. This stone is essential to the Church and to each man: without it the whole building would collapse.

The cornerstone affects the whole construction, our whole life – business affairs, interests, loves, time ...; nothing is beyond the scope of what faith demands in the life of a Christian. We are not disciples of Christ for a number of pre-determined hours (when we pray, for example, or when we take part in a religious service), or just on special days ... The profound unity of life that being a Christian demands, causes absolutely everything in our lives to be affected by the fact that we are followers of Christ. At the same time this does not prevent things retaining their own nature. Following Christ influences the very core of our personality. When someone is in love, this fact influences his whole view of things and events, however trivial they may appear. He is influenced by it as he walks along the street, when he is at work, in his attitude towards social relationships – and not only when he is in the company of the person he loves. Being a Christian is the most important characteristic of our existence, and it has to have incomparably more influence on our lives than even human love has on the most ardent of lovers.
Christ is the centre of our lives and of our whole being. Let us imagine an architect, comments Cassian, who wants to construct the vault of an apse. He has to trace the whole circumference beginning with a key point – the centre. Guiding himself by this infallible norm, he then has to calculate the exact circumference and the design of the whole building ... In this way, a single point becomes the fundamental key to an imposing building.\[319\] In a similar way, God is the point of reference of our thoughts, our words and our deeds. We should want to build our very existence in relation to him.

73.2 Faith gives us light by which to recognise the true reality of things and of events.

It is Christ who gives meaning to the way his followers think and live. Thus it would not make sense at all if we set aside the supervening and determining fact that we are Christians whenever we have to judge a work of art or a political programme, whenever we have to carry out some business deal or plan our holidays. Although he respects the autonomy of each discipline, the laws proper to each field of action and the broad freedom allowed to him in everything that is a matter of opinion, the faithful follower of Christ does not consider any matter at all in only one of its aspects, whether that aspect be, for example economic, say, or artistic or cinematographic. He does not simply accept that particular undertakings or projects are good without taking a broader view of them. If due subordination to God is not respected in these undertakings, in those programmes or in that work of art, only one definitive overall assessment is possible – a negative one – however good their partial values may appear to be.

When it comes to doing a piece of business or accepting a particular job, a good Christian should not only look at what is financially to his advantage, but he must examine other aspects too. Is it licit as regards the norms of morality? Does it cause good or harm to others? He tries to evaluate the benefits such a business proposition or job will contribute to society. If it is morally wrong or at best does not give good example, any other characteristics it may have – for example, providing a good income – do not turn it into a morally sound and therefore good transaction. However advantageous a business opportunity may appear, if it is not morally right it is a very bad undertaking and one that may not be entered into by any true follower of Christ.

Error is often presented decked out in the noble garments of art, science or freedom ... But faith has to be, indeed is, stronger than error. It is the powerful light that enables us to see, lurking behind what appears to be good, the evil that lies hidden beneath the surface of an otherwise good literary work, of a beauty that conceals ugliness. It is Christ who must be the cornerstone of every building.

Let us ask Our Lord for his grace so that we may live in a way totally compatible and utterly coherent with our Christian faith. In this way we will never think of our faith as a limiting factor – I can’t do this, I can’t go there. Rather it will be a light that enables us to recognise the reality of things and events, without ever forgetting that the devil will try to make an ally of human ignorance, (which cannot see the complete reality contained in this literary work or in that doctrine) and of the pride and concupiscence that all of us drag along behind us. Christ is the crucible that assays the gold there is in all human things. Anything that does not stand up to the testing clarity of his teaching is a lie and deceptive, even though it may be adorned with the appearance of some attractive good or perfection.

If we make use of the criterion that this unity of life gives us -that of being and at all times knowing ourselves to be faithful disciples of Our Lord – we will be able to gather together many of the good
things that men, who have been guided by right human criteria, have done and thought, and place them at the feet of Christ. Without the light of faith we would, as often as not, fail to detect and see through the rottenness by which we were at first deceived, since many such works do indeed possess some streak of goodness or of beauty.

If we want to have well-formed standards by which to discriminate and judge, while using the means to acquire them, we need to have a right will, which wants above all else to do the Will of God. This explains why very ordinary simple people, plain folk of scant learning and perhaps with few natural talents, but possessed of a deep Christian faith, can have excellent criteria which enable them to form wise assessments of the various things that happen; whereas others, perhaps more highly cultured or even with far greater intellectual capacity, sometimes show a lamentable absence of sound judgement and make serious mistakes in the most elementary matters.

Unity of life, an habitually Christian way of life, enables us to judge with certainty, and to discover the true human value of things. Thus we will sanctify all noble human realities and take them to Christ. Let us ask ourselves: In every situation, do I live in a way that is consistent with my faith and with my vocation? When I make a decision, however large or small, do I keep in mind above all else what it is God wants of me? Let us see in which specific points God is asking us to behave in a more decisively Christian way.

73.3 The Christian has his own scale of values in relation to the world.

A Christian, who will have built his life upon the cornerstone who is Christ, has his own personality, his own way of seeing the world and its happenings. He has a scale of values very different from that of the pagan, who does not live by faith and who has a purely worldly conception of things. A weak and lukewarm Christian faith, however, which exerts very little influence on ordinary life, can provoke in some people that kind of inferiority complex which manifests itself in an immoderate desire to ‘humanise’ Christianity, to ‘popularise’ the Church, to make it somehow seem to conform to the value-judgements prevalent in the world at a given time.[320]

This is why, as well as being immersed in our secular activities, as Christians we need to be immersed in God, through prayer, the sacraments and the sanctification of our daily work. We need to be faithful disciples of Jesus in the middle of the world, in our ordinary everyday life, with all the constant effort and hard decisions this entails. In this way we will be able to put into practice the advice Saint Paul gave to the first Christians in Rome when he alerted them to the risks of accommodating themselves to the pagan customs of the day: Do not be conformed to this world.[321] Sometimes this refusal to conform will lead us to row against the current and run the risk of being misunderstood by many of our contemporaries. The Christian must not forget that he is leaven[322] hidden in the lump of dough that has to be fermented by him.

God is the light that shines on all created reality and reveals the truth hidden within it. He is the lighthouse whose beacon-beam directs navigators on whichever sea they steer their course. The Church ... believes that the key, the centre and the purpose of the whole of man’s history is to be found in its Lord and Master.[323]

Jesus of Nazareth continues to be the cornerstone of every man’s life. Any building constructed without Christ is raised in vain. Let us think today as we finish our prayer, whether the Faith we profess is coming to bear more and more influence on our existence, on the way we view the world and mankind, and on the way we behave. Let us endeavour so to conduct ourselves that through our
actions all men will really come to know Christ, to follow his doctrine and to love him.
74. BEING EXEMPLARY CITIZENS

74.1 The Christian in public life. The exemplary fulfilment of our duties.

The Gospel of today’s Mass tells how some Pharisees came to Jesus and tried to catch him out in his speech, so that they might bring an accusation against him. With this end in view they asked him maliciously whether it is lawful to pay the tribute to Caesar or not. They were referring to the tax that all Jews had to pay to Rome, and which reminded them of their dependence on a foreign power. It was not a very hefty amount, but it presented them with a problem of both a political and a moral nature; the Jews were divided among themselves as to its binding force. And now they wanted to see Jesus taking sides, letting everybody know whether He was in favour of this Roman tax or against it. Teacher, they said, Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? If Our Lord were to say ‘yes’, they would be able to accuse him of recommending collaboration with the Roman power, a foreign denomination which the Jews hated because it was imposed on them by an invading force. If He answered ‘no’, they would be able to accuse him of rebelliousness against Pilate, the Roman authority. To come down either in favour of the tax or against it would mean, after all, that He would be telling them whether He approved of or rejected the lawfulness of the politico-social situation in which the Jewish people found themselves. Whatever He said, He would appear either to sympathise and collaborate with the occupying power or to encourage the latent rebelliousness of the Jews that was never very far from the surface. Later on they were to bring an accusation against him, saying with a falseness that would be only too obvious: We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar.

On this occasion, Jesus, who knew the hypocrisy of their question, said to them: ‘Bring me a coin, and let me look at it’... ‘Whose likeness and inscription is this?’ They said to him, ‘Caesar’s’. And Jesus amazed them by the simplicity and trenchant profundity of his answer: ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s’. Jesus does not evade the question, but by his answer expresses it in its true terms. The State should not elevate itself to the divine level, and the Church should not take sides in temporal affairs which are constantly changing and which are of no more than relative importance. By replying as He did, He showed his opposition as much to the Pharisees’ widespread error of the day about a messianic mission that was political, as He did to the error of the Roman State’s – or of any State’s – interfering in religious matters. By his answer Our Lord clearly established two separate and distinct spheres of competence. The political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields. Nevertheless, both are devoted to the personal vocation of man, though under different titles.

The Church, as such, has not been given the mission of finding specific solutions for temporal matters. In this way she follows Christ, who, by declaring that his kingship is not from the world expressly refused to be constituted judge in the realm of earthly affairs. As Christians, therefore, we must never fall into the mistake that Christ himself was so careful to avoid: of uniting the gospel message, which is universal, to a particular political system – ‘Caesar’. That is to say, we must avoid any situation where those who cannot give wholehearted allegiance to a particular system, or party, or to Caesar, may be obliged to experience understandable difficulties in accepting a message which has as its ultimate end eternal life. The Church’s mission, which continues throughout time the redemptive
work of Jesus Christ, is one of leading men to their supernatural and eternal destiny. Her just and necessary concern with problems that pertain to human society is derived from her spiritual mission, and must stay within the bounds of that mission.

It is for us as Christians, placed in the very centre of society, with all the rights and duties this brings with it, to find solutions for temporal problems. We must work to form around us a world which becomes ever more human and more Christian. We must do this by being exemplary citizens who demand all their rights and equally know how to fulfil all their duties towards society. Moreover, very often the way Christians must act in public life will not be limited to the mere fulfilment of the legal norms, of what is laid down by law. The difference between the legal order and the moral criteria governing our own conduct will sometimes oblige us to go even further than the law demands or to behave in a way that differs from what is asked for by the law’s strictly juridical criteria.[330] Such occasions might arise, for example, in the case of excessively low wages or unjust situations which are not covered by the law; the dedication of a doctor towards his patients who need him for more hours than those strictly demanded by the rules or agreements of the hospital, etc. Are we known at work – whatever our job may be – as people who do far more, for love of God and of men, than they are strictly obliged to do in terms of hours of work, dedication, interest, sincere concern for people and their problems ...?

74.2 Unity of life.

Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s ... Our Lord made a distinction between those duties that relate to society and those that refer to God, but in no way did He want to impose on his disciples what would amount to a double existence. Man is one, with just one heart and one soul, with his virtues and his defects, all of which have a bearing on his behaviour, and in public life just as in private life, the Christian must take his inspiration from the doctrine and following of Jesus Christ.[331] This will inevitably make his behaviour more human and still more noble. The Church has always proclaimed the just autonomy of temporal realities, understood, of course, in the sense that created things and society itself are endowed with their own laws and values ... But if by the terms ‘the autonomy of earthly affairs’ is meant that material being does not depend on God, and that man can use it as if it had no relation to its creator, then the falsity of such a claim will be obvious to anyone who believes in God. Without a creator there can be no creature.[332] Then society itself becomes inhuman and difficult to live in, as can be proved.

The Christian chooses his political, social and professional options according to his innermost convictions. And what he gives to the society in which he lives is a true vision of man and of society, because only Christian doctrine offers us the complete truth about man, about his dignity and about the eternal destiny for which he was created. Nevertheless there are many who on occasions would like Christians to live a double life – one life in their temporal and public activity, and the other in their life of faith: they even affirm, by means of sectarian or discriminatory words or actions, that there is incompatibility between one’s civic duties and the obligations that following Christ brings with it. As Christians, we must proclaim with our words and with the testimony of our coherent lives, that It is not true that there is opposition between being a good Catholic and serving civil society faithfully. In the same way there is no reason why the Church and the State should clash when they proceed with the lawful exercise of their respective authorities, in fulfilment of the mission God has entrusted to them.
Those who affirm the contrary are liars, yes, liars! They are the same people who honour a false liberty, and ask us Catholics ‘to do them the favour’ of going back to the catacombs, of retreating into silence.

Our testimony in the middle of the world has to be manifested by a deep unity of life. Love of God has to lead us to carry out faithfully all our obligations as citizens: to pay our taxes; to vote conscientiously in seeking to bring about the common good, etc. Failure to make one’s own opinion felt at whatever level – out of indifference, laziness or false excuses – by means of the ballot box or its equivalent is a fault against justice, because it means neglecting some rights which, owing to the consequences their virtual renunciation may have for other people, are also duties. That neglect can be serious if it means that by failing in our duty we have contributed to the success – within a professional body, on the Governing Body of the school our children attend, in the political life of the country – of a candidate whose ideology is at variance with Christian principles.

Blessed John Paul II exhorted us: Be sure to live and to infuse into temporal realities the sap of the faith of Christ, aware that this faith does not destroy anything that is truly human, but rather strengthens, purifies and elevates it.

Bring that spirit to bear in the attention you give to crucial problems. In the sphere of the family by living and defending the indissolubility of marriage and all the other values contained within it, by fostering respect for all human life from the very moment of its conception. Bringing it to bear in the world of culture, of education and of teaching, by choosing for your children a school in which the bread of Christian faith is presented to them.

Be strong, too, and generous when you are called upon to contribute to the irradication of injustice and social and economic discrimination; when you are called upon to participate in the positive task of increasing and justly distributing earthly goods. Bend every effort so that your laws and customs do not turn their back on the transcendent meaning of man or on the moral aspects of life.

74.3 Our union with God. This is necessary if we are to be better Christians.

And to God the things that are God’s Our Lord also stressed this aspect, although they did not expressly ask him concerning it. Caesar looks for his own likeness, give it to him. God looks for his own likeness: give it back to him. Do not cause Caesar to lose his coin because of you. Do not cause God to lose his coin among you, comments Saint Augustine. The whole of our life is God’s; our works, our concerns, our joys ... Everything of ours is his; especially those moments – like these moments of prayer – that we dedicate exclusively to him. Being good Christians will lead us to want to be good citizens, because our faith urges us all the time to be good students; to be good mothers who are capable of denying themselves and whose faith and love give them the strength to bring up their family in the best possible way; to be good and fair-minded business men, etc. Christ’s example leads us all to be hard-working, warm-hearted, cheerful and optimistic. It urges us to do more than we are strictly obliged to do. It teaches us to live loyalty towards our spouse if we are married, towards the firm we work for and towards the party or group to which we belong. Love of God, if it is true love, is the guarantee of love for men and shows itself in deeds.

A decree went out from the Emperor Augustus, enjoining that all the inhabitants of Israel should be registered. Mary and Joseph made their way to Bethlehem. Has it ever occurred to you that the Lord made use of the prompt acceptance of a law to fulfil his prophecy?
Love and respect the ways of behaving by which you may live in amity with other people. Have no doubt, either, that your loyal submission to duty can be the means for others to discover Christian integrity, which is the fruit of divine love, and to find God.[336]
75. WE WILL RISE AGAIN WITH OUR OWN BODIES

75.1 A truth of faith expressly taught by Jesus.

Some Sadducees, who did not believe in resurrection, came up to Jesus and tried to catch him out with a trick question. According to the ancient law of Moses, if a man died without leaving any children, his brother had to marry his widow in order to leave descendants to his brother, and he had to give the name of the dead man to the first of his sons. The Sadducees want to make any belief in the resurrection of the dead appear ridiculous. They therefore invent a clever hypothesis. If a woman marries seven times, having been left a widow by seven brothers in succession, whose wife will she be in heaven? Jesus answers them in a way that clearly shows the superficiality of their thinking. By his reply He reaffirms the truth of the resurrection of the dead. He takes a number of passages from the Old Testament, and as He expounds on the properties of risen bodies, He refutes all the objections brought forward by the Sadducees.

Our Lord reproaches them for their ignorance of the Scriptures and for not acknowledging the power of God, for this truth had already been firmly asserted in what was revealed. Isaiah had prophesied: Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For thy dew is a dew of light, and on the land of the shades thou wilt let it fall. The mother of the Maccabees encouraged her sons at the moment of their martyrdom, reminding them of the words of Scripture: The Creator of the world ... will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws. And for Job this same truth was to be the consolation of his unhappy days: For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last He will stand upon the earth ... then from my flesh I shall see God.

We have to foster the virtue of hope in our souls, and in particular the hope of seeing God. Those in love try to see each other. People in love have eyes only for their love. That’s logical isn’t it? The human heart feels this need. I would be lying if I denied my eagerness to contemplate the face of Jesus Christ. ‘Vultum tuum, Domine, requiram!’ – I will seek your countenance, O Lord. This desire will be satisfied if we remain faithful, because God’s concern for his human creatures has ensured the resurrection of the flesh, a truth which constitutes one of the fundamental articles of the Creed. But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain. The Church believes in the resurrection of the dead ... and understands that the resurrection refers to the whole man – to his body also.

The Magisterium has repeated on numerous occasions that it is a question of the resurrection of the same body as we had during our passage on earth, in this flesh in which we live, subsist and move. Because of this the two formulae ‘resurrection of the dead’ and ‘resurrection of the flesh are complementary expressions from one and the same tradition of the early Church, and both modes of expression must continue to be used.

The liturgy repeats this consoling truth on numerous occasions: In him (in Christ) the hope of our resurrection has dawned, and though we are saddened by the certainty of dying, He consoles us with the promise of eternal life to come. For those who are faithful to you, Lord, life is transformed, not taken away; and when our dwelling here on earth decays, there is waiting for us
God awaits us for ever in his glory. What great sadness for those who have counted solely on this world! What great joy to know that it will be ourselves, soul and body, who, with the help of grace, will live eternally with Jesus Christ, with the angels and with the saints, and who will give praise to the most Holy Trinity!

When we are grieved by the death of a loved one, or we are with mourners who have lost a member of their family, we have to manifest, to them as to ourselves, these truths that fill us with hope and consolation; life does not end here below on earth; we are going forward to meet God in eternal life.

**75.2 Qualities and endowments of glorified bodies.**

After death, each soul awaits the resurrection of its own body, with which, for all eternity, it will be in Heaven, close to God, or in hell, far away from Him. In Heaven our bodies will have different characteristics, but they will continue to be bodies and they will occupy a particular place, in just the same way as the glorious Body of Christ and that of Our Lady do. We do not know where this place is, or what it looks like. Earth as we know it will be transfigured. God’s reward will come upon the glorious body making it immortal, for mortality is a sign of sin, and creation was submitted to mortality as a result of the guilt of sin. Everything that threatens or is inimical to life will disappear. Those who rise unto Glory, Saint John affirms in the Apocalypse, shall hunger no more, neither shall they thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. The sufferings listed in the Apocalypse were the ones that caused greatest affliction to the people of Israel as they crossed through the desert: the scorching rays of the sun fell on them like darts, they rapidly became exhausted and the dry desert wind consumed their strength. Those very tribulations are a symbol of the sufferings that the new People of God, the Church, will have to undergo for as long as her pilgrimage towards her final home shall last.

Faith and hope in the glorification of our body will cause us to give it the value and respect due to it. Man is obliged to regard his body as good, and to hold it in honour, since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day. Nevertheless, how far removed from this just valuation is the cult that we so often see being given to the body in our day. Certainly we have a duty to look after our body, to use the opportune means of avoiding illness, suffering, hunger... but without forgetting that it has to rise again on the last day. What matters is that it should rise in order to go to Heaven, not to hell. Over and above our health there is the loving acceptance of God’s will concerning our lives. We should not have a disproportionate concern for our physical well-being. We should know how to put the pains and discomforts we may suffer to supernatural use – at the same time as we serenely use the ordinary means of avoiding them. If we manage to do this we will not lose our peace and our joy as we would if we were to put our hearts into merely relative and transitory things. Things only reach their final fulness in the glory of Heaven.

We should not forget for a moment what it is we are travelling towards. We should not forget the true value of the things that cause us so much concern. Our goal is Heaven. To be with Christ, soul and body, is what God created us for. This is why here on earth Our last word? It can only be a smile ... a merry song. On the other side Our Lord is waiting for us, with his hands held out in a welcoming gesture.

**75.3 Unity between the body and the soul.**
Although there is a great difference between the earthly body and the transfigured body, there is still a close relationship between them. It is a dogma of faith that the risen body is identical in species and number to the earthly body.[357]

Taking as its basis the nature of the soul and several passages of Holy Scripture, Christian doctrine shows the fittingness of the resurrection of one’s own body and of its new union with the soul. This is so, in the first instance, since the soul is only a part of man, and whilst it is separated from the body it cannot enjoy a happiness as complete and as fulfilled as that which will be possessed by the whole person. Besides, also, as the soul was created to be united to a body, a ultimate separation would violate the way of being proper to it. But a far more important reason is that it is more in conformity with divine wisdom, justice and mercy that souls should be united once more with their bodies so that both together, the whole man – who is not only soul, or only body – may share in the prize or the punishment merited during his passage through this life on earth. (Although it is of faith that the soul immediately after death receives its reward or punishment, without waiting for the moment of the resurrection of the body).

In the light of the Church’s teaching, we observe in greater depth that the body is not a mere instrument of the soul, although it is from the soul that it receives its capacity to act and through this to contribute to the existence and development of the person. Through his body, man finds himself in contact with earthly reality, which he has to dominate, work upon and sanctify, because God has willed it so.[358] Through his body, man can communicate with others and work with them to build up and develop the social community. We must not forget, either, that through the body man receives the grace of the sacraments: Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?[359]

Though we are men and women of flesh and blood, grace exercises its influence on the body as well, divinising it in a certain way in anticipation of the glorious resurrection. It will greatly help us to live with the dignity and bearing of a follower of Christ if we consider frequently that this body of ours, now a temple of the Holy Spirit so long as we are in a state of grace, is destined by God to be glorified. Let us turn today to Saint Joseph and ask him to teach us to live with a wholesome and proper respect for others and for ourselves. Our body, the one that we have during our earthly life, is destined to share for ever in the ineffable glory of God.
76. THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

76.1 We should adore the ‘one God’. Modern idolatry.

In the Gospel of today’s Mass we hear how a Scribe asks a question. This man who is full of good will, wants to know which of the precepts of the Law is the most important; the essential one. Jesus ratifies what had already been clearly expressed in the Old Testament: *Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.* The Scribe identifies himself fully with Jesus’ teaching, and immediately repeats the words that he has just heard. Our Lord speaks to him affectionately in words that will help him towards his definitive conversion. *You are not far from the kingdom of God.*

This commandment which is a summary of the whole *law of the Prophets*, begins by affirming the existence of *one God*. It is thus that it has been handed down to us in the Creed: *I believe in one God*. This is a truth that can be known by the natural light of reason, and the chosen people well knew that all pagan gods were false. In spite of this, idols were a constant temptation to them and a frequent cause of their turning away from the true God, *who took them out of the land of Egypt*. The prophets felt compelled to remind them of the falseness of those deities which they learned about as they came into contact with nations whose power and culture, which were very superior to their own, attracted and dazzled them. It was all a question of richer nations which were materially more advanced, but which were immersed in the darkness of superstition, ignorance and error. There were many occasions on which the chosen people failed to appreciate the incomparable richness of revelation and the treasure of the Faith. They abandoned the only *fountain of living waters* and turned instead towards broken and cracked cisterns which neither contained water nor had the capacity to hold any.

The ancient pagans, men who were highly civilised for the age in which they lived, invented idols for themselves and found different ways of adoring them. Many civilised men of our day – new pagans – raise up idols which are still better constructed and more sophisticated. In our day there seems to be real adoration and idolatry[362] for everything that makes its appearance in the name of progress or that provides yet more material well-being, pleasure or comfort ... It seems that man almost completely forgets the fact that he is a spiritual being destined for eternal life. Those words of Saint Paul in his *Letter to the Philippians* are all too topical. *Their God is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.*[363] It is the modern idolatry that tempts Christians who no longer give any thought to the immense treasure of their faith or the great richness of the love of God.

We break the first commandment of the decalogue when we put other things, even good things, before God, because then we love them in a disorderly way. When he does this man distorts the right order of created things and uses them for an end opposed to, or different from, that for which they were created. When the divine order taught by the decalogue is broken, man no longer finds God in creation: he then fabricates his own *God*, and radically hides himself within his own selfishness and pride. Still more, man foolishly tries to put himself in God’s place, to set himself up as the source of all that is good and of all that is evil. In this way he falls into the temptation with which the devil
coaxed our first parents: You will be like gods if you do not obey the commands of God.\[364\] Because of this very real temptation, each man, each woman, needs to often ask themselves – as we will now in our prayer – whether God is truly the first thing in their lives, the most important, the Highest Good, who guides the way they behave and make any decisions. We will be able to see this better if we examine how much effort we put into getting to know him better, for nobody can love what they do not know. Do we keep to the time that we set aside for our doctrinal-religious formation ...? Do we live an effective detachment from the things we possess or use so that they never become our most important good? ... *Thou shalt love the lord thy God. Him only shalt thou adore.* The effort we make to follow the path God wants for each of us – each one’s personal vocation – is the specific way we have of living that love and that adoration.

### 76.2 Reasons for loving God. Some faults and sins against the first commandment.

There are many very powerful reasons that move us to love God. He made us out of nothing and He Himself governs us, He facilitates for us the things necessary for life and sustenance ...\[365\] As well as this, we increased the debt we owe to him by the mere fact of our existence, when we were elevated by him to the order of grace and redeemed by him from the power of sin through the Passion and Death of his Only-begotten Son and because of the countless benefits and gifts that we constantly receive from him. We have been given the dignity of being his children and temples of the Holy Spirit ... It would be a tremendous lack of gratitude on our part if we did not thank him for all that He has given us. Rather, Saint Thomas points out, it would be as though we were to make to ourselves another God, as the children of Israel did, when they left Egypt and made an idol for themselves.\[366\]

True love – human love and, far more eminently, love for God – always ennobles and enriches man, it makes him a little more like his Creator.

The personal history of each man shows how even human dignity and happiness are achieved by following the path of love of God, never by leaving that path. When the ultimate reason for living is placed in anything other than God, it lays the way open to our falling under the domination of our own passions. It has been truly said that the way to hell is already hell. The prophet Jeremiah’s words to the people who allowed themselves to be dazzled by the idols of neighbouring nations are fulfilled: you shall serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favour.\[367\]

Ceasing to love God means starting along a path on which one concession leads to another, for whoever offends God, does not stop at one sin, but, on the contrary, he is driven to consent to others: everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. (John 8:34) This is why it is not at all easy to rise out of it, as Saint Gregory said: the sin which is not wiped out by penance, gives rise to other sins by its own weight.\[368\] Love of God leads us to hate sin, to keep away – with the help of grace, and with our ascetic struggle – from any occasion in which there may be an offence against God, and to do penance for the faults and sins of our past life.

We must frequently make positive acts of love and adoration of God. We must fill each genuflection – a sign of adoration – before the tabernacle with meaning. We can repeat the words *Adoro te devote* or the words we say in the *Gloria* during Holy Mass: *We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you, we give you thanks.*

We are lacking in love of God when we do not give him due worship, when we do not pray or when we pray badly. In the voluntary doubts we entertain against the faith, in reading books, newspapers or magazines which go against faith or morals by supporting superstitions or doctrines ...
which are both the result of ignorance – however scientifically they are presented – and which are opposed to the faith. When we expose ourselves, our children or those under our care, to influences which are harmful to faith or morals. Whenever we fail to put our trust in God, in his power and in his goodness ... This is the sign by which the soul can clearly see whether it loves God or not, with a pure love: if a person loves God, his heart will not be centred in on himself, it will not be concerned only with achieving its own likes and comforts. It will give itself to seeking the honour and glory of God and to pleasing Him. The more a heart keeps for itself, the less it has for God. We want to have our heart placed in God and in the people and the tasks that we do through Him and with Him.

76.3 Manifestations of our love for God.

Love for God should be expressed not only by giving him the worship which is his due, especially in the Holy Mass, but it should embrace every aspect of a man’s life, and it should have many manifestations. We love God through doing our work well, through faithfully fulfilling our duties towards our family, our work and society. With our mind and our heart ... in our external behaviour which should be proper to a child of God ... This commandment demands first of all adoration – that we give glory to God, which is not simply one more activity among many others, but rather the ultimate aim of all our actions, even those which can seem most ordinary: whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.[370] This basic attitude of adoration demands in practice that we should do everything, or at least want to do everything, in order to please God: that is to say, we should act with rectitude of intention.

Love for God and true love for one’s neighbour is nourished by prayer and the sacraments, by the constant struggle to overcome our defects, in our effort to keep ourselves in His presence throughout the day. In a special way, the Holy Eucharist must be the source at which our love for God is constantly nourished. Then we will be able to say, with the words of the Adoro te devote: To thee my heart I bow with bended knee. I adore you, O Lord, ... my heart submits itself completely to you.

What is it that our heart is immersed in during the day? Let us see in our prayer whether we use human devices to remind ourselves frequently about God throughout the day, and in this way to love him and adore him.
77. THE GUARDIAN ANGEL

77.1 The continuous presence of our Guardian Angel.

As well as creating man and the whole of the visible world, God willed to further transmit his goodness by bringing into being angels, who are creatures which are exclusively spiritual and of the greatest perfection.

The angels, who are pure spirits which have no material or corporeal composition, are the most perfect of all the creatures in creation. On the one hand their intelligence proceeds with a simplicity and acuteness that man is incapable of, and their will is more perfect than the human will. On the other hand, as they have already been elevated to the beatific vision, they are glorified creatures who see God face to face. Through this greater excellence, of both nature and of grace, God constitutes the angels as his ordinary ministers. God generally wills to use secondary causes in the government of the world, and He gives them the capacity to influence men and other inferior beings. The name attributed to them by Holy Scripture suggests that Revelation gives most importance to the truth as to the ‘tasks of the angels in relation to men’: angel, in fact, means ‘messenger’.

They are mentioned in many places in the New and Old Testament, and their presence is so obvious as to be inseparable from the salvific action of God towards men.

