In CONVERSATION with God

Daily Meditations
Volume 4 Part 1
Ordinary Time
Weeks 13 - 18

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

Volume 4 Part 1
Ordinary Time Weeks 13 – 18

SCEPTER
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1. LOVE FOR GOD

1.1 God alone must be loved absolutely and unconditionally. Upright human affections are raised and ennobled when we love God above all other loves.

Over and over again Jesus teaches us that God has to be the principal object of our love. We must love creatures in a secondary, subordinate way. In the Gospel of the Mass,[1] He tells us in words that leave no room for doubt: *He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.* And He continues: *He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.*

God alone is to be loved absolutely and unconditionally. Everyone and everything else is to be loved by us in the measure in which they are loved by God. Our Lord teaches us true love. He asks us to love family and neighbour, but not even these loves should we put before the love of God, which must always be given an overriding priority. All other earthly loves are enriched, purified and encouraged to grow when we love God. Our heart expands and our capacity for loving increases. We find ourselves able to overcome all the obstacles and limitations of self-centredness that are present in all of us creatures. The pure loves of this life are raised and ennobled still more when we love God first and most of all.

To love God the way He wants us to love him, we have to go so far as to lose our own life, that of the old man. We have to die to those disordered tendencies which incline and induce us to sin. We must die to that sometimes brutal egocentricity which leads man to seek himself in everything he does.[2] God wants us to preserve all that is healthy and upright and truly human in our nature, all that is good and humanly characteristic in each unique individual. Nothing genuinely human, of the positive, of the perfectible, will be lost. The life of grace will permeate the whole of man’s nature and elevate it. In this way the personality of the Christian who loves God is richly enhanced. The more a man dies to his selfish ego, the more truly human he becomes, and so much the better is he prepared for supernatural life.

The Christian who struggles to deny himself finds he is living a new life, the life of Jesus. Grace respects what is characteristic in each one of us at the same time as it transforms us, so that we come to have the same attitudes and sentiments that Christ himself has concerning men and events. Seeing things as He does, we begin to imitate his deeds. In this way a new, simple, natural behaviour is born in us, encouraging us to be better. We are filled with the same desires as Christ: our one objective becomes that of fulfilling the will of the Father. That, then, is the real expression of love and its clearest manifestation. Remaining what he is, by the help of grace the Christian becomes identified with Jesus in so far, paradoxically, as he divests himself of himself. *My desire is to depart and be with Christ,* says Saint Paul.[3]

Love of God cannot be taken for granted. If we do not nurture and take care of it, it dies. On the other hand, difficulties set it ablaze and confirm us in it if our will holds steadfastly in God. Love of God is nourished in prayer and in the reception of the sacraments, in the constant struggle against our defects, in the unceasing effort to maintain a living presence of God throughout the whole of our working day, in our relations with others, in our times of rest ... The Eucharist above all must be the spring at which our love of God is perpetually refreshed and strengthened. In a way, to love thus is already to possess Heaven on earth.
There is no limit or measure to the love of God.

The Christian is raised to the order of grace so that he loves with the love of God himself, which is given to him as an ineffable gift.[4] This is the essence of charity. The Christian receives it first at baptism. He can prepare himself for its augmentation through prayer, the sacraments and good deeds.

This love of God is infused in the Christian’s soul. It should be the rule of all his actions. Just as the objects we make are judged to be finished and perfect insofar as they conform to the preconceived plans to which we work, so any human action will be upright and virtuous if it conforms to the divine rule of love. If it departs from it, it will not be good or perfect.[5] All our deeds can be weighed and measured by this rule because the soul in grace does not receive divine love as something foreign to it. Charity does not destroy. It brings order, imposing on its recipient that unity of love which is so characteristic of the love of God. Hence it perfects and elevates our will.

Charity, with which we love God, and in God we love our neighbour, comes to fruition precisely to the extent that we use it. The more we love, the greater capacity we have for loving. And if it (i.e. love) does not possess completely what it loves, it cannot help being weary, in proportion to the absence of that which is not possessed ... Until this possession be achieved, the soul is like an empty vessel waiting to be filled, or like a hungry man craving food, or like a sick person sighing wretchedly for health, or like one suspended in the air with nothing to lean on.[6]

There is no limit or measure to God’s love. He expects us to love him with all our heart, with all our soul and all our mind.[7]

We can always grow in love of God. He tells his children, each one individually, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.[8]

We pray to God to convince us that there is only one absolute love, and that this Love is the source of all upright, noble loves. He who loves God will love all of God’s creatures more and better. It is easy to love some; with others it is more difficult. We do not find them attractive, they have offended us or have done us wrong. Only if I love God seriously can I love other creatures as his children, and because He has commanded me. Jesus has also established how we are to love our neighbour – not with feelings alone, but with deeds ... I was hungry in the person of the least of my brothers. Did you give me to eat? Did you visit me when I was sick?[9] Did you help me to carry the burden when it was too heavy for me to carry it alone?

To love our neighbour in God is not to go about by a long and circuitous route in order to love him. Love of God is a short-cut to our brothers. Only in God can we really understand and love all men, immersed even as they are in their errors and we in ours, and in spite of those things that humanly speaking would tend to separate us from them or lead us to pass them by without a glance in their direction.

How the love of God is shown.

Our love of God is merely a response to His love. He loved us first.[10] Ours is the love God places in our souls so that we too are able to love. That is why we ask him, Lord, give me the love with which you want me to love you.

We correspond with the love of God when we love others; when we see in them the dignity proper to the human person, made as it has been in the image and likeness of God, created with an immortal soul and called to give glory to God for all eternity. Love is to approach that wounded man we come across on our journey each day; it is to bind up his wounds, restore him to health and take care of him in all things.[11] We must exert ourselves on his behalf, making a serious effort in order to bring him
to God. Separation from God is always the greatest of evils, and those thus separated from him are in need of our help and our urgent attention. Apostolate is a wonderful sign of our love for God, and is the way to love him more.

Love is frequently shown by a response of gratitude. To illustrate this, Our Lord relates the parable of the debtors. Having done so, He asks Simon the Pharisee which of the two debtors He has spoken about would love their generous creditor the more.\[12\] Jesus uses the verb *to love* here as a synonym for *to be grateful*. In this way He shows us wherein lies the essence of the affection man owes to his principal creditor, God. Etymology also helps to throw light on the deep meaning of the Eucharist; *eucharist* in its derivation is *thanksgiving* for the gift of Love which the Blessed Sacrament itself conveys to us.

We correspond with the love of God when we fight against everything that separates us from him. We need to struggle every day, if only in little things. We shall always come up against obstacles that stand between us and God: defects of character, selfishness, laziness that would prevent us from finishing our work well ...

We love God when our whole life is an unceasing search for him. It is sometimes said that not only does God not seek us, but can hide himself from us so that we should seek him. In fact, we have not far to look. We can find him in our work, in our family, in our joys and our sorrows ... He asks us for our affection. He places in our heart the desire to seek him, and constantly encourages us in our search. If we could only understand how much God loves us! If we could only say with Saint John: *So we know and believe the love God has for us!*\[13\] If we could, it would be much simpler and easier for us to love him as we ought.

Our whole life has to become this constant seeking after Jesus, in good times and in those that seem bad, in our work and in our leisure, in the street and in the bosom of the family. This quest is the only one that can give meaning to our lives. We cannot carry out this task of ours alone. Let us go to Mary and beseech her, *Mother, do not leave me! Let me seek your Son, let me find your Son, let me love your Son – with my whole being. Remember me, my Lady, remember me.*\[14\] Teach me to hold fast to him as my first Love, He whom I love for himself, absolutely, above all other loves.

*What am I to thee, Lord, that thou shouldst command me to love thee; yea, and be angry and threaten to lay huge miseries upon me if I love thee not? Is it perhaps of itself no great misery if I do not love thee?*\[15\]
THIRTEENTH SUNDAY: YEAR B

2. DEATH AND LIFE

2.1 The death we must avoid and fear.

This Sunday the Liturgy speaks to us about death and life. The First Reading[16] teaches us that death had no place in the initial plan of the Creator: *God did not make death, and he does not take delight in the death of the living.* It is the result of sin.[17] Jesus Christ accepted it as a necessity of nature, as an inevitable part of man’s fate on earth. Jesus Christ accepted it ... in order to overcome sin.[18] The human heart recoils in anguish from death,[19] but we are comforted by the knowledge that Jesus annihilated it. He has destroyed death.[20] It is no longer the event that man must fear above all else. Rather it is, for the believer, the necessary step from this world to the Father.

The Gospel of the Mass shows us Jesus arriving once more at Capharnaum,[21] where a large crowd had gathered expectantly to meet him. Jairus, one of the rulers of the synagogue, was waiting. His need was great and so was his faith. His daughter was at the point of death. There was also a woman there who had spent every penny she had trying to find a cure for a long illness. Both these people felt an urgent need to meet Jesus. The healing of this woman, who had placed all her hope in him, takes place on the way to Jairus’ house.

Jesus has stopped to console the woman. Meanwhile, they inform the ruler of the synagogue: *Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Master any further?* But Jesus takes Peter, James and John to be witnesses of the miracle He is about to perform. They come to Jairus’ house, and He sees the confusion and the people there weeping and wailing. When He enters, He says, *Why do you make a tumult and weep? The child is not dead, but sleeping.* They failed to understand that for God real death is sin, which kills the divine life of the soul. For the believer, bodily death is like a sleep from which we awake in God. That is how the first Christians looked at it.

Saint Paul urged the Christians at Thessalonica not to be of any other mind: *We would not have you ignorant, brethren,[22] concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.* We cannot lament like those who expect nothing after this life. For *since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.*[23] He will do for us what He did for Lazarus: *Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him.* When the disciples thought He meant a natural sleep, Jesus clearly explains: *Lazarus is dead.*[24] When death comes we shall close our eyes on this life and awake in the real Life, a life that lasts for ever. *At night there are tears, but joy comes with dawn,* we pray in the Responsorial Psalm.[25] Sin is real death. It is the dreadful separation of man when he breaks away from God. Compared to this, the other separation, that of the body from the soul, is temporary and even trivial. *He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.*[26]

Death, which was to be the last enemy[27] is in fact our ally. It has become the last step after which we find ourselves in the definite embrace of Our heavenly Father. He has been waiting for us from all eternity, and has destined us to remain with Him forever. *When you think about death, do not be afraid, in spite of your sins. For He already knows that you love him and what stuff you are made of. If you seek him, He will welcome you as the father welcomed the prodigal son; but you have to seek him.* Lord, you know that I seek you day and night.
2.2 Sin, the death of the soul. Its effects.

The child is not dead but sleeping, Jesus tells Jairus. For men she was indeed dead. There was no wakening her. For God she was asleep, because her soul lived on under the divine power and her flesh should rest till the resurrection. Thus the custom arose among Christians of calling the dead, whom we know will rise again, by the name of sleepers.[29]

Bodily death is not an absolute evil. Don’t forget, my son, that for you on earth there is but one evil, which you must fear and avoid with the grace of God – sin.[30] The lack of God ... is death to the soul. [31] When a man falls into grave sin he is lost for himself and for God. It is the greatest tragedy that could befall him.[32] He is radically cut off from God by the total loss of divine life in his soul. He loses whatever merits he has acquired throughout his life and is in this state unable to acquire new ones. In some way he is subject to the slavery of the devil, and his natural inclination towards virtue is diminished. This situation is so grave that by all mortal sins, even those of thought, men are made into ‘children of wrath’ (Eph 2:3) and enemies of God.[33] By faith we know that a single sin, even a venial sin, but a fortiori a mortal sin, is a disorder greater than the most disastrous catastrophe that could lay waste the whole world, since the good of grace in a single soul is greater than the natural good of the whole universe.[34]

Sin not only harms the person who commits it, but harms also his family, his friends, the whole of the Church. One can speak of ‘a communion of sin’, whereby a soul that debases itself through sin drags down with itself the Church and, in some way, the whole world. In other words, there is not a single sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly personal and individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with consequences of greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family.[35]

We should often ask God never to let us lose the sense of sin and its seriousness. We should never put our soul in danger or get used to seeing sin around us as being of little importance. Let us atone for our own faults and for those of all men. At the end of our lives may God be able to say of us, he has not died, he is sleeping. Then He will awaken us to Life.

2.3 The life of the soul to be esteemed above all else.

Jesus paid no attention at all to those who laughed at him. On the contrary, He put them all outside and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. Taking her by the hand He said to her, ‘Talitha cumi’, which means ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise’. And immediately the girl got up and walked; for she was twelve years old. And immediately they were overcome with amazement.

The evangelists have handed down to us a seemingly small but significantly human touch of Jesus – and he told them to give her something to eat. Jesus, perfect God and perfect Man, is also interested in those matters that relate to our life here on earth. But He is far more interested in whatever concerns our eternal destiny. Saint Jerome comments on these words of Our Lord: The child is not dead, but sleeping. He points out that both things are true. It is as though He were saying, ‘She is dead for you, but sleeping for me’.[36] If we love our bodily life, how much more should we esteem the life of the soul!

The Christian who tries to follow Christ closely detests mortal sin and will habitually avoid grave faults, although nobody is confirmed in grace. The recognition of our own weakness will lead us to avoid the occasions of mortal sin, including even remote occasions. The life of the soul is worth a
lot! Love for the life of grace will move us to an assiduous mortification of the senses. We shall not trust ourselves, or our experience, or the length of time we have already spent following Christ. We shall love frequent confession and complete sincerity in spiritual direction.

To safeguard the life of the soul we must keep up the struggle at some remove from the borderline between what is serious and what is less serious, between what is forbidden and what is permitted. Deliberate venial sins cause havoc in souls that are not struggling sincerely to avoid them. They do not, it is true, utterly destroy the life of grace in the soul, but they certainly weaken it. They make it more difficult to practise the virtues, and render the gentle motions of the Holy Spirit less effective. If we do not react firmly, venial sins make us liable to more serious falls.

Let us ask our Mother the Blessed Virgin to obtain for us the gift of esteeming the life of the soul above all human goods, even that of bodily life itself. She will help us to react with true contrition against our weaknesses and errors. We can say with the Psalmist: *Thy eyes shed streams of tears, because men do not keep thy Law.*[37] Maintaining and increasing the life of the soul is more important than the death of the body.
THIRTEENTH SUNDAY: YEAR C

3. DON’T LOOK BACK

3.1 The demands of our vocation: promptness in self-giving, detachment, not imposing conditions ...

The Readings of the Mass today help us to meditate on our vocation, as well as on the service to God and men demanded by it. The First Reading[38] tells us how Elijah is sent by God from Horeb to anoint Elisha as a prophet of Yahweh. Elijah left the mountain and found Elisha as he was ploughing; he passed near to him and threw his cloak over him, as a sign that God wanted him to dedicate himself to his service. Elisha responded forthwith and wholeheartedly, leaving nothing behind that might cause him to regret his departure. He took the pair of oxen with which he had been ploughing and slaughtered them. He built a fire with the wood of his plough, cooked the oxen and gave the meat to his men, who ate it. He then got up and went after Elijah ...

In the Gospel,[39] Saint Luke tells us of three different men who have it in mind to follow Our Lord. The first approached Jesus as He and his friends are going up on what will be the last long journey to Jerusalem and Calvary. It seems that this new disciple is one who could scarcely be better disposed. I will follow you wherever you go, he tells the Master. At this sign of generosity, in order to make sure the newcomer knows what he is letting himself in for, Our Lord points out the kind of life he can expect if he genuinely wants to follow him. The mission of Christ is a constant coming and going, of preaching the gospel in season and out of season, and bringing salvation to all, and the disciple will be following one who himself has nowhere to lay his head. Such will be the life of all those who follow him. They will have to be detached from everything that might hold them back, and their dedication will necessarily have to be total.

The second would-be disciple is called directly by Our Lord. Follow me, He tells him. This potential disciple welcomes the invitation to follow the Master closely, but not right away. He thinks another time might be better as there is still some family business to be attended to ... He doesn’t realise that when God calls, the best time is now, notwithstanding the circumstances surrounding a vocation, for they might lead to an all-too-human rationalisation to find grounds for postponing one’s dedication. God has higher plans for the disciple as well as for those who would apparently be disadvantaged by his leaving them. From all eternity, everything has been prepared by God so that his choice and his timing is for the good of all concerned. The answer to Christ’s call must be prompt, cheerful and unconditional, and be instinctive with a spirit of detachment.[40] When Jesus passes close to us we should not put off our dedication to him. If He passes by, perhaps we will not find him when we try later on to catch up. Our Lord goes on his way. It is a serious matter to succumb to the temptation to put things off, to procrastinate when Christ calls us.[41]

God calls each one of us in special circumstances. In our prayer today let us consider whether we are responding promptly, with detachment, unconditionally, to the particular vocation Christ has given to every one of us.

3.2 The proofs of fidelity.

Saint Luke alone mentions the third disciple. He wants to turn back and take his leave of the people at home. Perhaps, since it will be the last opportunity, he wants to spend a little more time with his family. He seems to have put his hand to the plough and quite sincerely to want to follow the Master.
But Our Lord’s call is always urgent. The harvest is great and the labourers few. Some harvests are lost because there is no one to gather them in. To temporise, to look back, to start putting conditions on our proposed commitment, all come to the same thing. Jesus tells this prospective disciple, *Once the hand is laid on the plough, no one who looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.*

The new task of the one who is called is compared to driving the Palestinian plough. It is an implement not easy to direct, particularly in the hard soil of the fields beside the Sea of Galilee. After having once gripped the handle of the plough there is no looking back. One cannot turn back when God calls. To be faithful, and happy as well, we must have our eyes fixed on Jesus.[42] Once the event has started, the runner doesn’t think of other things. His only concern is getting to the tape and winning the race. The ploughman has a fixed point towards which he directs the plough. If he looks back he cannot open up a straight furrow.

At times the temptation to look back comes from our own limitations, or from an environment that is patently hostile to the obligations one has taken on; the temptation might even be provided by the behaviour of those who should be an example and are anything but. Because of the way they live they seem to tell us that *being faithful* is not one of the basic values. At other times the temptation could spring from a lack of hope, when we see holiness just as far away, as remote an objective as ever, in spite of all our efforts to keep on struggling. *After an initial enthusiasm, the dubieties, hesitations and anxieties have begun to take effect. You are worried about your studies, your family, your financial situation and, above all, by the thought that you are not really up to it, that perhaps you are of no use, that you lack experience in life ...*  

*I will give you a sure means of overcoming such fears, which are temptations insinuated by the devil or that come straight from your own lack of generosity!* Despise them: eradicate those recollections from your memory. The Master already preached this poignant warning twenty centuries ago: ‘No one who looks behind him ...’ [43] In such situations, instead of allowing ourselves to be filled with unprofitable regrets we must on the contrary resolutely fix our eyes on Christ. *Be faithful,* He tells us. *On you go!* And whenever we look at Jesus we continue to make good progress on our journey. *There is never any real reason for looking back.*[44]

*Looking back,* Saint Athanasius tells us, *is a sign of our having regrets, and indicates that reawakening of our longings for the things of the world.*[45] It is symptomatic of the lukewarmness that finds its way into the hearts of those who have not set their sights firmly on the Lord. It is the result of our not allowing God and the nobler aspects of our vocation to fill our heart.