As well as intervening in the extraordinary events of the history of mankind, angels act constantly in the personal lives of men, because God in his providence has given to the angels the mission of guarding the human race and of coming to the help of each man. Angels are yet another token of God’s goodness towards us, and because of this they help, encourage, and strengthen us. They attract us towards all that is good, and encourage us to have trust and serenity. One whole book of the Old Testament is dedicated to recounting the help given by an archangel, Saint Raphael, to Tobias and his family. Without letting him know of his angelic nature, Saint Raphael accompanies young Tobias on a long and difficult journey, he gives him invaluable advice and performs countless services for him. At the end of the narrative, he presents himself: I am Raphael, one of the seven holy angels who present the prayers of the saints and enter into the presence of the glory of the Holy One. God knew all about that family’s upright behaviour: When you ... prayed, I brought a reminder of your prayer before the Holy One; and when you buried the dead, I was likewise present with you. When you did not hesitate ... to go and lay out the dead, your good deed was not hidden from me, but I was with you.

Our life also is a long journey, and at the end of it when, with the help of grace, we reach the house of our Father God, our Guardian angel will be able to say to us: I was with you, for the Guardian Angels have the mission of helping each man to reach the supernatural end to which he has been called by God. I send an angel before you, God said to Moses, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place which I have prepared.

Let us thank God for having wanted to put us under the care of these princes of Heaven who function so intelligently and effectively. Let us frequently tell them of the respect that we have for them.

77.2 Devotion. Help in our everyday life and in the apostolate.
The *Acts of the Apostles* narrate some episodes that teach us about how the angels take care of man: the freeing of the Apostles from prison, particularly that of Peter, when Herod had threatened him with death; the intervention of an angel in the conversion of Cornelius and his family; the angel who leads the deacon Philip up to the minister of Candace, on the way from Jerusalem to Gaza.[378]

Blessed John Paul II cited these events by way of example in his catechism on the angels. He comments: *we can understand how the Church has a conscious conviction as to the ministry entrusted to angels on behalf of men. Through this ministry, the Church professes her faith in the Guardian Angels, and venerates them in the liturgy with a special feastday. She recommends that we should have recourse to their protection by frequently saying a prayer, such as the one invoking the ‘Angel of God’. This prayer is like a treasury of the beautiful words of Saint Basil: ‘Each member of the faithful has beside him an angel to be his tutor and shepherd, and to lead him to life.’* [379] This prayer to the Angel of God, which so many Christians have learned from their parents’ lips is usually translated into English, with some slight variations, as: *Angel of God, my guardian dear, To whom his love commits me here; Ever this day be at my side, To light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen.* It is a short prayer that even young children can say, and which can still help us when a large part of our life has already run and we still have the same need for protection and refuge. If we make a resolution to speak to our Guardian Angel more frequently today, we will not fail to be aware of his presence and we will receive much help and grace through his mediation. As well as giving us his spiritual help, he will give us his help and support in the little necessities of everyday life: finding something we have lost; remembering something we have forgotten and need to remember; arriving on time ... For everything that is ordered to the glory of God – and everything which is humanly good can be so ordered and directed – we can count on our Guardian Angel’s help. [380]

We can also relate to the Guardian Angels of our friends, particularly where the task of bringing them closer to God and preventing them from turning away from him is concerned. Suggesting an opportune change of conversation. Supporting an initiative they may have to receive the sacrament of Penance or attend some means of ascetical or doctrinal formation ...

From ancient days, Christian piety has held that wherever the Most Holy Eucharist is reserved, angels are present who constantly adore Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Christian art, summarising popular piety, has often shown representations of angels surrounding the *monstrances* with their faces covered by their wings, because they consider themselves unworthy to be in his presence. So great is his majesty! Let us ask them to teach us to treat Jesus, really present in the tabernacle, with greater love and, at the same time, to show him the greatest possible reverence.

77.3 Asking his help for the interior life.

In spite of the perfection associated with spiritual nature, the angels do not have divine power or wisdom. They cannot read the inside of consciences, because they do not have unlimited knowledge. This is why it is necessary for us to let them know what we need of them at every moment. We do not need to use words, but it is necessary to direct ourselves to them with our mind, because their intelligence has the capacity to know what we explicitly imagine and think. Hence the frequent recommendation to foster a deep friendship with our own Guardian Angel.

In the order of the senses, our conversation with our Guardian Angel is less ascertainable than our conversation with a friend on earth, but its effectiveness is far greater. The advice he gives us comes
from God and affects us more deeply than the human voice can: his capacity to hear and understand us is immeasurably greater than that of even one’s best friend; not only because he is constantly at our side, but because he penetrates far more deeply into what we need or what we express.

The help he can give us in our interior life is very valuable. He can improve our piety, direct us in our mental and vocal prayer and help us particularly to keep presence of God. Our Guardian Angel will keep a check on our imagination, if we ask him, when it persists in getting in the way of our work or our relationship with God. Somehow he will suggest to us resolutions to improve, or a simple and practical way of specifying some good desire which has remained inoperative up to now. We will always know we can trustingly ask him to pray to God for us, saying those things to him that we are unable to express in our personal prayer, because of our own clumsiness. We can ask him to suggest to us the right words in spiritual direction so that we learn to live complete simplicity and sincerity once we have made our examination of conscience together with him. In moments of weakness, our contact with our Guardian Angel will make us more serene.

The mission of the Guardian Angel begins on earth, but it will have its fulfilment in Heaven, because his friendship is destined to last forever. Its subject matter is so intimate and personal that the bonds of supernatural friendship which began on earth will remain forever in Heaven. At the moment when we give an account to God of our life, he will be a great ally of ours. *It is he who, at your particular judgement, will remember the kind deeds you performed for Our Lord throughout your life. Furthermore, when you feel lost, before the terrible accusations of the enemy, your Angel will present those intimations of your heart – which perhaps you yourself might have forgotten – those proofs of love which you might have had for God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.*

That is why you must never forget your Guardian Angel, and that Prince of Heaven will not abandon you now, or at that decisive moment. He will be our best friend here on earth and afterwards for all eternity.
78. THE VALUE OF LITTLE THINGS

78.1 The alms of the ‘poor widow’.

Saint Mark tells us in the Gospel of today’s Mass[383] that Jesus sat opposite the Temple treasury and watched people putting money into the receptacle for alms. The scene takes place in one of the porticos, in the so-called Treasure Chamber or Hall of offerings. The days of the Passion were almost upon him.

Our Lord did not comment at all on the many people who contributed large amounts. But Jesus saw a woman come up who was dressed in the typical garb of widows, and who was obviously poor. She had perhaps waited for the crowd to thin out before depositing two small coins there. These coins had the least value of any in circulation at the time. Saint Mark explains the real value of these particular units of currency for the benefit of his non-Jewish readers, to whom his Gospel is principally addressed. He wants everyone to know how very little they were worth. In men’s eyes that anonymous offering had very little value indeed; the two coins were worth a quarter, that is to say a quarter of an as. This coin in its turn was a tenth of a denarius which was the basic monetary unit; a denarius was the day’s wages of a farm worker. A quarter would buy scarcely anything.

If anybody had been keeping a record of the offerings made that day in the Temple, he would probably have thought it was not worth recording this widow’s contribution. We see in fact that this was the most valuable contribution of all! It would be so pleasing to God that Jesus called together his disciples, who were scattered around the place, so that they might be taught the lesson to be learned from this widow. Those tiny pieces of copper could scarcely be heard falling into the treasury box. Jesus however clearly perceived the love of this woman who said nothing but who was giving God all her savings. Truly I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living.[384]

It often happens that what God considers important is very different from what men consider important. His standard of measurement and theirs are not the same! We are generally impressed by the big gesture, by unusual things of the kind that attract everyone’s attention. God is moved – the Gospels have left us plenty of examples – by little details filled with love, which are within the radius of action of everyone. He is, of course, also moved by happenings that we consider to be very important, but only when they are carried out with the same spirit of rectitude of intention, of humility and of love. The Apostles, who later were to be the very foundation of the Church, did not forget the lesson they were taught that day. That woman has taught all of us to touch God’s heart every day in the only way most of us can: through little things. Have you noticed how human love consists of little things? Well, divine Love also consists of little things.[385]

In this passage of the Gospel we also learn the true value of things. We can turn everything that happens, no matter how inconsequential it may seem, into something very pleasing to God. And because it is pleasing to him, it is turned into something of great value. Only those things we make pleasing to God have any true and eternal value.

Today in our prayer we can consider the vast number of opportunities that present themselves to us: Great opportunities to serve God seldom arise, but little ones are frequent. Understand then that
he who is faithful over a few things will be placed over many. Do all things in the name of God, and you will do all things well. Provided you know how to fulfil your duties properly, then ‘whether you eat or drink’, whether you sleep or take recreation or turn the spit, you will profit greatly in God’s sight by doing all these things because God wishes you to do them.[386]

78.2 Lukewarmness and the neglect of little things.

It is the little things that make a job perfect, and worthy therefore of being offered to God. But it is not sufficient that what we are doing is good (work, prayer ...); it also has to be well finished. For there to be virtue, Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches, it is necessary to attend to two things: to what is being done and to the way it is being done.[387] As far as the way it is being done is concerned, the final touches with the chisel or the brush turn that work into a masterpiece. On the other hand, shoddy workmanship, work which is done clumsily or carelessly, is a sign of spiritual languor and of lukewarmness in a Christian who should be sanctifying himself through his daily work. I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead ... For I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God.[388] The very nature of our Christian vocation demands that we take care of little things. Our aim should be to imitate Jesus during his years in Nazareth, those long years of work, of family life, of friendly relationships with his countrymen. Doing little things with love for God’s sake demands attention, sacrifice and generosity. A single isolated little detail may not in itself be very important: what is small, is small: but he who is faithful in small things is great.[389]

Love is what gives little things their value.[390] If this love were lacking, our endeavour to look after little things would be pointless; it would become a mania or be merely Pharisaical; we would pay tithes in mint, dill and cumin – as the Pharisees did – and we would run the risk of leaving out the most essential points of the Law – those of justice and of mercy. Although what we have to offer may seem very little – just as the contribution of that poor widow did – it acquires a great value if we place it on the altar and unite it to the offering that the Lord Jesus makes of himself to the Father. Then, our humble surrender – insignificant in itself, like the oil of the widow of Sarepta, or the poor widow’s mite – becomes acceptable in God’s eyes through its union with Jesus’ oblation.[391] At other times, details in our work, in our study and in our relationships with other people are the crowning of something good which would remain incomplete without those details.

One of the most obvious warning signs that we are starting on the path of lukewarmness is that we give little value to the details of our life of piety, to details in our work, and to little specific acts of virtue: if we ignore these symptoms we end up paying little attention to big things as well. The misfortune is all the more grievous and incurable when we barely notice that we are sliding downwards and only slowly come to realise this ... That if we are in this state we give a mortal blow to the life of the spirit is something obvious to everyone.[392] Love for God on the other hand is shown by our inventiveness, by our unremitting zeal and our effort to find in everything an occasion for showing our love of God and for giving service to others.

78.3 Holiness is ‘a cloth woven of little details’.

God is not indifferent to a love that knows how to care for small details. He is not indifferent, for example, as to whether we go to greet him – first of all – when we go into a church or when we happen to be passing by a church. He is not indifferent to the effort we make to arrive on time (better, a few minutes early) for Holy Mass, to the way we genuflect in front of him in the tabernacle or the
way we behave or try to be recollected in his presence. Moreover, when we see somebody make a devout genuflection before the tabernacle, it is easy for us to think: that person has faith and loves God. That sign of adoration helps others to have greater faith and greater love. *It may perhaps seem to you that the Liturgy is made up of little things: the position of the body, genuflections, inclinations of the head, the way the thurible, the missal and the cruets are to be moved. It is then that we have to recall Christ’s words in the Gospel: ‘He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.’ Moreover, nothing is small in the Sacred Liturgy, when we think of the greatness of him towards whom it is directed.*

Our spirit of mortification normally consists in specific little sacrifices throughout the day: keeping up a persevering struggle in our particular examination of conscience, sobriety at meals, punctuality, being pleasant to people, getting up on time, not leaving our work for later even though we find it difficult and trying, having order in our work and taking care of the tools or implements and materials we use, being grateful for whatever food is put in front of us, not allowing ourselves whims and fancies.

In order to live charity in a way that becomes ever more refined and heroic, it will be necessary for us to apply this approach right down to the smallest and least important details of daily life. *Your duty to be a brother to all souls will lead you to practise the ‘apostolate of little things’, without others noticing it. You will want to serve them so that for them their way becomes agreeable.* At times it will mean taking a real interest in what other people are saying; at other times it will be putting aside our own personal concerns so as to give our attention to the people we live with. It will mean not getting annoyed about what are really trivia, not being touchy, making people feel welcome. We will have to help others in a way they may not notice but which lightens their burden, to pray to God for them, for example, when they are in need, to avoid having critical spirit towards them and always to be grateful to them ... All of these things are within the reach and scope of each one of us. And we should do the same where each one of the virtues is concerned.

If we give attention to little things, we will live each day to the full, and will know how to fill each moment with the sense of preparation for eternity. To do this, let us frequently ask Mary for her help: *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us ... now, in every ordinary little situation of our life.*
79.1 The virtue of the wayfarer. Its foundation.

Christian asceticism pictures man’s life on earth as a journey that has its end in God. We are all homo viator, the wayfarer longing to turn his steps quickly towards his definitive goal – God. Because of this we must all ‘provide ourselves with hope’ if we want to walk with a firm and certain step along the hard path in front of us.\[395\] If the traveller were to lose hope of reaching his destination he would not continue with his journey. The only thing that keeps him on his way is his trust that he will some day reach his goal. We want to travel very straight and fast towards holiness – to God.

In human life, when a person sets himself an objective, his hope of achieving it is based on his physical resilience, his training and his own experience. When all is said and done it is based on his will power which enables him, if necessary, to draw strength from his very weakness. To reach the supernatural end of our existence, we do not rely on our own strength, but on God, who is all-powerful. He is the faithful friend who does not let us down. His goodness and mercy are not the same as the mercy and goodness of men, which are frequently like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away.\[396\]

Thanks to the supernatural virtue of hope, the Christian can be confident that he will reach his definitive objective which has already begun with Baptism in this life and will remain forever in the next. This objective is not something merely provisional, it is not the point of departure towards a further goal, as is the case with ordinary journeys. Through this virtue, we hope and long for that eternal life promised by God to those who love him, together with the means needed to achieve it and the support of his omnipotent help.\[397\]The greater the difficulties and the weaker we are, the stronger our hope in God has to be, for the greater his help will be. His closeness to our lives will be all the more evident. In the Second Reading of the Mass,\[398\] Saint Paul recalls how Abraham believed in hope, against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told. John Paul I comments: You will still say, ‘How can this happen?’ It can happen because it clings tightly to three truths: God is omnipotent, God loves me immensely, God is faithful to his promises. And it is He, the God of mercy, who awakens trust within me; trust which makes me know that I am not alone, or useless or cast aside, but rather that I am part of a salvific destiny which will end one day in Paradise.\[399\]

Abraham did not hesitate despite his advanced years and his wife’s sterility, but he trusted firmly in the power and mercy of God, being fully persuaded that God is able to do what He promises. And we, Aren’t we going to trust Jesus Christ ‘who was delivered up for our sins and rose again for our justification’? How could God leave us alone to deal with the obstacles we encounter which try to prevent us living in accordance with the call we have received from Him? He holds out his hand to us in many different ways: normally in our daily prayer, in our fulfilment of the plan of life we have set ourselves, in the sacraments, and, in a special way, in the advice we receive in spiritual direction. Our Lord will never leave us alone on our journey through this world, and on which we frequently experience faintheartedness and weakness. The hope of becoming saints, of faithfully doing what God expects of each of us, depends on our accepting the hand that He holds out to us.
This virtue is not based on our own worthiness, on our personal situation in life, or on the absence of difficulties, but on God’s will – on his will that we should reach the goal – a will which is always accompanied by all the grace and help that we can need in any possible circumstances.

‘Nam, et si ambulavero in medio umbrae mortis, non timebo mala’ – though I should walk through the valley of the shadow of death, no evil will I fear. Neither my wretchedness nor the temptations of the enemy will worry me, ‘quoniam tu mecum es’ – for you Lord are with me.

79.2 Hope in spite of setbacks, obstacles and pain.

The Gospel of today’s Mass shows us, once again, how God is closer to those who need him most. He has come to cure, to forgive, to save, and not only to preserve those who are whole. He is the divine Physician, who cures above all the sicknesses of the soul. Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick, He says to those who criticise him for eating with Publicans and sinners. When the things of the soul are not going well, when they have lost their health – and we are never completely well – Jesus is ready to pour out more care, more help. He does not abandon the sick man, and He does not abandon us. He does not give anybody up for lost. He does not leave us alone with our defects, with those things we can and must improve, because He calls us to sanctity and he has the necessary graces ready for us. It is only the sick man who can cause the medicines, and the actions of the Physician who can cure all ills, to be ineffective by refusing to take them. The saving will of Christ for each one of his disciples – for us – is the pledge that we will reach what He himself asks of us.

The virtue of hope enables us to see that the difficulties of this life have a deeper meaning, they do not happen by chance, or by blind destiny, but because God wills them, or at least permits them, in order to bring forth greater good from those situations. They cause us to strengthen our trust in Him, to grow in the awareness of our divine filiation, to foster a greater detachment from our health and from earthly goods, to cleanse our hearts of intentions which are perhaps not altogether good, and to do penance for our sins and for those of all men ...

God tells each one of us that He prefers mercy to sacrifice, and if at some moment He allows pain and suffering to overwhelm us, it is because it is good for us, there is a far more lofty reason that we at times do not understand. It is for our own benefit, for that of our family, our friends, the whole Church. God wants a greater good, in just the same way as the mother who gives permission for an operation that will enable her child to become healthy again. It is at such moments that we have to believe with a faith which is strong and to re-awaken our hope, for it is only this virtue that will teach us to regard as a treasure what humanly presents itself to us as failure or perhaps as a great misfortune. These are the moments when we have to go close to the tabernacle and say slowly to Our Lord that we want everything that He wants. This is our great mistake, writes Saint Teresa, we do not want to give ourselves absolutely to the disposition of our Lord, who knows best what is for our good. Jesus, whatever you ‘want’, I love. Whatever You allow, I with your help, will accept as a great good, without laying down any limits or conditions. I will always thank you for everything, if you are close to me.

79.3 We need to frequently call to mind our hope of becoming saints.

In everything God works for good, we will say in the depths of our heart, even though we may be passing through a great physical or moral difficulty. We have to overcome the way we tend
towards selfishness, sadness or merely trivial objectives. We are journeying straight towards Heaven, and everything should become an instrument to bring us closer and enable us to arrive sooner. Everything, even our frailty.

In particular we must frequently practise the virtue of hope in all that concerns the state of our interior life, especially when it seems that we are not advancing, that our defects are slow in disappearing, that we constantly make the same mistakes. We may then view sanctity as something very distant from us; perhaps just an illusion. We have to have very much in mind at those moments the teaching of Saint John of the Cross, that the soul who has the hope of Heaven achieves all that is hoped for.[405] There are people who do not receive divine goods precisely because they do not have the hope of receiving them, because their outlook is too human, too narrow, and they do not even glimpse the greatness of the goodness of God who gives us his help us even though we do not in the least deserve it. And, this saintly author continues: To win love’s chase I took my way, and full of hope began to fly. I soar’d aloft and soar’d so high, that in the end I reach’d my prey.[406] Our hope should be in God alone, it should be all-embracing, childlike as God wants it to be. If we are not miserly in the way we live it, we will obtain everything from Him. When holiness – which is the final aim of our lives – seems far away, we will try not to slacken in our struggle to come closer to God. We will try to have ardent hope and to fulfil our duties. We will endeavour to put into practice the advice we have received in spiritual direction and the resolutions from our examinations of conscience or our last day of recollection. We will struggle resolutely against discouragement. At a given moment we may only be able to offer Our Lord the pain we feel for our defeats – on battle-fronts of greater or lesser importance – and our renewed desire to begin again. This will then be a humble offering which is very pleasing to God.

Hope encourages us to begin again with cheerfulness and patience and without getting tired. It makes us certain that, with the help of Our Lord and of His Mother, Spes nostra, our Hope, we will achieve victory, for He puts within our grasp all the means by which we may conquer.
80.1 Human nature in its original state of justice and holiness.

God placed man above the rest of creation, to have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.[407] God therefore endowed man with intelligence and will, so that he might freely give to his Creator a glory far more excellent than that offered to him by any other creature. Led by his love for man, God ordained furthermore that He would raise man up so that he should have a share in his own divine life[408] and should be able to penetrate in some way his innermost mysteries. This was an endowment far greater than anything that nature could provide. To this end, God freely endowed man with sanctifying grace,[409] and with the supernatural virtues and gifts. He formed him in a state of holiness and justice and gave him the capacity to act supernaturally.[410] Through grace, the soul is transformed in such a way that, without ceasing to be human, man is divinised: the transformation could be compared to that of iron, which becomes incandescent when it is put into fire, and itself becomes like fire. This example is still imperfect, because grace effects a much deeper transformation in the soul than the one produced on iron by fire.

Moreover, God enriched Adam’s nature with other free gifts – of immunity from death, from concupiscence and from ignorance – which are called praeternatural gifts. This integrity of human nature in the state of original justice derived from the perfect and free subjection of man’s will to his Creator. Strengthened by these gifts, man could not be deceived in the things he knew and he was immune from all error. Man’s body enjoyed immortality, not by its own power, but because of a supernatural power imprinted on the soul preserving the body from corruption so long as it was united to God.[411] In Adam God contemplates the whole human race. The gift of original justice and holiness had been given to man, not as to a single person, but as the general principle of the whole of human nature, in such a way that, after him, it would be transmitted by means of generation to all future men.[412] We would all have been born in friendship with God and embellished in soul and body with the perfections granted by God. When the moment came, He would have confirmed each one in grace and carried him away from earth without his suffering any pain or having to undergo the moment of death. He would have come in this way to enjoy everlasting happiness in Heaven.

Thus God poured out his goodness on the first man, and this was in accordance with the divine plan. For this plan to be fulfilled, God wanted man to co-operate freely with grace. In a similar way He is asking us now, during this time of prayer, for our correspondence with the many graces we receive. It is here on earth that we have to earn Heaven, for all eternity.

80.2 The fellowship of all men in Adam. The transmission of original sin and its consequences. The struggle against sin.

We know through Revelation that the presence of original justice and of perfection in man, who was created in God’s image, did not exclude man, insofar as he was a creature endowed with freedom, from submitting in the beginning to the test of freedom, just like the other spiritual beings.[413] God placed a single condition on man: of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.[414] We know from Holy Scripture about
the sad transgression of this commandment, and today we read in the First Reading of the Mass about the state man was left in. The devil himself, under the guise of a serpent, incited the first woman to disobey God’s command: *She took of the fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate.* Immediately his free subjection to the Creator was broken, and the harmony that had existed among his potencies disintegrated; he lost original holiness and justice, he lost the gift of immortality, and he became subject to ‘him who has the power of death’ (Heb 2:14), that is to say to the devil. By that sin of prevarication the whole person of Adam was changed for the worse, in all that concerned both body and soul. He was turned out of paradise, and even though human nature remained integral in what was proper to it, man has ever since encountered serious obstacles to his doing what is good, because there is now in him an inclination towards evil. Original sin, personally committed by our first parents at the beginning of history, is transmitted by means of generation to every man who comes into this world. It is a truth of faith which has been declared on several occasions by the Church.

The reality of original sin and the conflict that it creates in the depths of each man’s soul is a verifiable truth. Faith explains its origin, and we all experience its consequences. *What Revelation makes known to us is confirmed by our own experience. For when man looks into his own heart he finds that he is drawn towards what is wrong and feels that he is sinking beneath many evils which cannot originate in his holy Creator.* Without grace, the human creature perceives that he is powerless to recover the dignity that is proper to him.

The Servant of God Paul VI taught that man is born in sin, with a fallen nature and without the gift of grace with which man was formerly endowed. The natural powers proper to his nature are wounded and subjected to the power of death. Moreover, *original sin is transmitted jointly with human nature, by propagation, not by imitation, and it is found in all men as though proper to each one.*

There is a mysterious fellowship of all men in Adam, to such an extent that all men can consider themselves a single man, in so far as all of them are bound together in the same nature that they have received from their first parent. The solidarity of the grace that united all men in Adam before the first disobedience, turned into solidarity in sin. *In the same way that original justice would have been transmitted to Adam’s descendants, disorder has been transmitted in its place.*

The spectacle presented by evil in the world and in us, the tendencies and the instincts of the body which are not subject to reason, convince us of the profound truth contained in Revelation, and make us struggle against sin, which is the only true evil and is the root of all the evils that exist in the world: So much wretchedness! So many offences! Mine, yours, those of all mankind ...

‘Et in peccatis concepit me mater mea!’ (And in sin did my mother conceive me. Psalm 50:5). I, like all men, came into the world stained with the guilt of our first parents. And then ... my own sins: rebellions thought about, desired, committed ...

To purify us of this rottenness, Jesus willed to humble himself and take on the form of a slave (cf Phil 2:7), becoming incarnate in the spotless womb of Our Lady, his Mother, who is also your Mother and mine. He spent thirty years in obscurity, working as any other man, at Joseph’s side. He preached. He worked miracles ... and we repaid him with the Cross.

Do you need more motives for contrition?

80.3 Directing all human realities to God once again.
God expelled our first parents from paradise, as a sign that men would come into the world in a state of separation from God. Instead of transmitting supernatural gifts, Adam and Eve transmitted sin. They lost the inheritance they should afterwards have left to their descendents: the consequences of sin were straight away experienced by the first sons of Adam and Eve. Cain killed Abel out of envy. In the same way all evil, be it personal or social, finds its origin in the sin of the first man. Even though Baptism completely forgives the guilt and the punishment of original sin and of the personal sins a man may have committed before receiving it, it does not free him from the effects of sin: man remains subject to error, to concupiscence and to death.

Original sin was a sin of pride. Each one of us falls into the same temptation of pride when we seek to occupy – in society, in our private lives, in everything – the place that belongs to God: you will be like gods. These are the very words man hears within the disorder of his senses and potencies. As at the beginning, he seeks now also – on many occasions – the autonomy that makes him the arbiter between good and evil, and forgets his greatest good, which consists of his love for and his submission to his Creator. It is in his Creator that he regains his peace, the harmony of his instincts and of his senses, and all other good things.

Our apostolate in the midst of the world will lead us to give each man with his deeds (legal ordinances, manual work, teaching ...) the place that really corresponds to him in relation to his Creator. When God is present within a nation or a section of society, fellowship becomes more human. There is no solution for the conflicts that devastate the world, or that prevent the achievement of greater social justice, which does not come about through a new closeness to God, through a conversion of heart. The evil is at the root – in the heart of man – and it is there that it has to be cured. The doctrine of original sin, of that poison so very much at work today in man and in society, is a fundamental point of the catechism and of all sound doctrinal formation which should never be missed out.

When we see ourselves confronted with a world that sometimes seems to be profoundly disturbed, we cannot simply fold our arms and shrug like a person overwhelmed by a situation about which he can do nothing. We do not have to take part in the making of great decisions, which perhaps are not our concern anyway, but we do have to play our part in those matters that God has put within our reach, so as to give them a Christian orientation.

Our blessed mother, Mary, who was preserved immune from all stain of the guilt of original sin from the first moment of her immaculate conception by a singular grace and privilege of God, will teach us to go to the root of the evil that besets us. Above all she will strengthen us in our friendship with God, whatever the situation in which we find ourselves.
81. OUR RESPONSE TO SORROW AND NEED

81.1 The raising of the son of the widow of Nain. Jesus always shows compassion towards sorrow and suffering.

The Gospel of today’s Mass enables us to contemplate Jesus arriving in a small town called Nain, accompanied by his disciples and followed by a large crowd. It was about six miles south-east of Nazareth and five miles from Capharnaum.

Just inside the gate of the place the crowd accompanying Our Lord crossed the path of a procession of people who were carrying to his burial the only son of a widow. According to Jewish custom, they were carrying the body, which was wrapped in linen, on a bier or stretcher. The procession, led by his mother, was made up of a large number of people from the city.

The group coming into Nain stopped in front of the dead man. Jesus went up to the mother, who was weeping for her son, and He took pity on her.

The evangelist explains that Jesus was moved. Perhaps He even showed signs of it, as when Lazarus died. Jesus Christ was not, and is not, insensitive to suffering ...

Christ knows He is surrounded by a crowd which will be awed by the miracle and will tell the story all over the countryside. But He does not act artificially, merely to make an effect. Quite simply He is touched by that woman’s suffering and cannot keep from consoling her. So He goes up to her and says, ‘Do not weep’ (Luke 7:13). It is like saying, ‘I don’t want to see your crying; I have come on earth to bring joy and peace.’ And then comes the miracle, the sign of the power of Christ who is God. But first came his compassion, an evident sign of the tenderness of the heart of Christ the man. He laid his hand on the young man’s body and ordered him to get up. And He gave him to his mother.

The miracle is at the same time a good example of the concern we should feel for other people’s misfortunes. We must learn from Jesus. In order to have a heart like his we have to turn in the first place to prayer; we should ask Our Lord to give us a good heart, capable of having compassion for other people’s pain. Only with such a heart can we realize that the true balm for the suffering and anguish in this world is love, charity. All other consolations hardly even have a temporary effect and leave behind them bitterness and despair.

We should ask ourselves in our prayer today whether we know how to love everybody who crosses our path in this life, whether we have a real concern for their misfortunes, a concern that leads us to act in an effective way; thus, when we come to our daily examination of conscience we will find in the course of it that we have many acts of charity and of mercy we can offer to God.

81.2 Imitating Our Lord. Love with deeds. Order in charity.

Jesus Christ comes to save the lost to take upon himself our wretchedness in order to relieve us of the burden of it. He comes in order to show his compassion for those who suffer and are in need. He does not pass by. He halts, as we see in today’s Gospel. He consoles and He saves. Jesus makes mercy one of the principal themes of his preaching ... There are many passages in the
teaching of Christ that manifest love-m Mercy under some ever fresh aspect. We need only consider the Good Shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep or the woman who sweeps the house in search of the lost coin. And He himself taught us through his constant example how we should behave towards our suffering neighbour.

And just as God’s love is not simply an emotion or feeling, but something that leads Our Lord to perform deeds that show it, so our love for our neighbour has to be a love that shows itself in deeds. Let us not love in word or in speech, says Saint John, but in deed and in truth. And those deeds of love, in other words, the service it implies, should also maintain a definite order. Just as love leads us to want the best for those we love and to do good to them, so the order of charity should lead us to want, above all, that people should be united to God, and to endeavour to bring this union about. We have to realise that the most sublime good, the definitive good, consists in union with God. Apart from God no other partial good has any meaning. The opposite to this, namely the seeking of material goods as the most important thing for oneself and for others, is proper only to pagans or to those Christians who have allowed their faith to grow lukewarm, so that, in fact, it has very little influence on their daily lives.

As we consider the primacy of spiritual good over any material good, we must not forget the commitment that every Christian with a well-formed conscience has; it is to promote a more just social order, because charity also refers, albeit secondarily, to the material well-being of all men.

The importance of charity as regards the attention we should pay to the material needs of our neighbour, a consideration presupposing justice and help in shaping this virtue, is such that Jesus Christ himself when speaking about the last judgement, declared: Come, O blessed of my Father … for I was hungry and you gave me food … I was thirsty and you gave me drink … . And forthwith Our Lord draws attention to the way in which those who have neglected these deeds will be condemned. Let us ask Our Lord to give us an ever-watchful charity, because if we are to achieve salvation and arrive at our rightful destination, we need to recognise Christ when He comes out to meet us in our brothers, in the people around us. Every day we encounter him; in the midst of our family, in our place of work and when we are away from home ...

81.3 In order to love we need to understand. Love for those whose need is greatest.

Through his meeting with that poor woman of Nain, Jesus wants to show us how He immediately understands the sorrow and the feelings of the mother who has lost her only child. Jesus shares in that woman’s suffering. In order to love it is necessary to understand and to share. It is the real meaning of sympathy.

We ask Our Lord today to give us a big heart, a heart which is full of understanding, so that we are able to suffer with those who suffer, and to rejoice with those who rejoice. We must ask him to help us to prevent that suffering whenever we can, and to make us into people who live and spread happiness wherever we happen to be. We should ask for the vision, too, to understand that the true and principal good of others, which bears no comparison with any material or worldly good, consists in their union with God, which will lead them one day to total happiness in Heaven. It is not a question of superficial comfort for the disinherited of this world, or for those who undergo suffering or failure, but rather is it the profound hope of the man who knows he is a child of God and co-heir with Christ to eternal life, no matter what his situation in worldly terms may be. Robbing man of that hope, and substituting for it another hope of a purely natural, material happiness, is to deceive man in
such a way that, owing to the precariousness of such a Utopia, it will lead him, sooner or later, into the depths of despair.\[438\]

Our compassionate and merciful attitude, manifested in deeds, has to be shown in the first place towards the people we are normally with, towards those whom God has placed, day in day out, in our company, and towards those of them who are most in need. It is unlikely that compassion for people further away will be pleasing to God if we neglect the many opportunities that present themselves to us each day to practise justice and charity towards the people who belong to our family or who work beside us.

The Church is aware that the truth about the God who saves cannot be separated from the manifestation of his love of preference for the poor and needy.\[439\] Works of mercy, as well as the relief they give to those in need, serve to improve our own souls and those of the people who accompany us in those activities. We have all experienced that contact with the sick, with the poor, with children and with adults who go hungry, always means for us a meeting with Christ in his weaker or unprotected members, and for that very reason such contact can mean a spiritual enrichment. The Lord enters with greater intensity into the soul of him who approaches his little brothers, moved not by a desire of mere altruism – which is a noble desire but not one that is supernaturally effective – but by the very sentiments of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd and the Physician of souls.\[440\]

Let us turn to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus and to the heart of Mary, his Mother, and ask that we should never remain passive with regard the demands of charity. In this way we will be able to invoke Our Lady with confidence, in the words of the liturgy: Recordare, Virgo Mater Dei... Remember, O Virgin Mother of God, as you stand in his presence, ut loquaris pro nobis bona, to speak good things on our behalf and ask for our needs.\[441\]
TENTH WEEK: MONDAY

82. THE DIVINE MERCY

82.1 God’s mercy is infinite, eternal and universal.

Saint Paul calls God the Father of mercies, thus indicating God’s infinite compassion towards mankind, whom He loves dearly. Few other truths, perhaps, are insisted on as repeatedly as this particular truth: God is infinitely merciful; He has infinite compassion on men, particularly on those who have to bear the greatest of all misfortunes – sin. Scripture uses a great variety of terms and images – so that we should really learn the lesson – to teach us that God’s mercy is eternal, that is to say without limit in time. It is immense, without limitation of place or space. It is universal, since it is not restricted to one nation or one race, and it is as extensive and wide-ranging as are the needs of man.

That the Son of God, the Word, took flesh is a proof of this divine mercy. He came to forgive, to reconcile men with one another and with their Creator. Meek and humble of heart, He offers relief and rest to all who suffer tribulation. The Apostle James calls the Lord compassionate and merciful. In the Epistle to the Hebrews Christ is the merciful high priest, and this attitude of God towards mankind is ever the reason for his salvific action. He never tires of forgiving men, of encouraging them to journey towards their definitive homeland, and to overcome their weaknesses and the pain and deficiencies they may encounter in this life. The truth, revealed in Christ, about God ‘the Father of mercies’, enables us ‘to see him’ as particularly close to man, especially when man is suffering, when he is under threat at the very heart of his existence and dignity. This is why the unchanging plea the afflicted (the lepers, the blind, the lame ...) make to Jesus is have mercy on us.

Jesus’ goodness towards men – towards all of us – goes far beyond human reckoning. That man who fell among robbers who stripped him and beat him and went away leaving him half dead ... It was He who comforted him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He it was who then made him mount on his own horse, and found accommodation for him at that inn, so that he should be cared for. It was He who paid a large amount of money for him, and promised the inn-keeper that, on his return, He would pay him whatever more He should spend. He has taken the same care of each individual man. Time and again He has lifted us up when we have been badly injured, He has poured balm into our wounds, and has bound them up. Our salvation is in his mercy; in just the same way as the sick, the blind and the crippled have done, we must turn to the Tabernacle and say to him: Jesus have mercy on me ... God pours out his mercy in a special way through the sacrament of Penance. There he cleanses us from our sins, welcomes us, cures us, washes our wounds, gives us respite ... Moreover, in this sacrament He completely heals us and we receive new life.

82.2 Mercy presupposes justice, and surpasses the demands made on us by the virtue of justice.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy, we read in the Gospel of today’s Mass. God is particularly anxious that his children should develop this attitude towards their brothers and sisters, and He tells us that the mercy shown towards us will be in proportion to the mercy we ourselves have shown. The measure you will give will be the measure you get. It will be a proportionate amount, not the same amount, for God’s goodness surpasses all our reckonings. To a
grain of wheat will correspond a grain of gold; to our sack of wheat will correspond a sack of gold. For the fifty denarii we forgive, the ten thousand talents (a fortune of incalculable wealth) that we owe to God will be written off. But if we harden our hearts towards the misfortunes and weaknesses of others, the less accessible and narrower will be the gate by which we are to enter Heaven and find God himself. *He who would receive mercy in Heaven must practise it in this world. Because of this, since we all long for mercy, we must act in such a way that mercy becomes our advocate in this world, so that we may afterwards be free in the next. There is mercy in Heaven which is reached by means of showing mercy on earth.*[453]

Occasionally we try to set mercy up against justice, as though the one meant laying aside the demands of the other. This is certainly a mistaken view, for it makes mercy unjust, whilst the truth of the matter is that mercy is the fulness of justice. Saint Thomas teaches[454] that when God acts with mercy – and when we imitate him – He does something which is above justice, but which presupposes having previously had and lived this virtue to the full. In the same way, if someone gives two hundred denarii to a creditor to whom he owes only one hundred, he does not act against justice, but – as well as satisfying what is just – he behaves with liberality and mercy. This attitude towards our neighbour is the fulness of all justice. Moreover, without mercy we come in the end to a *system of oppression of the weakest by the strongest* or to an *arena of permanent struggle of some against the others.*[455]

With justice alone it is not possible for there to be real family life, or harmony at work, or concord amidst the great variety of social activities. It is obvious that if we do not live justice in the first place, we cannot practise the mercy that God asks of us. But after giving to each one what is his, after giving what belongs to him in justice, a merciful attitude leads us much further: for example, it leads us to know how to forgive offences promptly (even though these offences may be just in our imagination or caused by our own lack of humility); it leads us to help someone with his work on those occasions when he has more to do or is feeling tired, to give a word of encouragement to someone who is finding things difficult or is feeling worried or anxious (maybe a member of his family is ill, he has failed an examination, or he has lost some money ...); it leads us to be ready to perform those little deeds of service that are so necessary to the people around us, and so much a part of living and working with other people ...

### §82.3 Some effects of mercy.

However just relations between men become, it will still always be necessary to practise mercy each day. This virtue enriches and perfects the virtue of justice. Our merciful approach to life should encompass and have an eye to the most diverse needs – material needs (food, clothing, health, employment ...); needs of a moral order (helping our friends go to Confession ... waging a fight against the great ignorance there is as to the most elementary truths of the Faith by teaching the *Catechism* and co-operating in the work of formation ...). Mercy (*misericordia*) is, as we see from its etymology, a disposition of the heart that leads us to commiserate with the misfortunes of others that we encounter each day as though they were our own. When we understand this we must first of all try to show understanding for other people’s failings and defects. We must try to develop a positive, kindly outlook that will dispose us to think well of people, to forgive easily their faults and their errors, and never to neglect giving them the most appropriate help. Such an attitude should lead us to respect the radical equality of all men – for they are all children of God – and the differences and
peculiarities of each individual’s personality. Mercy demands true compassion, and an effective sharing in the misfortunes of our brothers and sisters, both material and spiritual.

Our Lord showed that this beatitude was the straight path along which we will achieve happiness in this life as well as in the next. *It is like a little trickle of fresh water that springs from the outpouring mercy of God and that gives us a share in his very happiness. It teaches us, far better than books can, that true happiness does not consist in having and possessing, in judging and in always being right, in imposing justice according to our lights. It consists rather in letting ourselves be taken up and clasped by God, in ourselves submitting to his judgement and to his generous justice, and in learning from him the daily practice of mercy.*[456] It is then we understand that *it is more blessed to give than to receive.*[457] A compassionate and merciful heart is a heart filled with happiness and peace. In this way we too will receive that mercy that we need so badly; and we will owe it to those who have given us the opportunity of doing something for them and for God. Saint Augustine tells us that mercy is the lustre – the glory – of the soul; it enriches it and causes its appearance to be good and beautiful.[458]

As we finish this time of prayer, let us turn to our Mother, Mary, for she is *the woman who knows most deeply the mystery of God’s mercy. She knows its price and she knows how deep it is. In this sense we also call her Mother of mercy.*[459]

Although we may already have abundant proof of her motherly love for each one of us, we can say to Our Lady, *Monstra te esse matrem!*[460] Show us that you are our mother, and help us to show that we are good children of yours and brothers of all men.
83. SALT THAT HAS LOST ITS SAVOUR

83.1 Lukewarmness.

Our Lord tells his disciples that they are the salt of the earth; they do to the world exactly what salt does to food, keeping it from going bad and making it agreeable to the palate. But salt can sometimes lose its savour or in itself deteriorate. Then it quite simply becomes useless. This kind of change is, after sin, the saddest thing that can befall a Christian, the point of whose existence has been to give light to many, whereas he has in fact now become darkness. Far from being able to point the people he comes in touch with in the right direction, he now becomes disoriented and aimless himself. Having been placed on earth so as to give strength to others he has nothing left to communicate now but weakness.

Lukewarmness is a disease of the soul that affects both the intellect and the will, and leaves the Christian devoid of the strength to carry out apostolate, at the same time filling him with a deep feeling of sadness and impoverishment. The sickness starts with a weakening of the will, brought about by means of repeated faults and culpable omissions, of frequently doing wrong and, possibly even worse, failing to do what is right. The Christian no longer sees Christ clearly on the horizon of his life. Because he has been consistently careless regarding the little details that are a proof of love, he discovers that Christ now seems far removed from him. His interior life undergoes a profound change; it no longer has Jesus as its focal point. The man who is lukewarm finds that his practices of piety have become empty of content; he no longer puts his heart and soul into them. He ‘goes through the motions’, performing them out of routine or habit, not any longer out of love.

In this state a man loses all spontaneity and joy – recognisable characteristics of a soul in love – in responding to anything that has reference to God. A lukewarm Christian is somehow ‘inside out’; his is a soul that has ‘grown weary’ in its endeavour to improve. Christ has faded from the horizon of his life. The soul descrives God, if it sees him at all, as a remote and distant figure, hazy and indistinct, with ill-defined features, and probably indifferent to him. No longer does he perform positive acts of generosity as he formerly did: he is now prepared to settle for much less.

Saint Thomas cites as a feature of this state a kind of sadness, whereby a man becomes sluggish in spiritual exercises because they weary the body. All norms of piety and devotion become for us a burden we find increasingly hard to bear, instead of being for us a powerful centre of energy, driving us forward and helping us to overcome any difficulties we may encounter.

There are many Christians who have sunk into lukewarmness. There is in our time a great deal of savourless salt about. Let us consider in our prayer today whether we are going forward with the firmness and confidence that Jesus asks of us, whether we regard our conversation with him as the treasure which enables our interior life to intensify and keep growing, and whether, we properly nourish our love. Let us consider whether, when we become aware of our weakness and our lack of correspondence with grace, we promptly make acts of contrition in order to close the breach the enemy has made and is attempting to widen in our defences.

83.2 True piety; feelings; spiritual aridity.

We must not confuse the state of the lukewarm soul with a sensation of dryness sometimes
experienced when we perform our acts of piety, a sensation produced on occasions or for long periods by tiredness or illness, or by the temporary loss of physiological keenness and enthusiasm. In such cases, in spite of the feeling of dryness, our will is firmly set on all that is good. Our soul knows that it is travelling directly towards Christ, even though it is at the moment passing over a stony waste where the going is hard and we cannot find a single well or even a spring of cool water. But our soul knows where its destination lies and goes straight towards it in spite of our weariness and thirst and the unfriendly terrain we have to tread.

In the state of what is called aridity, even though the soul has no feeling and it seems difficult to pray, to carry on any real conversation with God, true devotion nevertheless remains. Saint Thomas Aquinas has defined this type of devotion as the will to give oneself readily to things concerning the service of God. This ‘readiness’ grows weak if the will falls into a state of lukewarmness: I have this against you, says the Lord, that you have abandoned the love you had at first, that you have weakened, that you no longer love me as you did formerly. The person who is determined to keep up his prayer even in times of aridity, when all feeling is absent, is perhaps like him who draws water from a well, bucket by bucket: one aspiration after another, an act of sorrow ... It is hard work and it demands effort, but he does draw out water. On the other hand, in a state of lukewarmness our imagination strays and runs wild, we are no longer firmly determined to dispel voluntary distractions and, in practice abandon prayer with the excuse that we are getting no results from it. Genuine conversation with God, on the other hand, even if God allows it to be arid, is always fruitful, whatever the circumstances, as long as we have rectitude of intention and are firmly intent on being close to God.

We must remind ourselves here and now, in God’s presence, that true piety is not a matter of feelings, although sensitive affections are good and they can be a great help in our prayer and in the whole of our interior life, because they are an important part of human nature as it was created by God. But such affections must not occupy a disproportionately important place in our life of piety; they are not the main part of our relationship with God. Feelings help, but achieve no more than this assistance, because the essence of piety does not consist in feelings, but in the will’s being determined to serve God, quite independently of any state of mind – which is always so changeable! – or of any other circumstances. In matters of piety we must take care not to let ourselves be guided by feelings, but rather by our intellect, enlightened and helped, as we pray it will be, by faith. To allow oneself to be guided by feelings would be like handing over the management of one’s house to a servant whilst you as its real owner abdicate responsibility for it. It is not feelings that are bad, but rather the degree of importance we attribute to them ...

Lukewarmness is sterile; salt without savour is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men. On the other hand, aridity can be the positive sign that God wants to purify a particular soul.

83.3 The need to have interior life.

As men we can be a cause of happiness or of sadness, of light or of darkness. We can be the source of peace or of anxiety, either the leaven that enhances or a dead weight that hinders the progress of others. Our passage over this earth can never be a matter of indifference as far as others are concerned. We help others to find Christ or we separate them from him. We enrich others or we impoverish them. And we come across so many of these others – friends, workmates, members of our
family, neighbours ... who seem to go after material goods as though they hungered for them, material goods that only serve to lure them away from their true Good who is Jesus Christ. They journey through life like men who are lost. If the guide of the blind is not to become blind himself,[468] it is not enough for him to know the way from hearsay or from coming across mere references to it. If we are to help the people around us, it is not enough for us to have a vague and superficial knowledge of the way. We need to walk along it ourselves and to have first-hand knowledge of the obstacles that lie in our path and have to be surmounted. We need to have interior life, to enter daily into personal conversation with Jesus. We need to know his doctrine ever more deeply; to struggle with still more determination to overcome our own defects. The apostolate is the result of a great love for Christ.

The first Christians were true salt of the earth, and they preserved people and institutions – the whole of society – from corruption. What can it be that has happened in so many nations? Why is it that Christians should now be giving the sad impression that they are unable to slow down and halt that wave of corruption that is bursting in on the family, on schools and on institutions ...? The Faith is still the same. And Christ lives among us now just as He did previously. His power is still infinite – divine. Only the lukewarmness of so many thousands, indeed millions, of Christians, explains how we can offer to the world the spectacle of a Christianity that allows all kinds of heresies and stupidities to be propounded within itself. Lukewarmness destroys the strength and endurance of the Faith, and is the soulmate, in both a personal and a collective way, of compromise and of a spirit of comfort-seeking.[469] It is difficult to explain many of the things that happen nowadays at a personal and at a public level, if we do not bear in mind that so many people who should be awake, watchful and attentive have allowed their Faith to fall asleep; love has been snuffed out in so very many hearts. In many spheres, the ‘normal Christian’ now generally means someone who is lukewarm and mediocre. Among the first Christians the ‘normal Christian’ meant one who lived the heroism of each day, and when the occasion presented itself, accepted martyrdom itself: it could and did mean very often the surrender of one’s very life in defence of the Faith.

When love grows cold and faith falls asleep, the salt loses its savour and is no longer good for anything. It is just something for throwing away. What a pity if a Christian were to become as useless as this! Lukewarmness is often the cause of apostolic ineffectiveness, because if we are in its grip the little we do becomes a task devoid of human or supernatural attractiveness, and bereft of a spirit of sacrifice. Faith that appears moribund and radiates little love is unable to win anyone over or find the right words with which to attract others to a deep and intimate relationship with Christ.

Let us fervently ask God for the strength to react. We will be the true salt of the earth if we keep up our daily conversation with God and if we go with ever-greater faith and love to receive the Holy Eucharist. Love was, and is, the moving force in the life of the saints. It is the whole raison d'être of every life dedicated to God. Love gives us wings with which to soar over any personal barriers to our advance, or any obstacles presented to us by our surroundings. Love makes us unyielding when confronted by setbacks. Lukewarmness gives up at the slightest difficulty (a letter we should write, a telephone call we should make, a visit, a conversation, the lack of some material means ...) It makes mountains out of molehills. Love for God, on the other hand, makes a molehill out of a mountain; it transforms the soul, gives it new lights and opens up new horizons for it; it makes the soul capable of achieving its highest desires and gives it capacities it had never as much as dreamed of possessing. Love does not make a fuss about the effort involved, and fills the soul with happiness as it surveys the results of its efforts.
As we finish our meditation, let us turn with confidence to the Blessed Virgin, the perfect model of loving correspondence with the Christian vocation. Let us ask her to remove effectively from our soul any shadow of lukewarmness. Let us ask our Guardian Angels, also, to make us diligent in God’s service.
84. ACTUAL GRACES

84.1 We need grace in order to do good.

Through original sin human nature lost the state of sanctity to which it had been raised by God, and as a consequence it was also deprived of the integrity and interior order that it had once possessed. Since the first sin was committed man has lacked the strength of will that would enable him to fulfil all the moral precepts that are known to him. After sin made its appearance on earth, doing good became something difficult. Man therefore is divided in himself. As a result, the whole life of men, both individual and social, shows itself to be a struggle, and a dramatic one, between good and evil, between light and darkness.

God’s help is absolutely necessary if we are to be able to perform acts which are directed towards the supernatural life. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God. Moreover, because of original sin, that help becomes still more necessary. No one is freed from sin by himself or by his own efforts, no one is raised above himself or completely delivered from his own weakness, solitude or slavery. We all need Christ, who is the model, master, physician, liberator, saviour, and giver of life. Without him we can do nothing. With him we can do all things.

Although human nature is not corrupted by original sin, even after Baptism we experience a tendency towards evil, and we find it hard to do good: it is the so-called fomes peccati or concupiscence that – without being in itself a sin – proceeds from sin and inclines us towards sin. Freedom itself, although not entirely suppressed, has been weakened.

We can understand then, in the light of this doctrine, that our good works, which are the fruits of sanctity and apostolate, belong in the first place to God. In the second place – very much in the second place – they are the result of our having corresponded, as instruments which are always weak and disproportionate, with grace. God asks us always to bear in mind the abject penury of our condition, so that we may avoid the danger of ever becoming conceited. Often, as Saint Alphonsus Liguori says, a man dominated by pride is a thief who is even worse than other thieves because he does not steal anything of earthly value but instead steals God’s glory ... According to the Apostle, we cannot in fact do any good work of ourselves; we cannot even think a good thought (cf 2 Cor 3:5) ... Because of this, when we manage to do some good, let us address ourselves to Our Lord, saying: for all things come from thee, and of thy own we have given thee(1 Chron 29:14).

Whenever we find we have good results in our hands, we must offer them once more to God, because we know that only what is evil, or is in some way defective, belongs to us. Beauty and goodness belong to God.

84.2 Actual graces.

We can see from the pages of the Gospel that those encounters individual men and women had with Christ were unique and unrepeatable: Nicodemus, Zacchaeus, the woman taken in adultery, the good thief, the Apostles ... God’s action had already been slowly preparing those souls so that they should be open to God when the moment arrived. And so, as a result of that unique and decisive encounter, God’s grace would accompany them, seeking opportunities for a new conversion to take place within
their souls and helping them to make further progress. Other people we come across in the Gospels did not correspond fully or even in part, with God’s light. Our encounters with Christ, too, have been unique and unrepeatable. They have been like those of the people who met him in Galilee, beside the lake of Gennesareth, in Jerusalem or in some little town as he travelled through Samaria. Jesus is just as much present in our lives. God’s goodness enables us to receive those divine inspirations that help us to come close to God. He helps us to finish off a piece of work with perfection, to accept or perform a particular mortification or to make an act of faith. He helps us to conquer ourselves, for love of God, in something we find difficult. These are actual graces, free and transitory gifts from God that affect each soul in their own particular way. What a lot of actual graces we have received each day! What a lot more we will receive so long as we do not close the door of our soul to that silent and most effective action of the Sanctifier!

Through grace God grants to each man, to each woman, not only the facility to do good, but the very possibility of doing good, because as creatures we are quite unable, with our strength alone, to keep the Commandments, or to do anything at all that is supernaturally good.

_Apart from me you can do nothing_,[476] said Our Lord categorically. And Saint Paul teaches that salvation _depends not upon man’s will or exertion, but upon God’s mercy_,[477] on a mercy that is constant and infinite. How well we have experienced this!

The Holy Spirit enlightens us so that we can see the truth. He inspires and moves us, preceding, accompanying and perfecting our good deeds. _God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure._[478] Nevertheless, grace does not take away freedom, for it is we ourselves who will, and we ourselves who act.

We must ask God for the practical wisdom of always relying on him and not on ourselves, of seeking our strength in him and not in the keenness of our intellect or in any other resources of our own. We have to listen frequently, when putting our desires into practice, to the loving warning of the Master: _Apart from me you can do nothing_. In the supernatural life we will always be beginners, struggling with the docility and attention of a child who needs the assistance of adults for everything it does. Saint Francis de Sales uses this example to illustrate the delicacy of God’s love for men: _When a mother is teaching her little child to walk, she helps him and supports him when necessary. She lets him take a few steps on level ground where there is least danger. She takes his hands and holds him up, or she picks him up in her arms and carries him. In the same way Our Lord pays continuous attention to the steps taken by his children._[479] This is what we are like before God – little children who have not yet learned to walk.

It is up to us to correspond, to show our good will, to begin and begin again. We can do this by being sincere in spiritual direction, by having a very specific _particular examination of conscience_, (that point on which we are currently fighting). Our days will frequently be summed up as _asking for help, corresponding and giving thanks._

### 84.3 Our correspondence.

God treats each soul with infinite respect, and because of this, because He does not force our wills, man can prefer to resist grace and make God’s wishes sterile. In fact, throughout the day, perhaps in little things, we do say _no_ to God. And we have to try many times to say _yes_ to what God asks of us, and _no_ to our own selfishness, to the impulses of our pride and to laziness.

Our free response to God’s grace must occur in our thoughts, in our words and in our deeds.[480]
Faith alone is not enough to enable us to co-operate adequately. God asks for our personal effort, for deeds, for initiative, for effective desires ... Although Our Lord through his death on the Cross merited an infinite treasury of grace, those graces are not granted to us all at once, and their greater or lesser abundance depends on how we correspond. When we are prepared to say yes to Our Lord in everything, we attract a veritable cascade of gifts. Grace, love for God, inundates us when we are faithful to the small insinuations of grace each day – when we live the heroic minute in the morning and try to give our first thought to God; when we prepare well for Holy Mass and struggle to reject those distractions that try to separate us from what is really important; when we offer up our work ...

Nobody who does everything possible for him can say that he has been forgotten or not cared for by God. God gives his help to everyone, even to those who are outside the Church through no fault of their own. Moreover, God, who is infinitely merciful and infinitely patient, has procured time and time again, in a thousand different ways, the return of some prodigal who has made off with his inheritance and now finds himself in a lamentable situation. Each day God goes out towards him and moves his heart so that he may set out once again on the path that leads to his father’s house. And when He meets someone who corresponds with the grace given him, God heaps on him grace upon grace, and encourages him to rise higher and higher.

If in our personal prayer we find that it is difficult for us to correspond, let us follow this advice: Talk with our Lady and say to her trustingly, ‘O Mary, in order to live the ideal which God has set in my heart I need to fly very high – ever so high!’ Beside Mary we will always find Joseph, her most faithful spouse, who knew how to carry out especially well and so promptly what God manifested to him by means of an angel. We can turn to him throughout the day, and ask him to help us to hear clearly the voice of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the many details of our workaday life that are sometimes so very small, and ask for the fortitude to put these divine promptings into practice.
TENTH WEEK: THURSDAY

85. REASONS FOR PENANCE

85.1 Removing obstacles. Renouncing one’s own ego. Co-redemption.

Jesus summoned the crowds and his disciples and said to them: If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.\[^{484}\]

Our Lord had already taught that to be his disciple it was necessary to be detached from material goods.\[^{485}\] He now asks for a deeper detachment. One must renounce self, one’s own ego, and what is most personal. But for a disciple of Christ every act of self-giving includes an affirmation: to cease living for oneself so that Christ may live in me.\[^{486}\] Life in Christ, for whose sake I have suffered the loss of all things,\[^{487}\] as Saint Paul writes to the Philippians, is a real consequence of grace. The whole of Christian living is an affirmation of life, love and friendship. I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.\[^{488}\] Christ offers us divine filiation and a sharing in the intimate life of the Most Blessed Trinity. What stands in the way of that wonderful promise is simply attachment to our own ego, our love of comfort, well-being and success. Thus mortification is necessary. It is not something negative, but rather detachment from self in order to allow Jesus to live in us. Hence the paradox: to Live we must die.\[^{489}\] We must die to ourselves in order to live a supernatural life. If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.\[^{490}\]

If any man would come after me ... To respond to the invitation of Jesus, who passes alongside us, we need to go forward step by step, continually making progress. We need to die a little each day, to deny ourselves, to put off our old nature which belongs to our former manner of life,\[^{491}\] to reject those works which separate us from God or make friendship with him difficult. To achieve the holiness we are called to by God, we must bring under control our inclination to evil and our passions because, after original sin and also as a result of personal sins, they are no longer rightly subject to our will. To follow Christ we must be master of ourselves and be able to guide our steps in a definite direction. As has been rightly said: we are like a man with a donkey; either the man leads the donkey or it leads him; either we control our passions or they control us.\[^{492}\] When there is no mortification, it seems as if your spirit were growing smaller, shrinking to a little point. And your body seems to grow and become gigantic, until it gains control. It was for you that Saint Paul wrote: ‘I buffet my own body, and make it my slave; or I, who have preached to others, may myself be rejected as worthless’.\[^{493}\]

Saint Paul points out another reason for penance: Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.\[^{494}\] Was Christ’s Passion not sufficient in itself to save? asks Saint Alphonsus Liguori. Nothing was lacking in the value of his Passion; it was more than sufficient for the salvation of all men. And yet, to have the merits of Christ’s Passion applied to us, we need to co-operate, suffering patiently the toils and tribulations God may wish to send us, so as to liken us more closely to his Son Jesus.\[^{495}\]

When we are generous in practising mortification we are the first to benefit from this sharing in the sufferings of Christ.\[^{496}\] Besides, the supernatural efficacy of penitence reaches our own family.
It touches in a special way those most in need, our friends and workmates, those people whom we wish to bring closer to God and, indeed, the entire Church and the whole world.