Looking back nostalgically at what we have left behind, vainly imagining *what might have been,* could result in breaking the ploughshare against a stone, or at least making it inevitable that the furrow, the mission entrusted to us, does not come out straight. In the supernatural task to which God is calling all of us, it is souls that are at risk.

We want to have eyes for Christ alone, and for all noble things in him. We can say in the words of this day’s Responsorial Psalm: *O Lord, it is you who are my portion and my cup ... You will show me the path of life, the fullness of joy in your presence, at your right hand happiness for ever.*[46] The path of life is our own particular vocation which we must contemplate with love and thanksgiving.

### 3.3 Virtues which support us in our journey towards God.

Through Saint Luke, the Holy Spirit has willed to transmit to us the words addressed to these three disciples so that we can apply them to the calling we ourselves have received from God.

Man can actually be defined by his vocation. Each human being is and has in himself what God created him for. The meaning and purpose of human life is to know and freely carry out the divine
Will. Man finds his ultimate fulfilment or is lost according to whether he carries out in his life the specific plan God has for him.[47] We have all of us received a vocation, a call to know God and find in him the source of life. We are invited to a state of intimacy with God, to a personal relationship of prayer. We are asked to make Christ the centre of our life, and to follow him. The decisions we make are to be made while taking into account his Will. We are called to see our fellow human beings as persons, as God’s children. So we are required to overcome selfishness and to live fraternity, carrying out a fruitful apostolate and helping others to find God. Our calling is to do all this in our own lives, in the very conditions and circumstances in which God has placed us, fulfilling in all we do the specific mission which is devised for and corresponds to each individual personally.[48]

Fidelity to our particular vocation means responding to the successive calls God makes on us throughout our life. Normally it is a matter of being faithful in the small things of each day. It is a question of loving God in our work, and in all the joys and sorrows that form part of every life. We must firmly set aside everything that might lead us to where we would be unable to find Christ. Fidelity is based on a number of essential virtues, without which it would be difficult, not to say impossible, to follow the Master. Humility teaches us that we are like the great statue in the Book of Daniel.[49] We too have feet of clay. Prudence and sincerity are the consequences of humility. Charity and fraternity prevent our tendency to egocentricity, from turning us in on ourselves. The spirit of mortification leads us to temperance and sobriety, and helps us to struggle against softness and comfort-seeking. It helps us to avoid being involved in the search for compensations which are bound to turn sour because they lead us away from Christ. The spirit of prayer leads us to look upon and treat God as a friend, our closest Friend of all. *He who never stops walking on, and presses forward all the time,* says Saint Teresa, *may reach his goal late, but gets there just the same. Giving up prayer seems to me exactly the same as losing your way and getting lost.*[50]

We tell God that we want to be faithful. We want nothing more from life than to follow him in good times and in bad. He is the pivot upon which our whole life turns, the centre upon which all our actions converge. Lord, without you our life would be like a machine that is breaking down, badly off balance and grinding to a halt.

As we finish our prayer, let us turn to the Virgin most faithful, our Mother Mary.
4. THE VALUE OF ONE JUST MAN

4.1 For the sake of ten just men, God would have forgiven thousands of inhabitants of the two cities.

Holy Scripture depicts Abraham, our father in faith, as a just man in whom God rejoiced in such a special way that he confided to him the promise of the redemption of all mankind. The Letter to the Hebrews speaks with emotion and joy about this holy Patriarch and about all the just men of the Old Testament who died without having received what was promised, but who had seen it and hailed it from afar. This is a comparison, comments Saint John Chrysostom, taken from navigators at sea. When they see afar off the city they are making for, although they have not yet entered its harbour, they burst into excited cheers.

Although in this life the Patriarchs and the just of old times did not come to possess the redemption that had been promised, or to share in the union that we can now enjoy with the Only-begotten Son of God, Yahweh treated them as intimate friends and confided fully in them. Because of their faith and their fidelity He often overlooked the errors made by so many others of their contemporaries. Many men of those generations were saved because they were friends of those friends of God. When God proposed the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah on account of the many sins committed there, He communicated this thought to Abraham. Abraham felt that he shared the responsibility of those people: Then Abraham drew near and said, ‘Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it?’ Abraham is full of confidence in God. And God replies, ‘If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake’. But it was impossible to find those thirty righteous men. And Abraham had to reduce his original number of just men: ‘Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Suppose forty-five are found there’... And God says to him, ‘I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there’. But there were not forty-five either. And Abraham went on interceding with God: ‘Suppose forty are found there ...thirty ...twenty ...?’ Finally it was clear that there were not even ten just men in that city. The last time Abraham made his petition God had said: ‘For the sake of ten I will not destroy it’. God would have forgiven everybody in the whole place out of love for ten just men! Such is the value in God’s eyes of saintly souls. He is prepared to go to any lengths for them.

Scripture often speaks of solidarity in evil, in the sense that the sins of some can cause harm to the whole community. But Abraham turns the terms the other way round: he asks God who esteems the justice of the saints so highly, that it may be the saints who cause blessings to come down upon everyone, even though many are sinners. And God accepts this approach of the Patriarch’s.

We can meditate today on God’s joy and delight when He sees us struggling to be faithful to him. We can meditate on the value our actions may have when we do them for God. This is true of even our most inconspicuous actions, deeds that we may think nobody sees and that apparently have little in them of transcendence. God sets great store by those who struggle for sanctity. God’s delight is in the saints; it is for their sake that He pours out his mercy and his forgiveness on others who may have done nothing themselves to merit it. It is a wonderful but at the same time a real mystery, that God so delights in those who journey towards sanctity.
4.2 Our participation in the infinite merits of Christ.

The prophetic utterance that: through the death of one man all will be saved was to be fulfilled with the coming of Jesus Christ. In Christ the mystery of human solidarity attains an undreamt of fullness. Nothing has been or ever will be – the extent of this is infinite – so pleasing to God as the offering – the holocaust – that Jesus made of his life for the salvation of all, and which reached its culmination on Calvary. For there to take place on earth, within a human soul, an act of love of God of infinite value, it was necessary that that human soul should be the soul of a divine Person. Such was the soul of the Word made flesh; its act of love acquired such a value within the divine Person of the Word, and thus was able to make infinite satisfaction and attain infinite merits.

Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches that Jesus Christ offered to God more than was demanded as just compensation for the offences committed by the whole of mankind. And this came about through the greatness of the love with which he suffered; through the dignity of the Life that he offered in satisfaction for all men (for it was the life of God-made-Man); through the enormity of the pain that he suffered ... The charity of the suffering Christ was greater than the malice of those who crucified him, and because of it Christ was able, through his Passion, to make satisfaction even greater than the offence of those who crucified him and put him to death. To such an extent was this the case that the Passion of Christ was in itself sufficient and superabundant satisfaction for the sins of those who crucified him. It satisfied too for the sins of the men of all times, for both original sin and the personal sins of all souls, as though a doctor were to prepare a medicine by which all infirmities could be cured, even those which had still to come.

Jesus Christ has given full satisfaction to the eternal love of the Father. The Church has always taught this. The love of Christ dying for us on the Cross was more pleasing to God than all the sins of all men together can ever displease him. Insofar as we identify our will with God’s Will, we take upon ourselves the merits of Christ. We offer reparation to God by making our own the love and the merits of his Son! The matchless value that a single holy man or woman has in the sight of God is based on this. Although many sins are committed each day, there are at the same time many souls who in spite of their wretchedness desire only to please God with all their strength.

It does not matter if our lives do not cause any outward stir, if we make no apparent mark on the world or its history; what does matter is our decision to be faithful, to turn all the days of our life into an offering made to God. If we know how to set our eyes on God our Father, and to treat him with the same trust and friendship as Abraham did, we will never become pessimistic, even though our constant endeavours to serve God do not show any external results that can win acclaim or that we can pride ourselves on. How astutely cunning the devil is when he tries to fill our souls with pessimism as we regard our apparently scanty achievements. On the other hand, how very happy God is, when He perceives our constant daily struggle, our constant endeavour to begin again!

‘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. You have always been present in my life, Lord.

4.3 We must be as lights in the world.

For the sake of ten I will not destroy it. Ten just men would have been enough! People who are really holy more than make up for all the crimes, the abuse, envy, lack of loyalty, betrayal, injustice, selfishness ... of all the inhabitants of a great city. If we are united with the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God will look with special compassion on our relatives, friends, acquaintances ... who
have perhaps strayed from the path out of ignorance, or error, or weakness ... or because they did not receive the graces that we have received. We should try often to carry on the same kind of friendly and pleasant bargaining with Jesus that Abraham carried on with Yahweh! ‘Look, Lord’ – we will say to him – ‘this person is better than he seems. He has good intentions. Help him!’ And Jesus, who nevertheless knows the real situation, will move that person with his grace out of regard for our friendship with him.

God pays special attention to the petitions of those who are his own in the world; to the prayers of children, who pray with a heart that knows no malice, and the prayers of those who make themselves like children; to the supplications of the sick whom He holds closer to his heart; to the prayers of those who have told him countless times that they have no other will than his, that they want to serve him in the midst of their normal everyday tasks. Those who strive to be united to Christ truly sustain the world. And that union is not generally shown in external deeds that attract attention. There are incomparably more events than such visible actions whose importance to society remains hidden for the time being. There is, for example, the immense multitude of souls who have spent the whole of their existence giving themselves for others in the anonymity of the home, the factory, the office. There are those who have consumed themselves in anonymity amid the praying society of the cloister; those who have immolated themselves in the daily martyrdom of protracted illness. The day that everything is brought out into the public gaze when the Lord comes again, everyone will see the decisive role that the humble and the inconspicuous have played, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, in the unrolling of the history of the world. And this will also be a cause of joy for the blessed, who will derive from it a theme of everlasting praise of the God who is three times Holy.[63]

Saint Paul says to the first Christians that they shine as lights in the world,[64] enlightening all men with the light of Christ. God looks down from Heaven on our earth and delights in those who live ordinary, normal lives but are conscious of the dignity of their Christian vocation. God is filled with joy as He contemplates our work, which is nearly always small and of little account as the world values it, so long as we try to be faithful.
5. GOD’S SILENCE

5.1 God always listens to those who turn to him for help.

Throughout the Gospels we see Jesus behaving in a way that is both natural and simple. He does not ask for vociferous acclamation from those who follow him. He works miracles without fuss or ostentation, avoiding publicity insofar as He is able. He charges the people He has cured not to go round telling everybody about the grace they have received. He teaches that the Kingdom of God does not come with dramatic display. By the parables of the mustard-seed and the leaven hidden in the dough He makes clear to everyone the mysterious power of his words. We see him also silently listening to pleas for help to which He later accedes. The silence of Jesus during his trial before Herod and again before Pilate is filled with a sublime grandeur. We see him standing in front of a clamorous, excited crowd who bring in false witnesses to try to catch him out in his speech ... We find particularly impressive God’s silence as He stands in the midst of the uproar of the milling throng who have been aroused to fury by human passion. That silence of Jesus is neither indifference nor an attitude of disapproval towards some poor creatures who offend him; He is full of mercy and forgiveness. Jesus Christ always hopes for our conversion. God knows how to wait. He has more patience than we have.

His silence on the Cross is not simply a reserving of his ebbing strength, the better to control his anger and utter a final condemnation. It is the ever-forgiving God who hangs there. He opens wide the compassionate channel of a new and definitive era of mercy. God always listens to those who make the decision to follow him, even though sometimes it may appear that He remains silent, that He does not want to listen to us. He is always attentive to and considerate of the weaknesses of his creatures ... but it is so that He can forgive them and help them to rise up higher. If at times He keeps silent it is so that our faith, our hope and our love may grow more mature.

In the scene described in the Gospel of today’s Mass,[65] we can contemplate Jesus wearied after a day of intense hard work preaching. He got into a boat with his disciples in order to cross to the other side of the lake. When they had been on the water some time, a great storm arose, of such violence that the mounting waves threatened to swamp the boat. Meanwhile, Our Lord, utterly exhausted, had fallen asleep. He was so tired that not even the crashing of the waves against the sides of the boat caused him to wake up. At a moment of such great peril, it seems almost as if Jesus is not there. It is the only passage in the Gospel where we see him asleep.

The Apostles, most of whom were seasoned fishermen, realised immediately that their best efforts could not succeed in holding the boat’s head to the wind, and were horribly aware that their lives were in danger. So they went to Jesus and woke him up, shouting: Save us Lord, we are perishing.

Jesus tried to reassure them: Why are you afraid, O men of little faith? He asked them. It is as if he had said, ‘Don’t you realise that I am with you, and that this should give you an unwavering steadfastness even though you are surrounded by difficulties?’ Then He rose and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. The disciples were overcome with amazement, with peace and with joy. They were able to see for themselves yet again that to walk with Christ is to walk safely, even though He may keep silent and seem not to be there at all. And they said: What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him? He was their Lord and their God. Later on, when the Holy Spirit came into their souls on the day of Pentecost, they realised that they would often have to
live in the midst of troubled waters and that Jesus would always be in his boat – the barque of Peter, the Church. At times He would apparently be asleep and silent, and to that extent apparently absent, but He would always be as attentive to them as ever, and at the same time just as powerful. He would never abandon them to their own devices. They understood it well, when soon afterwards, at the beginning of their apostolic mission, they saw themselves beset by persecution and felt the bitterness of being misunderstood by the pagan society in whose midst they carried out their activity. Nevertheless, the Master gave them strength, kept them afloat and encouraged them to embark upon yet more apostolic enterprises. He does the same with us now as He did then with his first followers.

5.2 Trust in God.

Our Lord’s being asleep whilst his disciples, struggling with every nerve and sinew, felt themselves about to be overwhelmed by the storm, has often been compared to the silence God maintains as we labour. It will frequently seem that God is paying no heed and is indeed unconcerned about the difficulties that threaten and assail individuals and the Church itself.

When the hurricane rages and we find ourselves faced with similar situations; when all our efforts seem to be achieving nothing, we must follow the example of the Apostles, turn to Jesus and put all our trust in him: Save, Lord; we are perishing. Then we will feel the effectiveness of his infinite power and will be filled with confidence and serenity.

Why are you afraid, O men of little faith? He says to his followers, when He sees them overcome with anxiety and convinced that they are sinking. Why are you afraid if I am with you? He is the certainty of certainties. It is enough to be with him in his boat, where He can see us, for us to overcome all the fears we have and the difficulties we may encounter, when we are overwhelmed by meagre results and worry, by trials, by a sense of being misunderstood and by temptations. A lack of trustful certainty only makes its appearance when our faith is weak. Such weakness does bring with it a lack of trust. Precisely at such moments we may forget that the greater the difficulty, the more powerful God’s help will be. This will always be the case when we strive to live fully our vocation as Christians, whatever our situation ... in our family life, in our daily work ..., in carrying out our apostolate.

Jesus wants to see us filled with his peace and serenity, at all times and in all circumstances. Do not be afraid, it is I, He says to his disciples, who are terrified by huge seas. On another occasion He says: I tell you, my friends, do not fear.[66] From the moment of his entry into the world He showed what his presence among men would be like. The message of the Incarnation begins precisely with these words: Do not be afraid, Mary.[67] And the Angel of the Lord was to say to Joseph: Joseph, son of David, do not fear.[68] To the shepherds He would say once again: Be not afraid.[69] We cannot be afraid of anything. Even the holy fear of God is a form of love; it is nothing but the fear of losing him.

Complete trust in God, using whatever human means are necessary in each situation, gives an incomparable fortitude and a special kind of serenity to the Christian, whatever may happen to him and whatever the tribulations he may have to face up to. The consideration of our divine filiation frequently each day leads us to speak to God, not as if we were speaking to somebody far away who is as indifferent as he is remote, who is cold and inattentive to us, but with the consciousness that we are talking to a father who is concerned about every movement made by his children. We will come to look on him as the Friend who never lets us down and who is always ready to help, and, if necessary, to forgive. Close to him we will learn to understand that every tribulation and all difficulties bring benefits to us men if we know how to accept them with faith, if we do not turn our backs on him.
Blessed be the hardships of this earth! Poverty, tears, hatred, injustice, dishonour ... You can endure all things in him who strengthens you.[70] And Saint Teresa, with the well-tried experience of the saint, has written for us: If you have trust in him and are of an encouraging heart – for His Majesty is a great friend of those with such an attitude – do not be afraid that you will want for anything.[71] the Lord looks after those who are his own, even when He appears to be asleep.

5.3 When God seems to keep silent.

Some Christians who appear to follow Christ so long as everything happens the way they want turn away from him when they have most need of him: when their child, their husband or their wife, their brother or their sister falls sick ...; in times of financial stress; when they are hurt by calumny or defamation and some of their friends turn their backs on them, or if in their own interior life they lose those agreeable feelings that at other moments have made self-surrender and apostolate seem relatively easy. Perhaps now, as a very special grace from God, a grace that purifies their intentions and their hearts, such feelings disappear and give way to dryness and to a certain feeling of sadness. Then, it is possible for them to think that God no longer listens to them, or that He is keeping silent, as though He were neutral as regards their predicament or indifferent to their concerns. It is precisely then that we must say to Jesus even more forcefully: Lord, save us, we are perishing! He never fails to respond. He always pays attention to us. Perhaps He is waiting for us to pray with greater intensity and rectitude of intention, and for us to abandon ourselves still more completely into his strong arms.

In every tribulation, in times of difficulty and temptation, we must turn to Jesus immediately. Seek his face who ever dwells in real and bodily presence in His Church. Do at least as much as the disciples did. They had but little faith; they feared; they had not any great confidence and peace, but at least they did not keep away from Christ ... Do not keep from him, but when you are in trouble, come to him every single day, asking him earnestly and perseveringly for those favours which He alone can give. And as He on the occasion spoken of in the Gospel blamed indeed the disciples but did for them what they asked, so you should ‘trust in his great mercy’. Though He discern much infirmity in you which ought not to be there, yet He will deign to rebuke the winds and the sea, and will say:

‘Peace, be still’ – and there will be a great calm.[72] Our soul will be filled with serenity even in the midst of tribulation.