85.2 The Church’s invitation to penance. Penance and prayer. Friday, a day of penance.

Therefore the Church – while it reaffirms the primacy of the religious and supernatural values of penitence (values extremely suitable for restoring to the world today a sense of the presence of God and of his sovereignty over man, together with a sense of Christ and his salvation) – invites everyone to accompany the inner conversion of the spirit with the voluntary exercise of external acts of penitence.[497] When offered to God in a spirit of penance, a person’s physical or moral suffering ceases to be something useless or harmful and acquires a redeeming value for the salvation of his brothers and sisters. Therefore he is carrying out an irreplaceable service. In the Body of Christ, which is ceaselessly born of the Cross of the Redeemer, it is precisely suffering permeated by the spirit of Christ’s sacrifice that is the irreplaceable mediator and author of the good things which are indispensable for the world’s salvation.[498]

The Church reminds us frequently of the need for mortification. If any man would come after me... In particular she has set aside one day in the week, Friday, as a day on which we are to consider the need and efficacy of denying ourselves and practising some special mortification: abstaining from flesh meat, or doing something we find rather difficult (like finishing our work more perfectly or making life more pleasant for others), or performing some pious act: doing some spiritual reading, saying the Rosary, paying a visit to the Blessed Sacrament or doing the Stations of the Cross. We might also perform one of the corporal works of mercy: visiting the sick, spending some time with a person in need, or giving alms. However, we ought not to be content with just a weekly penitential act as a reminder of our Lord who suffered and died for us, and taught us the value of sacrifice. Each day God expects us to deny ourselves in little ways, in things which will enliven our soul and make our apostolate fruitful.

85.3 Some practices of penance.

First we ought to be aware of what are called passive mortifications. These can be – when offered with love – what happens to us unexpectedly, or what does not depend on our will: cold, heat, pain, patience at having to wait longer than we expected, not reacting in kind to a brusque answer we might receive. Along with these passive mortifications there are many others which can make our dealings with other people more pleasant – punctuality, for example, listening with real interest, speaking when there is an uncomfortable moment of silence, being affable and not allowing circumstances to dictate our moods, being courteous and polite with others, saying thank you and apologising when we have annoyed someone. Working intensely, with order, finishing a job once we have started it, and helping others to do their work can also present us with the chance to mortify ourselves. Mortification can also be lived with regard to our intellect, as in avoiding harsh and uncharitable criticism, not being curious or judging hastily. And there are possible mortifications of the will: struggling decisively against self-love, not speaking always about ourselves and of what we have done or plan to do, or talking excessively about our likes and dislikes.

Active mortification of the senses is another area for self-denial: guarding our sight, for instance; practising sobriety and offering up a mortification at every meal. Interior mortification should not be neglected, getting rid of useless thoughts that hinder our search for holiness, and especially avoiding
distractions in prayer during Holy Mass, and in the course of our work.

Let us examine ourselves to see whether we live self-denial cheerfully; whether we control our bodies as we ought; whether we have offered to God, with a desire to co-redeem, the suffering and upsets we meet with along our way; whether we are truly resolved to lose our life, step by step, little by little, for the love of Christ and the sake of the Gospel.

Our mortification and penance in the middle of the world should possess a series of qualities. Above all, it should be joyful. *That sick person, consumed by a zeal for souls, said: ‘Sometimes the body protests and complains, but I ... try to transform ‘those moans’ into smiles, because then they become very effective’. [499]* Many smiles and pleasant comments are found to be possible, if we are mortified, in the midst of suffering and illness.

Our mortification should be continual. Thus it will make presence of God easy wherever we are; it will help us to work intensely and to finish what we are doing. When we have an apostolic spirit we will be more pleasant and courteous in our dealings with other people.

Our mortification should be discreet and natural. It should be seen by the effect it has on the lives of others rather than by being unusual and strange, or otherwise out of place in one of Christ’s faithful.

Finally, mortification should be humble and full of love, because what moves us is the contemplation of Christ on the Cross, to whom we want to be united as fully as possible. We want nothing in our lives that does not lead us to Christ.

In our mortification, as on the hill of Calvary, we find Mary. Let us place in her hands the good resolutions we have formed during this time of prayer. Let us ask her to teach us to appreciate the need for a life of self-denial and mortification.
86. PURITY OF HEART

86.1 The ninth commandment and purity of soul.

On many occasions our Lord pointed out how the source of human acts lies in the heart, in the interior of a person, in the depths of his or her spirit. This inner life must be kept clean and pure, undefiled by disordered affections, jealousy or spite. Whatever good is done by anyone has its origin in the heart. There, with God’s grace, sincere piety towards God can grow and develop, as can pure love, understanding and respect for our neighbour. Purity of heart increases our capacity for love, whereas ‘bourgeois’ attitudes, selfishness and spiritual blindness, result from an inner life which is stained. Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.[500] And we are warned in the Book of Proverbs: Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.[501] The heart symbolizes what is most intimate to the human person.

In the Gospel of today’s Mass we are told: You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.[502] Here Jesus lays down the essential meaning of the ninth commandment, which forbids internal acts (thoughts, desires, imaginations) against the virtue of chastity. Every disordered affection, although it may seem pure and disinterested, goes against this precept if it is not in accord with the will of God in the light of one’s personal circumstances.

To live this commandment in a positive way – this is essential if we are to learn to love – we need, in the first place, a deep friendship with God, so that his love may fill our hearts. Besides, we must avoid what can give rise to temptations against holy purity. These can come when there is a lack of prudence in guarding our senses, when we do not mortify our imagination and rather allow it to entertain dreams and fantasies which withdraw us from reality and the fulfilment of our duties; or they can come when we seek compensations of an affective nature, or give in to vanity, or dwell on useless memories of the past. If we do not reject these internal temptations promptly once we have noticed their presence, if we do not use the means available to rid ourselves of them, we create a confused inner attitude, not responding as we ought to God’s grace. A person becomes accustomed to not being generous with God. If we play around with temptation, walking a tightrope between consent and rejection, it is possible that this lack of interior mortification may lead to internal sins against the virtue of chastity. With such an attitude it is difficult, not to say impossible, to make real spiritual progress. On the other hand, when a person is resolved to lead a clean life with the help of God’s grace, when he uses the means and especially that of humble and trusting prayer, and puts things right whenever there has been a mistake, then the Holy Spirit, the Sweet Guest of the soul, gives more and more grace. Thus does joy, one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, take deeper root in the soul of the person who puts the Holy Spirit before all others and renounces silly compensations that leave a sad and bitter mark on the soul.

86.2 Guarding one’s heart and fidelity according to one’s vocation and state in life.

By the ninth commandment not only does God ask that we avoid unchaste thoughts and desires, but also that we guard our heart, defending it against what makes true love impossible. To keep our soul clean entails guarding our own integrity and affections, being prudent so that we do not squander
tenderness where and when we ought not to; it means accepting fully at every moment the consequences of our vocation and state in life.\[503\] Those who have been called to marriage must guard and give their heart only to their own spouse, as much at the beginning of their married life as at the end. To do so they must constantly control their heart, not letting it become enmeshed in real or imaginary compensations. Married people \textit{mustn’t forget that the secret of married happiness lies in everyday things, not in daydreams. It lies in finding the hidden joy of coming home in the evening; in affectionate relations with their children; in everyday work in which the whole family cooperates; in good humour in the face of difficulties that should be met with a sporting spirit; in making the best use of all the advances that civilization offers to help us bring up children; it lies in making the house pleasant and life more simple.}\[504\]

Those from whom God has asked their whole heart, not wishing it to be shared with any other, have even higher reasons for keeping their soul clean and free of attachments. How awfully deceitful it would be to allow the heart to become entangled in small attachments which would choke, as thorns did the seed sown by the sower, the infinite love of God, who has called us from all eternity. ‘\textit{Do you think,’ asks St Jerome, ‘that you have reached the height of virtue because you have offered a part of the whole? God wants you to be a living host, one pleasing to himself.}’\[505\] And God always gives his grace to keep the heart intact, to keep it for him alone and for all souls through him; to keep it without compensations, free of the threads or chains which would prevent it from reaching the heights to which it is called. Courage is needed to cut away what binds a person down or to rectify a misdirected affection.

To guard our heart we must first guard our love, because if we are lacking in human love and are lukewarm in our friendship with God it will be easy for unruly desires and compensations to enter our soul. The heart was made to love and will not be satisfied with what is dry and loathsome.

Let us examine our hearts and see what care we put into those times which are dedicated especially to God: Holy Communion, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, moments set aside for prayer during the day and before bedtime. Let us see if our relationship with Jesus is a really personal one, such as it should be between friends. Let us be sure to avoid routine and half-heartedness in this friendship. Let us direct the affections of our heart in accord with the wishes of God, rejecting promptly any thoughts which might cloud or twist our relationship with God.

86.3 Guarding our eyes, affections and internal senses.

Custody of our heart often begins with the guarding of our eyes. Common sense and supernatural sense are like filters placed in front of our eyes to enable us not to fix our gaze on what we ought not to look at. We should do this with naturalness and simplicity, without having to do anything unusual, but we must do so with fortitude, in the street just as in the workplace and when socialising.

To get to know and love other people we must have contact with them. But to prevent our heart becoming wrongly attached to people to whom it might easily become attached and to whom God does not want it attached we must be prudent in keeping our distance. This means a moral, affective and spiritual distance. It means avoiding the unwarranted placing of confidences in other people, speaking to them unnecessarily of our sorrows and sufferings. At times prudence will dictate that we even keep physically distant. If we are upright in our conscience, an attentive and sincere examination of our motives will enable us to measure our behaviour, judging correctly between what we seem to be seeking and what we are actually seeking in our social and professional relationships.
To prevent our affections from spilling over unduly we do not need to suppress them, which in any case is impossible, but to guide and control them according to God’s will. Our heart needs to be strengthened by a clean love which will protect it against affections which are not pleasing to God.

Custody of the heart is connected with control of our memory, with rejecting images and interior dialogues which might inflame an attachment or sidetrack our heart. Taking refuge in a hyperactive imagination and opening the door to foolish dreams prevents us from being open to everyday reality. When we give in to this kind of temptation, and we can do so easily in moments of tiredness or interior dryness as a way of seeking compensation for the ordinary faults and failings of normal life, there arises a lack of unity of life. In parallel there exists an inner world where our vanity is always on top, and another hard, real world where we must achieve our personal sanctification, doing the good that God expects of each of us, man or woman. Those who are unhappy with their situation and are prone to escape into that unreal and imaginary inner world will find it very difficult to face up generously and realistically to what they must do at any given moment if they are to grow in virtue. How is it possible to live in a dream world and still do one’s duty? How can we struggle against a particular defect if instead of facing up to it we withdraw into our imagination and overcome it there? How can we be joyful in the face of sacrifice when we are accustomed to hide ourselves in a make-believe world of hallucinatory happiness?

Our heart could even become attached to persons we might have seen in a film, or come across in a novel or even in real life, although they are people with whom we have no real contact. A heart thus tied down, and perhaps stained, cannot find its way to God.

Today we can examine ourselves and see where our heart is during the day: what do we think about? Who occupies the foremost place in our thoughts? Let us ask Our Lady that Jesus may be the real centre of our life; that the clean and noble love, one ready for sacrifice, which He wishes each and every man and woman to live, may be lived, with him, in accord with our own vocation.

May I give you some advice for you to put into practice daily? When your heart makes you feel those low cravings, say slowly to the Immaculate Virgin: ‘Look on me with compassion. Don’t abandon me, my Mother.’ And recommend this prayer to others.[506] Don’t abandon me, don’t abandon anyone, my Mother!
87. KEEPING ONE’S WORD

87.1 Jesus praises those who keep their word. No need for oath-taking: our word of honour is sufficient guarantee.

In Jesus’ time the practice of oath-taking had fallen into disrepute due to the frequency and lack of seriousness with which oaths were taken. Casuistry had legitimized the non-fulfilment of oaths. Jesus opposed this custom, and with the formula But I say to you which he frequently used to show the divine origin of what he was saying, he forbade calling on God to witness not only to a lie but also to those matters where a person’s word ought to have been enough. The Gospel of today’s Mass, from Saint Matthew, reminds us of Jesus’ words: Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’.

To take an oath, that is to say, to call upon God to witness to the truth of what we are saying, or as a guarantor of a promise, is lawful and at times even necessary when circumstances warrant it. It is then an act of the virtue of religion and redounds to the honour and glory of God. The prophet Jeremiah tells us that swearing in truth, in justice and in uprightness is pleasing to God. What we state must be true, spoken prudently and not lightly or rashly, and must refer to something just and good.

When there is no pressing need, our word as Christians and as honourable men and women should be sufficient, because of our being known as people who seek the truth and keep our pledges and promises. We wish to be loyal and faithful to Christ, to whatever commitments we have freely taken on, to our family and friends, and to those who employ us.

In most situations in life to give our word will be an adequate guarantee of our truthfulness and fidelity. But for this to be so we must be truthful in little things, willing to correct our mistakes and fulfil our commitments. Do the members of our family, our friends and workmates know us to be loyal and faithful? Do they know that we never tell a lie, even in a jocular way, to achieve some good or avoid an evil?

87.2 Love for the truth always and in every circumstance.

Hypocrisy and falsehood are two vices forcefully attacked by Christ. Truthfulness is one of the virtues most praised. He said of Nathaniel: Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile. Jesus is himself the Truth while the devil, on the other hand, is a liar and the father of lies. Those who follow the Master must be honourable and sincere in their doings, must avoid deceitful behaviour and be truthful in their dealings with both God and man.

Truth is taught by word and example. Jesus is a witness of his Father, the Apostles, the first Christians, and now we are witnesses of Christ to a world that needs living testimony. But how will our friends and workmates believe the truths we wish to pass on to them unless our own lives are based on a real love for the truth? We Christians ought to be able to say, with Christ, that we have come into the world to bear witness to the truth at a time when many use lies and deceit to achieve promotion or a greater degree of material well-being, to avoid commitment and sacrifice, or simply through cowardice and a lack of human virtue. Jesus taught us that love for the truth is a necessary quality for being his follower. Such love brings peace because the truth will make you free.

We must be exemplary in this matter, being ready to live our lives, build up our material wealth and
do our job with a great love for the truth. We must love the truth and put effort into finding it. At times blinded by sin, passion, pride and materialism, we will not find it unless we love it. It is so easy to fall in with a lie when it comes, disguised or openly, as a means to achieve prestige or get ahead in our job. When faced with temptation, no matter how it presents itself, we must recall the clear, unambiguous teaching of Christ: *Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’*.\[517\]

We are obliged in justice to be truthful, and also out of love and respect for our neighbour. This same respect for those listening to us will bring us sometimes not to express our own ideas and opinions indiscreetly, but to take into account their age and the degree of their formation. Love for the truth which someone has confided to us will bring us to be morally upright in cases of professional secrecy or discretion, or with a person’s right to privacy. If need be, we should ask for advice about how to behave when confronted with someone who wants information to which he has no right.

87.3 Loyalty and fidelity to commitments.

When we give our word, in a certain sense we give ourselves. We put ‘on the line’ what is most intimate to ourselves. In spite of his personal failings, a true disciple and follower of Christ will be honest and loyal, a man of his word. In the Church, we Christians are called ‘the faithful’. This term underlines the state acquired by the members of the People of God through Baptism.\[518\] But a person who inspires confidence, whom we can trust, can also be called faithful. People like this live up to the confidence placed in them, to the demands of love, friendship or duty. This kind of person keeps his word. In Holy Scripture the term ‘faithful’ is applied to God himself because no one is more worthy of trust than He. God is always faithful to his promises; he never fails to keep his word. In Saint Paul’s words: *God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength*.\[519\]

Whoever keeps his word is faithful. The person who fulfils his commitments to God and to others is loyal. However, our society often falls into doubt and relativism. Many people, irrespective of their age, seem to be ignorant of the noble obligation to keep their word, to fulfil the commitments they once assumed with complete freedom, or to behave in accordance with the decisions they have made before God or man, in civil or religious life. Difficulties may arise, but the faith and teaching of the Church and the example of the saints show us that it is possible to live these virtues. God does not deny his grace to those who do what they can.

We must be firmly convinced and help others have the same conviction, namely, that it is possible to live all the virtues with all the demands they make. There is an idea in vogue that virtues and commitments are ‘ideals’ or ‘goals’ to aim at, but without much hope of attaining them. Let us ask God never to allow us to fall into that error.

A Christian who is loyal will not cave in when upright moral behaviour imposes or seems to impose serious difficulties. We should ask God for an upright conscience. One who gives in may desire in theory to practise a particular virtue, may wish not to sin, but in practice considers that when temptation is great or the difficulties serious he is more or less justified in giving in. This can happen in one’s work situation, or when faced with the obligation to react energetically when sensuality threatens to supervene, or when a serious effort has to be made to finance the children’s education, or to be faithful to one’s spouse, or one’s vocation. Let us call to mind today, in our prayer, these words of Jesus: *The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock*.\[520\]

Faithful to Christ. This is the greatest praise we can receive. That Christ can rely on us no matter
what present or future circumstances may bring; that our friends can know we will not let them down; that society can trust us, knowing that we will keep our word and fulfil our obligations freely and responsibly. *When making a night journey by train have you never thought how the lives of hundreds of persons are in the hands of the driver and the signalmen, who in spite of hunger and thirst must stay at their posts? The life of a whole country, the life of the world, depends on the fidelity of men in fulfilling their duties at work and in society, in their adhering to their contracts and being faithful to their word.*[521] And all this without having to call upon God as a witness, but simply as upright and loyal persons.

*Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, honourable people, loyal in fulfilling small daily duties, without recourse to lies or deceit at work, being simple and prudent, fleeing all murkiness, open and plain in what we say or do. If we are loyal to our fellow men, then with God’s grace we will be loyal to Christ and this is what really counts. *He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.*[522] We will not be upright and faithful to Christ unless we are loyal in our everyday human dealings.*

How pleasant it is when a friend comes to us in the midst of some difficulty and says: *You can count on me!* So too, in our prayer today, with simplicity and an awareness of our weakness, we approach God and say: *Lord, you can count on me!* We can use the same words as an aspiration right through the day.

Let us ask the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is also ‘Virgin most faithful’, to help us to be loyal and faithful, each and every day, in fulfilling our obligations and duties.
88.1 Urgency in the apostolate: the harvest is great and the labourers few.

The Gospel of today’s Mass speaks of something that must have happened frequently as Jesus went about towns and villages preaching the coming of the kingdom of God. On seeing the crowds he had pity on them; he was moved by their plight, seeing them harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, not knowing where to turn. Instead of guiding and caring for them, their shepherds had neglected them and behaved more like wolves than like shepherds. Then Jesus said to his disciples: *The harvest is great, but the labourers are few.* The same is the case today; there are too few labourers for the work to be done. The harvest can be lost because there is no one to go out and reap it. So there is a pressing need for Christians to be joyful, effective, simple, faithful to the Church and conscious of what they have to do. We are all involved because God needs workers and students to bring Christ onto the shop-floor and into the university, with their prestige and apostolate. God needs teachers who are exemplary and teach with a Christian outlook, teachers who give time to their students, teachers who are real masters. God needs men and women who live their faith in every activity. God needs parents who are concerned for the education and faith of their children, and who take an active part in school boards, committees, and local associations.

When we see so many people going wrong, empty of God and filled only with concern for their material possessions, or by the desire to have them, we cannot remain unmoved. For although they may seem indifferent, deep down in their soul these people are thirsty for God. They want someone to speak to them of God and the truths of salvation. If we Christians do not work with a spirit of sacrifice in this matter then what the prophet Joel foretold will happen: *The fields are laid waste, the ground mourns; because the grain is destroyed, the wine fails, the oil languishes. Be confounded, O tillers of the soil, wail, O vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley; because the harvest of the field has perished.* God expected these fruits to be gathered in and they were lost because of the negligence of the harvesters.

The words of Jesus, *the harvest is great, and the labourers few*, should bring us to examine ourselves each day: what have I done today to make God known? Have I spoken to anyone of Christ? What apostolate have I done? Am I concerned for the salvation of friends and colleagues? Do I realise that many people might come closer to God if I were more daring and gave better example in fulfilling my duties?

88.2 There are no excuses. God calls everyone to be an apostle. Prayer is the most effective and necessary means for winning vocations.

Many excuses can be made for not bringing Christ to others – lack of means, inadequate preparation or time, the fact that we live in a small corner of the world and know few people, or because we would have to travel long distances even within the region where we live. However, God continues reminding all of us, and more especially in these times of so much religious indifference, that *the harvest is great, and the labourers few.* A harvest not saved in time is lost. The following words of St John Chrysostom may help us see in our prayer whether we are too easily excusing ourselves of the noble call to be an apostle as God wishes. *There is no one colder than a Christian*
who is uninterested in the salvation of others. You must not use your poverty as an excuse. The widow who gave her mite will accuse you. Peter himself said: ‘Gold and silver I have none’ (Acts 3:6). And Paul was so poor that often he suffered hunger and was lacking in what he needed to live. You must not use as an excuse your humble background. They too were humble, of modest background. Nor should your lack of knowledge be an excuse. They were unlettered men. Slave or fugitive, you must do what you can. Such was Onesimus, and be mindful of his vocation... Do not use your poor health as an excuse. Timothy was frequently ill. Each of us can be useful to our neighbour if we do all that we can. We want to be faithful to God. We will be if we do all we can.

The harvest is great, and the labourers few. St Gregory the Great comments: When we hear this we cannot but feel sad, because we know that there are people who want to listen to the good news, but what is missing are people who might announce these tidings to them.

For there to be many people working shoulder to shoulder in the world, each one in his own proper place, we have only to follow the way shown us by Jesus himself: Pray, therefore, the Lord of the harvest that he send labourers into the harvest. Jesus invites us to pray that God may awaken in many souls the desire to take a greater part in the work of redemption. Prayer is the most effective means of winning new apostles and of bringing people to discover their vocation. The desire to win new apostles must be shown first of all in prayer of petition: constant, trusting and humble petition. All Christians should pray that God send labourers into his harvest. If we ask God for vocations we will ourselves feel more obliged to be daring in our apostolate, thus winning reapers for the harvest.

88.3 Asking God for vocations.

By sending out his disciples Jesus prepared his arrival in various towns and villages. Theirs was a work of preparation only, as all apostolate is. They were to go into all the towns where He himself was to come. Every apostolic work aims at preparing someone for the coming of God.

The harvest is great... We must continually ask God to awaken in Christian men and women the vocational meaning of their lives; that they may want not just to be good, but to learn to be workers in God’s harvest, responding generously to the Lord’s call. Men and women, young and old, dedicated to God in the world; many in apostolic celibacy; ordinary Christians, with the same secular activities as their fellow citizens, who bring Christ into the very heart of society.

Pray to the Lord of the harvest... We must also pray that there be many vocations to the priesthood and religious life, vocations that are faithful, holy and joyful, vocations that are so much needed by the Church.

God, who could do the work of redemption in the world all by himself, has wished to count on disciples who will go before him into towns and villages, into universities and factories, announcing the wonders and demands of the coming kingdom of God. Clearly our Mother the Church needs people who will walk in the path of commitment and holiness. The Roman Pontiffs have not ceased to remind us of the need for apostolic vocations, for in the hands of such lies in great measure the evangelization of the world.

Help me to cry: Jesus, souls!... Apostolic souls! They are for you, for your glory. You’ll see how in the end he will hear us.

What am I doing to win these vocations? These vocations should come from among one’s children,
brothers and sisters, relatives, friends and acquaintances. Let us not forget that God calls many. Let us ask him for the grace to promote and encourage the call of God, directed perhaps to people we are in contact with every day.

Let us ask Our Lady to help us take seriously Our Lord’s words: *The harvest is great*, and be resolved to do all we can, with a sense of urgency and with constancy, and thus to see to it that there be many labourers in God’s harvest. Let us ask him for the joy of being an instrument used by Jesus to call others. “*Good news: another ‘crazy’ fellow for the asylum’... And all is excitement in the ‘fisherman’ s ‘ letter... May God make your nets effective.*

God never forgets the ‘*fisherman’.*
89.1 God makes use of little things to act in souls.

Thus says the Lord God: ‘I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar, and will set it out; I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it upon a high and lofty mountain; on the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar; and under it shall dwell all kinds of beasts’. These beautiful words of the prophet Ezekiel, taken from the First Reading of today’s Mass, remind us how God uses what is little to work in the world and in souls. Jesus gives us the same teaching. The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds of the earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

Our Lord chose a few men to begin the work of evangelization. For the most part they were humble fishermen, unlettered men, with evident defects and few material resources. He chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. Looking at things from a purely human point of view, it is impossible to explain how these men could have spread the teaching of Christ to the whole known world in so short a time, with so many obstacles and so much opposition to overcome. In the parable of the grain of mustard seed, writes St John Chrysostom, Jesus urges his disciples to have faith and to be confident that the preaching of the Gospel will be carried out in spite of everything.

We too are like that grain of mustard seed in the task given us by God in the middle of the world. We ought not to forget the disproportion between the means we have, our talents, and the magnitude of the apostolate we have to do. But neither should we forget that we can always count on God’s help. Difficulties will come and we will be more aware of our own nothingness. This should bring us to have more trust in the Master and in the supernatural character of the task we are trying to accomplish. In the moments of struggle and opposition, when perhaps ‘the good’ fill your way with obstacles, lift up your apostolic heart: listen to Jesus as he speaks of the grain of mustard-seed and of the leaven. And say to him: edissere nobis parabolam: explain the parable to me’... And you will feel the joy of contemplating the victory to come: the birds of the air will lodge in the branches of your apostolate, now only in its beginnings, and the whole of the meal leavened.

If we don’t lose sight of our littleness and the power of grace we will be always strong and faithful in what God asks of us. If we do not keep our eyes fixed on Jesus we will become discouraged and pessimistic and will soon abandon the task. With God we can do all things.

89.2 Difficulties ought not to discourage us.

The Apostles and first Christians faced a society threatened in its very foundations; a society in which it was well nigh impossible to have ideals. St Paul describes Roman society and the pagan world as places where the natural light of reason had been darkened in many ways, especially in regard to the dignity of the human person. He goes on to say: Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the
Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they were gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Working from within society, Christians changed it. There the seed fell, then spread to the whole world. Although it was a small seed it carried a divine power, because the seed was Christ’s. The first Christians who came to Rome were no different from ourselves, and with God’s help were able to do an effective apostolate, working shoulder to shoulder, in the same jobs as everyone else, facing the same problems, obeying the same laws, unless they were directly contrary to the law of God. Truly the first Christians in Jerusalem, Antioch and Rome were tiny mustard seeds seemingly lost in a huge field.

Although our society seems at times to be like the one described by St Paul, we ought not to lose heart at meeting obstacles. God counts on us to transform the place where we live and work. Although what we can do may seem small and insignificant, like the grain of mustard seed, let us not neglect to do what we can, because God counts on that contribution. With our prayer and sacrifice He will ensure that there is growth and fruit. That ‘little’ we can do may be advising a colleague or friend to read a particular book; or being attentive to a client, fellow passenger or workmate; or giving a helping hand when needed; or praying for a sick friend or a neighbour’s child, and asking that they pray for us; or helping someone get to Confession. And always living a cheerful, honest life. Everybody should be discreetly, quietly and daringly apostolic. This can be so if we remain united to God, if we reject a comfort-loving existence, if we overcome lukewarmness and discouragement. The time in which we are called to live demands especially that we feel deeply obliged to be always zealous and enthusiastic. We will be so only if we struggle. Only the person who makes a strenuous effort is suitable for bringing the world peace, the peace of Christ.

89.3 The need to overcome false human respect.

The spreading of the Gospel, often by friends, colleagues at work or neighbours, brought about in whole families a radical change of life and set them on the road to salvation. For others it was a scandal and for still others foolishness. St Paul tells the Christians at Rome that he is not ashamed of the Gospel because it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith. St John Chrysostom comments: If someone approaches you and asks: ‘do you adore somebody who has been crucified?’ Do not hang your head in shame or blush. Use that reproach as a chance for glory and let your eyes and the look on your face show that you are not ashamed. If they whisper again in your ear: ‘What! do you adore somebody who has been crucified?’ reply: ‘Yes, I adore him!’... I adore and glory in a crucified God who with his Cross reduced the devils to silence and took away all superstition. For me the Cross is the trophy of God’s love and kindness. That is a fine reply. We can use it ourselves.

From the first Christians we must learn not to be inhibited by human respect, not to be afraid of
what others will say. Rather must we be concerned to make Christ known no matter where we find ourselves, very much aware of the treasure we have found, of the precious pearl we have located after much searching. The struggle against human respect never ceases, because not infrequently we come across an adverse environment when we are serious about trying to follow Christ closely and trying to live in accordance with our beliefs. Many who call themselves Christians show little courage when they should be witnessing to their faith. They seem to be more concerned about the opinion of others than about the judgement of Christ. They often allow themselves to be carried along by the current, afraid of saying anything. This attitude betrays superficiality, lack of deep convictions and little love of God. Naturally enough, at times it will be hard to behave in accordance with what we are, Christians who wish to live their faith at every moment and in every circumstance of life. But these times will also be excellent moments to show Christ our love, forgetting about what others think, and not being swayed by public opinion. God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control. Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, St Paul says to Timothy.

This was always the attitude of those who preceded us in the task of evangelization. And even before that, we have the example of Judas Maccabaeus. At a time when many even from Israel... sacrificed to idols and profaned the sabbath he and his brothers, following the example of their father Mattathias, rebelled against that iniquity and for the honour of God fought gladly for Israel. As Judas himself said: It is not on the size of the army that victory in battle depends, but on the strength that comes from heaven. This is the way it has always been in the things of God, from the beginning of the Church to our own day. God uses what is weak to do his work. We will not lack his help. He will turn the little we can do into a great power for good.

From the Cross of Christ comes the power and courage we need. Let us look to Mary. She did not draw back when the crowd cried out, nor did she leave Our Redeemer alone when each person, anonymous in that crowd, was in his cowardice emboldened to ill-treat Christ.

Call upon her with all your strength: ‘Virgo fidelis!, Virgin most faithful!,’ and ask her that those of us who call ourselves God’s friends may be truly so at all times.
90. CONTRITION FOR SIN

90.1 Contrition makes us forget ourselves and make our way to God. Our falls ought not to discourage us.

We read in today’s Gospel that Jesus was invited for a meal by a Pharisee named Simon. We are not told where it was, but in all likelihood it was somewhere in Galilee, perhaps in Capharnaum.

Simon showed no special love for Jesus, for he did not even take the trouble to show him the normal courtesy of the times: a kiss of welcome, perfumed water for washing, ointment...

When Jesus was seated at table a woman made her way in and went directly towards him. She was a woman of the city and a sinner. She must have known our Lord and perhaps have been struck at some time by his words or gestures of mercy. Today she decided she wanted to meet him personally. And she showed many signs of repentance and contrition. She brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

We know what was going on in her heart because of what Jesus said afterwards: She loved much. She showed how great her respect for Jesus was. She forgot about the others who were present and about herself. She was only interested in Jesus.

Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. That’s the reason for so much pardon. The scene ends with our Lord’s consoling words: Your faith has saved you; go in peace. Begin again your life, with new hope.

Peace always comes when there is deep contrition. Go in peace. These are the very words the priest says to us after forgiving us our sins. Faith and humility saved that woman; with contrition she began a new life. As St Gregory the Great says: That woman represents us when, after having committed a sin, we turn back to God with all our heart and imitate her in our cries of penance. Contrition makes us forget ourselves and return to God through a deep act of love. Contrition is also a sign of the depth of our love and calls down God’s mercy upon us. As the prophet Isaiah says: This is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit. Our worst defects and failings ought not dishearten us, even if they are many and frequent, provided we are humble and repentant.

Let us ask God to engrave on our hearts this consoling teaching so that we continue our effort to be holy and reach God’s love. In this adventure of love we should not be depressed by our falls, not even by serious falls, if we go to God in the sacrament of penance, contrite and resolved to improve. A Christian is not a neurotic collector of good behaviour reports. Jesus Christ our Lord was moved as much by Peter’s repentance after his fall as by John’s innocence and faithfulness. Jesus understands our weaknesses and draws us to himself on an inclined plane. He wants us to make an effort to climb a little each day. He seeks us out, just as He did the disciples of Emmaus, whom He went out to meet. He sought Thomas, showed himself to him and made him touch with his fingers the open wounds in his hands and side. Jesus Christ is always waiting for us to return to him; He knows our weaknesses.

90.2 We cannot ignore our faults and failings. Avoid making excuses.
In silence Simon contemplated the scene and despised the woman. Jesus has forgiven her, but he, setting himself up as judge, condemns her. He thinks also that Christ, whom the people have been speaking about so much, cannot be a true prophet. Perhaps he only invited him in order to get a closer look.

Jesus then shows that he knows not only the inner feelings of the sinful woman but also Simon’s thoughts. ‘Simon,’ he said, ‘I have something to say to you’. And he answered, ‘What is it, Teacher?’ ‘A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him the more?’ The reply was clear. The one who had more forgiven him should love the more. And Simon replied correctly. The parable then became a real event. What our Lord did next was to praise the woman who did not even dare to speak. And Jesus looks at her while he speaks to Simon. In fact it is to the woman he is speaking: Then turning towards the woman he said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn’t give me... You don’t love me, but she does. She loves me in spite of her many sins, or perhaps, because of them, because her need for pardon is very great.

Simon did not offer our Lord the signs of welcome usually extended to an honoured guest. There was no water to wash his feet, now dirty from the dusty roads. There was no kiss of peace. There was no ointment for his head. Yet the woman more than made up for it. She washed his feet, wiped them with her hair and kissed them. Simon did not even advert to his lack of courtesy. Nor did he realize that if he did not commit more and graver sins himself it was because of God’s mercy which kept him from evil. In the words of St Augustine: *He who is forgiven little, loves little. You who say you have committed few sins, why did you not commit them? Without doubt because God was leading you by the hand... There is no sin one man commits that another cannot commit if God, who made man, does not lead him by the hand.*

We cannot forget that our faults are real. We cannot blame them on society, or on difficult circumstances in life, or think them inevitable, excusing ourselves and shirking our responsibility. To do so would be to shut the door on forgiveness and any real meeting with Jesus, as happened in the case of Simon the Pharisee. ‘More than the sin itself,’ says St John Chrysostom, ‘what displeases and offends God is the sinner’s not feeling any sorrow for his sins’. There will be no sorrow for sin if we make excuses for our weaknesses. On the other hand, we should make a good examination of conscience and not be content with acknowledging that we are sinners in some vague, undefined way. In the words of Cardinal Wojtyla: *We cannot rest content at the outer level of evil. We must get to its roots, its causes, to the truth in the depths of our consciences*. Jesus knows our hearts well and wishes to purify and cleanse them.

90.3 Humility and repentance. Confession. Sincerity.

We read in the responsorial psalm today: *I acknowledged my sin to thee, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’; then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin. Thou art a hiding place for me, thou preservest me from trouble; thou dost encompass me with deliverance.* Sincerity brings salvation, for *the truth will set you free*. On the other hand, deceit, pretence and lies lead to separation from God and the fruits of charity dry up. The same psalm says: *My strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*

At the root of insincerity lies pride. This vice prevents a person from submitting to God,
recognising his dependence on God and doing what God wants. A proud person has difficulty in even recognising that he is doing wrong and needs to correct his behaviour. When this vice takes root in the soul it makes objectivity all but impossible. Not wanting to acknowledge faults and failings, such a person seeks excuses for bad behaviour. The end of this road is spiritual blindness. We need then to be humble, as the sinful woman was, if we are to grow in sincerity and self-knowledge and be able to confess our sins. A great help is to make an examination of conscience, in God’s presence, rejecting excuses which might justify our behaviour, being sincere when we come to confess our sins sincerely and frankly in the sacrament of Penance.

Humility allows us to see the great debt we owe God and to be aware of our radical personal insufficiency. Being humble, we will ask God for pardon many times a day for our sins of omission and commission, or at least for what is not going well in our life. Thus our many faults will bring us to love much and to give thanks to God who in his love for us has prevented us from falling even more often. If we live in this way, being completely sincere with ourselves, we will have no reason to set ourselves up as judges of others.

If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of a woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner. Charity and humility teach us to see in the failings and sins of others our own weaknesses. Thus we will be more heartfeltly united to the sorrow of every sinner who repents. We would fall into the same or worse faults if God in his mercy did not stand by us.

St Ambrose tells us: Our Lord wanted love, not ointment; he appreciated faith; he praised humility. You also, if you want his grace, must increase your love. Pour out on the body of Jesus your faith in his resurrection, the sweet fragrance of the Church and the ointment of other people’s charity.\[558\]

Let us ask the Blessed Virgin Mary, Refugium peccatorum, the refuge of sinners, that she win for us from her Son a sincere sorrow for our sins and a deep and effective appreciation of the sacrament of Penance.
91. LIFE OF GRACE

91.1 A new life. Dignity of the Christian.

From the moment sanctifying grace is infused into us at Baptism, as Christians we now have a new supernatural life making us different from other people. What we now have is a special life exclusive to those who believe in Christ, who are born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. In Baptism a Christian begins to live the very life of Christ or Christ’s own life, for there is set up between him and us a communion of life which is distinct from and stronger and more intimate than the communion which exists between the members of human society. The union with our Lord is so profound that it transforms Christian existence altogether, making it possible for God’s life to develop within our souls as something actually belonging to them. Our Lord speaks of the vine and the branches. Saint Paul compares this shared life to the union between the head and the body. The same sap vivifies the vine and its branches, and the same blood courses through the head and the members of the body.

The first consequence of this reality is the incomparable blessing of our being made into God’s children. Divine filiation is not just a title or a descriptive label. When a man adopts another human being as his son he confers on him his name and his goods; he can offer him his affection, but is incapable of communicating anything of either his own nature or his life. Human adoption is necessarily an external thing; it does not change the person into another kind of being, or add any perfections to the one adopted, or any qualities except external ones, like clothes, habitation, extra means to improve culture etc. With divine adoption it is different; here we have a genuinely new birth which produces a wonderful improvement in the actual nature of the one who has been adopted. Beloved, we are God’s children now. This is not fictional, merely a manner of speaking or simply the conferring of an honorary title, because it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. It is a reality which is so great and joyous that it makes Saint Paul exclaim: So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

How much good it will do our soul to reflect frequently that Christ is the fountain source from which springs forth in abundance this new life which has been given to us! Saint Peter writes: By him God has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may ... become partakers of the divine nature.

On considering such marvellous condescension, our head and our heart are inclined to give constant thanks to Our Lord for endowing us with such riches, and we resolve to live in constant awareness of the precious jewels we have received. The angels gaze at the soul in grace with respect and admiration. And we? How do we view our brother men who have received or are called to receive this inestimable treasure? Do we really appreciate what our soul is now worth? Is our appreciation reflected in our behaviour, in the extreme care we take to avoid anything, no matter how slight, that might be unworthy of our condition as Christians?

91.2 Sanctifying grace giving a share in divine nature.

At the beginning, after the first creation, man was new, perfect, as he came fresh from the hand of
God. But sin aged him and created havoc in him. And so God made a new creation: sanctifying grace, a limited participation in the divine nature, makes man, without ceasing to be a creature, similar to God and share, really and intimately, in the divine life.

This sanctifying grace is an interior reality producing a kind of splendour and light which cleanses our souls from all stains and makes them most beautiful and brilliant. This grace is what unites our soul with God in the closest bond of love. How then ought we to protect it, convinced that it is the greatest good we have? Sacred Scripture compares it to a garment God places on the hearts of the faithful, a seed which sends down its roots into the interior of man, a fountain of waters springing up without ceasing unto eternal life.

Sanctifying grace is not a passing, transitory gift, like those impulses and inspirations which we call actual graces, to help us to carry out or avoid some particular action. It is a permanent principle of supernatural life, a stable disposition founded in the very essence of the soul. Even though it can be lost through mortal sin, for the reason that it produces a stable and permanent mode of being it is called also habitual grace.

Grace does not violate the natural order, but presupposes it, elevates and perfects it, and both the natural and the supernatural orders help each other since both proceed from God. And so the Christian, far from renouncing the mundane duties of his earthly life – work, family, etc. – develops, perfects and coordinates them with the supernatural life to the point of ennobling natural life itself.

With this privilege, and the dignity it confers, we have to live and behave in conformity, in all our actions. We should not forget at any moment of the day these gifts we have been favoured with. Our life will be completely different if in the midst of our daily duties we keep in mind the honour done to us by our Father God, an honour by which, through grace, we are able to call ourselves his children and truly be so in effect.

91.3 Grace leads to identification with Christ: docility, life of prayer, love for the Cross.

Sanctifying grace divinises the Christian and converts him into a son of God and a temple of the most holy Trinity. This likeness in being should be reflected necessarily in our work, in our thoughts, actions and desires, in the measure in which we make progress in the ascetical struggle, so that our purely human life gives way to the life of Christ. There has to be fulfilled in our souls that interior process which the words of John the Baptist indicate: He must increase, but I must decrease. We have to ask Our Lord to make more firm in us the aspiration to have in our hearts the same mind which was in Christ Jesus. We shall ask him to help us uproot our egoism, to cure us of thinking too much about ourselves and to eliminate from our hearts any kind of lukewarmness. Those who boast, then, of bearing the name of Christian not only have to contemplate the Master as the most perfect Model of all virtues, but have to reproduce in their own behaviour the doctrine and life of Jesus Christ, in such a way that they appear like him, in the way they treat others, in their sympathy with others’ sorrows, in their striving for perfection in professional work, thus imitating the thirty years of the hidden life in Nazareth...

In this way Jesus’ life is repeated in the life of the Christian, in a growing likeness with him which is gradually brought about in a marvellous way by the Holy Spirit, and which will have its completion with total identity with Our Lord and union with him in Heaven. But let us consider this serenely in our prayer. To achieve this identification with Christ demands a very clear orientation of...
the whole of our life, co-operating with Our Lord in the work of our own sanctification, removing obstacles to the action of the Paraclete and trying to do always what pleases God most, in such a way that we can say like Jesus: *My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work.*

This correspondence with grace, which has to become a reality day by day, minute by minute, can be summarised in three main points: it involves, first of all, being *docile* to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, maintaining a life of prayer in every situation through devotional practices we have determined on in the course of spiritual direction, and the purposeful cultivation of a constant spirit of penance. This docility is required because the Holy Spirit is the one who presses us to adhere to the doctrine of Christ and to assimilate it in depth, giving us the light to become aware of our personal vocation and the strength to fulfil all that God expects of us. The same Holy Spirit assists us in our personal interior growth and in the abundant apostolate which we have to carry out among our friends, relations and colleagues. A life of prayer is necessary too, because the self-surrender, obedience and meekness of the Christian are born of love and lead to love. And love leads to genuine concern for others and to mutual dealings, to meaningful conversation and to friendship. The Christian life requires a constant dialogue with God, One and Three, and it is to this intimacy that the Holy Spirit leads us.

Union with the Cross there must be also, because in the life of Christ, Calvary preceded the Resurrection and Pentecost and this same process must be reproduced in the life of each Christian. So we will accept in the first place the contradictions, great and small, which come our way, and offer Our Lord each day many other small mortifications through which we will unite ourselves to the Cross with a sense of co-redemption, purifying our life and preparing ourselves for a profound and intimate dialogue with God.

Let us examine today, as we end our prayer, the manner in which we correspond with grace in these three points, because the development of the life of grace in us depends on this correspondence. We tell Our Lord that we do not want to rest content with the standard we have already achieved in prayer, in our sense of the presence of God, in sacrifice...; that with his grace and the protection of Our Lady we will not rest until we reach the goal which gives meaning to our life – complete identification with Jesus Christ.
92. HOLINESS IN THE WORLD

92.1 The universal call to holiness.

All Sacred Scripture is a calling to holiness, to the fulness of charity, but Jesus makes it quite explicit in the Gospel of today’s Mass: You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. And Christ is not addressing his words to the Apostles or to just a few of his followers, but to everyone. Saint Matthew makes the point at the conclusion of these discourses that the crowds were astonished at his teaching. Jesus does not demand sanctity of an exclusive coterie of disciples who accompany him everywhere, but of all who approach him: the multitudes, among whom were mothers of families, labourers, and skilled craftsmen who would stop to hear him after work, children, tax-collectors, beggars and cripples ... The Lord calls people to follow him without distinction of state, race or condition. Christ speaks to us, to each one in particular, to our neighbours, work-mates or friends in the office or in the Faculty and to those who pass us and each other in the street: Be perfect ... he says, and grants us the means and the appropriate graces that will make perfection possible. This is not just advice from the master, but an imperative command. All in the Church, whether they belong to the Hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness, according to the Apostle’s saying: ‘For this is the will of God, your sanctification’ (1 Thess 4:3).

All Christians, in any state or walk of life, are called to the fulness of Christian life and to the perfection of love. In the doctrine of Christ there is no invitation to mediocrity, but a clear call to heroism, to love and to cheerful sacrifice. Love is within reach of the child, of the invalid who has been confined to a hospital bed for a lengthy period, of the businessman, of the doctor who hardly has a minute to spare ... because sanctity is a matter of love, and of the effort we make to reach the Master with the help of grace. We have to give a new meaning to life, together with all its joys and exhilarations, its pains and woes. Sanctity requires a fight against conformity, against lukewarmness, against an easy-going worldly attitude. It demands heroism – not in extraordinary situations that we are unlikely to encounter, but in continual fidelity to our task in the unremarkable duties of each day.

The liturgical readings today refer to Saint Cyprian, who exhorted the Christians of the third century: Beloved brethren, we ought to know and remember that since we call God our Father, we have to behave like his children, so that He will be pleased with us ... Let us behave as befits those who are God’s temple ... He has said it: ‘Be perfect, because I am perfect.’ So we pray, beseeching him that we who were sanctified in Baptism may persevere in that initial sanctification, asking this, moreover, for each day. Today we implore this of God: Lord, grant us a lively desire for sanctity, that we may be exemplary in our duty of loving you more each day. Help us to spread your doctrine everywhere ...

92.2 Becoming saints wherever we find ourselves.

Our Lord is not happy with a lukewarm life and a half-hearted dedication. Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit. And so the Master purifies his own, permitting them to experience trials and contradictions. If the goldsmith hammers the gold repeatedly, it is to take off the impurities in it; if the precious metal is abraded again and again it is to make it shine.
All the pain God allows, whether it be of body or of mind, serves to purify the soul so that it may yield more fruit. It is of the mystery of suffering that we have to see it always as a grace from Heaven.

All times are good times for entering into the depths of sanctity; all circumstances are opportune for loving God more, for our interior life feeds, as plants do, on the stuff of the circumstances in which we are immersed. Growth is the work of the Holy Spirit. Plants do not choose the ground in which they are nourished; the sower lets the seeds fall to the earth, where they prosper, converting the useful elements in the soil, with the help of rainwater, into the substance of the maturing grain. And so what is sown ripens and reaches up and grows strong.

With even greater reason will we grow in strength, because it is our Father God who has chosen the terrain and gives us the graces necessary for us to bear fruit. The plot of earth where Our Lord has planted us is the particular family of which we are part, and not any other. We grow up among those who form our initial immediate environment, with all their virtues and failings and idiosyncrasies. The rich mould we are rooted in is our work, which we must love so that it will sanctify not only us, but also our colleagues, our classmates, our neighbours ... The earth from whose nutrients we have to produce fruits of holiness is our country, our own country, our city, our town, the prevailing social or political system, our own condition of life and no other. It is there, in that environment, in the midst of the world where the Lord says we can and must live all the Christian virtues, developing them with all the demands they make on us and not allowing them to be stunted or to wither. God calls people to holiness in every circumstance: in war and in peace, in sickness and in health, when we think we have triumphed and when we face unexpected defeat, when we have plenty of time and when time is at a premium, so that we seem barely to manage to do what we must. Our Lord wants us to be saints at all times. Those who do not rely on grace, and habitually see things with a completely human outlook, are saying constantly: this, now, is not the right time for sanctity ..., later ... perhaps ...

Let us not think that in another place, in another situation we would be ready to follow Our Lord more closely and carry out a more fruitful apostolate. Let us leave that mystical wishful thinking to one side. The fruits of sanctity Our Lord expects are those produced in and from the environment in which we find ourselves, here and now: tiredness, sickness, family, the job, one’s colleagues, one’s fellow students ... Leave behind false idealisms, fantasies, and what I usually call mystical wishful thinking. If only I hadn’t married ... If only I hadn’t this profession ... If only I were healthier ... If only I were young ... If only I were old ...! Instead, turn seriously to the most material and immediate reality, which is where Our Lord is ... This is the environment in which our love of God should grow and develop, using precisely those opportunities we find at hand. Let us not allow them to slip away, for it is in them that Jesus is waiting for us.

92.3 All circumstances are good to help us grow in holiness and carry out a fruitful apostolate.

If we contemplate life in a merely human way, could it not seem that there are any number of moments or situations which are surely less propitious for growth in sanctity or for carrying out a fruitful apostolate? Think of journeys, examinations, times of excessive pressure of work, exhaustion, disheartenment ...; or what about tough environments, delicate professional decisions to be made in a paganised atmosphere, slanderous campaigns ...? None the less, those are familiar moments in every ordinary life: modest successes and occasional setbacks, feelings of well-being and bouts of indifferent health, joys and sorrows and slight to serious worries; years of prosperity and perhaps
other times of economic distress ... Our Lord is expecting us to turn all these occasions into opportunities for sanctity and apostolate.

In these moments we will give more attention to and put more effort into personal daily prayer – we can always find time: love is ingenious at finding time if need be – into our visits to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, into our relations with Our Lady ... for these very occurrences are the ones in which we need more help. We shall obtain the assistance we need in prayer and in the Sacraments. Then it is that virtues are strengthened and the whole interior life matures.

Nor should we wait for special circumstances in order to get on with our apostolate. Any day, any time is good. If the first Christians had waited for more propitious occasions they would have converted very few to the Faith. This task will always call for audacity and a spirit of sacrifice. *It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.*[592] Effort and the exercise of human virtues are necessary. Apostolate demands constancy in a special way. The Apostle Saint James says: *Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.*[593] And with constancy should go the generosity to sow lavishly, freely, even though we may not ourselves see the results. Someone else may harvest what we have sown.

Let us ask the Blessed Virgin for an effective zeal for sanctity in the circumstances in which we find ourselves now. Let us not await that *more opportune* moment; there isn’t one. This is the most favourable moment, *the acceptable time* to love God with all our heart, with all our being...
93. MENTAL PRAYER

93.1 Necessity and fruits of such prayer.

The Gospel of today’s Mass is an invitation to personal prayer. And when you pray, Jesus tells us, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men ... But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret ...

Our Lord, who gives us this teaching about prayer, himself practised what He preached throughout his life on earth. The Gospel tells us about the many times Jesus withdrew by himself to pray. The Apostles and the first Christians, and then in the course of time all those who have ever wanted to follow the Master closely have taken up his example. The path that leads to holiness is the path of prayer; and prayer ought to take root and grow in the soul little by little, like the tiny seed which later develops into a tree with many branches.

Daily prayer helps us to watch out for the enemy, whose attacks are unceasing; it makes us strong in trials and difficulties, and by its means we learn to serve others. It is a beacon of intense light illuminating our way, enabling us to see clearly the obstacles that obstruct our path. Personal prayer moves us to do our work better and to fulfil our family and social duties, besides being a decisive influence on our relationships with others. But above all, it teaches us how to deal with the Master and grow in love. Don’t stop praying! Blessed John Paul II advised us; prayer is a duty, but it is also a great joy, because it is a dialogue with God through Jesus Christ!

In prayer we are with Jesus – a marvellous consideration. We go to give ourselves to him, to know him and to learn how to love. The way we do so depends on many circumstances: it depends on where we are and what is going on at the moment, on the good things that have gladdened us, on the setbacks or griefs we have experienced ... all of which are convertible into joy when we are close to Christ. Frequently we will study a passage of the Gospel and contemplate the most holy Humanity of Jesus, thus learning to grow in our love for him, since one does not love what one does not know well. On other occasions we can determine whether we are sanctifying our work and drawing closer to God, or reflect on how we are getting on with those we meet, with our family and our friends. Perhaps we may find it useful to follow some book, such as the one you are reading now, relating what we read to our own personal situation, and articulating in our heart the aspiration our reading suggests; we may go on to develop some particular affection the Holy Spirit may be inspiring in the depths of our soul, and either make some small resolution we can put into practice that same day, or renew, perhaps, one we have previously made.

Mental prayer is a task that is going to demand our utilising, with the help of grace, our intelligence and our will-power, determined, as we shall have to be, to fight against distractions, never to accept voluntary ones, and to put real effort into maintaining a dialogue with Our Lord. Such conversation is the essence of all prayer with him while we are speaking to him in our heart, looking at him, and listening to his voice in the intimacy of our soul. We should always be firm with ourselves in making sure we dedicate to God all the time we had planned to spend with him, whether or not we feel dry and are apparently gaining nothing by it. It doesn’t matter if all we can do is to remain kneeling during this time and fail completely in our attempts to fight off distractions: we are not wasting
Prayer is always fruitful if there is a conscious effort to carry it out in spite of our flagging concentration and moments of dryness. Jesus never leaves us without abundant graces for the whole of that day. He always shows his gratitude generously for the time we have spent with him.

93.2 The preparatory prayer. Putting oneself in the presence of God.

It is especially important to place ourselves in the presence of the One with whom we wish to speak. Very often the rest of the prayer will depend on those first minutes in which we mentally strive to be close to him who cares for us and who, we know, awaits our petitions and our acts of love. This done, we can go on to consider with him some matter that perhaps worries us, or we can simply remain in his presence looking at him and knowing he is looking at us. If we take special care with these first moments, lovingly placing ourselves in the presence of Christ, then without doubt a good part of our dryness and our difficulties in speaking to him will disappear ... because they have been quite simply an unwanted dissipation of our attention and a lack of interior recollection.

In order to place ourselves in the presence of God at the beginning of mental prayer, we should make some reflections so as to remove other concerns from our mind. We can say to Jesus: My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, listening to me ... He is there in the Tabernacle, really present in the sacramental species, with his Body, his Blood, his Soul and Divinity. He is present in our own soul in grace, as the driving-force of our thoughts, affections, desires and supernatural works ... That you see me, that you hear me!

We begin immediately, St Josemaría Escrivá tells us, with a greeting such as we usually employ when we converse with anyone in the world. Since He is God, we greet him in adoration: I adore you with profound reverence! And if we happen to have offended the person we greet, don’t we ask his forgiveness? I ask you for pardon for my sins, and grace to make this time of conversation with you fruitful ... And so we are praying, and already find ourselves in intimate colloquy with God.

But supposing this important person we wanted to speak with had a mother, a mother who loved us as well? Would we not seek her recommendation, ask her to put in a word on our behalf? The Mother of God, who also happens to be our Mother, is ready to be invoked: My Mother Immaculate! Besides, we have recourse to Saint Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus, who is also an influential advocate for us in the presence of God: Saint Joseph, my Father and Lord! And my Guardian Angel, that prince of Heaven who helps and protects us ... Intercede for me!

Once we have made our preparatory prayer, with the introductions which are customary in social intercourse, we can now speak with God! About what? About our joys and our sorrows, about our jobs, our desires and ambitions ... About everything!

We can also say to him simply: My God, here I am like a fool and I don’t know what to say to you ... I would like to speak to you, to pray, and enter into intimacy with your Son Jesus. I know I am here next to you, and yet I don’t seem to be able to put two words together. If I were with that dearest Lady, my Mother, I would speak about all sorts of things, but with you I can’t think of anything ...

This is prayer ...! Remain before the Tabernacle, like a little dog at his master’s feet, throughout the time fixed beforehand. Lord, here I am! It’s hard! I would run away, but I am going to stay here through love, because I know that you see me and hear me and smile on me. And near him, even when we do not know what to say to him, we are filled with peace; we recover the strength we need to fulfil our duties, and the cross becomes light because now it is no longer ours
alone; Christ helps us to carry it.

93.3 The help of the Communion of Saints.

Close to Christ in the Tabernacle, or wherever we are doing our mental prayer, we will persevere through love, both when we are in good spirits and when it is hard going for us and nothing seems to be of any use. It will help us very often to know that we are united to the Ecclesia orans, the Church praying in all parts of the world. Our voice is united to the cry that rises up every moment to God the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. During our time of mental prayer and also throughout the day, St Josemaría Escrivá goes on, remember that we are never alone, although physically we may find ourselves in isolation. In our life ... we remain always united to the Saints in heaven, the souls undergoing purification in Purgatory and all our brothers and sisters who are still going on with their struggle on earth. Besides, (and this is a great consolation for me since it is an admirable sign of the continuity of Holy Church), you can unite your own prayer to the prayer of all Christians of whatever era: those who have gone before us, those who are living now and those who may live in centuries yet to come. In this way, aware of the marvellous reality of the Communion of Saints, that unending song of praise to God, although you may not feel like praying or are facing difficulties like dryness, you will continue to pray with effort but with more confidence.

Fill yourselves with joy, realising that our prayer is united to the prayer of all those who have ever lived with Jesus Christ, the unceasing prayer of the Church Militant, the Church Suffering and the Church Triumphant; they join all those still to come. Therefore ... when you find yourself dry in prayer, make yourself go on praying, and say to the Lord: My God, I don’t want my voice to be missing from that great chorus of permanent praise to You which will never come to an end.

In daily prayer we find the origin of all spiritual progress and a continual source of joy, provided we put the effort into it and are determined to be alone with the one we know loves us. We grow in our interior life and make progress in it in proportion as our prayer-life develops, increasingly influencing as it does our actions, our work, our apostolate and our spirit of mortification ...

Let us have frequent recourse to the Blessed Virgin, that she may teach us how to treat her Son, for no one has ever known how to address our Saviour the way his Mother did. And along with her, we can always go to Saint Joseph, who conversed so often with the child, the boy, the young man Jesus while he was working or at rest, travelling on long journeys or going about his business in the streets of Nazareth ... After Mary, Joseph was the one who spent most time close to the Son of God. He will teach us how to talk to the Master and, if we ask him, will help us to make firm resolutions, both concrete and clear, which will help us to improve our work, smooth off the rough edges of our character, make us more ready to serve, and be cheerful throughout all the vicissitudes and contradictions that can possibly befall us ...

Sancte Joseph, ‘ora pro eis, ora pro me!’ Saint Joseph, pray for them (here we can fix our attention on the particular people for whom we wish especially to pray). And pray for me.
94. VOCAL PRAYERS

94.1 The need for such prayer.

In the Gospel of today’s Mass Our Lord tells us: *And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words.* He wants to disabuse his disciples of the mistaken view held by many Jews of that time who thought that for God to hear them they had to say long vocal prayers. He teaches them to address God with simplicity, as a son speaks to his father. *Vocal prayer* is very pleasing to God, but it has to be true prayer: the words have to express the feelings of the heart. It is not enough to recite mere formulas, for God is not pleased with a worship that is merely external. He wants us to be in intimate contact with him.

Vocal prayer is an indispensable, simple and efficacious means, adapted to our way of being, of enabling us to keep presence of God during the day, to tell him of our love for him, and about our needs. As we read in the Gospel of the Mass, Our Lord wanted to leave us with the vocal prayer, *par excellence*, the *Our Father* which in a few words comprises all that a man can ask of God. Throughout the centuries this prayer has ascended to God, filling innumerable souls in all kinds of situations with hope and consolation.

Neglecting vocal prayer would mean a great impoverishment of the spiritual life. But on the other hand, when these prayers are in frequent use, even when short but full of love of God, the path of contemplation in the midst of the world, or in work, is opened up and made easy. *We start with vocal prayers which many of us have been saying since we were children. They are made up of simple, ardent phrases addressed to God and to his Mother, who is our Mother as well. I still renew, morning and evening, and not just occasionally but habitually, the offering I learned from my parents: ‘O my Lady, my Mother! I offer myself entirely to you, and in proof of my filial love, I consecrate to you this day my eyes, my ears, my tongue, my heart ...’ Is this not, in some way, a beginning of contemplation, an evident expression of trusting self-abandonment?*

First one brief aspiration, then another, and another ... till our fervour seems insufficient, because words are too poor ...: then this gives way to intimacy with God, looking at God without needing rest or feeling tired. *And Saint Teresa, like all the Saints, knew well this accessible way for everyone to reach God: I know, she says, that many persons who say vocal prayers are raised by God to high contemplation without their knowing how.*

Let us think today about what interest and concentration we put into our vocal prayers, how many we say throughout the day, on the necessary pauses so that what we say to Our Lord is not just words that follow one after the other ... Let us meditate on the need for that modicum of effort we have to put into them to avoid the routine which would soon mean the death of true devotion and true love. Let us try to make each aspiration, each vocal prayer, an act of love.