With this new peace that Our Lord brings to our hearts we will set off confidently to fight once again in those battles of peace – the external battles and those of the soul. We will joyfully accept those annoying things that actually serve to purify us, and we will become more united to him. We should not forget either, in such circumstances, that God has placed an Angel beside us to look after us, to help us and to carry our prayers the more easily into his presence. Whenever you are in need of anything, or are facing difficulties, whether great or small, invoke your Guardian Angel, asking him to sort the matter out with Jesus, or to carry out the particular service you may require.[73]
6. MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

6.1 The Lord sometimes presents himself to us in a way different from what we had expected.

Jesus came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gadarenes, in the land of the Gentiles. He was looking, perhaps, for a quiet spot in which to rest for a while with his disciples. It was there that Our Lord cured two demoniacs who came out to meet him. There was a herd of swine feeding nearby; the devils begged him, if He cast them out of those tormented men, to send them into the herd of swine. Our Lord permitted just that. So they came out and went into the swine; and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and perished in the waters. The herdsmen fled, and going into the city they told everything, and what had happened to the demoniacs. And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their neighbourhood.

They begged him to leave that place. It was a great opportunity those people missed; they had God himself among them and were unable to recognise him. Perhaps He never again passed through that region. They had him so close to them! And they asked him, the only One who could give them everything that was good, to leave them! How inhospitable the world sometimes is towards its God! Very often, for many people, it is material goods that matter. It is not unusual to see how people try to build a society in which as far as they are concerned God is not present. They make no room for him. It is as if God were of no relevance in the sphere of man’s joint projects. The very One who gives meaning to everything is excluded. It is God who throws light upon the meaning of pain, joy, life, death, work ... Without him nothing is worth while.

Exclusion of God, rupture of our union with God, disobedience to God: throughout the history of mankind this has been and still is, in all its various forms, sin. It can go as far as a virtual denial of God and his existence: this is the phenomenon called atheism. At the heart of many attitudes that lead men to reject or exclude supernatural truth can be found a radical and practical materialism, whereby the goods of this world are esteemed above all else. This is what prevents us from seeing God’s action in everything around us.

We say to Jesus that we want to place him at the peak of all human activity, through doing our work conscientiously each day. We want him to enter fully into our lives and into the lives of our families. We want him to give meaning to what we are and to what we have: to our intellect, to the love of our hearts, to our friendships, to the clean love of each one in accordance with his particular vocation. We tell him that we want to be ever watchful like the sentry, so that He can enter into our souls, even when He presents himself to us in a way we had not expected.

6.2 Detachment if we are to see Jesus and do his Will even when it does not coincide with ours.

In spite of the miracle they had heard of from the swineherds and in spite of having seen those unfortunate men freed and saved from the demons, the Gerasenes still refused to make Jesus welcome. We can imagine what good things would have filled their homes and still more especially their souls! But they were blind to spiritual good. It is just the same with so very many people today. So many people have their own plans for their own well-being that only too often they look on God simply as someone who will help them to carry out those same plans. The true state of affairs is just the opposite. God has his plans for our happiness, and He is waiting for us to help him accomplish
them – and let us be quite clear about it: we cannot improve on God’s plans.[77]

Some Christians, because they are excessively attached to their own ideas and their own whims, more or less tell Jesus to go out of their lives. They may do this precisely at those moments when He is closest to them, and when they need him most. They may do this when they are overtaken by illness or frustrated by setbacks; when they have lost some material things they probably needed to lose so as to be prepared to receive the supreme Good when He comes, very often, along paths quite different from those they were expecting. Perhaps they hoped He would come in triumph, and instead He presents himself to them quietly in the midst of ruin or failure – not in the type of failure brought about by our own indolence because we have failed to use the right means or to put in the necessary amount of study, (which in any case should lead us to make an act of contrition and to start again with a firm resolution). It is, rather, the kind of failure that we experience when so far as we can see we have used all the human and supernatural means necessary to produce success. He sometimes comes along totally unexpected paths. How very often does God’s logic fail to coincide with man’s logic! It is the moment for us to embrace his holy Will: *Is that what you want, Lord? ... Then it's what I want also.*.[78] Time and again when confronted with an unexpected reverse we have made this our prayer, repeated in a thousand different ways!

It has been said that God’s plan is *all of a piece*. Perhaps the loss of their livestock, the detachment that such material deprivation demanded, could have been the beginning of the conversion of those Gentiles; perhaps they would have been the very first Gentiles to receive Baptism after the dispersion brought about by the first persecution in Judaea. At the end of our lives, and sometimes long before it, we will see how those separate events and fragmented circumstances which seemed to be no more than loose pieces without any particular meaning, dovetail together. *Everything in God works for good with those who love him.*[79]

If we are to discover God’s Will in everything that happens in life, even in the least pleasant things – in those things that have harmed us or annoyed us; if we are to follow Christ whatever the circumstances, we must be thoroughly detached from ourselves, from our intellectual talents, our health, our good name, our noble ambitions, our triumphs and our successes.

I would also include ... the high ideals that lead us to seek only to give glory to God and to praise him. We can ensure our detachment by tailoring our will to this clear and precise rule: ‘Lord, I want this or that only if it pleases you, because, if not, I’m not the slightest bit interested.’ By acting in this way, we are dealing a mortal blow to the selfishness and vanity that lurk in every conscience. At the same time we will find true peace of soul through this selfless conduct that leads to an ever more intimate and intense possession of God.[80]

We have to purify our hearts of any disordered love (very often a disordered love of self and excessive attachment to the things we have or would like to have, to our own ideas and opinions, to the plans we have made for our own happiness ...) if we are to have more trust in God our Father. Then we will be able to see things clearly and will be able to interpret correctly the things that happen to us and always be able to find God in them.

6.3 Looking at humanly unfavourable circumstances with the eyes of faith, and finding God in them.

If that slaughter of the pigs had not happened, the swineherds would probably not have gone to the town, and its inhabitants would not have learned that Jesus was there, so close to them. If the woman who came across the Master in Capharnaum had not been ill for such a long time and had not spent every penny she had on doctors, perhaps she would never have approached the Master to touch the
hem of his garment, and would never have heard Jesus’ consoling words – the most important words she was to hear in her life – which were worth far more than all her sufferings and useless expenditure ... What seems a misfortune to us is perhaps not so dreadful; sin is the only absolute evil, and from it – with love, with humility and with contrition – we can draw out the most sweet-tasting effects of a new encounter with Christ,[81] an encounter in which the soul is rejuvenated.

Behind those apparent evils (illness, exhaustion, pain, financial ruin ...) we always find Jesus, smiling at us and holding out his hand to help us bear that situation and grow internally. How grateful that leper must have been for having suffered the sorry burden of his disease, for it was what led him to Christ! The misfortunes of this life are a constant call to our heart, which says to us: The Teacher is here and is calling for you![82] But if we are more attached to our own plans, health, life ... than we are to God’s Will – sometimes mysterious and incomprehensible to us at the beginning – we will come to look on misfortune as only the loss of something that, being only partially and relatively good, we have perhaps treated as absolute and definitive. What a great mistake we would make if we failed to see Jesus visiting us at those very moments!

God disposes events with a logic quite different from our own, in such a way that, sometimes with sorrow and at others with delight, we should detach ourselves from everything else so that He may fill our entire existence. We should often think about the inner action of God within us. He disposes even the least of happenings in order to make us happy. He arranges everything in such a way as to make detachment from ourselves and from our future plans easy ..., so that we become saints. In God’s eyes a single soul is of greater value than the whole universe, and the marvels that God works in the secrecy of our lives are, by far, more extraordinary than all the splendid wonders of the material cosmos.[83] If those Gentiles had understood who was in their midst, if they had perceived the wonder worked in those two men who were freed from the devil, what would their financial misfortune have mattered if through it they had come to recognise Jesus? They would have been so grateful and would have invited Jesus into their houses and organised a great banquet because the Master was with them and because two lost men had been restored to them.

If we look at the lesser or greater misfortunes of this life with the eyes of faith we will always end up giving thanks for them. For that sickness, for the humiliation we were made to endure when we least looked for it, for hunger, for thirst, for the loss of employment ... ‘Thank you, Lord!’ we will say to him from the depths of our hearts –’because you have presented yourself to me where I least expected you!’

Let us ask Our Lady, who experienced so many hardships, so much anguish, so much sorrow, to teach us not to miss those opportunities of meeting Christ in the midst of the – humanly speaking – most unfavourable circumstances.
7. THE INFINITE VALUE OF THE MASS

7.1 The sacrifice of Isaac, an image and figure of the Sacrifice of Christ on Calvary.

We read in the Book of Genesis[84] how God wanted to put Abraham’s faith to the test. He had been promised that his descendants would be numerous as the stars of heaven. The Patriarch had seen time pass him by and was now a great age; his wife was barren. But he nevertheless continued to believe God’s word.

Yahweh had announced to him that he would have a son, and Abraham believed in hope against hope. When at last the child came into the world, he called him Isaac. And after the boy had grown and become the cherished reward of that trust of his, God, the Lord of life and of death, commanded Abraham to offer him in sacrifice: Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you. But at the very moment that he was about to sacrifice his beloved son the Angel of the Lord stopped him. And the Patriarch heard these words filled with abundant blessings: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.

The Fathers of the Church have seen in Isaac’s sacrifice an announcement of the future sacrifice of Jesus. Isaac, the only son of Abraham, the beloved son, carrying his bundle of wood on his shoulders up the mountain where he is to be sacrificed, is a figure of Christ, the Only-begotten Son of the Father, the Beloved, who carries his Cross on his shoulders up to Calvary, where He offers himself as a sacrifice of infinite value for all men.

In the Mass, after the Consecration, the Roman Canon reminds us of this oblation of Abraham’s, when he gives up his son. He is our father in faith. Be pleased to look upon these offerings with a serene and kindly countenance, we say to God the Father, and to accept them, as once you were pleased to accept the gifts of your servant Abel the just, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith, and the offering of your high priest Melchizedek ...[85]

Abraham’s obedience is the greatest expression of his unconditional faith in God. It was because of this faith that he regained Isaac, and after having offered him in sacrifice, received him back as a symbol. He really did consider that God is able to raise men from the dead by his own power; for this reason he received him back and the whole episode is an image of what was to come.[86]

Origen points out that the sacrifice of Isaac makes us more clearly understand the mystery of the Redemption. The fact that Isaac was compelled to carry the wood for the holocaust is a figure of Christ who was made to carry his cross on his shoulders. But at the same time, carrying the wood for the holocaust is the task of a priest. So Isaac was both victim and priest ... Christ is at one and the same time Victim and High Priest. Indeed, according to the spirit, He offers the victim to his Father; according to the flesh, He himself is offered on the altar of the Cross.[87] For this reason each Mass has an infinite, immense value that we can never fully understand. It causes the whole heavenly court to rejoice. It alleviates the pain of the souls in purgatory. It draws down all types of blessings upon earth, and gives more glory to God than all the sufferings of all the martyrs together, more glory than the penances of all the saints, than all the tears shed by them since the beginning of the world and all that...
they may do till the end of time.\[88\]

7.2 Adoration and thanksgiving.

Although all of Christ’s acts were redeeming acts, there is however in his life an event which is unique and stands out above all others, and to which all other events are directed. It is the moment when the obedience and the love of the Son combine to offer to the Father a sacrifice that knows no bounds; this boundlessness is due to the dignity of the Offering and of the Priest who offers it on Calvary. It is He who remains in the Mass as the principal Priest and as the Victim truly offered and sacramentally immolated.

In the Holy Mass, the effects that relate immediately to God, such as adoration and thanksgiving are always produced in infinite plenitude. They do not depend on the degree of our attention, or on the fervour of the priest. In each Mass there are infallibly offered to God adoration, reparation and thanksgiving of limitless value, because it is Christ himself who offers the Mass and in it offers himself. Thus it is impossible to adore God in a better way, or to give greater recognition of his sovereign dominion over all things and all men. It is the most complete fulfilment of the precept: You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.\[89\]

It is impossible to make a more perfect reparation to God for the faults that are committed daily than by offering or participating with devotion in the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar.\[90\] It is impossible to offer him greater thanks for the gifts we have received than through the Holy Mass: What shall I render to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.\[91\] What a tremendous opportunity the Mass is for us to thank God for all the good things we receive, since we no doubt sometimes forget to thank God for the many, many gifts He has showered upon us; the same may happen to us as happened to those lepers whom Jesus cured ...

Adoration, reparation and thanksgiving are infallible effects of the sacrifice of the Mass that refer to God himself,\[92\] for it is He himself who offers and is offered. What a great honour it is for priests to lend Christ their voice and their hands in the Eucharistic sacrifice! What grandeur of privilege is that of the faithful who are able to take part in such a great Mystery!

Tell Our Lord that from now on, every time you celebrate or attend Mass, and every time you administer or receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist, you will do so with greater faith, with a more burning love, just as if it were to be the last time in your life. And be sorry for the carelessness of your past life.\[93\]

7.3 Expiation and atonement for our sins; begging God for all our needs.

On Mount Moriah, Isaac the beloved only son of Abraham, was not in the event sacrificed; on Calvary, Jesus really suffered and died for all of us, pro peccatis, on account of our sins. This fruit of expiation and atonement also reaches the souls of those who have preceded us and who are being purified in Purgatory, awaiting the award of the wedding garment\[94\] so as to be able to enter into Heaven.

The Eucharistic sacrifice effects, of itself and of its own power, the forgiveness of sins; but it brings this about in a ‘mediate’ way ... For example, a person who without attending the sacrifice, asks God to change his life and to lead him to Confession, will obtain this grace only by virtue of his fervour and his persistence ... but if he hears Mass with this objective, it is certain he will effectively obtain this favour so long as he does not place any obstacles in its way.\[95\]

When Jesus Christ offers himself to his Father He prays for all men. He always lives to make intercession for them.\[96\] What better moment can we find than during the Holy Mass to approach him...
and ask for what we so badly need?

Each Mass is offered by the whole Church, who in her turn makes supplication for the whole world. *Each time the Holy Mass is offered it is the blood of the Cross that pours down like rain upon the world.*[97] Together with the Church we pray in a special way for the Pope, for the bishop of the diocese, for our own prelate and for our brothers and sisters, *for all those who, holding to the truth, hand on the catholic and apostolic faith.*[98]

As well as the general effects of the Mass there are also other particular effects for those who take part in the Holy Sacrifice and for those for whose intention it was celebrated. For the priest there is a very special, irrenounceable effect, as it depends on his meritorious will that the Mass is being said; the servers, the choir ... and all the devout participants who are present at the sacrifice also share in these particular effects, each one according to his or her dispositions. *All gathered here whose faith and devotion are known to you. For them we offer you this sacrifice of praise … for all who are dear to them: for the redemption of their souls, in hope of health and well-being.*[99]

As well as the effects of the *praise* and of the *adoration* that are given to God, the Holy Mass also produces fruits of remission for our sins, and of impetration for all our needs. These are of themselves capable of being infinite and unlimited, but may be finite and limited according to our dispositions. This is why the preparation of our soul to attend and partake of this unique Sacrifice, and the moments of thanksgiving and recollection once the sacred action is over are so very important. *Are you there,* the holy Curé d’Ars asks, *with the same dispositions as Our Lady on Calvary, realising that you are in the presence of God himself and are present at the enactment of that very same sacrifice?*[100]

Let us ask Our Lady to intercede for us so that our celebration of or our participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice may become for us the fountain at which our desires for God are satisfied and ever increased.
8. HABITUAL MORTIFICATIONS

8.1 Mortifications are the result of love, and in their turn they nourish love.

In the Gospel of today’s Mass Saint Matthew tells us that after he had responded to Jesus’ call, he prepared a meal for Him in his own house. All the other disciples, and many tax collectors and sinners who were perhaps life-long friends of his, came to the meal. When the Pharisees saw this, they said: Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? Jesus heard what they were saying and He himself answered them. He told them that it is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. Then He makes his own some words of the Prophet Hosea: I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice. Our Lord does not refuse to accept the sacrifices offered to him. He insists, however, that such sacrifices must be accompanied by the love that has its origin in a heart that is good, for it is charity that has to give life to all of a Christian’s actions, and particularly to his worship of God.

Those Pharisees, who faithfully fulfilled the Law, did not accompany their sacrifices with the sweet fragrance of charity towards their neighbour or with love of God. Elsewhere Our Lord was to say in the words of the Prophet Isaiah: These people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. During that meal in Matthew’s house it becomes obvious from their questions that they do not in the least understand the other guests, and that they make no effort to bring them any closer to God or to the Law which they themselves keep so faithfully. Theirs is a narrow outlook, and there is a lack of love in their way of judging. To use different words, Yahweh had already said to the chosen people, who set too much store upon certain external formalities: I prefer virtue to austerity.

That is why we must cultivate penance and mortification as a proof of our true love for God and for our neighbour.

Our love for God is expressed in our acts of worship. But it is also shown in each of our actions throughout the day, particularly in the small mortifications that should inform everything we do, and that carry up to the Lord our desire to forget ourselves and please him in everything.

If, deep down, we do not have this disposition, the mere fact of repeating certain acts will be valueless, because they will be bereft of any real meaning; the little sacrifices we try to offer to the Lord each day have their origin in love, and in their turn nourish this love.

The spirit of mortification that God wants is not something negative or inhuman. It is not an attitude of rejecting what is good and noble in using and enjoying the good things of earth. It is rather a manifestation of supernatural mastery over the body and over all created things – over material things, human relationships, work ...; mortification, whether it is voluntary mortification or whether it is that other type of mortification that comes without our seeking it, is not simply privation: rather is it a manifestation of love, for to suffer need is something that can happen to anybody, but knowing how to endure it belongs to great souls. It belongs to souls who have loved much.

Mortification is not simply moderation. It is not just a matter of keeping our senses under control and of avoiding the disequilibrium that follows upon disorder and excess. Rather, it is true self-denial. It makes room in our souls for supernatural life, which is a foretaste of the glory that is to be revealed to us.

8.2 Mortifications that make life more pleasant for others.
I desire mercy and not sacrifice ... It is because of this that our mortification should be lived, more than anywhere else, in those things that affect our relationships and dealings with other people. Our attitude should be always one of mercy, just like Our Lord’s attitude towards the people He met everywhere He went. Our mortification receives its impulse and direction from the regard we have for those with whom we are in daily contact, whether at home, at work or for any other reason away from home. It leads us to make things in this life more pleasant for them. In particular it leads us to help people who are having to bear even greater physical or moral sufferings; we will do little acts of service for them or deprive ourselves of some small comfort if we can help them in that way.