94.2 Vocal Prayers.

The secret of the fruitful lives of good Christians lies in their prayer, in that they pray well and pray often. It is from our prayer, whether mental or vocal, that we derive strength for self-denial and sacrifice and overcome tiredness in work, offering our fatigue to God, and so continue faithful in the small heroic acts of each day. It has been said that prayer is the food and breath of the soul, because it
puts us in close contact with God and leads us to know and love him more. Genuine piety is the
habitual and unchanging attitude that allows the Christian to evaluate from God’s standpoint his daily
work. Looking at things in this way, he finds opportunity to exercise the virtues, to offer up the well-
finished piece of work, the small mortifications ... Scarcely realising it, we become immersed in
God, and gradually find we are praying as well through faultless work even though we may not be
making express acts of prayer. A glance at a crucifix or at a picture of Our Lady, an aspiration, a short
vocal prayer, all help us at this stage to maintain this stable manner of being of the soul, and it is
then possible for us to pray constantly, or always to pray as Our Lord asks. There are many
times when we ought to be concentrating intently on our work, and at such moments the mind is
incapable of thinking directly about God and focusing our attention on what we are doing at the same
time. Nevertheless, if we maintain that habitual disposition of the soul, that union with God, or at
least retain the intention of doing everything for God, then we are in fact praying without interruption.

Just as the body needs food and the lungs crave fresh air, so the soul requires to turn to the Lord for
sustenance, Our heart will find an habitual expression in words, in the vocal prayers taught us by
God himself – the Our Father – or by his angels – the Hail Mary. On other occasions, we will use
the time-proven words that have expressed the piety of millions of our brothers in the faith:
prayers from the liturgy – ‘lex orandi’; or others whose source is the love of an ardent heart, like
the antiphons to Our Lady: ‘Sub tuum praesidium’, ‘Memorare’, ‘Salve Regina’... Many
favourite prayers to the Blessed Virgin, many profound and beautiful poems to Our Lord such as the
Adoro te devote of Saint Thomas Aquinas, (often said on Thursdays in honour of Our Lord in the
Blessed Sacrament), were composed by men and women sometimes well-known and sometimes not.
These traditional prayers have been kept lovingly in the bosom of the Church over the years as
precious gems so that we could make use of them. Perhaps for many they have the remembered
sweetness of those basic lessons for life they learnt at their mother’s knee. They are a very important
part of the spiritual equipment we need to face up to every kind of difficulty.

Vocal prayer is superabundance, an overflowing of love, and logically should be frequently
employed from the start of the day till we give our last thought to God before rest. And it will rise to
our lips, this vocal prayer, perhaps silently, at the most unexpected moments. Acquire the habit of
saying vocal prayers in the morning, while you are dressing, like little children. You will have
greater presence of God later during the day.

94.3 Fighting routine and distractions.
Scripture tells us that the Patriarch Enoch walked with God, that he kept him in mind in his joys
and sorrows and in all his undertakings. If only we were more like that! If only we could walk
through the world at God’s heels; so close to him, so alive to his presence, that we could share
everything with him, refer to him every moment of sunshine, every shadow of uncertainty in our
lives; accept everything He sends us with conscious gratitude, obey the least whisper of his call!
But often, unfortunately, the true point of reference for us is not God, but ourselves. Hence the
necessity for this continual effort to immerse ourselves in God, to be attentive to his least
requirement, avoiding self-centredness in our thoughts, or at least keeping them directed to God by
doing some good works specifically for him, or offering them up as sacrifices.

Vocal prayers are an incomparable means for keeping God present in the course of our daily
duties. To this end it is going to be necessary for us to pay attention to what we are saying in our
prayer. Consequently we will sometimes have to struggle in very small but necessary details –
pronouncing the words clearly and deliberately, and thereby steering clear of routine. There will also
have to be time for reflection, so that what we are making vocal becomes in a certain way mental
prayer, despite the fact that we may not be able to avoid distractions altogether.

Without some special grace from God it is impossible to maintain continual and perfect attention to
the sense and significant meaning of the words. Sometimes our attention will be directed towards
the manner of pronouncing the words; at other times we will give our attention to the person we are
addressing. But there will be occasions when, through circumstances having to do with other people
or with our surroundings, it will not be easy to give prayerful attention in any of these three forms.
Then it will be necessary at least to examine our external attitude, being careful to reject or eliminate
any outside activity which of its nature hinders interior attention. Some manual tasks, for example, do
not prevent the mind from concentrating on something else; such could be the activity, say, of the
mother of a family, who prays the Rosary while she is cleaning the house or keeping an eye on the
little ones. While she may be distracted from time to time, she maintains that interior attention,
something she could not do while she was, say, reading a magazine or watching television. In any
event, we should draw up our plan of life in such a way that whenever possible we can devote the
requisite time to certain vocal prayers like the Angelus or the Rosary, on which we can concentrate
properly. On the other hand, the simple involuntary distractions that momentarily divert our attention
are imperfections which Our Lord excuses when He sees us putting real effort into our prayers.

Along with vocal prayers, the soul needs the daily food of mental prayer. Thanks to these moments
of meditation and to our vocal prayer and aspirations, we will be able to turn our whole day into a
continuous praise of God, in a natural way and without any outward display. Just as people in love
are always thinking about each other, we will be aware of God's presence. And all our actions,
down to the most insignificant, will be filled with spiritual effectiveness.[614] The Lord will look on
them with satisfaction and will bless them.
95.1 The family, ‘the primary environment’ in which to sow the seed of the Gospel.

Our Lord advises us not to pile up treasures on earth, because they do not last long, being fragile and perishable: *moth and rust consume*, or *thieves break in and steal.*[615] However much we manage to accumulate in life, there is little point to it. Nothing on earth is worth putting our heart into in an absolute way. Our heart is made for God, and for the noble things of this earth in him. It is useful for all of us to ask ourselves frequently: What do I give my heart to? Exactly what is my treasure? What do I think about usually? What is the focal point of my most intimate concern? Is it God, present in the Tabernacle, perhaps at a short distance from where I live or from the office where I work? Or, on the contrary, is it my business, my study, or my work that occupies the foremost place ... or could it be unsatisfied selfish dreams or hungry desires to have more? Many men and women, if they were honest, would perhaps find themselves obliged to reply: I think about myself ... yes, only about myself and about people and things to do with my own interests. But we need to keep our heart fixed on God, on the mission we have received from him, and on other persons and things for God’s sake. Jesus, with his infinite wisdom tells us: *Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.* Our heart is placed in the Lord because He is the one real and absolute treasure. Not health, or prestige, or any feeling of well-being can be our treasure ... only Christ. And for his sake, in an ordered way, our treasure subsumes all the other noble aspirations and duties of an ordinary Christian life, the life of a Christian who, by divine vocation, finds himself situated precisely here in the world. In a special way, Our Lord wishes us to put our heart into serving the persons of the particular human or supernatural family we have, those who, ordinarily, are the ones we have to lead to God in the first place, and who constitute for us the first object we ought to sanctify.

Concern for others helps man to break free from his selfishness, to grow in generosity and in consequence to find true joy. He who knows he has been called by Our Lord to follow him closely no longer regards himself as the centre of the universe, because he has found many to serve in whom he sees Christ in need.[616]

The example of parents or of brothers and sisters in the home, is on many occasions of real value for the other members of the family who, from it, learn to see the world from a Christian viewpoint. The family is of such importance, by the Divine Will, that in it *the evangelising action of the Church has its beginning.*[617] It is *the first appropriate environment for sowing the seed of the Gospel and the one in which parents and children, like living cells, go on assimilating the Christian ideal of serving God and the brethren.*[618] It is a splendid place for apostolate. Let us examine today whether our family is like this, to see if we are like a leaven which day after day goes on transforming, little by little, those who live with us. Let us see whether indeed we are praying constantly as we should to Our Lord for our brothers’ and sisters’ or our children’s vocations, and for the vocations of our parents, that they may move towards a complete dedication to God, for this is the greatest grace the Lord could give them, the real and precious treasure that with your help many of them can find.
95.2 Careful attention towards those God has placed in our charge.

Where our own treasure is, there we have love, self-surrender and the best of sacrifices. For this reason we should value greatly the particular call each one of us has received, and the vocation of those we live with, since they are to be the immediate beneficiaries of this treasure of ours. It is hard, after all, to love what is regarded as having little value. Besides, the Lord would not want a kind of charity that denied priority to those He has placed in our care, whether by a natural or supernatural kinship, because this would not be ordered and true.

The family is the basic and most important unit of society, the one God looks upon as its firmest support. And it is perhaps the part of society most insidiously and ruthlessly attacked from all sides: taxes are levied that ignore the social importance and value of the family; certain ideological and politically motivated trends in education militate against the proper formation of children; materialism and hedonism distort the vision of parents and teachers, and promote for spurious demographic and social reasons a campaign against life itself, striking in this way at the very heart of the family; a false sense of freedom and independence is inculcated in young people, and advanced social programmes leave mothers with insufficient time to look after their children. Many have lost sight of the fact that parents have the right to educate their own children and, in the face of excessive state intervention, have ended up renouncing an elementary right which by its very nature cannot be given up. Sometimes – and this is due in part to these inhibitions – there are imposed certain kinds of teaching dominated by a materialistic view of man. In such methods the pedagogical and didactic approaches, text-books employed, schemes of work, curricular programmes and school materials deliberately set aside the spiritual nature of the human soul.

Parents have to be aware that no earthly power can exempt them from the responsibility God has given them in relation to their children. In different ways we have all been given by Our Lord the care of others: the priest has the souls entrusted to him; the teacher has his pupils, the professor his students. Likewise, many others have the responsibility of giving spiritual formation. No one will respond on our behalf before God when we are asked: Where are those I entrusted to you? But each one of us will be able to reply: Of those whom thou gavest me I lost not one, because, Lord, we knew how to use, with your grace, both ordinary and extraordinary means so that no one would stray.

All of us ought to be able to say with regard to those who have been entrusted to us: Cor meum vigilat: My heart is vigilant. This is the inscription on many images of Our Lady in the city of Rome. Our Lord wants us to have a care for all souls, but in the first place for our own, those He has entrusted to us.

Our Lord asks for an attentive love, a love capable of realising that perhaps someone is neglecting his duties towards God, and of then helping him kindly; or of being aware that another is sad and isolated from his fellows, so that we pay him more attention. With another it might be that we gently help him to go to confession, urging more insistently when the opportune moment comes. A vigilant heart is alert to notice when behaviour inappropriate to a Christian home has crept in, that programmes on the television, say, are watched without previous selection, or, too often, that conversations seem rarely to touch on other than banal topics, or that there is little evidence of an atmosphere of hard work, or genuine concern for others. The vigilant heart also is concerned to give good example, without losing patience, with prayer and more details of affection, asking Saint Joseph’s intercession that we may live with fortitude and constancy, full of charity and human sympathy. And in the event that someone falls ill, those who are vigilant redouble their compassion.
because they have learnt that the sick are God’s favourites and the one who is suffering now is the treasure of the house; he is enabled to make an offering of his sickness, to say some prayer, and in so doing suffers as little as possible, because affection alleviates or even turns the mind from pain, or at least moderates it to something less intolerable.

95.3 Devoting the necessary time, which takes priority over other interests. Family prayers.

Let us consider today in our prayer whether the family or those in our care do occupy the place in our lives desired by God, and see if our heart is truly watchful over them. Here, along with our vocation, is indeed a treasure which lasts unto eternal life! Other treasures which previously seemed important to us may well now fall into perspective and begin to lose their charm. Perhaps we may find that a lack of rectitude of intention has corroded them or that they were counterfeit treasures anyway, fool’s gold of little value.

To live family life properly very often means making use of the opportunity to spend time for the benefit of others: to have time to celebrate family occasions or reunions, time to talk, to listen, to understand, to pray together ... It is not enough to have a generally benevolent but invisible affection: we must make it overt and appreciable, and for this we have to make a conscious effort and pray, deliberately cultivating and exercising the requisite human virtues and forgetfulness of self. It is far from being a waste of time to put to ourselves the question: for what or for whom do I live? What interests fill my heart?

Now, when it seems evident that attacks on the family have multiplied, the best way of defending it is by means of true human affection, taking into account with open eyes our own defects and those of others, and making God present in an agreeable way in the home. This we can do by saying grace at meals, by joining in with the smallest children for their night prayers, by reading a few verses of the Gospel with the older ones and saying a short prayer for the dead, for the Pope’s and the family’s intentions. Nor let us forget the Holy Rosary, the prayer which the Roman Pontiffs have recommended so warmly and so frequently to be recited in the family, and which draws down so many graces. From time to time it will be possible to pray while travelling, or at some moment which fits in with the family timetable. And this need not always be left to the initiative of mother or grandmother, because the father or the older children can make a wonderful contribution in this pleasant task. Many families have kept up the healthy habit of going to Mass together on Sundays.

It isn’t at all necessary for the practices of piety in the family to be numerous, or lengthy, but it would be unnatural if there were none at all in a home where all, or almost all, were professed believers. Then again, it would not make much sense if they individually regarded themselves as faithful followers of Christ and the sincerity of their belief found no reflection in their family life. It has been said of parents who pray with their children that it is easier for them to find the way that leads to their hearts. And they never forget the help they have got from their parents – to converse with God, to have recourse to Our Lady in every situation. How many will have reached the gates of Heaven thanks to those prayers they learned from their mother’s lips, or their grandmother’s or older sister’s!

United in this way, with great affection and an unshakable faith, they are better and more effectively able to resist attacks from the external environment. And if at any time sorrow or sickness intervene they are more easily borne with, and become opportunities for an even greater union and a deeper faith.
The Blessed Virgin, our Mother, will teach us the treasure we have in the calling from Our Lord, with all it implies, in one’s own home, in one’s family circle, in the persons God has wanted to involve us with in our life in so many different ways.

Within the Heart of Jesus we will find an overflowing measure of grace from the fount of heavenly gifts. Let us try to make our heart like to his.
96. EVERYTHING WORKS OUT WELL

96.1 Loving the will of God. God has the best possible plans for each man. Serenity in the face of contradictions.

Everything, even the smallest object in the universe, exists because God keeps it in being. 

_He covers the heavens with clouds, he prepares rain for the earth, he makes grass grow upon the hills. He gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens that cry._ [621] The entire creation is the work of God, and He lovingly takes care of all his creatures, beginning by keeping them all in existence. This ‘maintaining’ is, in a certain sense, a continual creation (conservatio est continua creatio). [622] The same care and providence is extended in a particular way to man, the object of God’s predilection.

Jesus Christ makes known to us constantly that God is our Father, and that he wants the best for his children. The very best we could imagine, for ourselves and for those we love best, falls far short of the divine plans. Our Father God knows very well what we need, and his all-seeing gaze takes in both this life and eternity; our sight is short and very defective, our view limited. It is in accord with reason that happiness and sanctity consist essentially in knowing, loving and carrying out the Will of God, which is manifested to us in different ways, but with sufficient clarity, throughout life. In the Gospel of the Mass, the Lord makes us a recommendation so that our days may be filled with peace: _... do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them._ [623] Here we have an invitation to live with cheerful hope in the carrying-out of our daily duties. It is logical that we shall meet with setbacks, anxieties and laborious difficulties, but we should bear them as God’s children, without useless worry, or any spirit of rebellion or sadness, because we know that Our Lord allows these things to happen – this illness, that apparent disaster – to purify us, to convert us into co-redeemers with him. The sufferings and contradictions should serve to refine us as precious metals are refined, to help us grow in virtue and love God more ... _Have you not heard the Master himself tell you the parable of the vine and the branches? Here you can find consolation. He demands much of you, for you are the branch that bears fruit. And he must prune you ‘ut fructum plus afferas’: to make you bear more fruit’. Of course: that cutting, that pruning hurts. But, afterwards, what richness in your fruits, what maturity in your actions._ [624] Let us not be disconcerted when we encounter the contretemps of the divine plans; God is well aware of what He is about, and of what He is permitting to happen.

Let us take a good look at ourselves today, to see if we are accepting reverses, disappointments or apparent failures with equanimity; whether we are resentful or, no matter how briefly, giving rein to gloomy thoughts or rebelliousness. Let us see, side by side with Our Lord, whether our physical or moral weaknesses are not truly capable of drawing us towards our Father God, and of making us more humble. _Do not be anxious about your life ..._ Our Lord tells us once more in this time of prayer.

96.2 Abandonment in God and responsibility.

_Very often we do not know what is good for us; and what confuses matters more is that we think_
we do. We have our own plans for our happiness, and too often we look upon God as someone who will help us to carry them out. The true state of affairs is invariably the reverse of this. God has his own perfect plans for our happiness, and is waiting for us to help him carry them out. And let it be clear that we can in no way improve on God’s plans. Being possessed of a thoroughly practical certainty concerning these truths, and living them day by day, leads to serene abandonment even when we are faced with some seemingly insurmountable obstacle which we cannot understand and that causes us grief and frustration. Nothing falls apart, there is no disastrous collapse if we are supported by our sense of divine filiation: *But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you ...?*

It sometimes happens, Saint Thomas says, that when an observer not proficient in medical sciences sees a doctor prescribe water for one sick man and wine for another, he thinks in his ignorance that the prescription is as random as the tossing of a coin. *And so it happens with God. He, knowing the causes of things and according to his providence, in his Wisdom disposes whatever it is that men need: he afflicts some who are perhaps good and allows others who are bad to live in prosperity.*

We can never forget that God wants us to be happy here, but He wants us to be still happier forever with him in Heaven.

Sanctity consists in the loving fulfilment of the Will of God, which is manifested in the duties of each day in one’s own circumstances. Knowing that his loving attention and his divine providence embraces the minutest detail of our lives, we can abandon ourselves in God with complete trust. But this abandonment has to be active and responsible, with our applying the means that each situation demands: it may be going to the doctor when we are sick; it may be taking all the preliminary steps necessary to obtain that post we need so much and for which we have prayed to God: it may be working hard to make progress in our studies or our chosen profession, putting in the hours necessary to get through that difficult examination or achieve that required qualification ... Abandonment in God has to be closely united with responsibility, which leads us to use the most opportune human means, for on many occasions what is disguised as ‘bad luck’, adverse circumstances etc., is nothing but hidden mediocrity, indolence or imprudence in not employing the precise means that a situation has called for. When work is done conscientiously, with order, (systematically and methodically), when it is properly finished off, when it has been sanctified like constant apostolate done with a spirit of sacrifice, it gives fruit in due course. And if these fruits take their time in coming, it is a sign that God will give them by means we have not suspected, and that He wants us to sanctify ourselves in precisely these circumstances.

96.3 *Omnia in bonum – for those who love, everything works out in the best possible way.*

Our awareness of our divine filiation helps us to discover that all the happenings of our life are directed or permitted for our good by the most lovable Will of God. He who is our Father grants us what is best for us, and expects us to see his paternal love as much in adverse occurrences as in those more favourable events that are to our liking.

As Saint Paul says: *in everything God works for good with those who love him.* He who loves God and shows his love with deeds knows that, come what may, everything is for the best, provided one does not stop loving. And precisely because he loves, *he uses the means*, so that the result will be good, so that the finished work, carried out with rectitude of intention, will bear fruits of sanctity and apostolate. And once he has used the means available to him, he abandons himself in God and
rests in his loving providence. *Take note*, Saint Bernard says, *he does not say that things serve for caprice, but work together for good. Not for caprice, but usefulness; not for pleasure, but salvation; not for our desire but for our advantage. In this sense, all things work for our good, even death itself, even sin itself ... For do not sins work towards the good of him who through them becomes more humble, more fervent, more solicitous, more cautious, more prudent?* [630] After using the means within our reach, or in matters over which we have no control, we will say in the intimacy of our heart: *Omnia in bonum*, all is for good.

With this conviction, fruit of divine filiation, we will live full of optimism and hope and so overcome many difficulties. *It looks as if the whole world is coming down on top of you. Whichever way you turn you find no way out. This time, it is impossible to overcome the difficulties. But, have you again forgotten that God is your father? All-powerful, infinitely wise, full of mercy. He would never send you anything that is evil. That thing that is worrying you, it’s good for you, even though those earthbound eyes of yours may not be able to see it now. ‘Omnia in bonum!’ Lord, once again and always, may your most wise Will be done.* [631] *Omnia in bonum!* All is for good. We can turn everything into something pleasing to God and for the good of the soul. This expression of Saint Paul can serve as an aspiration or a short prayer which will give us peace in difficult moments.

The most holy Virgin, Our Mother, will teach us how to live trustfully and with confidence in God’s omnipotence, if we have recourse to her frequently each day. In the most Sweet Heart of Mary, whose feast we celebrate in this month of June, we never fail to find peace, consolation and joy.
97. DO NOT BE AFRAID

97.1 Courage in ordinary life.

In the Gospel of the Mass Our Lord tells us not to be afraid, but to live as children of God. At times we come across people who are tormented and overwhelmed by the hardships that life brings with it. The adverse circumstances and the obstacles seem only to grow when one relies on human resources alone in order to overcome them. We also frequently meet Christians who seem to be ashamed of speaking clearly about God, of saying no to falsehood and, whenever necessary, of showing themselves to be faithful disciples of Christ. They are afraid of what people will say, of a critical remark, of going against the current or of drawing attention to themselves. Is it possible for a Christian not to draw attention to himself in a pagan environment, where so often economic values are the supreme values?

Jesus tells us not to be concerned about possible slander or criticism. Do not be afraid of men, for everything that is now covered will be uncovered, and everything now hidden will be made clear: What a shame if it were to be discovered that we were afraid of proclaiming to the four corners of the world the truth that God has entrusted to us! What I say to you in the dark, tell it in the daylight; what you hear in whispers, proclaim from the housetops. At times we will keep silent because that is the best thing to do, for reasons of supernatural prudence, or charity, but never out of fear or cowardice. We Christians are not friends of darkness and hidden corners; we are friends of light, of openness in our lives and in our words. The times we live in are such that we need to proclaim the truth clearly. Falsehood and confusion are leading many souls astray. It seems absurd, but at times even good doctrine, the moral norms of behaviour, following one’s conscience in our work and in the demands of married life, common sense itself, are held in less esteem than some scandalous, erroneous doctrine which is held to be ‘advanced’ or tinged with a progressive hue ...

We shouldn’t be afraid of losing the gloss of a superficial prestige, or of being criticised or even slandered because we go against the current or what happens to be fashionable. If anyone declares himself for me in the presence of men, I will declare myself for him in the presence of my Father in heaven, Our Lord says. He rewards us fully for all those times when people do not understand us because we try to live bravely, with holy daring, in a world which is frequently unable to understand anything except purely material values.

I consider, says Saint Paul, that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. Therefore, Saint Cyprian comments, who would not make the effort to achieve such great glory, to become a friend of God, to possess Christ immediately, to receive the divine rewards after the anguish and torments of the earth? If for the soldiers of this world it is glorious to return home after humbling the enemy, how much more glorious and praiseworthy will it be to return in triumph to heaven once the devil is overcome ...; to bear aloft the signs of victory ...; to be seated at God’s side when He comes in judgement, be co-heir with Christ, to rank with the angels, and with the Patriarchs, the Apostles and the Prophets; to rejoice in the possession of the Kingdom of Heaven ...?

97.2 Our strength is based on an awareness of our divine filiation.
Fearing neither life nor death, facing even serious difficulties joyfully, steadfastly confronting obstacles that demand effort and sacrifice, serenely enduring illness, remaining always calm in the face of an uncertain future ... that is how God wants us to live. It is possible if we remember frequently each day that we are children of God, particularly when we are assailed by worry, anxiety or darkness. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

God makes clear the great affection He has for us and the great value He places on mankind. Saint Jerome commenting on this passage from the Gospel of the Mass writes, If the sparrows are so cheap and yet fall under the providence and care of God, how can you who are eternal by the nature of your souls be afraid that He whom you venerate as your Father will not take special care of you?

Divine filiation strengthens us when we are surrounded by personal weaknesses and the obstacles that we come up against; by the difficulties we encounter in an environment that is so often hostile to God and at times violently opposed to Christian ideals. But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior, the prophet Jeremiah tells us in the First Reading of the Mass. This is the Prophet’s cry of hope and confidence when he is alone, beset on all sides by his enemies. God my Father is with me as a dread warrior, we can repeat when we see danger close at hand and the storm clouds looming. Dominus, illuminatio mea et salus mea, quem timebo? The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith proclaimed the apostle Saint John in the midst of the great difficulties proceeding from the pagan world in which Christians, as ordinary citizens, worked in the most diverse trades and professions and carried out an effective apostolate. And the sure foundation of an unshakeable faith gives rise to a confidence that is not vanity or ingenuousness, but the joyful firmness of the Christian who in spite of his personal wretchedness and limitations knows that Christ has won the victory by his death on the cross and his glorious Resurrection. God is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? Nobody and nothing, Lord. You are the safeguard of my life!

97.3 Courage and trust in God in the great trials and in the little things of ordinary life.

Jesus encourages us to be afraid of nothing, except sin, which destroys our friendship with God and leads to eternal damnation. When faced by difficulties we must be strong and brave, like true sons of God. Our Lord tells us Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot destroy the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. This fear of God is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It helps us to struggle with greater determination against sin, against everything that separates us from God. It prompts us to avoid the occasions of sin, not to trust ourselves, remembering always that we have ‘feet of clay’, that we are fragile and brittle. Bodily evils, even death itself, are as nothing compared to the evils of the soul, to sin.

We should be worried by nothing except the fear of losing God. This fear is a filial concern, a care not to offend Him. At certain times in our life we may well undergo great trials. God will give us the grace necessary to endure them and to grow in interior life. My grace is sufficient for you, Jesus will tell us.

He who helped Paul will take care of us. At such times we will call upon God, humbly and with
faith: ‘Lord, put not your trust in me. But I ... I put my trust in you.’ Then as we sense in our hearts the love, the compassion, the tenderness of Christ’s gaze upon us – for He never abandons us – we shall come to understand the full meaning of those words of Saint Paul, ‘virtus in infirmitate perficitur’ (2 Cor 12:9). If we have faith in Our Lord, in spite of our failings – or, rather, even with our failings – we shall be faithful to Our Father, God: his divine power will shine forth in us, sustaining us in our weakness.[641]

Normally, however, we shall have to be strong and brave in little things: when we politely but firmly turn down an invitation to a place or a show where a good Christian would feel ill at ease, when we have to give our opinion on the direction their teachers are giving to the education of our children; when we have to break off that conversation which is taking a dubious turn, or see an opportunity to invite a friend to some talks on the Faith, or lead up to the chat which results in that tactful, opportune advice about going to Confession. An ambitious apostolate is often held back or stopped by diffidence or cowardice in little things. And it is also courage in little things that make our life fruitful.

In the hour of rejection at the Cross, the Virgin Mary is there by her Son, willing to go through the same fate. Let us lose our fear of behaving like responsible Christians when the environment in which we move is not easy. She will help us.[642]
98.1 The storm on the lake. God will never abandon us.

According to the Gospels, the Apostles, while sailing to the opposite shore as the Lord had told them, were twice caught by a storm on the Lake of Gennesareth. In the Gospel of today’s Mass, Saint Mark tells us that Jesus was with them in the boat. He used the time to rest after a hard day’s preaching. He lay down in the stern, resting his head on a cushion, probably a simple, coarse leather bag stuffed with rags or wool. That was the usual thing the sailors had on these boats. How the angels in Heaven would gaze upon their King and Lord as he recovered his strength, lying upon the hard deck planking! He who governs the Universe is stretched out there exhausted!

Meanwhile his disciples, many of them sailors, begin to feel the first squalls of the gathering storm. It soon falls on them, with tremendous force ... and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. They did what they could, but the seas grew higher and rougher and they were about to founder. Then as a last resort they turn to Jesus. They wake him with a cry of distress. Teacher, do you not care if we perish?

The skill of those sea-hardened fishermen was not enough. Our Lord had to intervene. And He awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. Peace also entered the hearts of those frightened men.

Sometimes the storm arises around us or within us. And it seems that our frail craft cannot take any more. At times we have the impression that God is heedless of our fate. The waves are breaking over us: personal weaknesses, professional or financial difficulties that are beyond our management, illness, problems with children or parents, the menace of calumny, a hostile environment, slander ... But if you live in the presence of God, high above the deafening storm, the sun will always be shining on you; and deep below the roaring and destructive waves, peace and calm will reign in your soul.

God will never abandon us. We must go to him, using all the means we need to employ. At all times, tell Jesus with the confidence of one who has taken him as his Master, and wants to follow him unconditionally, ‘Lord, do not leave me!’ And together with Him we will face up to those trials and surmount them. They will no longer be bitter, and we will not be dismayed by the storms that blow.

98.2 We must be ready to face up to misunderstandings.

Jesus awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ This miracle made an unforgettable impression on the Apostles. It confirmed their faith and prepared them for the harder, more testing battles that lay ahead. The sight of a perfectly calm sea, subject to the voice of Christ, was engraved on their hearts. Years afterwards, these men would pray, and the memory of this scene would bring peace to them as they underwent all the trials Our Lord had forewarned them of.

On another occasion, on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus had told them that what the prophets had foretold about the Son of Man was about to be fulfilled. For he will be delivered to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spat upon; they will scourge him and kill him, and on the third day he will rise. At the same time He warns them that they too will go through terrible times of persecution and slander. A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.
If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they malign those of his household?[646] Jesus wants to convince those first disciples, and us too, that there is no compromise possible between him and his doctrine on the one hand, and the world as a kingdom of sin on the other.[647] He reminds them not to be surprised to be treated in this way: If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.[648] Hence, as Saint Gregory explains, the hostility of the wicked echoes like praise for our way of life, because it shows that insofar as we annoy those who do not love God, there is at least some rectitude in us. Nobody can please God and the enemies of God at the same time.[649] So if we are faithful there will be winds and storms. But Jesus will say once more to the stormy sea ‘Peace! Be still!’

At the very beginning of the Church the Apostles gathered abundant fruits. But at the same time they would suffer threats, insults, persecution.[650] They were not concerned whether opinion was favourable or hostile towards them. They were concerned to make Christ known to all, to take the fruits of our redemption to the uttermost corner of the earth. They preached the doctrine of Christ, which in purely human terms constituted a scandal for some and seemed sheer madness to others.[651] This doctrine entered all environments, transforming souls and customs.

Many of the circumstances within which the Apostles had to work have changed, but others remain as they were or have become even worse. Materialism, the excessive love of comfort and well-being, sensuality and ignorance represent once again in many places furious winds and stormy seas. And we can add to this the temptation of many people to adapt the doctrine of Christ to the times, seriously deforming the essential message of the Gospel.

If we want to be apostles in the midst of the world we must realise that some people – at times our husband, our wife, our parents, or an old friend – will not understand us. We will have to take heart, because it is not easy to row against the stream. We will have to work calmly and firmly. We cannot be deterred or allow ourselves to be deflected by the attitude of those who in many ways have compromised or so identified themselves with the customs of the new paganism that they seem unable any longer to understand the transcendent, supernatural meaning of life.

Our intimacy with God will give us calmness and strength, and we will be a firm rock for many. We can never forget that, particularly nowadays, the Lord needs strong and courageous souls who refuse to come to terms with mediocrity, but will be able to enter all kinds of environments with a sure step ...[652] In parent-teacher associations, in professional bodies, in the universities, in the trade unions, in informal conversation before or after a meeting ... As a specific example, the influence of families is particularly important in social and public life. ‘They should be the first to take steps to see that the laws ... not only do not transgress against, but actually support and positively defend the rights and duties of the family,’ (cf Familiaris consortio, 44) in this way promoting real ‘family politics’ (ibid). In this field it is essential to foster in a renewed and complete way knowledge of the doctrine of the Church on the family, to awaken the consciences and social and political responsibilities of Christian families, and to establish or strengthen existing associations for the good of the family.[653] We cannot remain inactive while the enemies of God strive to eliminate all trace of the eternal destiny of man.

98.3 Our attitude towards difficulties.

‘The three concupiscences (cf 1 John 2:16) are like three gigantic forces which have unleashed a tremendous frenzy of lust, of a created being’s conceited pride in his own strength, and of a
desire for riches’ (St Josemaría Escrivá, Letter, 14 February 1974, 10) ... And without being pessimistic or depressed, we can see that ... these forces have achieved an unprecedented development and a monstrous aggressiveness, to such an extent that ‘an entire civilization is tottering, powerless and without moral resources to fall back on’ (ibid).[654] We cannot remain inactive in such a situation. For the love of Christ urges us on, says Saint Paul in the Second Reading.[655] Charity, and the real need of so many creatures, drives us to carry out an untiring apostolic activity in all environments. Each person has to work in his own environment, in spite of the hostility we will meet and the misunderstandings of people who cannot or do not want to understand.

Walk therefore, ‘in nomine Domini’, with joy and security in the name of the Lord. No pessimism! If difficulties arise, then the grace of God will come more abundantly as well. If more difficulties appear, more of God’s grace will come down from Heaven. If there are many difficulties, there will be many graces from God. Divine help is always proportionate to the obstacles with which the world and the devil oppose apostolic work. And so I would even dare to affirm that, in a way, it is good that there are difficulties, because then we will obtain more help from God. ‘Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more’ (Rom 5:20).[656]

We can use this opportunity to purify our intentions, to be more attentive to the Master, to strengthen our faith. Our attitude must always be one of forgiveness and calmness, because God is with each of us. Christian, Christ is sleeping in your boat, Saint Augustine reminds us; Wake him, and he will rebuke the storm and peace will be restored.[657] Everything is for our good and the good of souls. It is enough to be in his company to feel that we are safe. Worry, fear and cowardice arise when our prayer weakens. He knows well enough everything that is happening to us. And if need be, he will rebuke wind and sea, and a great calm will be established, and his peace will flood into us. And we too will be filled with awe like the apostles.

The Blessed Virgin will not leave us for an instant. If the winds of temptation arise, fix your eyes on the star, call upon Mary ... With her for a guide you will not go astray; whilst invoking her, you will never lose heart; so long as she is in your mind, you are safe from deception. If she holds your hand, you cannot fall; under her protection you have nothing to fear; if she walks before you, you will not grow weary; if she shows you favour, you will reach the goal.[658]
99. THE LOVE AND FEAR OF GOD

99.1 Love of God and submission to his infinite holiness.

O God, thou art my God, I seek thee,
My soul thirsts for thee;
My flesh faints for thee,
as in a dry and weary land where no water is.
My soul thirsts for thee,
O God, my God ...

we pray in the Responsorial Psalm of the Mass,[659] making the liturgical prayer our own. To get ever closer to God Our Lord we must depend on two solid rock foundations which are united and complementary: confidence and respectful reverence; closeness and reverential submission; love and fear. They are the two arms with which we embrace God,[660] teaches Saint Bernard. We are attracted to God the Father, full of mercy and goodness, the fulness of all true good. In the knowledge that we are less than nothing, we humbly bow down before this same God, absolutely sublime, imposing, exalted. We submit our will to him and fear his just punishments. In today’s Mass we also pray: Sancti nominis tui, Domine, timorem pariter et amorem fac nos habere perpetuum ... – Grant, O Lord, that we may always revere and love your holy name, for you never deprive of your guidance those you set firm on the foundation of your love.[661] Love and a holy filial fear are the two wings that will raise us to him.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,[662] Holy Scripture teaches us. And this is the basis of all the virtues, for if a man is not steadfast and zealous in the fear of the Lord, his house will be quickly overthrown.[663] Christ himself teaches his friends that they should not fear those who can kill the body, because there is nothing more they can do. I will tell you whom to fear, he says to his most faithful followers, to those who have left all things to follow him. Fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear him![664] The Acts of the Apostles tell us how the early Church grew, was built up, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.[665]

We should not forget that the love of God grows stronger the farther we are from mortal sin and the greater the efforts we make to overcome deliberate venial sin. The holy fear of God is a great help to us in carrying on this open struggle against everything that offends him. It is always a filial fear, proper to a son who recoils from inflicting sorrow and sadness on his Father. He knows who his Father is, what sin is, and the infinite separation it imposes on the sinner. This is why Saint Augustine says Blessed the soul who fears God, since it is strong against the temptations of the devil. ‘Blessed is the man who fears the Lord always’ (Prov 28:14) and he to whom has been given the remembrance of the fear of the Lord. He who fears God leaves the pathway of evil and adheres to the path of virtue. The fear of God makes a man wary and vigilant to avoid sin. The dissolute life triumphs where there is no fear of God.[666]

Love of God and filial fear are two aspects of the same attitude which enables us to walk in safety. As we consider the infinite goodness of God, who approaches us in the Sacred Humanity of Jesus Christ, we are moved to love him more and more. As we contemplate the majesty and justice of God...
and our own nothingness, the fear of saddening God is awakened, together with the fear of losing him whom we love so much, because of our personal sins. So fear and love must go together, Blessed J. H. Newman advises us. **Continue to fear, continue to love until the last day of your lives**, he tells us.[667] From that moment on, only love will remain. **Perfect love casts out fear.**[668]

### 99.2 The importance of filial fear for the uprooting of sin.

The holy fear of God is a guarantee and support of true love. It helps us to make a definitive break with mortal sins. It impels us to do penance for the sins we have committed, and preserves us from deliberate faults. **The thought of the punishment we deserve for our sins helps us to face the daily difficulties and deprivations and struggles without which there cannot be any real freedom from sin or any perfect union with God.** We always have, indeed, plenty of reason to be penetrated with the fear of God when we consider the many occasions of sin that lie all around us, our own extreme weakness, the strength of our inordinate attachments and habits, our natural inclination to self-indulgence, the pull of our own concupiscence from within and the attractions of the world from without, our many faults and defects and the plain carelessness of which we are guilty every day.[669] When faced with such personal weakness, is it possible not to fear? Is it possible not to trust in the immense divine goodness?

Filial fear turns our affection from sin and keeps the soul on guard against a false and deceptive complacency. The greatest of dangers is perhaps precisely that lack of concern about the sin that has been committed and a thoughtlessness and superficiality which could lead eventually to a total loss of the sense of sin. This attitude, which can be seen in those who seem to be falling back into paganism, is the result of having lost this holy fear of God. In such deplorable situations the offence against God is ridiculed, passed off as trivial or otherwise made light of. The most serious aberrations are held to be ‘only natural’, because the relationship has been broken between the creature and its Creator, on whom it depends for its very existence. The most serious deformations of conscience, and therefore of the essential direction of man, frequently have their origin in the loss of this attitude of sacred reverence for him who created all things out of nothing.

Filial fear and love always go together. If we were to reject the filial fear of God, the desire to please him, the concern not to grieve him, we would run the risk of altogether neglecting the ascetical struggle and fall into a presumptuous reliance on the goodness of God. On the other hand, if one is motivated only by fear, one cuts oneself off from the great and merciful love of God our Father, from childlike simplicity and trustful abandonment. These attitudes are essential for a soul aspiring to holiness.

The beginning of the fear of God is an imperfect love. It is based on fear of punishment. But this fear can and must be raised to a filial attitude from which we come to contemplate above all the greatness of God, his infinite majesty and our condition as creatures. ‘**Timor Domini sanctus**’ – the fear of God is holy. It is a fear which is the veneration of a son for his Father – never a servile fear; for your **Father God is not a tyrant.**[670] It is transformed into the fear of a child who sincerely loves his Father, and this love gives him the strength to avoid everything that might grieve his parent or come between them.

### 99.3 Confession and the holy fear of God.

When we go to the Sacrament of Penance it will help us very much if we foster the holy fear of
God in our souls. To receive the sacrament, attrition (a supernatural but imperfect sorrow, arising from fear of punishment, or revulsion from the ugliness of the sin ...) is sufficient. But we will receive much more grace if we impel our soul to a sense of filial fear for having offended an Almighty God who is also Our Father. It will be much easier to pass from this filial attitude to one of genuine contrition, a repentance springing from love, to an attitude of sorrow based on love. Then confession becomes an immense source of grace, a place where love grows constantly stronger.[671]

Interior life grows in sensitivity and depth if we keep continually before us those truths that reveal to us the foundations of this gift of the Holy Spirit: God’s holiness and our wretchedness, our daily failures, the absolute dependence of the creature on his Creator, the enormity of a single venial sin in the sight of the divine holiness, the ingratitude implied by our lack of generosity in living up to the demands of our vocation ...[672] We shall understand better the mystery of sin if above all we develop the habit of considering frequently the Passion of Our Lord. We shall learn to love, and thereby dread committing a single venial sin. When we contemplate the suffering that Christ endured for our sins, the countless sins of all the world, our hope will be strengthened and our contrition intensified, and we shall have a firmer resolve to avoid every deliberate fault.

The holy fear of God joined to love gives a special strength to the Christian’s life. With it, nothing can make him tremble, for nothing can then separate him from the love of God.[673] The soul is consolidated in the virtue of hope and set free from a false and careless security by maintaining a watchful love – cor meum vigilat – against the treacherous lures of temptation.

Let us ask our Mother Mary, Refugium peccatorum, to make us understand just how much we lose every time we step aside from the path that leads to her son Jesus, even if our faults are only slight ones.
100. THE SPECK IN OUR BROTHER’S EYE

100.1 Pride leads us to exaggerate our neighbour’s faults and to underestimate and excuse our own. Avoiding negative judgements on others.

On one occasion Our Lord said to those who were listening to Him, *Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.* Avoiding negative, and often unjust, judgements on others is a sign of humility.

The slightest faults of others are exaggerated by our personal pride, whereas our own perhaps much greater defects are minimised and explained away. Moreover, pride tends to see in others what are really our own imperfections and errors. Hence Saint Augustine gives this wise piece of advice: *Strive to acquire the virtues you think your brothers lack, and then you will no longer see their defects, because you yourselves will not have them.*

Humility on the other hand has a positive influence through a series of virtues which favour a good human and Christian atmosphere in social life. Only the humble man is in a position to forgive, to understand, and help, because he alone realises that he has received everything from God. He is aware of his own wretchedness and how much he himself is in need of the divine mercy. So even when he has to judge, he is understanding towards his neighbour. He finds excuses and forgives whenever necessary. Besides, we have a very limited view of what motivates the actions of others. God alone can penetrate into the most intimate interior of hearts, read minds and grasp the real effect and value of all the circumstances that influence and accompany any action.

We must learn to pass over even the obvious and undeniable defects of the people we are with each day, so that we do not keep our distance from them or lose our respect for them because of their mistakes or bad manners. Let us learn from Our Lord, who *could not entirely excuse the sin of those who crucified him, but extenuated its malice by pleading their ignorance. When we cannot excuse a sin, let us at least make it worthy of compassion by attributing the most favourable cause we can to it, such as ignorance or weakness.*

If we make the effort to discover our neighbour’s good points, we shall see that the deficiencies in his character, the defects in his behaviour, are as nothing in comparison with his virtues. This positive, just attitude towards those with whom we are constantly in contact will bring us closer to God. We shall grow in interior mortification, charity and humility. *Let us strive always to look at the virtues and good deeds we see in others, Saint Teresa tells us, and cover their defects with the thought of our own great sins. This is a manner of acting that, although we cannot do so with perfection right away, gradually gains for us a great virtue – that of considering all other men as being better than ourselves. In such a way, with the help of God, one begins to acquire this virtue.*

We have to adopt a positive attitude towards the shortcomings of others, even when they are external sins like gossiping or working badly. In the first place we must pray for them, atone for them to God and be patient and strong. We must love and esteem them more, because love and esteem is
100.2 Accepting people as they are, with their defects. Helping them by means of fraternal correction.

Our Lord did not discuss the apostles or look down on them because of their defects, which are evident and clearly reflected in the Gospels. At the beginning of their dedication to God they are at times moved by envy, or anger, and are even ambitious for prominence among themselves. At such times the Master corrects them tactfully and is patient with them and continues loving them. He teaches those of his followers who are to hand on his doctrine something that is essential in family life, in a working environment, in personal relationships, and indeed in the whole of the Church: it is to live charity in deeds.

Loving others despite all their defects is the fulfilment of the Law of Christ. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, ‘you shall love your neighbour as yourself’. This commandment of Jesus does not say we must love only those who are without defects, or those who have certain virtues. Because charity is an ordered virtue, Our Lord asks us to esteem first of all those whom God has placed at our side by ties of blood or by reason of family relationships, then those who work beside us and those who are our friends and neighbours ... This charity will have its own particular characteristics according to the bonds which unite us. But we must always have an open, welcoming attitude, and have the desire to help everyone. It is not a question of practising this virtue with ideal persons, but with those who actually live and work with us, with those we meet in the street at rush-hour, when the traffic is at its worst and public transport overcrowded. Perhaps at home or at the office we shall come across cross-grained people who are irritable or even in a bad temper, those who are unwell or tired, those who are selfish and envious. It is a question of getting along with these real, specific individuals, of being considerate with them and helping them.

Our neighbour’s faults demand the response of a Christian. We must be understanding. We must pray for them and, when appropriate, help them by means of fraternal correction. Our Lord recommended no less, and the Church has always practised it.

This fraternal help is the fruit of charity. It has to be exerted humbly, without wounding. The correction should be given alone, in a friendly, positive way, helping that friend or colleague to realise that the point in question harms his soul, or his work, or is making it difficult for others to get along with him. It could detract from the human regard or prestige he should be able to expect. The Gospel precept goes far beyond the purely human level of social convention and even of friendship, when this is based on purely human criteria. It is a sign of human loyalty, and avoids any criticism or gossiping behind people’s backs. Is this the way we behave? Do we really carry out this recommendation that comes to us from Christ himself?

100.3 Positive criticism.

If we make a point of not concentrating our attention on the speck in our brother’s eye, it will be easy to avoid speaking badly of anyone. In any given case, if we have the duty of judging a particular action, of looking critically at what someone has done, we shall do so, remembering that we are doing it in the presence of God. We shall pray and purify our intentions. We shall respect the elementary norms of prudence and justice. I shall not tire of insisting, St Josemaría Escrivá would repeat, that the person who has the duty of judging must listen to both sides. ‘Does our law judge a
man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?’ that noble, loyal and upright
man Nicodemus reminded the priests and Pharisees who sought to condemn Jesus. [680]

If we must criticise, the criticism should always be constructive and appropriate. We must always
respect the doer of the action and his intentions, which we can know only in part. The Christian makes
his criticism in a very human way, without wounding. He strives to maintain friendly relations even
with those who are opposed to him, because he shows his respect and understanding.

In all honesty, the Christian does not judge where he does not know. When he does judge, he knows
he must take into account the time and place, and every other available circumstance, and express
himself with care. Otherwise he could easily lapse into detraction or slander. Charity and honesty
mean that we will not irrevocably make our minds up on the basis of a first simple impression. We
will not pass on pieces of gossip as the truth, or that unconfirmed piece of news – perhaps it never
will be confirmed – which damages the good name of someone or of an institution.

Charity helps us to see the defects of others only in the context of their motives and positive
qualities. Humility, however, enables us to discover so many errors and defects of our own that,
without being pessimistic, we are led to ask God to forgive us. We shall understand that others have
their faults, and we shall make an effort to improve by amending our own. To do this we must learn to
receive and accept the honest and well-meant criticism of those who know us and care for us. *A sure
sign of spiritual greatness is listening to advice, accepting it and being grateful for it.* [681] It is
characteristic of people overwhelmed by pride that they will not accept advice. They always have an
excuse at hand, or react badly to those who out of charity or friendship want to help them overcome a
failing or avoid repeating a bad course of action.

We have many reasons to give thanks to God. Among them we hope to have people at our side who
will give us a timely warning about where we are going wrong and advise us as to what we can and
should do better. This is friendly, honest criticism, and worth more than its weight in gold.

The Blessed Virgin Mary always had an appropriate word. She never gossiped, and many times
kept silent.
101. THE NARROW PATH

101.1 The road that leads to Heaven is narrow. Temperance and mortification.

On the way to Jerusalem someone asked him, Lord, will those who are saved be few?[682] Jesus did not give a direct answer, but replied, Strive to enter by the narrow gate; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. In the Gospel of today’s Mass, Saint Matthew reports this exclamation of Our Lord: For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.[683]

Life is a road that ends in God. It is a short road. It is important that when we reach our journey’s end the door be opened and that we may enter. We press onwards on our journey towards the consummation of history ... The Lord himself said: Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay each one for what he has done ... (Apoc 22:12-13).[684]

Two roads there are, two attitudes to life. One is to look for the most comfortable and agreeable way, to pamper the body and avoid sacrifice and penance; the other to seek the will of God even though it takes an effort to guard the senses and keep the body in check. It is either to live like pilgrims who, since they are only passing through, have what they strictly need and do not attach much importance to material things, or to be chained down by comfort-seeking, by pleasure and material goods which are seen as ends in themselves and not simply as means.

One of these two pathways leads to Heaven, the other to destruction, and those who go that way are many. We must frequently ask ourselves which of these paths we are following, and where it is we are heading. Are we pressing on – straight for Heaven, in spite of our defects and weaknesses? Are we following the narrow road? Do we practise temperance and mortification constantly, offering up small but none the less real sacrifices? Where are we heading? What is really the underlying objective of all that we do?

To want something (in theory and in principle) does not, however, mean much. We would learn more by looking at actual facts. A student bent on becoming a doctor would not enrol in the Faculty of Languages ... Were he to enrol in this Faculty, however, he would be showing by the very fact of his choosing it that the attainment of his professional ambitions will depend on the study of linguistics rather than medicine, in spite of whatever he may say to the contrary ... This is because when we want something we have to choose the requisite means to obtain it ... If a soldier were to say that he wished to go to his unit’s headquarters, but quite deliberately took the road leading to the enemy lines, he would really be wanting to go where he professedly did not want to go.[685] And if the reason offered is that he has chosen that road because it is more convenient, then what he actually wants is the road itself. He does not care in the least where it leads him.

Many people spend their lives in the pursuit of immediate goals. They do not worry about God, the be-all and end-all of their lives, who should be the reference point for everything else. To gain that perspective we need to smoothe off the rough edges a little more each day – just as if we were working in stone or wood – and get rid of the hindering defects in our own lives with a spirit of penance ... And with small mortifications.[686]

101.2 Need for mortification, struggle against comfort-seeking.
We show a preference for the broad road, the least uncomfortable way through life, even though it has little to offer us. We choose the wide door, which does not lead to Heaven. Frequently we are overwhelmed by an unruly, intemperate desire for material possessions.

The path Our Lord points out to us is a joyful one. Yet at the same time it is the path of the cross and sacrifice, of temperance and mortification. *If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.*[687] *Unless a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*[688]

We need to practise the virtue of temperance in this life if we desire to enter into the next life. We Christians must live a spirit of detachment in our attitude to the things we possess and use. We must not be unduly concerned about material goods. We should not seek to acquire or hold on to things that are superfluous to our needs. Where necessary, a sign of our rectitude of intention will be the way we live mortification in this area. We cannot be like those people who *seem to be dominated by economics; almost all of their personal and social lives are permeated by a kind of economic mentality.*[689] Their objective is the possession of material goods, thinking that with them they can fulfil their longing for happiness. They have a frenzied urge to obtain them, and forget all too easily that our life has to be a road that leads to God. It is nothing more than that – a road leading to God. Our Lord warns us: *Take heed to yourselves, He tells us, lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the cares of this life.*[690] *Let your loins be girded and your lamps be kept burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast.*[691]

Along the broad road of ease, comfort and avoidance of mortification, the graces God gives us shrivel and remain fruitless, like the seed that falls among the thorns. *They are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.*[692] Sobriety, however, makes it easier for us to approach God. *With a pampered and satiated body the soul is not free to fly high.*[693]

We must press on towards God, and our only concern need be that we are on the right road. Are we really on the good road, that of sacrifice and penance, joy and dedication to the service of others? Do we make a serious effort to overcome the desires for ease and comfort that constantly allure us?

101.3 Some examples of temperance and mortification.

Temperance is a very effective apostolic weapon when dealing with an all-too-frequently materialistic environment. It is one of the most attractive characteristics of Christian life. Wherever we are we must make the effort to give the good example the practice of this virtue promotes. It will be a natural feature of the way we behave. For many people, the good example given by a Christian has been the beginning of their finding God.

A temperate life is a life of mortification and joy. We shall often find opportunities to practise mortification in the little things that allow our reason to control our bodies and enable the soul to understand the things relating to God. Interior mortification guides our imagination and memory by keeping away useless or harmful thoughts and memories. It is also practised in the control of the tongue, by means of which we steer clear of useless and frivolous conversations, for example, or of gossip.

To follow along the narrow path of temperance we must also practise mortification of the external senses – sight, hearing, taste ... *One has to give the body a little less than its due. Otherwise it turns*
We allow ourselves a little less than we would like in comfort, in indulging our whims etc. There are frequent opportunities for mortifications in ordinary, everyday life, in hard, constant, orderly work, knowing that the spirit of sacrifice is best lived in finishing off well the work we have started; in punctuality, filling the day with heroic minutes; in taking care of the things we have or use; in showing our zeal for service by our fulfilling to the last detail the smallest obligations; in the specific points of charity by which we make the path to sanctity attractive for others; at times a smile can be the best sign of a spirit of penance ...

The narrow path passes through all the activities of a Christian, from our attitude to home comforts to the way we use the material and implements we work with or the way we relax. To rest, it is not necessary to spend a lot of money, or devote an inordinate amount of time to playing games to the detriment of our other duties. A good example of temperance and sobriety can also be shown in the moderation with which we make use of television and other aids to enjoyment or entertainment that technology makes available for us.

The narrow path is safe and attractive. Along it, together with a certain note of sobriety and sacrifice, we also encounter joy, because the cross is no longer a gallows. It is the throne from which Christ reigns. And at his side, his Mother, our Mother too. The Blessed Virgin will obtain for you the strength that you need to walk resolutely in the footsteps of her Son.
102. YOU WILL KNOW THEM BY THEIR FRUITS

102.1 Good fruit is produced by a sound tree. False teachers and their bad doctrine.

Our Lord repeatedly insists on the danger from false prophets who will lead many to spiritual ruin. In the Old Testament there are references to these bad shepherds who wreak havoc on the People of God. The prophet Jeremiah, for example, denounces the impiety of those who prophesied by Baal and led my people Israel astray ... they speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord ... lead my people astray with their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them; so they do not profit this people at all. Such unreliable guides soon made their appearance in the bosom of the Church. Saint Paul calls them false brothers and false apostles, and warns the first Christians to be wary of them. Saint Peter calls them false doctors. Nowadays also, there are undoubtedly many teachers of error. They have sown the bad seed abundantly and have been the cause of confusion and ruin for many souls.

Our Lord warns us in the Gospel of today’s Mass to beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. They inflict great harm on souls. Those who go to them for light find darkness. They seek strength and instead find doubt and weakness. Our Lord points out that both the true and the false messengers of God will be known by their fruits. This is how you can tell them. The preachers of false reform and doctrine bring nothing but separation from the life-giving vine-stem of the Church, the bewilderment and perdition of souls. Jesus tells us: You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. In this gospel passage Our Lord warns us to be prudent and on our guard against these lying teachers and their deceitful doctrines. It is not always easy to detect them, for sometimes bad doctrine comes with the appearance of being good.

102.2 Intimacy with God and Christian works.

Sound trees give good fruit. The tree is sound when the good sap flows through it. For the Christian, this is the life of Christ himself, personal holiness, and nothing else can take its place. We should never separate ourselves from him. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. When we are close to Jesus we become effective. We learn how to be joyful, to be understanding, and to love. In short, we learn how to be good Christians.

The life of union with Christ necessarily transcends the limited sphere of the individual – and this to the benefit of others. This is the source of apostolic fruitfulness: the apostolate, of whatever kind it be, must be an overflow of the interior life, of a life-giving union with Our Lord. This life of intimate union with Christ in the Church is maintained by the spiritual helps common to all the faithful, chiefly obtained by active participation in the liturgy. Laymen should make such a use of these helps that, while meeting their human obligations in the ordinary conditions of life, they do not separate their union with Christ from their ordinary lives, but through the very carrying out of their everyday tasks, whose performance is God’s will for them, actually promote the growth of their union with him. Contact with Christ in Holy Communion, in the Mass (the true centre of the
Christian life), in personal prayer and mortification which permit this contact with God, will show itself in the specific way we set about our daily work, in our dealings with others, whether they are believers or not, and in the way we carry out our civic and social duties. The sap is not seen, but the fruit certainly is. Christ should be seen in us in the way we behave, in our joy and serenity in the presence of sorrow and difficulties, in our readiness to forgive others. He will be seen in the demanding way we fulfill our duties and in our exemplary sobriety in making use of material goods; in our sincere gratitude for the help we are offered in the little things of daily life.

If we neglect this intimate union with God our apostolic effectiveness will be reduced to nothing in the lives of the people we habitually come into contact with. The fruits will become bitter, and unworthy of being laid before God. Saint Pius X declares: But among those who refuse or neglect ‘to consider in their heart’ (Jer 12:11), there are some who do not conceal the consequent sterility of their souls, but excuse themselves, offering as a reason that they are given entirely to the cares of ministry, to the manifold advantage of others. They are deceived miserably. For, unaccustomed to speak with God, they lack the divine fire when they speak to men about him, or impart the principles of Christian living, so that the gospel message seems to be lifeless in them. At best then it is not unusual for their advice to be merely common sense, with no supernatural content to it. They give their own doctrines instead of the Gospel doctrine. If we neglect personal piety, real intimacy with God, we shall not perform the deeds God expects from every Christian. For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. If our heart is not in God how can we hand on the words and the life that come from him? Let us take a look at our prayer. Do we have a set time for it, and are we punctual? Do we really try to overcome distractions? Do we pray in the most suitable place? Do we ask Our Lady, Saint Joseph and our Guardian Angel to help us maintain a lively personal dialogue with God? Do we make at least one small resolution each day?

We can also examine our efforts to preserve presence of God while we are walking along the street, while at work and at home ... and we can be definite about what needs putting right or improving in our daily life. Let us make such a resolution. It does not matter if it is small, but it should be definite.

102.3 The bitter fruit of laicism. The activity of the Christian in the world – to hand all things back to Christ.

Just as the man who excludes God from his life becomes a diseased tree that will yield bad fruit, so a society that wants to exclude God from its customs and laws causes countless evils and inflicts the most serious harm on its citizens. A State from which religion is banished can never be well-regulated. In it the phenomenon of laicism appears, with the desire of supplanting the honour due to God. A system of morality based on transcendent principles is replaced by merely human ideals and norms of conduct. These inevitably end up as less than human. God and the Church become purely internal matters of conscience, and the Church and the Pope are subjected to aggressive attacks, either directly or indirectly, through persons or institutions unfaithful to the Magisterium.

Not infrequently as a result of laicism the individual citizen, the life of the family, and of the commonwealth as a whole are all removed from the beneficent and wholesome influence of God and of his Church. Then, day by day, the symbols and symptoms of those errors which corrupted the heathens of old, declare themselves more plainly and more lamentably. And all this in parts of the world where the light of Christian civilization has shone for centuries. The signs of this
secularization can be seen in many countries. Even in those of long-standing Christian traditions this process of secularization is making inroads: the decline is apparently invariable, the symptoms all too plain – divorce, abortion, an alarming increase in the use of drugs even by children and young people, violence, contempt for public morality ... If God is not accepted as a loving Father, man and society inevitably become dehumanized. His laws were established for the protection and preservation of that human nature by means of which the individual is to find his personal dignity and reach the goal for which he has been created.

With the evidence of these bitter fruits before our eyes, we Christians must respond generously to the call we have received from God to be salt and light wherever we may be, however limited might appear the field of activity in which we live our lives. We must show by our deeds that the world is more human, more cheerful, more honest, cleaner, the closer it is to God. Life is the more worth living the more deeply it is penetrated by the light of Christ.