Our spirit of mortification will lead us to overcome any lack of optimism which would necessarily affect other people. We will endeavour to smile even when we have our own difficulties. We will try to avoid everything, however small, that may annoy those closest to us, to forgive others and to find excuses for them ... In this way we will die to self-love, which is so deeply rooted in our being. We will learn to be humble. This habitual disposition that makes us a cause of joy for others can only be the fruit of a profound spirit of mortification, because many may not find giving up food and drink and a soft bed too difficult ... But bearing an insult, a wrong, or hurtful words ... this is something to be borne not by many but by few.[108]

As well as in these mortifications that refer to charity, God wants us to know how to find him in all those things He allows to happen, and that can go against our likes and preferences and upset our plans. These are known as passive mortifications. They can take the form of serious illness; of problems that arise in the family and for which there seems to be no easy solution; of a major setback at work ... but perhaps more often, indeed probably every day, we come up against little things that annoy us and that we had not expected, whether at work, in our family life or in the carrying out of the plans we have made for a particular day ... These are opportunities for telling God that we love him, precisely through accepting those very things we may have shied away from at the outset. When we accept that particular reverse – be it great or small – with love, and offer it to God, we experience peace and joy in the midst of sorrow. When we do not accept it, our soul becomes as though out of harmony and sad, or else we experience an inner rebelliousness that only serves to separate us from God and from other people.

Another field of mortification in which we can show our love for God is in the exemplary fulfilment of our duty, by working intensely, for example; by not leaving unpleasant tasks for later; by struggling against mental laziness; by taking care of little things – order, punctuality and so on; by facilitating the task of someone who works alongside us; by offering up the tiredness that all hard work brings with it.

By these little victories over ourselves, whilst we work and in our relations with other people – on every possible occasion – we are able to show that we love God above all things, and in particular that we love him more than ourselves. By means of these mortifications we raise ourselves up towards him; by not doing them, we remain rooted to the ground. Those little sacrifices we offer up throughout the day prepare our souls for prayer and fill us with joy.

8.3 Other mortifications. A spirit of mortification.

God asks us for sacrifice offered up with love. Mortification is not for the battlefront, where there exists an imminent danger of falling into sin. Mortification belongs rather to the open field of generosity, because it is a matter of knowing how to deprive ourselves of something it would be possible not to deprive ourselves of and still not offend God. The mortified soul is not the soul that does not offend God, but the soul that loves. Saint Paul reminded the first Christians in Corinth that to
live like this, with an habitual spirit of mortification is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.[109]

Our love for God moves us to control our imagination and our memory, and to get rid of useless thoughts and memories. It enables us to control our sensitivity, our tendency to have a good time as the foremost reason for being alive. Mortification leads us to overcome our laziness from the moment we get up. It prevents us from allowing our sight and other senses to wander uncontrolled. It leads us to be sober and temperate in matters of food and drink, and to avoid always giving in to our whims and impulses ... It may lead us to practise corporal mortifications, although always with the opportune advice received in spiritual direction or in Confession.

At times we will concentrate on some mortifications rather than on others. We will always pay special attention to those mortifications that help us improve in the fulfilment of our duties towards God, in our duties of state and in living charity better. We may even find it useful to note down some of the mortifications we propose for ourselves, to look over the list some time during the day, and then to ask our Guardian Angel for help so that we will actually put them into practice. If we bear in mind the tendency every man and every woman has to forget things and to put things off for some time later, we will realise that we need to use the means if we are not just to neglect such resolutions. Those little acts of renunciation throughout the day, many of which we will have foreseen and looked for, bring us close to Christ and constitute a powerful weapon to enable us to acquire, first in one field and then in another, the actual habit of mortification. They are human stratagems that can only be substituted for with difficulty, given our natural tendency to resist the Cross and to try to forget about it.

The promise Jesus made becomes a reality for the mortified soul: *He who loses his life for my sake will find it.*[110] This is the way to find him in the middle of the world, in and through our daily work. The friend told his Beloved that He should pay him the amount due for the time he had served him. The Beloved took into account the thoughts, desires, tears, dangers and toil that the friend had suffered for love of him. Then the Beloved added eternal bliss to the account, and gave Himself as payment to his friend.[111]
9. NEW WINE

9.1 Preparing our souls to receive the divine gift of grace. New wineskins.

Jesus was teaching, and his listeners well understood what He said. Those people who were the first to hear the words of the Gospel of today’s Mass all knew about patching garments; they were all accustomed to work in the country and they knew what happened when new wine, made from recently harvested grapes, was poured into old wineskins. It was through these simple well-known images that Our Lord taught the most profound truths about the Kingdom He had come to bring to souls: *and no one puts a piece of unshrunken cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; if it is, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.*

Jesus makes it clear that we need to receive his teaching with a fresh and youthful spirit: that we have to want to be renewed. Just as the strength of the fermentation of new wine causes old receptacles to burst, so the message that Christ was about to bring to this earth was to break down all types of conventionalism, routine and inertia. Later the apostles were to think back to those days they spent beside Jesus and see them as the starting point of their real life. They did not receive his preaching as just one more interpretation of the Law, but rather as new life which surged up within them with a quite extraordinary impetus and which demanded new dispositions of them.

Throughout these twenty centuries, whenever men have come face to face with Jesus, something has moved within them, and broken down old and worn out attitudes. The Prophet Ezechiel had already announced that God would grant to his followers another heart and He would give them a new spirit. The Venerable Bede, commenting on a certain passage of the Gospel, explains how the apostles would have been transformed at Pentecost and at the same time filled with the fervour of the Holy Spirit. This was to happen later in the Church to every one of her members, once they had received Baptism and Confirmation. Those new wineskins – a clean and purified soul – should always be full; *for empty they are devoured by moth and rust; full of grace they are preserved.*

The new wine of grace needs the soul to possess certain dispositions which are being constantly renewed: determination to start time and again on the path of sanctity, which is a sign of inner youthfulness, of that youthfulness possessed by the saints, who are people in love with God. We dispose our souls to receive God’s gift of grace when we respond to the inspirations and suggestions of the Holy Spirit as they prepare us to receive new graces. Then, if we have not been altogether faithful, when we go to Our Lord asking him to cure our souls, we can say with Saint Ambrose, *Remove, Lord Jesus, the rottenness of my sins. Whilst you hold me bound with bonds of love, cure what is sick within me ... I have met a physician who lives in heaven and pours out his medicine on earth. Only He can cure my wounds, for He himself has none; only He can remove sorrow from my heart, wanness from my soul, for He alone knows my innermost secrets.*

Only your love, Lord, is able to prepare my soul to receive more love.

9.2 Contrition heals us and prepares us to receive new graces.

The Holy Spirit constantly brings to the soul new wine – sanctifying grace – which has to grow more and more. This *new wine does not grow old, but the wineskins can grow old. Once they tear they are thrown into the rubbish bin and the wine is lost.* This is why it is necessary to constantly...
restore the soul, to rejuvenate it; there are times when we fail to love, perhaps through venial sins, that render the soul unfit to receive more grace and cause it to grow old. In this life we will always be aware of the scars left by sin – character defects that we are unable to overcome, invitations of grace we do not respond to generously, impatience, routine in our life of piety, failure to show understanding for people...

It is contrition that disposes us to receive new graces, that increases our hope and enables us to avoid routine. It makes a Christian forget himself and turn to God once again with a still deeper act of love. Contrition brings with it an aversion from sin and conversion to Christ. This heart-felt sorrow is not the same as the state of mind brought about by the unpleasant effects of having sinned – the breakdown of family harmony, the end of a friendship. It is not even the same as wishing that we had not done a particular thing ... It is the definite condemnation of an action, the conversion towards what is good, towards God’s holiness which is manifested for us in Christ. It is the *irruption of a new life into the soul*,[118] a life filled with love when it finds itself once more with God. This is why a person does not know how to repent, cannot be moved to contrition, if he does not relate his sins, be they large or small, to God.

Before Jesus, all our actions take on their true dimension. If we were simply to stop at our faults, without any reference to the person who has been offended, we would probably seek to justify our faults and sins and give little importance to them. On the other hand we might find ourselves filled with discouragement and despair in the face of so much error and omission. God teaches us to acknowledge the truth of our lives, and in spite of all our wretchedness and defects, He fills us with peace and the desire to improve and to start again.

The humble soul feels the need to ask God for forgiveness many times each day. Each time she separates herself from what God has expected of her, she sees the need to return, like the prodigal son, with true sorrow: *Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.*[119] And Our Lord, *who is close to those of contrite heart*[120] will hear our prayer. With this spirit of contrition the soul is constantly prepared to receive the *new wine* of grace.

9.3 Sacramental Confession: a means of growing in interior life.

Our Lord, knowing that we were fragile, left us the sacrament of Penance, where the soul not only comes away healed, but, if it has lost grace, rises with a new life. We must go to receive this sacrament with a sincerity that is complete, humble, contrite and with the desire of reparation. A well-made Confession presupposes a deep examination of conscience – deep does not necessarily mean long in a time sense, especially if we go to Confession frequently – if possible in front of the tabernacle, and always in the presence of God. In his examination of conscience, the Christian sees what God has expected his life to be and what in reality it has been. He see the goodness or the malice of his actions, the omissions, the opportunities he has let slip ..., the gravity of the fault committed, the length of time he has remained in it before asking for forgiveness.[121]

The Christian who wants to have a refined conscience, and so goes to Confession frequently, *will not be content with a Confession that is simply valid, but he will aspire to a good Confession* which is an effective help to the soul in its aspiration towards God. For frequent Confession to achieve this end we need to take this principle in all seriousness: without repentance there is no forgiveness of sin. This gives rise to the fundamental norm of anyone who goes to confession frequently – not to confess any venial sin without first seriously and sincerely repenting of it.

*There is a ‘general repentance’. This is pain and detestation for all the sins committed in one’s past.*[122]
life. This general repentance is of exceptional importance for frequent confession, since it helps to heal the wounds that our weaknesses left behind them, purifies our soul and makes it grow in love of God.

Whenever necessary, sincerity will lead us to get down to those little details that enable us to acknowledge our weaknesses better: how? when? why? for how long? We have to avoid insubstantial and prolific detail just as much as generalisation. We need to say simply and delicately what has happened, what is the true state of our soul. We have to flee from digressions such as I wasn’t humble, I was lazy, I lacked charity: things that are applicable to almost every human being. When we practise frequent confession, we have to make sure that it is always a personal act in which we ask God’s forgiveness for very real specific weaknesses, and not generalisations.

This sacrament of mercy is a sure refuge: in it our wounds are cured. What was already worn and growing old is rejuvenated. All our errors, large or small, are cured, because Confession is not only a judgement in which our transgressions are forgiven, but also a medicine for the soul. Confession that is impersonal often hides a point of pride and of self-love that seeks to camouflage or to find justification for anything that is humiliating and leaves us, humanly speaking, looking bad. Perhaps it can help us to make this act of penance more personal, if we are careful about the very way we make our confession: I accuse myself of... for this sacrament is not to woefully relate things that have happened; it is humbly and simply to accuse oneself of one’s errors and weaknesses before God himself, who will forgive us through the priest and will inundate us with his grace.

‘Blessed be God’ you said to yourself after having finished your sacramental Confession. And you thought: it is as if I had just been born again.

You then continued calmly: ‘Domine, quid me vis facere? – Lord, what would you have me do?’

And you yourself came up with the reply: ‘By the help of your grace I will let nothing and no one come between me and the fulfilment of your most Holy Will: Serviam – I will serve you unconditionally!’ I will serve you, Lord, as you have always wanted me to: with simplicity, in the midst of all the ordinary, everyday events of my life.
10. HELPING OTHERS TO CARRY THEIR BURDENS

10.1 Christ’s example.

Jesus behaved towards people in a way very different from the way many of the Pharisees behaved towards them. He came to free men from the heaviest of their burdens by taking them upon himself. *Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

Close to Christ, all our efforts and indeed all those things we find most difficult to bear if we are to fulfil God’s Will become even pleasant. Sacrifice offered with Christ does not bring with it a feeling of harsh rebelliousness, but rather one of joyful giving. He bore upon himself our sorrows and our weightiest burdens. The Gospels give us a constant example of his concern for all men. Saint Gregory the Great writes that *everywhere He left examples of his mercy.* He raises the dead, cures the blind, the lepers, the dumb, and frees those possessed by the devil … There are occasions when He does not even wait for the sick person to be brought to him, but says: *I will come and heal him.* Even at the moment of his own death He shows his concern for the people around him. He gives himself up to death lovingly; *He is the expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world.*

We must imitate Our Lord not only by avoiding causing unnecessary worries to others, but by helping people to bear the worries they already have. Whenever possible we will help others to fulfil their human task. We will help them to carry the burdens that life itself imposes on them: *When you have finished your work, do your brother’s, helping him, for Christ’s sake, so tactfully and so naturally that no one – not even he – will realise that you are doing more than what in justice you ought.*

*This, indeed, is virtue befitting a son of God!* We should never think that any act of self-denial or sacrifice offered for the good of another is more than we should do. Charity should stimulate us to show our regard for others in very specific ways. It should lead us to look for opportunities of making ourselves useful, of lightening the burdens of others and of giving joy to all those we are able to help in any way, even though we know that we will never do as much as we should.

We should always try to relieve others from whatever seems to weigh them down, just as Christ would have done in our place. Sometimes this will mean our doing some small act of service. At times it will mean giving a word of encouragement or of hope. At others we will help someone to glance up at the Master so that he comes to see his situation in a more positive light; it may be a situation which had seemed to overwhelm him simply because up till then he had felt he must face it alone. We should think too of those aspects of our behaviour with which sometimes, without really meaning to, we make life a little harder for others … our whims and fancies, our rash judgements, negative criticism, a lack of consideration for others, an unkind word…

10.2 We should be compassionate and merciful. The burden of sin and of ignorance.

Love enables us to discover in others the divine image in whose likeness we have all been made. We should recognise in everyone the tremendous price paid for his ransom – the priceless ness of his redemption – the very Blood of Christ. The greater our love, the more we are able to appreciate
our neighbour and, as a consequence, show concern for his needs and sorrows. Then we see not only another human being who is suffering or having a hard time, we see Christ in that person, Christ, who identified himself with all men: *Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.*

Christ makes himself present to us through charity. He acts in the world at every moment through the members of his Mystical Body. It is for this reason that our constant union with Jesus enables us also to say: *Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* Charity is the full realisation of the Kingdom of God in the world.

If we are to be faithful followers of Christ we have to ask him unceasingly to give us a heart like his, capable of feeling sorrow for all the evil that man drags along behind him. We should be particularly sorry about the evil that is sin, which, more than any other evil, drags man down and overwhelms him. Jesus always responded with compassion when He saw all the limitations and the weaknesses of men: *I have compassion on the crowd ...* the evangelists record in their different ways. Christ was moved by all the kinds of misfortune He encountered during his time on this earth. We know that He always looks with mercy on the mass of human wretchedness that has been accumulated throughout the centuries. If we are to call ourselves followers of Christ we must bear in our hearts the same feelings of mercy as the Master had.

In our personal prayer, let us ask Our Lord to help us with his grace to feel true compassion, above all for those who suffer the immeasurable evil of sin, for those who are far from God. Then we will be able to understand how it is that the apostolate of Confession is the greatest of the works of mercy. It is by doing this apostolate that we give God the opportunity to pour out his generous forgiveness on that prodigal son who has left his father’s house. Of what a great burden do we relieve the person who was burdened by sin and now goes to Confession! What a true relief! Today could be a good time to ask ourselves: how many people have I helped to make a good Confession. Who else can I help?

We should try especially to lighten the burdens of people more closely connected to us because they share the same faith, the same spirit, the same ties of blood, the same work ... Saint Leo the Great said emphatically: *Certainly look on everyone who suffers with a general benevolence, but be especially concerned about those who are members of Christ’s Body and are united to us through the Catholic Faith. For we owe more to those who belong to us through the union of grace than to strangers through the community of nature.*

As far as we can, let us relieve all those who carry the heavy burden of ignorance, especially ignorance of their religion, which *today reaches levels never before descended to in certain countries of Christian tradition.* Perhaps because of the impositions of a secular state or because of lamentable disorientation and negligence, crowds of children who have been baptised are reaching adolescence with a total lack of the most elementary notions of the Faith and morals and even of the rudiments of piety. Today, to teach the unlearned means above all to teach those who know nothing about Religion; it means ‘to evangelise them’ – that is to say, to speak to them about God and about the Christian life. What a great weight has to be borne by those who do not know Christ, by those who have been deprived of Christian doctrine or who are imbued with error!

10.3 We should turn to Christ when life becomes difficult for us, and learn from Our Lady how to forget ourselves.

We will find that no way leads more certainly to Christ and happiness than that of a sincere concern to free those who are weary and heavy-laden from whatever weighs them down. God has disposed things in such a way that we should learn to bear one another’s burdens: because there is nobody
without any defect; nobody who is sufficient unto himself; indeed nobody who is sufficiently wise unto himself.[134] We all need one another. Living with other people requires that mutual help without which we would find it difficult to keep going.

If at some time we should find ourselves wrestling with a burden that is beyond our strength, we should not fail to listen to Our Lord’s words: Come to me. Only He can restore our strength, only He can quench our thirst. Jesus says now and always: ‘Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest’. We can be sure that Jesus constantly invites us to come to him, sees our difficulties and has compassion on us. Still more does He offer us his promises, his friendship, the hope of goodness, of a healing remedy for our ills, of comfort; and still more does He offer us nourishment, bread, the very source of energy and life.[135] Christ is our repose.

Our continuous conversation with Our Mother Mary teaches us to be understanding with our neighbour in his time of need. There was nothing that she failed to notice, because even the smallest of cares were important to the love that always filled her Heart. She will help us to follow the way that leads to Christ at those very times when our need to unburden ourselves on him is even greater: You will draw strength from it to put the Will of God fully into practice, and you will be filled with desires of serving all men. You will be the Christian you have sometimes dreamed of being: full of works of charity and justice, happy and strong, understanding towards others and demanding on yourself.[136]
FOURTEENTH SUNDAY: YEAR B

11. MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU

11.1 God gives us his help to enable us to overcome all obstacles, temptations and difficulties.

In the Second Reading of today’s Mass, Saint Paul lets us see the depths of his humility. After speaking to the Corinthians about his labours for Christ and the visions and revelations he had received from the Lord, he goes on to tell them of his weakness: to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated.

We do not know with any certainty what Saint Paul is referring to when he speaks of this thorn in the flesh. Some Fathers of the Church, (e.g. Saint Augustine) think it is a particularly painful physical affliction; others, (e.g. Saint John Chrysostom) think that he is referring to the tribulations caused him by the continuous persecutions of which he is the victim; and some, (e.g. Saint Gregory the Great) are of the opinion that he is referring to temptations that he finds particularly difficult to resist. Whatever it is, it is something that humiliates the Apostle, and that in some way hinders his work as a bearer of the Gospel.

Saint Paul had asked God three times to remove this obstacle from him. He received this sublime reply: My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. God’s help is sufficient for him to overcome that difficulty; at the same time we are given to know about the divine power that enabled him to overcome it. He becomes stronger when he relies on God’s help, and this causes him to exclaim: For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecution, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong. In our own weakness we too constantly experience the need to turn towards God and draw on the strength that comes to us from him. How often God has said to us deep in our hearts: My grace is sufficient for you, you have my help to enable you to overcome all trials and difficulties.

Perhaps we sometimes have a particularly vivid experience of loneliness, weakness or tribulation: If so, seek the support of him who died and rose again. Find yourself a shelter in the wounds in his hands, in his feet, in his side. And your willingness to start again will revive, and you will take up your journey again with greater determination and effectiveness.

Even our frailty and our weaknesses can be turned to good account. In his commentary on this passage, Saint Thomas Aquinas explains that God can sometimes allow certain evils of a physical or moral order precisely so as to draw from them a greater, more necessary good. God will never abandon us in the midst of temptation. Our very weakness helps us to have greater trust, to seek refuge in God more urgently, to ask him for greater strength and to be more humble: ‘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, with our failings – we shall be faithful to our Father, God; his divine power will shine forth in us, sustaining us in our weakness.

11.2 If you want to, you can.

A thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me ... It seems here as if Saint Paul senses his limitations in a very vivid way, and at the same time relives the occasions when he
contemplated the greatness of God and the greatness of his own mission as an Apostle. Sometimes in
the course of our lives we too have caught glimpses of generous aims, aims of sincerity, of
perseverance ..., and yet, it seems as though we have, in the very depths of our soul, a sort of radical
infirmity, a lack of strength, an obscure impotence ..., and this sometimes makes us feel sad and we say
'I can’t'.[142] We can see what Our Lord wants of us in this or that situation, but perhaps we feel
weakened and exhausted by the trials and difficulties facing us. Your intelligence – enlightened by
faith – shows you the way clearly. It can also point out the difference between following that way
heroically or stupidly. Above all, it places before you the divine greatness and beauty of the
undertakings the Trinity leaves in our hands.

Your feelings, on the other hand, become attached to everything you despise, even while you
consider it despicable. It seems as if a thousand trifles were awaiting the least opportunity, and as
soon as your poor will is weakened through physical tiredness or lack of supernatural outlook, those
little things flock together and pile up in your imagination, until they form a mountain that oppresses
and discourages you. Things such as the rough edges of your work; your resistance to obedience; the
lack of proper means; the false attractions of an easy life; greater or smaller but repugnant
temptations; bouts of sensuality; tiredness; the bitter taste of spiritual mediocrity ... and sometimes
also fear – fear because you know God wants you to be a saint, and you are not a saint.

Allow me to talk to you bluntly. You have more than enough ‘reasons’ to turn back, and you lack the
resolution to correspond to the grace that He grants you, since He has called you to be another Christ,
‘ipse Christus’! – Christ himself. You have forgotten the Lord’s admonition to the Apostle: ‘My grace
is enough for you’, which is confirmation that, if you want to, you can.[143]

My grace is sufficient for you. Our Lord says these words directly to each one of us so that we
should be filled with fortitude and with hope when we see the trials that await us. Our very weakness
will help us to rejoice at Christ’s power; it will teach us to love and to feel the need to be always very
close to Jesus. Our very failures, our unfulfilled plans, will lead us to exclaim: When I am weak, then
I am strong, for Christ is with me.

Whenever we are beset by greater temptations, setbacks or weariness, the devil will try to make us
stray from the path by causing a lack of trust and discouragement to creep into our soul. This is why
today we must learn the lesson Saint Paul wants to teach us: it is at such times that Christ is especially
present to us and ready to help us; we have just to turn to him. Then we too will be able to say with the
Apostle: For the sake of Christ, then, I am content to put up with weaknesses, insults, hardships,
persecutions, and calamities.

11.3 Means we should use in times of temptation.

It would be rash to desire temptation or to provoke it, but it would also be wrong to be afraid of
temptation, as though Our Lord were not going to give us his help to overcome it. We can confidently
apply to ourselves the words of the Psalm: For he will give his angels charge of you, to guard you in
all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone. You will
tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot. Because he
cleaves to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls
to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will rescue him and honour him. With long life
I will satisfy him, and show him my salvation.[144]

At the same time, Our Lord asks us to be prepared for temptation and to use all the means at our
disposal to overcome it: prayer and voluntary mortifications; fleeing from the occasions of sin, for
whoever loves danger will perish by it;[145] leading a life of hard and constant work, carrying out the
duties of our work in an exemplary manner and simply changing our activity in order to rest; fostering a great horror for every sin, however small it may seem; and, above all, making a real effort to increase within ourselves our love for Christ and for Our Lady.

We are putting up an effective struggle when we open our soul in spiritual direction whenever we are tempted to be unfaithful. To speak about it is already almost to overcome it. He who reveals his own temptations to his spiritual director can be certain that God grants his director the grace he needs to direct him well ...

We should never think that temptation is overcome by settling down to argue with it, or even by attacking it head-on ... As soon as it presents itself to us we should turn away from it and direct our glance towards Our Lord, who lives within us and fights at our side, who himself has conquered sin; let us embrace him in an act of humble submission to his Will, of accepting that cross of temptation ..., of trust in him and of faith in his closeness to us, at the same time making an act of supplication that He may transmit his strength to us. In this way temptation will lead us to prayer, to union with God and with Christ; it will not be loss, but rather gain. In everything God works for good with those who love him (Rom 8:28).[146]

From our trials, our tribulations and temptations we can draw out much good, for in undergoing them we will show Our Lord that we need him and that we love him. They will set us on fire with love and increase all the virtues within us, for a bird flies not only by the impulse of its wings, but also by the lift and resistance of the air: in some way we have need of obstacles and setbacks in order that our love may grow. The greater the resistance to any progress along our way provided by our surroundings or by our own weakness, the more help and grace God will give us. And our Mother in Heaven will always be particularly close to us at those moments of greatest need: we should not fail to seek her motherly protection.
12. AS A RIVER OF PEACE

12.1 Our Lord comes to bring peace to a world that lacks peace.

This Sunday’s Liturgy centres in a special way on peace as being of great benefit for the individual soul and for society. In the First Reading,[147] the Prophet Isaiah announces that the era of the Messiah will be characterised by its abundance of this divine gift; it will be like a torrent of peace, like an overflowing stream. It is to be an era that will gather together everything that is good: joy, happiness, consolation and the prosperity promised by God when Jerusalem was restored after the Babylonian exile. As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you. Isaiah refers in these words to the Messiah, the bearer of that peace which is, at one and the same time, grace and eternal salvation for each individual and for the whole people of God. The new Jerusalem is an image of the Church and of each one of us.

The Gospel of today’s Mass[148] tells how Our Lord sent the disciples out to announce the coming of the Kingdom of God. Wherever they went miracles occurred time and again: blind men recovered their sight, lepers were cleansed, sinners were moved to repentance. Wherever they went they carried with them the peace of Christ. Before sending them out on that apostolic mission, Our Lord himself had charged them: Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace be to this house’. And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest upon him ... The Church will repeat this message until the end of the world.

Nevertheless, after so many years, we can still see that the world is not at peace; it desires peace and clamours for it, but it does not find it. There are few ages when the word ‘peace’ has been pronounced so often, and there are perhaps few ages when peace has been further away from the world. Even, it has been said, in many nations and countries, the general situation has little to do with peace. Not that there is war, or at least what we generally understand by war, but there is certainly a lack of peace. Race struggles. Class struggles. The struggle between ideologies and political parties. Terrorism. Guerrilla warfare. Kidnap and assassination attempts. Insecurity. Riots. Disputes. Violence. Hatred which brings resentment, accusations and recriminations.[149] Peace, peace’, they say, when there is no peace.[150] There is no peace in society, or in the family or within souls. What is happening for there to be no peace? Why is there so much tension and so much violence? Why are our souls beset by so much anxiety and so much sadness, if what everyone wants is peace?

Perhaps the world is looking for peace where peace cannot be found; perhaps we are confusing peace with a quiet life. Quite possibly we think peace depends on external circumstances that have nothing to do with man himself. Peace comes from God and it is a gift of God that passes all understanding.[151] It is granted only to men of good will[152] – to those who strive with the whole of their strength to live their lives in accordance with God’s Will. Peace, and the joy that comes with it, cannot be given by the world.

Men are forever ‘making peace’ and forever getting entangled in wars. This is because they have forgotten the advice to struggle inside themselves and to go to God for help. He will then conquer, and we will obtain peace for ourselves and for our own homes, for society and for the world.

If we do things in this way, you and I will have joy, because it is the possession of those who conquer. And with the grace of God – who never loses battles – we will be able to count ourselves conquerors as long as we are humble.[153] Then we will be the bearers of true peace, and we will carry
it wherever we go as an invaluable treasure. We will take it to our families, to our place of work, to our friends ... to the whole world.

12.2 Violence and anxiety have their roots in men’s hearts; they are consequences of sin.

In the beginning, before original sin had been committed, everything was ordered so as to give glory to God and happiness to men. There were no such things as wars, hatred, anger, lack of understanding, injustice ... Through that first sin, to which personal sins were subsequently added, man turned into a being who was selfish, proud, mean, avaricious ... If we look at sin we will detect in it the cause of all the failings we see around us. Blessed John Paul II pointed out that violence and injustice have their roots deep in the hearts of each individual, of each one of us. It is from the heart that come all the disorders that men are capable of committing against God, against their brothers and against themselves, provoking far down in their consciences a rent, a deep bitterness, a lack of peace that is necessarily reflected in the network of social life. But it is also from the human heart, from its great capacity to love, from its generosity in being willing to undergo sacrifice, that there can arise – made fruitful by Christ’s grace – feelings of fraternity and works of service to men who ‘like a stream of peace’ (Is 66:12) work together for the construction of a more just world, in which peace brings with it the badge of citizenship and impregnates all structures of society.

Peace is the consequence of sanctifying grace, just as violence, in any one of its manifestations, is the consequence of sin.

The whole future of peace is in our hearts,[156] for sin has not been so powerful that it could completely obliterate the image of God in man, but only soil it, deform it and weaken it. It was able to wound his soul but not annihilate it. It was able to darken his intellect, but not destroy it. Sin managed to open a way for hatred, but not to eliminate man’s capacity for loving. It twisted man’s will, but not to such an extent as to make rectification impossible.[157] This is why, although man tends towards evil when he lets himself be led by his fallen nature, he can nevertheless, with the help of grace, overcome those disordered passions and possess and communicate to others the peace Christ won for us. It is then that the life of a Christian becomes a cheerful struggle to overcome evil and to reach Christ. In that struggle he finds safety which is filled with optimism. If ever he forms a pact with sin and with his own wretchedness, he loses that feeling of certainty and becomes a source of unease and even of violence for himself and for others.

As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you. It is only in Christ that we will find the peace that we so much want for ourselves and for those closest to us. Let us go to him when the difficulties of life threaten the serenity of our soul. Let us go to the Sacrament of Penance and to spiritual direction if, because we have not struggled hard enough, worry and anxiety have entered into our hearts.

12.3 Peace begins in the soul when we acknowledge all that separates us from God with a heartfelt act of contrition. Spreading peace throughout the world by starting with the people closest to us.

Christ’s presence in the hearts of his followers is the beginning of true peace. Such peace brings with it rich fulfilment; it is not mere ease of life or absence of struggle. Saint Paul affirms that Christ himself is our peace;[158] to possess him and to love him is the origin of all true serenity.

This stream of peace in our soul, an overflowing stream, begins with the acknowledgement of our sins, faults, negligences and errors. Then if we are humble and we look at Christ, he will disclose to us his great mercy, as though he were hidden behind a veil saying to us: ‘Those are the shortcomings
have taken upon myself in order to show you the Father’s love in a very personal way, through this loneliness and sorrow. His love is the only love capable of freeing us from our wretchedness, of turning it around, so to speak, and using it towards your salvation’. Then there will resound in the ear of our hearts, the words: ‘Your faith has saved you and has cured you. Go in peace’.[159] There is no peace without contrition. There is no peace unless we are deeply sincere with ourselves and acknowledge those things in our lives that separate us from God and our fellow men. There is no peace without deep, undiluted sincerity in Confession.

With this interior calm, we will find that by beginning over and over again and never complying with our defects and our shortcomings we will be able to go out into the world, to that space in which we spend each day of our lives, and spread around us that peace that the world does not have and consequently cannot give.

Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace be to this house’ ... It is not simply a greeting – it is Christ’s peace that his followers have to take out into all the paths of the world. We will say to everyone that true peace is founded on justice, on the sense of the inviolable dignity of man, on the acceptance of an indelible and desirable equality of man, on the basic principle of human brotherhood, that is to say, on the respect and love due to each man.[160] The peace of the world begins within the heart of each individual.

The Christian who lives by faith is a man of peace who spreads serenity around him; people feel at ease with him and others will seek his company. Let us ask Our Lady, as we finish these moments of prayer, to teach us to go humbly to the source of peace (the tabernacle, Confession, spiritual direction) if ever we see that anxiety, fear, sadness or worry are seeking a way of entering into our hearts. Regina pacis, ora pro nobis ... ora pro me.
FOURTEENTH WEEK: MONDAY

13. FINDING CHRIST IN THE CHURCH

13.1 It is not possible to love, follow or listen to Christ without loving, following and listening to the Church.

Everyone looks for Jesus. Everyone needs Jesus, and He in turn is always ready to have compassion on all who approach him with faith. His most Sacred Humanity was like a channel through which all graces flowed, for as long as He remained among men. This is why the crowds tried to touch him, for there flowed out of him a power that cured all.

The woman we hear about in the Gospel of today’s Mass[161] also felt moved to approach Christ. To her physical sufferings – which had already lasted for twelve years – was added the shame of feeling herself impure according to the law. The Jews at that time considered not only the woman affected by a sickness of this type to be impure, but also everything she touched. This is why she approached Jesus from behind and touched just his cloak, so that people would not notice her. She delicately touched the hem of his cloak, she approached with faith, she believed and she knew she had been cured ...[162]

These miracles – cures and the casting out of devils – that Christ worked whilst He lived on this earth were a proof that the Redemption was already a reality, not merely a hope. The people we see coming up to the Master foretell, as it were, the devotion Christians would later have to the Most Sacred Humanity of Christ. Later, when He was about to go up to Heaven and take his place beside his Father, knowing that we would always have need of him, He established the means by which, at any time or in any place, we would be able to receive the infinite riches of the Redemption: He founded the Church, in such a way that we would easily see it or find it. When we look for the Church we are like those people who looked for the Son of Mary. To be in the Church is to be with Jesus; to unite oneself to this flock is to unite oneself to Jesus. To belong to this society is to be a member of his Body. It is only in the Church that we can find Christ – Christ himself – the very same Christ that the chosen people waited so long for.

Those people who claim to approach Christ whilst leaving his Church to one side, and even causing her harm, may one day get the same surprise as Saint Paul did when he was on his way to Damascus: I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.[163] And, the Venerable Bede reflects that He does not say ‘why are you persecuting my members, but why are you persecuting me?’ For He is still affronted in his Body, which is the Church.[164] Paul did not know until that moment that to persecute the Church was to persecute Jesus himself. When he speaks about the Church later on, he does so in words that describe her as the Body of Christ,[165] or simply as Christ;[166] and he describes the faithful as members of Christ’s Body.[167]

It is not possible to love, follow or listen to Christ, without loving, following or listening to the Church, because she is the presence, at once sacramental and mysterious, of Our Lord, who prolongs his saving mission in the world to the very end of time.

13.2 In the Church we share in Christ’s Life.

Nobody can say that he loves God if he does not choose the way to him – Jesus – laid down by God himself. This is my beloved Son ... listen to him.[168] We act illogically if we claim to be Christ’s friends and at the same time spurn his words and his wishes.
Those crowds of people from many different places all find in Jesus someone who speaks to them with authority, who speaks to them about God. He himself is the divine Word made flesh – they come face to face with Jesus the Master. And we in our day attach ourselves to him when we accept the teaching of the Church: *He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me.*

Moreover, Jesus is our Redeemer. He is the Priest; He fully possesses the one and only priesthood and He offered himself as the propitiatory victim for sin. *So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him ‘Thou art my Son’ ...* We unite ourselves to Jesus, at once priest and victim, who gives honour to God the Father and sanctifies us when we take part in the life of the Church; we do so particularly when we partake of her sacraments, which are like divine channels through which grace flows until it reaches our souls. Each time we receive the sacraments we come into contact with Christ himself, the fountain of all grace. Through the sacraments the infinite merits that Christ gained for us reach men of all times and are, for all, the firm hope of eternal life. In the Holy Eucharist that Christ commanded the Church to celebrate, we renew his oblation and immolation. *This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.* And only the Holy Eucharist guarantees to us the Life that He has gained for us: *Whoever shall eat of this bread shall live for ever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh which is the life of the world ...*

The condition for sharing in this sacrifice and banquet stems from another of the sacraments Christ conferred on his Church – Baptism. *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,* He who believes and is baptised will be saved ... And if our sins have caused us to be separated from God, the Church is also the means by which our condition as living members of the Lord is restored: *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.* Christ laid it down that this strong link with him should be brought about by those visible signs that are the sacramental life of his Church. Through the sacraments we also find Christ.

Although there may sometimes be dissensions within the Church, it will not be difficult for us to find Christ. Majorities and minorities do not matter much when it is a question of finding Jesus: on Calvary there stood only his Mother with a few women and an adolescent, but there, a few yards away, was Jesus! In the Church we too know where our Lord is: *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,* He declared to Peter, *and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.* Not even Simon’s denials of him were sufficient for him to revoke those powers. Our Lord, once He had risen from the dead, confirmed those powers in a solemn way: *Feed my lambs ... Feed my sheep.* The Church is where Peter and his successors – and the bishops in communion with him – are.

### 13.3 Faith, hope and love for the Church.

In the Church we see Jesus, the same Jesus the crowds wanted so much to touch *for there flowed out of him a power that cured all.* Anybody who binds himself to Christ the Teacher, the Priest and the King by accepting the doctrine, the sacraments and the authority of the Church, belongs to the Church. In a certain way we maintain the same relationship with the Church as we do with Christ – by means of faith, hope and charity.

First of all *faith,* which means believing what on so many occasions is not so obvious. The contemporaries of Jesus too saw a man who worked, who grew tired, who needed food, who felt pain, cold and fear ..., but that Man was God. In the Church we have seen holy people who often pass unnoticed, hidden as they have been by a very ordinary life. We also see weak people like ourselves,
small-minded, lazy, self-interested. But if they have been baptised and remain in a state of grace, despite all their defects, they are in Christ, they share in his very life. If they are sinners, the Church welcomes them too into her midst as members who need her still more.

Our attitude towards the Church also has to be one of hope. Christ himself assured us: On this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.[178] She will be the firm rock where we can seek safety against the erratic lurches the world seems to make. She can never fail us, because in her we will always find Christ.