Jesus constantly urges us not to remain inactive, not to waste the slightest opportunity of giving a more Christian orientation to the people who surround us, to the environment in which we live. As we end our prayer today we can ask ourselves: What can I do in my family, at school, at the university, in the office ... to make God more actively present there? We ask Saint Joseph for fortitude of spirit in order to bring Christ into all these human realities. With faith we see the example of his life, which gives us a picture of Joseph as a remarkably sound man who was in no way, fearful or diffident about life. On the contrary, he faced up to problems, dealt with difficult situations and showed responsibility and initiative in whatever he was asked to do.\[709\]

With God’s grace and the intercession of the Holy Patriarch we shall make a constant effort to bear abundant fruit wherever God has placed us.
103. THE FRUITS OF THE MASS

103.1 The Eucharistic sacrifice and the ordinary life of the Christian.

The Second Vatican Council reminds us that the sacrifice of the Cross and its sacramental renewal in the Mass are, apart from the difference in the manner of offering, ‘one and the same’ sacrifice of praise, of thanksgiving, of propitiation and of satisfaction. The ends which Our Saviour gave to His sacrifice on the Cross are usually summed up in these four.

The four ends of the Mass are achieved in different ways and to a different extent. The ends that refer directly to God, namely, adoration, praise and thanksgiving, are always produced infallibly and with all their infinite value, independently of our collaboration. This is true even when the Mass is celebrated without the presence of a single member of the faithful, or, if there is one, if he assists in a distracted way. God our Lord is praised infinitely every time the Eucharistic Sacrifice is celebrated, and thanksgiving is offered up which satisfies God fully. This oblation, says Saint Thomas, pleases God more than all the sins of the world offend him, since Christ himself is the actual Priest who offers, as well as being the actual victim who is offered in every Mass.

However, the other ends of the Eucharistic Sacrifice (propitiation and petition), which are for the benefit of man and are called the fruits of the Mass, do not in fact always achieve the fulness of which they are capable. These fruits – of reconciliation with God and of obtaining from him what we ask for from his bounty – could also be of infinite value. They too rest on the merits of Christ. We never receive these fruits to that perfect degree, since they are applied to us according to our personal dispositions. The more ardently and intently we take part in the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar, the greater application of these fruits of propitiation and petition we shall receive. Christ’s own prayer multiplies the value of our prayer to the extent that we unite our petitions and atonement to his in the Mass, on the Cross itself.

So that we might receive the fruits of the Mass, the Church invites us to unite ourselves with the Sacrifice of Christ. That is, to take part in Jesus Christ’s praise, thanksgiving, propitiation and impetration. The external rite of the Mass (comprising the actions and ceremonies) both signifies the interior sacrifice of Jesus Christ and is a sign of the offering and dedication of all the faithful united to him. This dedication of the whole of our being, of all our daily activities, is yet another reason for us to carry them out perfectly and with a right intention. As the Second Vatican Council puts it: For all their deeds and actions, prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit, indeed, even the hardships of life if patiently borne, all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (cf 1 Pet 2:5). In the celebration of the Eucharist these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord. All our actions and our very life itself take on a new value when they hinge on the Mass as the centre of our day towards which all our thoughts and deeds are directed. It is the source from which flow all the graces we need to sanctify our stay on earth.

103.2 Taking part in the Mass conscious of what we are doing, with devotion and full collaboration. Our participation should be personal prayer, union with Jesus Christ, who is at
once the Priest and the Victim.

Our Mother the Church wants to obtain ever more fruits from the Mass. So she desires that when we are present we should not be there as strangers or silent spectators, but constantly increasing our understanding of the rites and prayers, taking part in the sacred action in full awareness of what we are doing, with devotion and earnest collaboration. We should foster a right disposition of heart, with soul and voice in unison, and co-operating with divine grace. We shall pay particular attention to the dialogues and acclamations. We shall fill the established periods of silence with acts of faith and charity, particularly at the Consecration and when we receive Our Lord in Communion ... The most important thing is interior participation, our union with Jesus Christ who offers himself. The external elements which also form part of the liturgy will be of great help to us in doing this – bodily postures (kneeling, standing, sitting), reciting or singing of other parts together, such as the Gloria, the Creed, the Sanctus, the Our Father, etc.

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We will often find it helps to follow the prayers of the celebrant in our missal. The effort to be punctual, arriving a few minutes before Mass begins, will help us to be better prepared. Besides, it is a sign of love for Christ and a courtesy towards the priest who is celebrating Mass as well as to others who are attending. God wants us to be exemplary in this, too. Wouldn’t we arrive in good time for an important interview? There is nothing more important than the Mass.

Internal participation is mainly a question of practising the virtues through acts of faith, hope and charity. At the moment of the Consecration we can say with the words of the Apostle Thomas, words overflowing with faith and love, My Lord and My God, ... or ‘I firmly believe that You are really present on the altar’ ... or whatever form of words appeals to our personal devotion.

Above all, our taking part in the Mass must be personal prayer, the high point of our customary dialogue with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This prayer, to the extent possible to each person, is a requisite for a genuine, conscious liturgical participation. But not that alone, it is also the fruit of such a participation. Now and always, but nowadays more than ever, we need to foster the spirit and practice of personal prayer ... We cannot keep going as Christians without a constant, intimate, personal life of prayer, faith, and charity. Without these we cannot usefully and advantageously take part in the liturgical renewal.

Without them we cannot be effective witnesses to that Christian authenticity that we hear so much about. Lacking such participation we cannot think, breathe, act, suffer and hope with the living, pilgrim Church ... To all we say, ‘Let us pray, brethren’: ‘Orote Fratres’. Never tire of trying to call up from the depths of your soul that intimate voice which addresses God as ‘Thou’ ..., the God beyond words, the mysterious Other who watches over you, waits for you, loves you. And you will never be let down, or left alone. You will experience the new joy of an enrapturing response: ‘Ecce Adsum,’ behold I am with you. God is with us and in us in a very special way in Holy Communion, when our taking part in the Mass reaches its highest point. The proper effect of this Sacrament, teaches Saint Thomas Aquinas, is to change man into Christ, so that he can say with the Apostle, ‘I live; no, it is not I who live. It is Christ who lives in me.’

103.3 Preparation for Mass. Apostolate and the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

Before Mass we have to prepare our soul to be ready for the most important event that takes place in the world each day. The Mass celebrated by any priest in the most out-of-the-way, the remotest corner of the world, even when no other person is attending, is the greatest thing happening on earth at
that moment. It is the most pleasing thing that we men can offer to God. It is the opportunity to thank him for the many benefits we receive; to ask forgiveness for so many sins and such lack of love and for all our spiritual and material needs. *We all have things we need to ask for.* Lord, this illness ... Lord, that sorrow ... Lord, that humiliation I can’t accept even for love of You ... We desire blessings, happiness and joy for the members of our household. We are saddened by the fate of those who suffer hunger and thirst for bread and justice; of those who undergo the anguish of loneliness; of those who at the end of their lives are facing death without an affectionate look or the help of a friend.

*But it is sin which is the wretchedness that causes suffering, and is the great world-wide malaise we have to remedy. It separates us from God and endangers souls with the prospect of eternal damnation. To bring men to eternal glory in the love of God – that was the essential desire of Christ when He gave up his life on Calvary, and that has to be our desire when we celebrate Mass.* [717]

Our apostolate is therefore directed towards the Mass and is strengthened by it.

Some minutes of thanksgiving after Mass will round off these most important moments of the day. They will have a direct influence on our work, on our family life, on the cheerfulness we show to everyone, and in the certainty and confidence with which we face up to the rest of our day. The Mass lived in this way will never be an isolated incident. It will nourish all our actions and give them a special tone, value and significance.

We always find our Mother Mary in the Mass. *How could we take part in the sacrifice without remembering and invoking the Mother of the High Priest and Victim?* Our Lady played such an intimate part in the priesthood of her Son during his life on earth that she is eternally united to the exercise of his Priesthood. Just as she was present on Calvary, so is she present in the Mass, which is a prolongation of Calvary. She helped her Son on the Cross by offering him to the Father. In the sacrifice of the altar, the renewal of the sacrifice of Christ, she helps the Church to offer herself in union with her Head. *Let us offer ourselves to Jesus through the mediation of Mary.* [718] Let us remember Mary during Mass, and she will help us grow in piety and recollection.
104. THE VIRTUE OF FAITHFULNESS

104.1 Faithfulness – a virtue required by love and faith.

Sacred Scripture often speaks to us about the virtue of faithfulness, of the need to keep our promises, to carry out undertakings freely contracted, to make the effort to finish off a mission to which one has committed oneself. The Lord said to Abraham: Bear yourself blameless in my presence. You shall maintain my Covenant, yourself and your descendants after you, generation after generation.[719] The strength of the covenant with the Patriarch and his descendants would be a continual source of blessing and happiness. On the other hand, breaches of this pact by Israel would be the cause of its misfortune.

God asks for faithfulness from men, from those whom he looks on with predilection, because He himself is always faithful, despite our weaknesses and shortcomings. Yahweh is the God of loyalty, who is rich in love and fidelity,[721] faithful in every word of his,[722] and his faithfulness remains forever.[723] Those who are faithful are most pleasing to him,[724] and He promises them the definitive reward: he who is faithful unto death will receive the crown of life.[725]

Throughout the Gospel Jesus speaks about this virtue. He offers us the example of the faithful and prudent servant, of the honourable administrator ... The idea of faithfulness penetrates the life of a Christian so deeply that the term faithful is enough to describe the disciples of Christ.[726] Saint Paul, who had repeatedly exhorted the first Christian generation to practise this virtue, intones a hymn to faithfulness which can be taken as summarising his life as he approaches the end of it: he writes to Timothy: I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on the Day: and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his coming.[727]

Faithfulness consists in accomplishing what was promised, in making deeds conform to expressed intentions.[728] We are faithful if we keep our word, if we hold firm, in spite of the obstacles and difficulties, to the commitments we have undertaken. Perseverance is intimately united to this virtue, and is often identified with it.

Faithfulness applies to many areas: our relationship with God; between spouses, among friends ... It is an essential virtue. Without it social intercourse becomes impossible. As far as the spiritual life is concerned, it is closely related to love, faith and vocation. That passage of the Second Epistle to Timothy makes me shudder, where the Apostle laments that Demas has fallen in love with this present world and gone to Thessalonica. For a trifle, and for fear of persecution, this man, whom Saint Paul had quoted in other epistles as being among the saints, had betrayed the divine enterprise.

I shudder when I realise how little I am: and it leads me to demand from myself faithfulness to the Lord even in events that might seem to be indifferent – for if they do not help me to be more united to him, I do not want them.[729] What use are they to us if they do not lead us to Christ?

Bear yourself blameless in my presence. You shall maintain my Covenant, God is continually telling us in the secret depths of our hearts.

104.2 The foundations of faithfulness.
Ours is not an age characterised by a flowering of this virtue of faithfulness. It is perhaps for this reason that Our Lord wants us to appreciate this particular virtue all the more, both in the implementing of a dedication freely undertaken in our relationship with him, and in our human relationships with others. Many will ask: how can man, who is changeable and weak, commit himself forever? He can; because his fidelity is sustained by One who is himself unavering, who is neither lacking in strength nor subject to mutability – by God himself. Yahweh is faithful in all of his words. The Lord supports this disposition in those who wish to remain loyal to their commitments, and especially to their most important one. This is the commitment that relates directly to God – and to other men because of God – as is the case when there is a calling to total dedication, a commitment to sanctity. Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of Light with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Christ needs you, and calls you to help millions of your fellow men to be truly human and to work out their salvation. Live with these noble ideals in your soul ... Open your heart to Christ, to the law of love, without placing conditions on your availability, without fear of receiving noncommittal replies, because love and friendship do not vanish over the horizon. They always maintain their plenitude, for love does not grow old.

Saint Thomas teaches that we love someone when we desire the good of that person. If, on the other hand, we try to take advantage of the one concerned, either because it gives us pleasure or because he is of use to us, then, properly speaking, we don’t love that person: whatever we want, it is not his good. When we love, we desire what is the best for the other; our whole person is directed to this love, independently of our likes or dislikes or moods: the payment and the price of love is to receive more love.

We have to ask the Lord for the firm conviction that the essence of love is not mere sentiment or feeling, but the will and the right-intentioned deeds it evokes: it demands effort, sacrifice and dedication. Feelings and emotions and moods change; on them something as fundamental as faithfulness cannot be built. The virtue of faithfulness acquires its firmness from love, from genuine love. And so, when love – both human and divine – has gone beyond the realm of mere feelings, what remains is not its least important constituent, but rather its most essential, in fact, that which gives ultimate meaning to everything.

The Lord has a calling, a plan, a vocation for every one, for each one in particular. He has promised that this call will always come, and he will sustain it through temptations and the varied difficulties one encounters in life. And to demonstrate this permanence, he uses an analogy that we well understand: it is the love and care which a mother has for her child. Imagine, he says, a mother, deeply maternal, (and not, if it were possible, an egotistical mother who is selfishly immersed in her own world). How could such a mother forget about her own child? We consider it impossible; but we can imagine the possibility that from time to time she does forget about it, or does not continually have its needs in the forefront of her mind. It is possible. But I, the Lord says, will never forget about you, about your commitments in life, about my loving designs for you, about your vocation. Faithfulness is a loving response to this love of God. Without love, cracks and fissures soon appear in the solidity of every commitment.

104.3 Love and fidelity in little things.

What can I give Yahweh in return for all the good things he has given me? For our part, we
can all offer whatever we have, in order to fulfil the task of being faithful. For this, perseverance until the end of one’s life, is made possible by faithfulness to the little details of daily living and by constantly and purposefully beginning again, when through weakness one has veered off the path, fidelity is the response to this love of God, ceaselessly allowing oneself to be loved by him, removing the obstacles which prevent his merciful love penetrating to the depths of our soul. On many occasions in life, fidelity to God comes down to perseverance in a life of prayer, to a faithful persistence in those devotions and customs which keep us close to the Lord each day. Our own perseverance and the perseverance of others relies on our union with and our filial love for God. Those who love, persevere – because they feel the strength of their Father God in the apparent monotony of the day to day struggle.

Love is the weight which drags me along, the lodestone, the direction for our soul to be faithful. For this, a recognition of the love of God, a love from which no man can be excluded, leads to sincerity, a sure support for faithfulness. It will be a sincerity, in the first place, with oneself: one will be able, under its influence, to recognise and identify by name, even before they have taken shape, those desires, thoughts, aspirations and dreams that insistently besiege the soul, but which point in unmistakably wrong directions. Immediately thereafter comes sincerity with God – born of an upright intention and interior cleanliness; then will come sincerity with whoever is chosen to guide the soul spiritually by making manifest the symptoms of an egoism, that in diverse forms attempts to harden the heart. In this way we will always be able to count on powerful help.

The virtues of faithfulness and loyalty ought to be present in every aspect of a Christian life: relationships with God, with the Church, with one’s neighbour, at work, as regards duties towards the state or nation ... And this fidelity is practised in the different fields where one is faithful to one’s vocation, for in it is contained all the other values which we acquire – through loyalty and faithfulness. If fidelity to God is lacking, everything else begins to disintegrate and break down.

The heart of Jesus, the human Heart of the God-Man, is aflame with the ‘living call’ of triune Love, which can never be extinguished. It is faithful in its love for men. We have to learn from this faithful love. And again we turn to Mary: ‘Virgo fidelis, ora pro nobis, ora pro me.’ Virgin most faithful, pray for us, pray for me.
105. MARY, CO-REDEMPTRIX WITH CHRIST

105.1 Mary present in the sacrifice of the Cross.
Throughout Jesus’ earthly life his Mother Holy Mary fulfilled the Divine Will by looking after him with loving care – in Bethlehem, in Egypt, in Nazareth. She looked after him in all his ordinary needs as any mother would do for her child, and also in extraordinary necessities, such as when his life was in danger. The Child grew up with Mary and Joseph in an atmosphere full of sacrifice and cheerful love, secure care and protection and work.

Later on, during his public life, Mary rarely followed him in a physical way, but she knew where he was at each moment, and news of his miracles and his preaching reached her. Sometimes Jesus went to Nazareth and while He was there spent more time with his Mother. The majority of his disciples would have known her since the time of the wedding at Cana of Galilee.[740] Apart from the changing of the water into wine, in which she played such an important part, the Evangelists do not record her presence on the occasion of any other miracle. Nor was she present when the people were full of enthusiasm over her Son. She is not to be seen amid the palms of Jerusalem, nor at the hour of the great miracles – except at the first one at Cana.

But she doesn’t escape from the contempt at Golgotha; there she stands, ‘juxta crucem Jesu’, the Mother of Jesus, beside his Cross.[741] She stays as a rule in Nazareth, in perfect union with her Son, pondering in her heart all that is happening; but in the hour of sorrow and desertion, Mary is there.

God loved her in a unique and singular manner. Nevertheless, He did not spare her the ordeal of Calvary, making her share in suffering no-one else has ever experienced except her Son. Perhaps she could have stayed quietly at home in the consolingly agreeable company of the women; after all, there was nothing she could do, and her presence neither avoided nor relieved the sufferings and humiliations of her Son. But she was there, nevertheless. She stayed with Christ for the same reason as any mother stays beside the deathbed of her son, instead of going out to try to distract herself when she sees that she can neither keep him alive nor stop his suffering. No, the Virgin Mary identified herself with her Son; her love made her suffer with Him.[742] Little by little she kept getting nearer to the Cross; finally, the soldiers must have allowed her to stay very close. She looks at Jesus, and her son looks at her. In the closest union, she offers her Son to God the Father, co-redeeming with Him. In communion with her suffering and agonizing Son, she put up with pain and almost death. As a Mother, she abdicated her rights over her Son, in order to obtain the salvation of mankind, and to satisfy divine justice in as much as it depended on her. She immolated her Son, in such a way that it can rightly be said that she redeemed the human race with Christ.[743]

The Virgin Mary not only accompanied Jesus but was actively and intimately united to the sacrifice which was offered on that first altar. Voluntarily she shared in the redemption of the human race, thereby fulfilling the fiat she had pronounced years before in Nazareth. And so we may consider that in each Mass, the very centre and heart of the Church, we find Mary. On many occasions this fact will help us to live the Eucharistic Sacrifice better, by uniting our sacrifice, which also has to be a holocaust, to the sacrifice of Christ, feeling ourselves to be on Calvary, very close to Our Lady.

105.2 Co-redemptrix with Christ.
From the Cross, Jesus entrusted his Mystical Body, the Church, to Mary, in the person of Saint John. He knew that we should need a Mother to protect us all the time; someone to lift us up and intercede for us. From that moment, she guarded and will guard it (the Church) with the same fidelity and the same effort as that with which she guarded her Firstborn – from the crib at Bethlehem, through Calvary, until the Cenacle of Pentecost, where the birth of the Church took place. Mary is present in all the vicissitudes of the Church ... In a particular way she is united to the Church in the most difficult moments of her history ... Mary appears particularly close to the Church at such times because the Church is always like her Christ – first her Child, then the Crucified and then the Risen Jesus.

The Virgin Mary intercedes so that God will impress on the souls of Christians the same zeal that He placed in hers, namely, the co-redemptive desire that all men may become once more God’s friends. The faith, hope and ardent charity of the Virgin Mary on the summit of Golgotha, which make her Co-redemptrix in an eminent way, are also an invitation to us to grow, to be strong humanly and supernaturally in external difficulties and to persist, without getting discouraged in our apostolate although it may sometimes appear that there are no results, or that the outlook is darkened by the power of evil.

Let us struggle – you struggle! – against this routine, against this just dragging along monotonously, against this conformism which amounts to inactivity. Look at Christ on the Cross: look at Mary next to the Cross: before her gaze she is confronted with a terrifying outburst of insults, mockery, treachery ...; but Christ, and seconding this redemptive action, Mary, continue strong, persevering, full of peace, with optimism in the suffering, fulfilling the mission entrusted to them by the Trinity. It is a sharp reminder to each one of us to be other Christs, and a reminder that Christ fulfils his mission at the time of suffering, of fatigue, and of the most terrible contradiction ... I want to advise you to turn your eyes towards the Virgin Mary, and to ask her, for yourself and for others, that we may have absolute confidence in the redemptive action of Jesus, and that, like you, Mother, we should want to be Co-redeemers. To share the Redemption, to cooperate in the sanctification of the world, to save souls for eternity: could there be a greater ideal to fill one’s life? The Blessed Virgin co-redeems now with her Son on Calvary, but she also did so when she pronounced her fiat on receiving the Angel’s message; she did so in Bethlehem, she did so during the time she remained in Egypt and in every day of her ordinary life in Nazareth ... Like her we can be co-redeemers at all hours of the day, if we fill them with prayer, if we work conscientiously, if we live in charity with those we meet in our jobs, in the family ... if we offer up calmly the contradictions each day brings with it.

105.3 Mary and the Mass.

When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ It was Jesus’ last gift before his Death; he gave us his Mother as our Mother.

Since then Christ’s disciple has something of his own: he has Mary as his Mother. Her place as Mother in the Church will be for always: And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. That is Jesus’ hour, when with his redemptive death he inaugurates a new era that will last till the end of time. Since then, if we want to be Christian we have to be Marian, to be a good Christian it is necessary to have a great love for Mary. The work of Jesus can be summarised in two marvellous
He has given us divine filiation, making us children of God, and He has made us children of Mary.

Origen in the third century points out that Jesus did not say to Mary, ‘this is also your son’, but, here is your son; and since Mary did not have any other son but Jesus, his words mean in effect: from now on, for you this will be Jesus.[749] The Virgin Mary sees her son Jesus in each Christian. She treats us as if Christ himself were in our place. How then will she forget us when she sees us in need? What will she not obtain for us from her Son? We can never imagine, even remotely, how much Mary loves each one of us.

Let us get used to finding Mary while we celebrate or participate in the Holy Mass. There, in the Sacrifice of the Altar, the participation of Our Lady evokes the silent reserve with which she walked the roads of Palestine. The Holy Mass is an action of the Trinity; by the Will of the Father, co-operating with the Holy Spirit, the Son offers himself in a redemptive oblation. In this unfathomable mystery, one notices, as if shrouded in veils, the most pure face of Mary, Daughter of God the Father, Mother of God the Son, Spouse of God the Holy Spirit.

Treating with Jesus in the Sacrifice of the Altar necessarily brings with it intimacy with Mary, his Mother. Whoever finds Jesus also finds Mary Immaculate and, as happened to those holy persons, the Three Wise Men, who went to adore Christ: ‘and going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother (Matt 2:11).[750] With her we can offer our whole life, all our thoughts, desires, works, affections, actions, loves, identifying ourselves with the same sentiments which Christ Jesus had.[751] Holy Father! we can say in the intimacy of our heart, and we can repeat this interiorly during the Holy Mass, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary I offer you, your beloved Son Jesus, and also myself in him, with him and through him, for all his intentions and in the name of all creatures.[752]

To celebrate or attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar properly is the best service we can offer Jesus, his Mystical Body and the whole human race. Next to Mary, in the Holy Mass we are particularly united with the whole Church.
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Blessed John Paul II, 2/93.3, 5/82.2
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   72.2 Cult of the saints. The dies natalis.
   72.3 Veneration and regard for relics. Images.
NINTH WEEK: MONDAY
73. The Cornerstone.
   73.1 Jesus Christ is the corner stone.
   73.2 Faith gives us light to recognise the true reality of things and of events.
   73.3 The Christian has his own scale of values.
NINTH WEEK: TUESDAY
74. Being Exemplary Citizens
   74.1 The Christian in public life. The exemplary fulfilment of our duties.
   74.2 Unity of life.
   74.3 Our union with God.
NINTH WEEK: WEDNESDAY
75. We will rise again with our own bodies
   75.1 A truth of faith expressly taught by Jesus.
   75.2 Qualities and endowments of glorified bodies.
   75.3 Unity between the body and the soul.
NINTH WEEK: THURSDAY
76. The First Commandment
   76.1 We should adore the one God. Modern idolatry
76.2 Reasons for loving God.
76.3 The first commandment embraces all aspects of life.

NINTH WEEK: FRIDAY

77. The Guardian Angel
77.1 The continuous presence of our Guardian Angel.
77.2 Devotion. Help in our daily life and in apostolate.
77.3 Asking his help for the interior life.

NINTH WEEK: SATURDAY

78. The Value of Little Things
78.1 The alms of the poor widow.
78.2 Love gives value to things of little importance.
78.3 Holiness is a cloth woven of little details.

TENTH SUNDAY: YEAR A

79. The Virtue of Hope
79.1 The virtue of the wayfarer. Its foundation.
79.2 Hope in spite of setbacks, obstacles and pain.
79.3 Frequently calling to mind hope of becoming saints.

TENTH SUNDAY: YEAR B

80. The Roots of Evil
80.1 Human nature in its original state of justice and holiness.
80.2 The fellowship of all men in Adam.
80.3 Directing all human realities to God once again.

TENTH SUNDAY: YEAR C

81. Our Response to Sorrow and Need
81.1 The raising of the son of the widow of Nain.
81.2 Imitating Our Lord. Love with deeds.
81.3 In order to love we need to understand.

TENTH WEEK: MONDAY

82. The Divine Mercy
82.1 God’s mercy is infinite, eternal and universal.
82.2 Mercy presupposes justice.
82.3 Some effects of mercy.

TENTH WEEK: TUESDAY

83. Salt that has lost its Savour
83.1 Lukewarmness.
83.2 True piety, feelings, spiritual aridity.
83.3 We have to be the salt of the earth.

TENTH WEEK: WEDNESDAY

84. Actual Graces
84.1 We need grace in order to do good.
84.2 Actual graces.
84.3 Our correspondence.

TENTH WEEK: THURSDAY
85. Reasons for Penance
85.1 Removing obstacles. Renouncing one’s own ego.
85.2 The Church’s invitation to penance. Penance and prayer. Friday, a day of penance.
85.3 Some practices of penance.

TENTH WEEK: FRIDAY
86. Purity of Heart
86.1 The ninth commandment and purity of soul.
86.2 Guarding one’s heart and fidelity according to one’s vocation and state in life.
86.3 Guarding our eyes, affections and internal senses.

TENTH WEEK: SATURDAY
87. Keeping one’s word
87.1 Jesus praises those who keep their word.
87.2 Love for the truth always and in every circumstance.
87.3 Loyalty and fidelity to commitments.

ELEVENTH SUNDAY: YEAR A
88. The most effective way
88.1 Urgency in the apostolate.
88.2 Prayer is the most effective and necessary means.
88.3 Asking God for vocations.

ELEVENTH SUNDAY: YEAR B
89. The Mustard Seed
89.1 God makes use of little things to act in the world.
89.2 The difficulties we encounter in apostolate ought not to discourage us.
89.3 God is our strength. The need to overcome false human respect.

ELEVENTH SUNDAY: YEAR C
90. Contrition for Sin
90.1 Contrition makes us forget ourselves and make our way to God.
90.2 We cannot ignore our faults and failings.
90.3 Humility and repentance. Confession. Sincerity.

ELEVENTH WEEK: MONDAY
91. Life of Grace
91.1 A new life. Dignity of the Christian.
91.2 Sanctifying grace giving a share in divine nature.
91.3 Grace leads to identification with Christ: docility, life of prayer, love for the Cross.

ELEVENTH WEEK: TUESDAY
92. Holiness in the World
92.1 The Universal call to holiness.
92.2 Becoming saints wherever we find ourselves.
92.3 All circumstances are good to help us grow in holiness and carry out a fruitful apostolate.

ELEVENTH WEEK: WEDNESDAY
93. Mental Prayer
93.1 Necessity and fruits of such prayer.
93.2 The preparatory prayer.
93.3 The help of the Communion of Saints.

ELEVENTH WEEK: THURSDAY
94. Vocal Prayers
94.1 The need for such prayer.
94.2 Vocal Prayers.
94.3 Attention while praying.

ELEVENTH WEEK: FRIDAY
95. Where Is Your Heart?
95.1 The family, the first appropriate environment in which to sow the seed of the Gospel.
95.2 Careful attention towards those God has placed in our charge.
95.3 Devoting the necessary time, which comes before other interests. Family prayers.

ELEVENTH WEEK: SATURDAY
96. Everything works out well
96.1 Loving the will of God.
96.2 Abandonment in God and responsibility.
96.3 Omnia in bonum – for those who love, everything works out in the best possible way.

TWELFTH SUNDAY: YEAR A
97. Do not be afraid
97.1 Courage in ordinary life.
97.2 Our strength is based on an awareness of our divine filiation.
97.3 Courage and trust in God in the great trials and in the little things of ordinary life.

TWELFTH SUNDAY: YEAR B
98. Calmness in the Face of Difficulties
98.1 The storm on the lake. God will never abandon us to face difficulties alone.
98.2 In the midst of the world we must be ready to face up to misunderstandings.
98.3 Our attitude towards difficulties.

TWELFTH SUNDAY: YEAR C
99. The Love and Fear of God
99.1 Love of God and submission to his infinite holiness.
99.2 The importance of filial fear for the uprooting of sin.
99.3 Confession and the holy fear of God.

TWELFTH WEEK: MONDAY
100. The Speck in our brother’s eye
100.1 Pride leads us to exaggerate our neighbour’s faults.
100.2 Accepting people with their defects.
100.3 Positive criticism.

TWELFTH WEEK: TUESDAY
101. The Narrow Path
101.1 Temperance and mortification.
101.2 Need for mortification, struggle against comfort-seeking.
101.3 Some examples of temperance and mortification.

TWELFTH WEEK: WEDNESDAY
102. You will know them by their Fruits
102.1 Good fruit is produced by a sound tree.
102.2 Intimacy with God and Christian works.
102.3 The bitter fruit of laicism.

TWELFTH WEEK: THURSDAY

103. The Fruits of the Mass
103.1 The Eucharistic sacrifice and the ordinary life of the Christian.
103.2 Taking part in the Mass conscious of what we are doing, with devotion and full collaboration.
103.3 Preparation for Mass. Apostolate and the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

TWELFTH WEEK: FRIDAY

104. The Virtue of Faithfulness
104.1 Faithfulness – a virtue required by love, faith and vocation.
104.2 The foundations of faithfulness.
104.3 Love and fidelity in little things.

TWELFTH WEEK: SATURDAY

105. Mary, Co-redemptrix With Christ
105.1 Mary present in the sacrifice of the Cross.
105.2 Co-redemptrix with Christ.
105.3 Mary and the Mass.

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