And if we owe God charity, love; that is, we must have this same sentiment towards our Mother the Church, for no-one can have God for his Father who does not have the Church for his Mother.[179] She is the Mother who gives life to us – that life of Christ's by which we are children of the Father. A mother is to be loved. Only bad children remain indifferent, sometimes hostile, towards the person who gave them their very being. We have a good mother: this is why we are so hurt by the wounds that are caused her by some outside and by some inside the Church, and by the sicknesses that others of her members can sometimes undergo. This is why, as good sons and daughters of the Church, we try hard not to talk about the weaknesses of individuals, past or present, of this or that Christian, whether or not they have been placed in positions of authority. We try never to criticise the Church who is Holy and so merciful that she does not deny her motherly care even to sinners. How can we ever speak about her coldly, harshly or insolently? How can we remain indifferent to our mother? We are not and we do not want to be indifferent. Whatever is hers is ours, and we cannot be expected to take a neutral stance, like a judge who will impartially hear a case against someone. Such can never be the attitude of a child in relation to his mother.

We belong to Christ when we belong to the Church. In her we become members of the body of him whom Our Lady conceived, gestated, and brought into the world. This is why the Blessed Virgin is Mother of the Church, that is to say, Mother of the whole people of God, both faithful and pastors.[180] The latest jewel that filial piety has set in the litany of Our Lady, the most recent compliment to the Mother of Christ is almost synonymous: Mother of the Church we say.
14. THE ASCETICAL STRUGGLE

14.1 Many battles are waged each day in men’s hearts. Our Lord’s constant help in the struggle.

Jacob’s mysterious wrestling-match with the angel in human form on the banks of the River Jabbok marks a pivotal turning point in the Patriarch’s life. Up till then Jacob had behaved in an all too human way, relying on purely natural means. From that moment on he would put his trust above all else in God, who reaffirmed in him his Covenant with the chosen people.

Jacob was able to win in that contest only through the strength that God gave him, and the lesson to be learned from this event was that God’s blessing and protection would never be wanting in any of the difficulties that were to come. The Book of Wisdom expresses it thus: *In his arduous contest she gave him the victory, so that he might learn that godliness is more powerful than anything.*

For the Fathers of the Church this scene from the Old Testament is an image of the spiritual struggle the Christian has to sustain against forces very superior to himself, and against his own passions and tendencies, which have inclined mankind towards evil ever since original sin was committed. Saint Paul warns us that *we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.*

These are the rebel angels, who have already been vanquished by Christ, but who will not cease to incite man towards evil until the very end of his life on earth. Every day there are contests within our hearts, Saint Augustine teaches. Each man fights against a whole army within his soul. The enemies are pride, avarice, gluttony, sensuality, laziness … And, the saint adds, it is difficult to prevent those attacks from wounding us. Nevertheless we can be certain of victory if we make use of the resources that God has given us, namely prayer, mortification, complete sincerity in spiritual direction, the help of our guardian angel and, above all, of our Mother, Mary. Moreover, *if He who has given his very life for us is the Judge in this contest, how can we fail to be rightfully proud and confident?*

*In the Olympic games, the referee stations himself between the two adversaries without favouring either one or the other, awaiting the outcome. If the referee places himself equidistant from the two contenders, it is because his attitude is neutral. In the struggle where we come face to face with the devil, Christ does not remain impartial; He is entirely on our side. How can this be? ‘You can see that from the moment we entered the lists’ – these are words spoken by Saint John Chrysostom to some Christians on the day of their Baptism – ‘He anointed us whilst at the same time He bound the other in chains. Us He has anointed with the oil of gladness, and the devil He has bound with unbreakable fetters so as to bring his assaults to nothing. If I stumble He holds out his hand to me: He raises me from my fall and He sets me on my feet again.*

However many temptations, difficulties or tribulations may assail us, Christ is forever our safeguard. He does not leave us. *He is not neutral!* He is always on our side. We can all say with Saint Paul: *Omnia possum in eo qui me confortat …*, I can do everything in Christ who strengthens me, who gives me the help I need if only I turn to him and use the means He has established.

14.2 Daily effort which is both cheerful and humble is necessary if we are to follow Christ.

A mountaineer was climbing towards a shelter high up on the mountain. The path became steeper and steeper and at times it was difficult for him to take the next step forward; the icy wind whipped
against his face, but he was oblivious to this owing to the impression made on him by the great silence that reigned all around and by the beauty of the landscape.

The refuge, which was simple and rough-hewn, was very welcoming. Very soon he noticed some words written above the fireplace, words that he felt completely identified with. *My place is at the summit*, they said. That is our place also: at the summit, next to Christ, with a constant desire of aspiring to sanctity in the place where we are, even though we are only too well aware of the poor clay of which we are made, of our shortcomings and failings. But we know too that God asks us to make a small effort every day. He asks us to struggle without respite against the passions that tend to pull us down. He asks us never to form a pact with our defects or mistakes. What will make us persevere in this struggle is love, a deep love for Christ, whom we seek unceasingly.[186]

The Christian’s ascetical struggle has to be positive, cheerful, constant, and be carried on with a *sporting spirit*, a spirit of energetic contest. *Sanctity has the flexibility of supple muscles.* Whoever wishes to be a saint should know how to behave in such a way that while he does something that involves a mortification for him, he omits doing something else – as long as this does not offend God – which he would also find difficult, and thanks the Lord for this comfort. If we Christians were to act otherwise we would run the risk of becoming stiff and lifeless, like a rag doll.

*Sanctity is not rigid like cardboard; it knows how to smile, to give way to others and to hope. It is life – a supernatural life.*[187]

In the interior struggle we will also meet with failures. Many such failures will be unimportant; others will be more serious, but our atonement and our contrition will bring us even closer to God. And if ever we smash into small pieces what we felt was most precious in our life, God will be able to mend that very thing if we are humble. He always forgives us and helps us when we turn to him with a contrite heart. We must learn to begin again many times; with new joy, with new humility, for even if we have caused serious offence to God and have done much harm to other people, we can still later come very close to God in this life and be happy with him in the next, as long as there is true repentance, as long as we make room in our lives for penance, humility, sincerity and repentance – and begin again.

God allows for our weakness and always forgives us, but we need to be sincere, to repent, and to struggle to rise up again. There is incomparable joy in heaven each time we begin again. Throughout our journey on earth we will have to do so many times, because there will always be faults, shortcomings, weaknesses and sins for us to recover from. May we never lack the straightforwardness to acknowledge this and to open our souls to Our Lord in the Tabernacle and in spiritual direction.

### 14.3 Beginning again many times. Recourse to the Blessed Virgin, our Mother.

The Christian’s daily struggle will generally be specific and will entail fighting on very minor matters. Fortitude will be necessary in order to fulfil with sincere effort our acts of piety towards God, without abandoning them no matter what presents itself during the course of the day, and so as not to let ourselves be carried away by our state of mind at the time. The way we live charity, overcoming sudden ill-temper, making an effort to be warm, good-natured and considerate towards others – these will be important, as will our efforts to finish off the work we have offered to God, without skimping or taking any shortcuts, doing it as well as we possibly can and using the means to receive the formation we need ...

There will be moments of victory and of defeat, of falling and of rising again. We must always begin again ...; it is what God asks of all of us. The struggle demands a love that is vigilant and an
effective desire to seek God throughout the day. This cheerful struggle is the exact opposite of lukewarmness, which is characterised by carelessness, a lack of interest in seeking God, laziness and sadness in fulfilling our obligations towards God and other people.

In this struggle we can always count on the help of Mary our Mother, who follows step by step our journey towards her Son. In the Divine Office, the Church commends every day to her priests this Antiphon of the Virgin: Hail, loving Mother of the Redeemer, gate of Heaven ever open, star of the sea; assist your people who have fallen yet strive to rise again ...[188]

This people that falls and struggles to rise up again is ourselves, is each one of us. The change that occurs each time we begin again, even though it may be in aspects that appear to be of little importance – the particular examination of conscience, the advice received in spiritual direction, the resolutions resulting from our self-examination – is greater than we can ever imagine. Think how much greater it will be when it is a matter of passing from the death of sin to the life of grace! Mankind has made wonderful discoveries and achieved extraordinary results in the fields of science and technology. It has made great advances along the path of progress and civilisation, and in recent times one could say that it has succeeded in speeding up the pace of history. But the fundamental transformation, the one which can be called ‘original’, constantly accompanies man’s journey, and through all the events of history accompanies each and every individual. It is the transformation from ‘falling’ to ‘rising’, from death to life.[189]

Each time we begin again, each time we decide to struggle once more, we receive the help of Our Lady, Mediatrix of all graces. We must turn to her with complete abandonment whenever temptations become stronger. My Mother! Mothers on earth look with greater love upon the weakest of their children, the one with the worst health, or who is the least intelligent, or is a poor cripple.

Sweet Lady, I know that you are more of a Mother than all other mothers put together. And, since I am your son, since I am weak, and ill, and crippled, and ugly ...[190]
15. GO TO JOSEPH

15.1 Jacob’s son – a figure of Saint Joseph.

Many Christians, conscious of the exceptional mission of Saint Joseph in the life of Jesus and Mary, since the Old Testament is the forerunner of the New Testament, have tried throughout the centuries to find in the history of the Hebrew people deeds and images that prefigure the man who was to be the virginal spouse of Mary. Many Fathers of the Church have seen in the person of the same name, Joseph, son of Jacob the Patriarch, a prophetic announcement. When Pope Pius IX proclaimed Saint Joseph patron of the universal Church he gathered together those ancient insights. The Liturgy also gives witness to this same parallelism. Not only did these two men share the same name, but there are also to be found in their lives, interwoven in both cases with trials and joys, certain virtues and attitudes which are similar and coincide in many instances.

Joseph the son of Jacob and Joseph the virginal spouse of Mary both went to Egypt as the result of whole series of providential circumstances. The first Joseph went there because he was pursued by his brothers and handed over to strangers out of envy, circumstances that prefigure the betrayal that Christ would have to undergo. The second Joseph went to Egypt having fled from Herod in order to save the Child who was to bring salvation to the world.[191]

Joseph the son of Jacob received from God the gift of being able to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams, and was thus himself forewarned as to what would happen later. The other and greater Joseph also received God’s messages in dreams. Saint Bernard observes that the former was given to understand the mysteries of dreams; the latter deserved to know and to share in the most supreme mysteries.[192]

It is as if the dreams of the first Joseph, although experienced in his person, were in fact fulfilled in the second Joseph. Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers ... he said to them ...

behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright; and behold, your sheaves gathered round it, and bowed down to my sheaf ... Then he dreamed another dream, and told it to his brothers, and said ... and behold, the sun, the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me ...

These dreams became a reality when his father Jacob went down to Egypt with the whole family and did indeed kneel before Joseph, who was by then governor of that land. But at the same time we can see his dream prefiguring the mystery of the Holy Family of Nazareth, that mystery in which Jesus, The Sun of Justice and Mary, praised in the Liturgy as shining Star, all bright and beautiful, both submitted to the authority of the head of the household. We can think of it as prefiguring the many devout Christians who turn to this great saint and ask for his help in so many ways.

The first Joseph won the confidence and the favour of Pharaoh and became the overseer of the granaries of Egypt. When famine ravaged the lands of neighbouring peoples and they came to Pharaoh to beg for wheat in order to stay alive, he said to them: Go to Joseph; and what he says to you, do.[194] When the whole of those regions were famished, Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to all comers from Egypt’s empire ... Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth.

Now too the entire world is ravaged by hunger, a hunger for doctrine, for piety and love. The Church bids us: Go to Joseph. In the face of all the necessities that we personally suffer, she says to us: Go to the Holy Patriarch of Nazareth.
There are moments of great indecision in our lives, moments of uncertainty and urgent need. Go to Joseph, Jesus says to us. He who during his life was entrusted with the great mission of caring for Me and my Mother in our bodily needs, he who guarded our very lives at so many times of crisis, will continue to care for Me in my members, who are all those who suffer and are in any kind of want. Go to Joseph; he will give you whatever you need.

15.2 Saint Joseph’s patronage over the universal Church and over each one of us. We should turn to him in any necessity.

Behold, a faithful and prudent steward whom the Lord set over his household.[195] The Liturgy applies these words to Saint Joseph, a faithful and wise father, who promptly attends to the needs of the Church, that great family of the Lord.

It is very pleasing to Jesus that we should get to know Joseph and ask for his help. He is the one Jesus loved so much whilst he was on earth and loves so much now in Heaven. He is the one from whom He learned so much and to whom He talked from the moment He could lisp his first words.

Joseph governed the house of Nazareth with a father’s authority. The Holy Family was not only a symbol of the Church, but in a certain way contained the Church within itself as a seed contains the tree, and a spring contains the river. The holy house of Nazareth contained the foundations of the nascent Church. This is why the holy Patriarch considers specially entrusted to him the crowds of Christians who go to make up the Church, that is to say, this immense family spread throughout the earth, over which – because he is Spouse of Mary and Father of Jesus Christ – he possesses, so to speak, a father’s authority. Thus is it something natural and most worthy of the blessed Joseph, that, as once he succoured all the needs of the family of Nazareth and surrounded it in a holy fashion with his protection, so now he should encompass the Church of Jesus Christ with his heavenly protection and defence.[196]

This patronage of the holy Patriarch over the universal Church is principally of a spiritual order; but it also extends to the temporal order, as did that of the other Joseph, son of Jacob, who was called by the king of Egypt saviour of the world.

Saints and good Christians of all centuries have had recourse to him. Saint Teresa tells of the great devotion she had to Saint Joseph, and of her own experience of his patronage: I do not remember even now that I have ever asked anything of him which he has failed to grant. I am astonished at the great favours God has bestowed on me through this blessed saint, and at the perils from which he has freed me, both in body and in soul. To other saints the Lord seems to have given grace to succour us in some of our necessities, but of this glorious saint my experience is that he succours us in them all, and that the Lord wishes to teach us that as He was himself subject to him on earth, (for, being his guardian and being called his father, he could command him) just so in Heaven He still does all that he asks ...

If I were a person writing with authority, I would gladly describe at length and in the minutest detail, the favours which this glorious saint has granted to me and to others ... I only beg, for the love of God, that anyone who does not believe me will put what I say to the test, and he will see by experience what great advantages come from his commending himself to this glorious patriarch and having devotion to him. Those who practise prayer should have a special affection for him always. I do not know how anyone can think of the Queen of the Angels, during the time she suffered so much with the Child Jesus, without giving thanks to Saint Joseph for the way he helped them.[197]

15.3 Ite ad Ioseph ... Go to Joseph.

We must turn to Saint Joseph and ask him to guard and protect the Church, since he is her defender
and protector. We must ask him to help our families in their necessities, and to help us in our own spiritual and material needs: Sancte Ioseph, ora pro eis, ora pro me ... Pray for them, pray for me.

For the men and women of today, just as for those of any other age, Saint Joseph represents a dearly loved and venerable figure, whose vocation and dignity we all admire, and for whose faithfulness in the service of Jesus and Mary we thank him. Through Saint Joseph we go straight to Mary, and through Mary, to the source of all holiness, Jesus Christ.[198] He teaches us to speak to Jesus with piety, respect and love: Joseph, blessed and happy man, we say to him in the words of an ancient prayer of the Church, who was permitted to see and hear the God whom many kings wished in vain to see and hear, and not only to see and hear him, but to carry him in your arms, kiss him, clothe him and care for him ..., teach us to receive him with love and reverence in Holy Communion; give us a greater sensitivity and finesse of soul. Saint Joseph, our Father and Lord: most chaste, most pure ... You were found worthy to carry the Child Jesus in your arms, to wash him, to embrace him. Teach us to get to know God, and to be pure, to be worthy of being other Christs.

And help us to do and to teach, as Christ did. Help us to open up the divine paths of the earth, which are both hidden and bright; and help us to show them to mankind, telling our fellow men that their lives on earth can be of an extraordinary and continual supernatural effectiveness.[199]

Moreover, Saint Joseph provides us with a model whose silent teaching we can and should strive to follow. In human life, Joseph was Jesus’ master in their daily contact, full of refined affection, glad to deny himself the better to take care of Jesus. Isn’t that reason enough for us to consider this just man, this holy Patriarch, in whom the faith of the old covenant bears fruit, as a master of the interior life? Interior life is nothing but continual and direct conversation with Christ, so that we may become one with him. And Joseph can tell us many things about Jesus. Therefore, let us never neglect devotion to him – ‘Ite ad Ioseph’: ‘Go to Joseph’ – as Christian tradition puts it in the words of the Old Testament (Gen 41:55).

A master of interior life, a worker deeply involved in his job, God’s servant in continual contact with Jesus – that is Joseph. ‘Ite ad Ioseph.’ With Saint Joseph, the Christian learns what it means to belong to God and fully to assume one’s place among men, sanctifying the world. Get to know Joseph and you will find Jesus. Talk to Joseph and you will find Mary, who always sheds peace about her in that attractive workshop in Nazareth.[200]
16. THE SUPERNATURAL MISSION OF THE CHURCH

16.1 The Church proclaims the message of Christ and carries on his work in the world.

Jesus consummates the work of Redemption through his Passion, Death and Resurrection. After his Ascension into Heaven He sends the Holy Spirit so that his disciples may be able to announce the Gospel and to make the whole of mankind sharers in salvation. In this way the Apostles are the labourers sent into the harvest by the owner, the servants sent to call those who have been invited to the marriage feast, the servants who are charged with filling the wedding hall.[201]

But as well as having this mission the Apostles represent Christ and the Father himself: *He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me.*[202] The mission of the Apostles is to become intimately united to that of Christ: *As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.*[203] It will be precisely through them that Christ’s mission will be extended to all nations and to all ages. The Church, founded by Christ and built on the Apostles, continues to proclaim the Lord’s own message and carries on his work in the world.[204]

The Gospel of today’s Mass[205] tells us how Jesus urges the Twelve whom He has just chosen to go out to fulfil their new task. This first errand is a preparation and a figure of the definitive sending that will take place after the Resurrection. Then He will say to them: *Go ... Preach the gospel to the whole creation. Make disciples of all nations. Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.*[206]

Until the coming of Jesus, the Prophets had foretold to the chosen people of the Old Testament all the benefits the Messiah would bring with him. Sometimes they had employed an imagery adapted to the mentality of people who were not yet mature enough to understand fully the reality that was to be accomplished. Now, in this first apostolic mission, Jesus sends his Apostles to announce that the Kingdom of God, so long promised, is imminent, and to manifest its spiritual aspects. Our Lord tells them exactly what they have to preach: *The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.* He does not say anything about freedom from the Roman yoke under which the nation was suffering. He does not speak about what kind of social or political system they were to live under, nor, indeed, about any other exclusively worldly matter. Christ did not come for such a purpose, and they have not been chosen to concern themselves with such things.

They will live to bear witness to Christ, to spread his teaching and to make all men sharers in his salvation. Saint Paul followed along the same path. *If we were to ask him about his preaching he himself would summarise it thus: ‘I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified’ (1 Cor 2:2). To enable men to know Jesus Christ better and better; to enable them to have a knowledge of him that would not stop at faith alone, but would be translated into real deeds, is what the Apostle strove for with the whole of his strength.*[207]

The Church, which continues in time the work of Jesus Christ, has the same supernatural mission that her Divine Founder transmitted to the Apostles. *The Church was founded to spread the kingdom of Christ over all the earth for the glory of God the Father and to make all men partakers in redemption and salvation so that they may lay the entire world at the feet of Christ.*[208] Her mission transcends all social movements and ideologies or the claims made by various groups ...; at the same time, with ever-renewed solicitude, she shows her concern for all human problems and tries to direct her social teaching towards the supernatural and truly human end of man.
16.2 The Church’s mission is of a supernatural order, but she is not indifferent to undertakings that affect human dignity.

Go and preach, saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. The mission of our Mother the Church is to give men the most sublime treasure that we can ever imagine. Her mission is to lead all men to their supernatural and eternal destiny mainly through preaching and the sacraments: This and no other is the end of the Church: the salvation of souls, one by one. For this the Father sent the Son. And, Jesus said, ‘even so I send you’ (John 20:21). From this arises the command to make his doctrine known and to baptize, so that the Most Blessed Trinity may reside in the soul, through grace.[209] Jesus Christ has told us himself: I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.[210] Our Lord was not referring to an easy and comfortable earthly life, but rather to eternal life. He came to free us mainly from everything that prevents us from reaching the life we were destined for – to liberate us from sin, which is the only absolute evil. Thus He also gives us the possibility of overcoming the numerous consequences of sin in this world, such as anxiety, injustice, loneliness ... He shows us how to bear them cheerfully for God when we cannot avoid them, and how to turn sorrow into fruitful suffering which wins eternity.

Like her Master, the Church does not take sides in particular temporal options. Those who without faith saw him almost completely deserted on the Cross might have thought He had failed. Precisely because He did not opt for any one human solution, He was followed by neither Jews nor Romans. But no. It is precisely the opposite: Jews and Romans, Greeks and Barbarians, freemen and slaves, men and women, the healthy and people in poor health, all follow after this God-made-man who has freed us from sin, in order to set us on the path towards our eternal destination. It is only there that our true fulfilment will be achieved; this will be no less than the freedom and perfected humanity of man, made in the image and likeness of God, and whose deepest aspirations far exceed any mere transient ambitions and endeavours, however noble they may be.[211]

The Church has as her mission the charge to lead her children to God, to their eternal destination. However, she is not indifferent to human endeavour. By the very nature of her spiritual mission she moves her children and all men to become aware of the root from which all evils spring, and urges them to find solutions for so much injustice, for the deplorable conditions in which so many people live, and which are an offence against the Creator and against human dignity. The hope of heaven does not weaken commitment to the progress of the earthly city, but rather gives it meaning and strength. It is of course important to make a careful distinction between earthly progress and the growth of the Kingdom, which do not belong to the same order. Nonetheless, this distinction is not a separation, for man’s vocation to eternal life does not suppress but rather confirms his task of using the energies and means which he has received from the Creator for developing his temporal life.[212]

We are co-redeemers with Christ, and we must ask ourselves to what extent we pass on to our family and friends the most precious gift that we have – our faith in Christ. When we contemplate this incomparable gift we should feel moved to act, for caritas Christi urget nos,[213] the charity of Christ urges us on to help build up around us a world which is more just and more human.

16.3 Christians manifest their unity of life by encouraging works of justice and mercy.

Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers ...

From the Church’s earliest days faithful Christians spread the Faith to all parts of the world. From those first years too, vast numbers of Christians have committed their powers and their lives to liberation from every form of oppression and to the promotion of human dignity. The experience of the saints and the example of so many works of service to one’s neighbour are an incentive and a beacon
for the liberating undertakings that are needed today.[214] They are needed perhaps with an even greater urgency than in other periods of history.

Our faith in Christ moves us to be aware of our common involvement with the problems and shortages that other men experience, and often with their ignorance and their lack of economic resources. This solidarity with our fellow-man is not a superficial sentiment about the evils that beset so many people, whether close to us or far away, but a firm and persevering determination to strive for the common good; that is to say, for the good of all and of individuals, so that we may all be truly responsible for all men.[215] Faith leads us to feel a deep respect for others, for each individual person, and never to remain indifferent to other people’s needs: heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons ... Following Christ will manifest itself in deeds of justice and mercy; it will show itself too in our determination to get to know the principles of the social doctrine of the Church and to carry them out, first of all in our own surroundings, right there where we live.

It should be possible to say of each one of us at the end of our lives, as it was said of Jesus, He went about doing good.[216] We have to do good within our own families, among our colleagues at work and among our friends, and even with those people we just chance to come across. As disciples of Christ we have to be sowers of fraternity whatever occasions and circumstances life brings with it. When a man or a woman lives the Christian spirit in all its intensity, all his or her activities and relationships reflect and communicate God’s love and the surpassing goods of the Kingdom. As Christians we need to know how to make fast and strengthen our relationships each day with our families, our friends and our neighbours, whether we are at work or at leisure, sealing them with the seal of Christian love, which is simplicity, truthfulness, faithfulness, meekness, generosity, solidarity and joy.[217]
17. PRUDENT AND SIMPLE

17.1 Our Lord’s example of two virtues – prudence and simplicity – which mutually perfect each other.

Jesus sends the Twelve out all over Israel to announce that the Kingdom of God is at hand, that it is now very close. And the Master gives them some very precise instructions about what they have to do and to say, making no secret about the difficulties they will encounter. We read then in the Gospel of today’s Mass: Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.[218] They must be vigilant so as not to be taken unawares by evil, so that they will recognise the wolves disguised as lambs and be able to distinguish the false from the true prophets. [219] In this way they will not miss a single opportunity of proclaiming the Gospel and of doing good. They have to be at the same time simple, for it is only in this way that they can win over the hearts of all. Without simplicity, prudence would easily become cunning.

As Christians we have to both live and propagate these two virtues, which strengthen and complement each other. Simplicity means having rectitude of intention and behaving with firmness and consistency. Prudence always points out to us the most appropriate means of achieving our end. Saint Augustine teaches that prudence is the love that distinguishes what helps us to go towards God from what hinders us.[220] This virtue enables us to know objectively the reality of things, according to their ultimate end; to judge with certainty concerning the right way to follow, and to act in consequence. The prudent person is not, as is so often believed, the man who shrewdly knows how to make his way in the world and make the most of it for himself. He is, rather, the one who manages to construct the whole of his life in accordance with the voice of a right conscience and the demands of sound morals.

We can then see that prudence is the keystone by which we each accomplish the fundamental task we have been given by God. This task is the perfection of man himself,[221] holiness.

Our Lord taught us by his words and by his example to be prudent. The first time He spoke, at twelve years of age, in the portico of the Temple all were amazed at his understanding.[222] Later on, during his public life, his words and his conduct were as clear as they were prudent, being such that his enemies could not find fault with him. Our Lord does not seek subterfuges, but keeps in mind who it is He is talking to. It is for this reason that He makes it known only gradually that He is the Messiah. He announces his death on the Cross in accordance with the degree of preparation and knowledge of those to whom he is speaking. We too must learn from Christ.

17.2 Seeking advice.

In order to be prudent we have to have light in our understanding; then we will be able to judge events and circumstances correctly.[223] It is only with good doctrinal, religious and ascetical formation, and with the help of grace, that we will discover the ways that truly lead to God and know what decisions to make ... Nevertheless there are many occasions when we need to ask for advice. To be prudent the first step is to acknowledge our own limitations. This is the virtue of humility. Through it, we admit that in certain matters we cannot cover everything, that in many cases we cannot take in all the circumstances that have to be borne in mind in order to make a fair judgement. So we look for advice – but not advice from just anyone. We go to someone who has the right qualities, to someone
who wants to love God as sincerely as we do and who tries to follow him faithfully. It is not enough to ask just anyone for his opinion. We must go to somebody who can give us sound and disinterested advice.[224]

Saint Thomas points out that, generally, before making any decision that may have serious consequences for oneself or for others, we must seek advice.[225] But it is not only in these extreme cases that we must look for it. Sometimes people, both young and old, are in urgent need of guidance as to their reading – books, magazines and newspapers. They need to know whether to go to performances that, sometimes quite blatantly and sometimes in a less obvious but subtle way, may undermine our faith or create an evil compost in our hearts in which afterwards all sorts of doubts or temptations may take root. Such doubts and temptations could have been avoided with just a little more humility and prudence. There is no justification for not giving a wide berth to a situation which could be the beginning of our straying from the right path.

Simplicity moves us to put things right when we have made a mistake, or when new facts come to light that put an entirely different complexion on a problem. In the supernatural life, simplicity, so close to humility, leads us to ask for forgiveness many times in our lives, for we succumb to so many weaknesses and errors.

Blessed John Paul II, speaking about prudence, invited his listeners to make an examination of conscience as to their own behaviour. We too can examine ourselves today. Am I really prudent? Do I live in a consistent and responsible fashion? Does the programme I am following help me towards the true good? Does it help to bring about the salvation that Christ and the Church want for me?[226] Am I going straight towards achieving my supernatural end – sanctity – to which Our Lord has called me? Do I put aside anything that might hamper my progress? Do I seek advice in matters relating to my soul? Do I put things right when I make a mistake?

17.3 False prudence.

Prudence would not be true prudence if, having given due consideration to the facts, it chose the cowardly way of not making a decision that involved risk, or caused us to avoid facing up squarely to a problem. The attitude of the person who allows himself to be led by human respect in the apostolate and lets opportunities slip, while he waits for other opportunities that may never arise, is not a prudent attitude. Saint Paul calls this false virtue prudence of the flesh.[227] It is a false virtue that asks for more reasons and considerations before giving God what He asks of us personally. It is what causes us to worry excessively about the future, and gives us a reason for not being generous here and now. It is what always makes us find some excuse for not deciding to commit ourselves fully.

Prudence means not shunning the boldness of giving oneself and daring to become involved in God’s work. It is not the ability to find lukewarm compromises or to justify a remiss and negligent attitude by giving it the name of some acceptable theory. That is not how the Apostles went about things. Despite their weaknesses and at times their fear, they constantly sought the quickest way of spreading the Master’s teaching, even though those ways sometimes led them into a plenty of trouble and caused them countless tribulations – and even martyrdom.

Following Our Lord means living a life of small and great acts of madness, as is always the case where true love is concerned. When Our Lord asks more of us – and He always asks for more – we cannot draw back with a false prudence, the prudence of the world. We must not be swayed by the judgement of those who do not feel themselves called, and who see everything through merely human eyes, and sometimes with eyes that are not even human, because they have what is no more than an earthly outlook, an outlook that prevents them ever getting off the ground. No man and no woman
would ever have given themselves to God or ever have initiated any supernatural undertaking if they had followed that ‘prudence of the flesh’. They would always have found more or less convincing reasons for refusing to proceed – or for deferring their response till a more convenient time, which often boils down to the same thing.

It was said of Jesus, *He is beside himself.*[228] It seems that the most elementary precautions would have enabled him to escape death. Just a few formulae would have been sufficient to mitigate the rigour of his teaching and for him to arrive at a compromise with the Pharisees. He could have presented in some other way his teaching on the Eucharist in the synagogue at Capharnaum,[229] where many left him. Just a few words would have been sufficient for him, who was eternal Wisdom, to obtain his freedom at Pilate’s hands. Jesus was not ‘prudent’ according to the world, but he was more prudent than serpents, than men, or than his enemies. His was a different type of prudence. This has to be our type of prudence even if, because we imitate him, men may sometimes call us mad and ‘imprudent.’ Supernatural prudence shows us at each moment the quickest and most direct way to reach Christ ... bringing with us many friends, relatives and colleagues.

*Do you want to be daring in a holy way, so that God may act through you? Have recourse to Mary, and she will accompany you along the path of humility so that, when faced by what to the human mind is impossible, you may be able to answer with a resounding ‘fiat’ – be it done!, which unites the earth to Heaven.*[230]
FOURTEENTH WEEK: SATURDAY

18. LOVE FOR TRUTH

18.1 We should talk about God and God’s teaching clearly, firmly and fearlessly.

The Gospel of today’s Mass[231] is yet another invitation from Our Lord for us to lead a life that is essentially truthful, the result of the faith we bear in our hearts. We should not be afraid of the unpleasantness or gossip that the following of Christ closely sometimes brings with it. *It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household? So have no fear of them ...*

It may happen that in a given situation we are made to suffer calumny or slander – or quite simply some vexation – because we have spoken truthfully, because we have adhered to the truth. Perhaps there will be times when our words or our actions are wrongly interpreted. Our Lord wants his disciples, which means us, always to speak clearly and openly: *What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops.* With divine pedagogy, Jesus had spoken to the crowds in parables and, little by little, He had revealed to them his true personality and the truths of the Kingdom. He never concealed his teaching. Since the coming of the Holy Spirit, those who follow him have to proclaim the truth in the full light of day, from the housetops, without fear that the doctrine they preach may conflict with the teachings currently in vogue or happen to be most prevalent. How else are we going to convert the world in which we are so deeply immersed?

Some people think, either as a matter of tactics or out of diffidence, that the lives of Christians and the conception they have of the world, of man and of society, should not be unduly or conspicuously pressed when circumstances are against them or when their reputation might be jeopardised. If they were to do this, Christians would be as though *caught in an ambush* in the midst of a society that seems to see its objectives as being situated in a radically different direction; then the fact of being men and women who look on Christ as their supreme ideal would have no outward resonance. That is not what Our Lord taught. *'Ego palam locutus sum mundo.' I have preached openly before the whole world, was the answer Jesus gave to Caiphas when the time had come for him to give up his Life for us.*

*And yet there are Christians who are afraid to show ‘palam’ – openly – veneration for Our Lord.[232]*

In the society in which we live we will have to speak out with the certainty and firmness that truth unfailingly gives. We will have to talk about many subjects which are of transcendent importance for the family, for society and for the dignity of the human person. Take the indissolubility of marriage. Freedom in education. The Church’s teaching on the transmission of human life. The dignity and beauty of purity. The excellence of virginity and celibacy for love of Christ. The consequences of social justice in relation to thoughtless spending or unjust wages ... There may be occasions when out of prudence or charity we should keep quiet. But prudence and charity are not the result of cowardice or self-comfort. It will never be prudent to keep quiet when keeping quiet may cause scandal or confusion, or when such behaviour may have an adverse effect on the faith of others.

*What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light ...* Our Lord is speaking to us, for there are today many enemies of God and of truth who do not want Christians to be salt and light within secular undertakings. Such people use all sorts of means to achieve their results.
18.2 Acting according to one’s conscience. Sincerity with oneself.

There is an episode in the Gospel that shows us the behaviour of some Pharisees, who were not known for their love for truth. Whilst Our Lord was walking in the Temple, the chief priests, the Scribes and the elders came up to him and asked him: *By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you authority to do them?* Our Lord is prepared to answer their question if they show sincerity of heart. He asks them their opinion about the baptism of John: whether it was from Heaven, and thus enjoyed divine approbation, or whether it was only from men, and as such did not merit any further consideration. But they do not tell him their true opinion, their opinion in all conscience. They do not go into the truth of the matter, they do not seek to form the heartfelt judgement the question deserves. Instead, they analyse the consequences of their possible answers, and choose the reply that suits them best in this particular situation: *If we say ‘From heaven’ He will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’* But if they say the baptism of the Precursor was from men, the people might lay hands on them, for *all held that John was a real prophet*.

In spite of being religious leaders, they do not have the strong principles that could give meaning to their words and their deeds. *They are ‘practical’ men, who dedicate themselves to ‘politics’. In all that concerns their own interest or comfort, their reasoning is intelligent. But they are not prepared to go any further in their reasoning: they are men for whom comfort has taken the place of conscience.* Their norm of conduct is to follow whatever course of action is most opportune or most convenient on each occasion. They do not act in accordance with the truth. This is why they say: *We do not know.* It was not in their interest to know, much less to say so. Christ’s reaction is very significant: *Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.* It is as if He were saying to them: if you are not prepared to be sincere, to look into your hearts and face up to the truth, any dialogue between us is useless. I cannot talk to you, and you cannot talk to me. We would not understand each other. The same thing happens every day. *The person whose life is not guided by sincerity, by an habitual disposition to face up to the truth or to the demands of his conscience – however uncomfortable or hard they may be – flatly separates himself from any possibility of communicating with God. Anyone who is afraid of looking into his conscience is afraid of looking at God. Only those who can look God in the face can really get to know him.* It is not possible to find God without this radical love of truth. Neither is it possible to get on well with the people around us.

Love for the truth will lead us first of all to be sincere with ourselves, to keep a clear conscience and not deceive ourselves. We will not allow our conscience to become dulled by allowing errors or culpable ignorance to creep in. We will not be afraid of going deeper into those personal demands that truth brings with it. If, with the help of grace, we are sincere with ourselves, we will be sincere with God. Our life will then be filled with light, peace and fortitude. *You were reading in that dictionary the synonyms for ‘insincere’: ‘two-faced, surreptitious, evasive, disingenuous, sly’. As you closed the book, you asked the Lord that nobody should ever be able to apply those adjectives to you, and you resolved to improve much more in this supernatural and human virtue of sincerity.*

18.3 Always tell the truth – in what is important and in what seems a small matter.

In a world where so many people habitually think little of a lie and indulge in pretences, we, as Christians must be men and women of truth who always flee from even the smallest falsehood. This is how people should know us – as men and women who never tell lies even in matters of little importance, as men and women who shut out of their lives anything that smacks of dissimulation, hypocrisy and duplicity, and who know how to put matters right if they make a mistake. Then our lives will be filled with a great apostolic fruitfulness, for people always trust an upright person, one
who knows how to speak the truth with charity and understanding towards all and without hurting people.

How many weaknesses, how much opportunism, how much conformity, how much vileness![237] said Pope Paul VI referring to those good people who forget the beauty and the seriousness of the commitments that unite them to the Church. That same situation, which has perhaps become more apparent in recent years, will lead us to hate any falseness, however trivial it may seem to us, because lying opposes truth just as light opposes darkness, as piety opposes impiety, as justice opposes iniquity, as goodness opposes sin, as health opposes sickness and life opposes death. This being so, the more we love truth, the more we must abhor lying.[238] It is not a matter of knowing just how far we can go in saying things that are untrue before we incur a grave fault. It is a matter of hating lying in all its forms. It is a matter of telling the whole truth, and, when out of prudence or charity this cannot be done, then we will hold our tongue and not invent little ‘white lies’ that falsely ease our consciences.[239] We must love the truth in itself and for itself, not only in those things that can harm or benefit ourselves, or other people in a personal way. We must abhor lying as something stupid and despicable, for whatever reason it is resorted to. We must hate it because it is an offence against God, who is supreme Truth.

We easily believe what we want to believe. This is why, for example, many of her enemies are always inclined to regard any injurious rumours about the Church as true, and to pass judgement without having sufficient facts. They will even seek to influence public opinion on such a basis. This is really the same as lying, because of where the rumour comes from and what it leads to. In direct opposition to lying, which is so often resorted to in cold blood, we have truth, light and sincerity which are unambiguous and cannot be mistaken. We must firmly practise truthfulness in our everyday relations with other people, in our business affairs, in our family life, in our study and, whenever we have access to them, through the organs of public opinion. We should be resolutely opposed to matching one lie with another.

The prayer of the Liturgy on this day invites us to exclaim: Lord, may our voices, our spirits and the whole of our lives be a continual praise in your honour ...[240] May our conversations be always truthful, proper to a child of God.
19. THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

19.1 The seed and the path. Lack of interior recollection prevents union with God.

Saint Matthew tells us in the Gospel of today’s Mass that Jesus sat beside the sea and that such great crowds gathered about him to hear his words that He had to get into a boat so that they could listen to him from the shore. Sitting now in a small fishing-vessel, Our Lord began to teach them: A sower went out to sow. And the seed He spoke about fell on very different types of soil.

In Galilee, where the terrain tended to be very uneven and hilly, it was only the narrow strips of land in the valleys and skirting the river banks that were sown with seed. The parable faithfully records for us the agricultural situation of that particular area. The sower scattered his seed broadcast, which is why some of it would fall onto the path. The seed that fell on those paths would soon be eaten up by birds or trodden underfoot by passers-by. The detail of the rocky soil, covered perhaps by only a thin layer of earth, was also true to reality. Because of the lack of soil-depth, the seed shoots up more rapidly, but only to have the heat dry it up just as quickly, since it has no depth of root.

The soil on which the good seed falls is the whole world; it represents each individual person. We too are soil for the divine seed. Even though the sowing is carried out with great love – it is God who pours himself into our souls – the results depend largely on the condition of the soil on which it falls. Christ’s words tell us forcefully about the responsibility man has to prepare himself to receive God’s grace and to correspond with it.

Some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in his heart. The path is soil that has been trodden on until it has become hard. These compacted areas are dissipated, empty souls, prepared to accept only external things. Such souls are incapable of recollecting their thoughts and guarding their senses. They have no order in their affections and are not particularly watchful over their feelings, so that they frequently allow their imagination to engage in useless thoughts. These souls are like ground that has never been tilled or cultivated, having always turned their face away from God. Their hearts are hardened, like those constantly trodden pathways. They hear God’s word, but the devil easily snatches it away from them. He is not idle; rather, he has his eyes always wide open and is always ready to spring and snatch away the gift that you do not use.

We must ask Our Lord for fortitude so that we never become like those who are like the path on which the seed fell – negligent, lukewarm and full of scorn. Negligence and lukewarmness are manifestations of a lack of contrition and repentance, and of our failure to put up a determined struggle against venial sins. The first time the divine Sower scattered his seed onto the soil of our soul was in Baptism. How often since then has He given us an abundance of his grace! How often has He passed close beside us, helping, encouraging and forgiving us! At this moment, in the intimacy of our prayer, we can say to him quietly: O Jesus! If in spite of the poor way I have behaved, you have done for me what you have done, what more would you do if I were to respond well?

This truth will lead you to be generous without measure.

Weep and show with sorrow and love how much it pains you, for Our Lord and his Blessed Mother deserve from you a different kind of treatment.
19.2 The rocky ground and the thorns. The need for sacrifice and detachment in the supernatural life.

Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil; but when the sun rose they were scorched, and since they had no root they withered away. This stony ground represents superficial souls with little inner depth, souls that are inconstant and incapable of persevering. They have good dispositions; they even receive grace with joy, but when the moment comes to confront difficulties they turn back. They are not capable of sacrificing themselves in order to fulfil the resolutions they have made so their resolutions die without bearing fruit.

Saint Teresa taught that there are some people who, having overcome the first enemies of the interior life, cease to make any effort; they lose heart, and give up the struggle when they are only a couple of steps away from the fountain of living water – the water concerning which Our Lord told the Samaritan woman that whoever drank of it would never thirst. We must ask Our Lord for constancy in our resolutions, and for a spirit of sacrifice so that we do not give up when faced with difficulties – as we surely will be. We have to begin time and again, with holy stubbornness, and we have to strive always to reach the sanctity that Jesus calls us to, and for the attainment of which He gives us all the graces we need. Saint John of the Cross taught that the soul that truly loves God never allows laziness to prevent it from doing everything in its power to find the Son of God, its Beloved. And after having done all it can, it is still not satisfied and considers it has done nothing.

Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. This is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches stifle it, and it proves unfruitful.

Love of riches, a disordered ambition to gain influence or power, and excessive concern for well-being and a comfortable way of life are like sharp thorns that prevent any union with God. The souls of people who seek only such things are souls immersed in material things, being wrapped in a deep-seated avarice that leads us to appreciate only what we can touch. Such eyes are firmly fixed on earthly things and consequently are blind to supernatural realities. It is as though they were blind to all that really matters.

If we allow our hearts to become attached to money, influence or praise; if we set our hearts on the ultimate comfort we see advertised; if we give in to our own whims and seek so many things that are quite unnecessary, we are allowing a serious obstacle to God’s love to become embedded in our hearts. It is difficult for anyone obsessed by the thought of owning more and more possessions, and by the constant determination to seek out what is most comfortable, not to fall into other sins. In connection with such things, Saint John of the Cross comments: This is why Our Lord called them ‘thorns’ in the Gospel, so that we should understand that anyone who fondly caresses such things with his will, will be wounded by some sin.

Saint Paul teaches that anyone who puts his heart on earthly things, as though they were the absolute good, commits a type of idolatry. This disorder in the soul often leads to a lack of mortification and to sensuality, so that we give up looking at supernatural things. Those words of Our Lord’s are always fulfilled: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. The seed of grace will be choked without any doubt in this bad soil.

19.3 Correspondence to grace. Bearing fruit.

As for what was sown on good soil, here we have the man who hears the word and understands it; he indeed bears fruit, and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.
God hopes we will be good soil that will receive his grace and bear fruit. The greater our generosity towards God the better and more abundant will be the fruit we produce. The only thing that matters, comments Saint John Chrysostom, is that we should not be a beaten-down thoroughfare, or rocky ground, or thorns, but that we should be good soil ... Our hearts must not be that path from which the enemy, like the birds, snatches the seed trodden underfoot by passers-by. Our hearts must not be the rocky ground where the shallowness of the soil causes the seed to germinate immediately so that it is scorched by the sun. Our hearts must not be a thistle-bed of human passions strangled by the cares of this world. All men, whatever their lives may have been in the past, are able to become soil that is prepared to receive God’s grace. God pours himself into our souls in accordance with the degree of welcome He finds there. God gives us so many graces because He trusts each one of us; there is no soil that is too impervious or too uncultivated for him, so long as it is prepared to change and to respond to him. Any soul can become rich pasture land, although previously it has been nothing but desert, because God’s grace never fails us, and his care is greater than that of the most expert husbandman. Once grace has been given, the results depend only on man, who is free to correspond or not. The ground is good, the sower is the same and the seeds are the same in each case. Nevertheless, how is it that one gives a hundredfold, another sixtyfold and another thirtyfold? We can see that the difference depends on the person receiving it, for even where the soil is good there is a great deal of difference between one patch of ground and another. You can see that neither the farmer nor the seed is at fault, but the soil on which the sowing was done. This is not a result of nature, but of the disposition of the will.

Let us consider in our prayer today whether we correspond with the graces God gives us, and whether we apply the particular examination of conscience to those harmful roots in our soul that prevent the growth of the good seed. Do we get rid of any noxious weeds through frequent Confession? Do we try to increase the number of acts of Contrition that prepare our soul so well to receive God’s inspirations? We can never be content with what we are doing to serve our God, just as an artist is never satisfied with the painting or statue he is working on. Everyone tells him how marvellous it is, but he thinks: ‘No. It isn’t quite right. I wanted it to be better.’ This is how we should feel.

Moreover, the Lord has given us so much. He has a right to the very best from us – and we must go at his pace. Don’t let us fall behind.
FIFTEENTH SUNDAY: YEAR B

20. LOVE AND VENERATION FOR THE PRIESTHOOD

20.1 The priest’s identity and mission.

All baptised persons can apply to themselves Saint Paul’s words to the Christians of Ephesus which we find in the Second Reading of today’s Mass: *He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.*[254] Through Baptism and Confirmation all the Christian faithful belong to *a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.*[255] The baptised, says the Second Vatican Council, *by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, that through all the works of Christian men they may offer spiritual sacrifices.*[256] By their sharing in the priesthood of Christ, the faithful take an active part in the celebration of the Sacrifice of the Altar. They sanctify the world through their secular tasks, sharing in the one mission of the Church by means of the different vocations they have received from God. Housewives, for example, sanctify the various aspects of motherhood and related duties; sick people are called to offer up their suffering lovingly to God; each one makes a pleasing offering to God of his daily tasks and circumstances.

From the ranks of the faithful, all of whom have this common priesthood, some are called by God, through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, to exercise the ministerial priesthood. This second priesthood builds upon the first one, but they are essentially different. By means of the consecration received in Holy Orders, the priest becomes an instrument of Jesus Christ, to whom he offers his entire being, in order to bring the grace of Redemption to all mankind. He is a man *chosen from among men and appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.*[257] What then is the priest’s identity? *That of Christ. Each one of us Christians can and should be not just any other Christ, ‘alter Christus’, but Christ himself, ‘ipse Christus!’* But in the priest this happens in a direct way, *by virtue of the sacrament.*[258]

Our Lord, who is present among us in many ways, is so particularly in the person of the priest. Every priest is a great gift of God to the world. He is Jesus who goes about *doing good;* he cures illnesses, he brings peace and joy to men’s minds; he is the *living instrument of Christ* in the world.[259] He offers Our Lord *his voice, his hands, his whole being.*[260] At Mass, he renews *in persona Christi* the redemptive Sacrifice of Calvary itself. He makes Christ’s Redemption present and effective within history. Blessed John Paul II reminded the clergy of Brazil that Jesus *identifies himself with us in such a way in carrying out the powers he conferred upon us, that it is as if our personality disappears before his, since it is He himself who acts through us.*[261] It is Christ who changes the substance of bread and wine into His Body and Blood at Mass. And it is *Jesus himself who, in the sacrament of Penance, utters the authoritative and fatherly words ‘your sins are forgiven.’* It is *He who speaks when the priest, carrying out his ministry in the name and in the spirit of the Church, announces the Word of God. It is Christ himself who cares for the sick, for children and sinners, when he enfolds them with the love and pastoral care of the sacred ministries.*[262]

A priest is of more value to mankind than the entire material universe. We must pray constantly for the holiness of priests, helping them and sustaining them with our prayer and our affection. We must see Christ himself in them.

20.2 The priest, a steward of the mysteries of God.
Jesus selects the Apostles, not only as messengers, prophets and witnesses, but also as his own representatives.

This new identity, to act in persona Christi, must be expressed in a life which is simple and austere, a holiness which inspires a wholehearted dedication to the welfare of others. The Gospel of today’s Mass tells us that Jesus sent his disciples and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.[263] He told them to take a staff for their journey, but nothing else: no bread, no haversack, and no money in their wallets.

God takes possession of the man He calls to the priesthood and consecrates him to the service of his fellow men, and bestows upon him a new personality. And once he has been chosen and consecrated to the service of God and others he is not just a priest at certain moments only, for example while he is carrying out sacred functions. He is a priest always and at every moment, whether he is performing the highest and most sublime office or the most vulgar and humble action of his ordinary life. Just as a Christian cannot leave aside the fact that he is a new man, that Baptism has given him a particular character, and act ‘as if’ he were just a man purely and simply, neither can the priest leave aside his priestly character and behave ‘as if’ he were not a priest. Whatever he does, whatever attitude he adopts, whether he likes it or not, it will always be the action or the attitude of a priest, because he is a priest always and at all times down to the very depths of his being, whatever he may do or whatever he may think.[264]

The priest is a messenger from God to the world, sent to announce to mankind its salvation, and is constituted a steward of the mysteries of God.[265] These mysteries include the Body and Blood of Christ, which he offers the faithful at Mass and Holy Communion; the grace of God in the sacraments; and the divine word which he utters in preaching, in catechesis and in confession. To the priest has been confided the most divine of divine works, the salvation of souls. He has been made an ambassador and a mediator between God and men.

It warms my heart to think of the quiet human and supernatural dignity of those brothers of mine, scattered throughout the world. It is only right that they should now feel themselves surrounded by the friendship, help and affection of many Christians. And when the moment comes for them to enter God’s presence, Jesus will go out to meet them. He will glorify forever those who have acted on earth in his Person and in his name. He will shower them with that grace of which they have been ministers.[266]

Let us meditate now in the presence of God on how well we pray for priests, how we treat them, how grateful we ought to be to them for having responded positively to our Lord’s call, how to help them persevere and be saints. Let us ask God our Lord to give all of us priests the grace to perform holy things in a holy way, to reflect in every aspect of our lives the wonders of the greatness of God. [267]

20.3 How to help priests. Praying for them. Respect for the priestly state.

So they went out and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them. Priests are, as it were, an extension of Our Lord’s Sacred Humanity, because they continue to perform in souls the same miracles which He himself did while He was on earth: the blind see, people who can scarcely walk recover their strength, and those who have died through mortal sin recover the life of grace through the sacrament of Confession.

The priest does not seek worldly compensations or the enhancement of his reputation, nor does he measure his task according to this world’s scale of values. His task is not that of an arbitrator of differences nor of caring for people’s material welfare: that is a job for every Christian, and for
all men of good will, whereas the priest’s rôle is to bring people eternal life. That is what he has to offer. It is also what the world needs most. That is why we must pray to God that the Church will always have enough priests, priests who are really trying to be holy. We must ask for and encourage priestly vocations, if possible, among the members of our own families, children, brothers and cousins. It is indeed a great joy for a family if God blesses them with the gift of a vocation.

The laity have the very pleasant duty to help priests, especially with their prayer, so that they celebrate Mass with dignity and spend many hours hearing confessions, eager to administer the sacraments to the sick and the elderly, and particularly keen to teach catechism. We pray that priests will always be very concerned for the upkeep of God’s House, and cheerful, patient, generous, friendly and indefatigable workers in spreading the kingdom of Christ. We have to be generous in contributing financially and helping their work in whatever way we can. And we should never speak badly of them: One should speak about Christ’s priests only in order to praise them.[269]

If we sometimes see faults and defects in our priests, we have to make excuses for them and behave like the good sons of Noah, covering over their failings with the cloak of charity.[270] That can be yet another reason to help them with our good example and our prayer, and – whenever it is opportune – with a correction which will be fraternal and filial at the same time.

To help us grow in love and veneration for priests, we can meditate on these words which Saint Catherine of Siena places on Our Lord’s lips: I do not want the respect which priests should be given to be in any way diminished, for the reverence and respect which is shown them is not referred to them, but to Me, by virtue of the Blood which I have given to them to administer. Were it not for this, you should render them the same reverence as lay people, and no more ... You must not offend them; by offending them you offend Me and not them. Therefore I forbid it and I have laid it down that you shall not touch my Christs.[271]
21. THE GOOD SAMARITAN

21.1 The first expression of charity is to bring our neighbour closer to the Faith.

You shall love your neighbour as yourself. The doctor of the Law gave the right answer. Jesus confirms it: You have answered right; do this, and you will live. The story is told in the Gospel of today’s Mass.[272]

This precept already existed in the Jewish Law, which even specified it in practical details. We read for example in Leviticus: When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner.[273] And after specifying other expressions of mercy, Scripture continues: You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.[274]

Here we have a distant foreshadowing of what was to be Our Lord’s new commandment. But among the Jews there was a certain vagueness about the word ‘neighbour’: it wasn’t clear whether it included only the members of one’s own clan, or one’s friends, or the entire chosen people. Opinions varied on the subject, and that was why the doctor of the Law asked Our Lord, Who is my neighbour? To whom should I show all this love and mercy?

Jesus answers with a very beautiful parable, which we find in the Gospel of Saint Luke: A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half-dead.[275] This is my neighbour: he is a man, any man whoever who has need of me. Our Lord makes no specific reference to race, friendship or blood connections. Our neighbour is anyone who is close to us and has need of help. Nothing is said of his country, or of his background or social condition: homo quidam, just a man, a human being.

As we go through life we come across many cases of people who have been similarly injured and left destitute and half-dead in body and soul. Our concern to help them, which springs from our closeness to Jesus, broadens our heart and prevents us from falling into narrow-mindedness and selfishness. One discovers people who have been hurt by misunderstanding and loneliness, or by the absence of the most basic human necessities; people humiliated in their dignity as persons; people who have been shamefully robbed of their most elementary rights in ways which cry to heaven for vengeance. Christian men and women can never pass by on the other side, as some of the individuals in the parable did.

Every day we also meet the man who was left half dead, either because he has not been taught the elementary truths of the Faith, or because they have been stolen from him by the effects of others’ bad example, or by media-conditioning. We can never forget that the Faith is the greatest treasure man has, much more important than all material and human values. At times, before preaching the Faith, we may first have to approach the man lying at the roadside and tend to his injuries. But as Christians we can never overlook the need to spread the Faith and to help people understand it better, and to propagate the Christian meaning of life.[276] At the same time, we try to provide other good things as well – education, culture, personal betterment, an appreciation of the value of work, honesty in personal relationships, and a desire for social justice. All these things are living expressions of what charity really means in practice.
A Christian cannot be uninvolved in the human and social progress of mankind, but the over-riding concern to enlighten men’s minds in regard to faith and the religious life cannot ever be relegated to second place.[277]

21.2 Sins of omission in the area of charity. Jesus is the object of our charity.

The parable goes on: Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.

Here Our Lord is speaking to us about sins of omission. Those who passed by on the other side did not inflict any fresh injuries on the abandoned and badly-wounded wayfarer; they did not steal whatever he had left, or insult him. They had worries of their own, they didn’t want any complications, they had important things to do. They gave greater importance to their own business than to the man in need. Therein lay their sin: they passed by on the other side.

That service which they omitted to offer the injured wayfarer would have merited the same praise Our Lord gave to Mary Magdalen – she has done a beautiful thing to me[278] – since anything we do for others we do for God. Christ himself awaits us in the person of that needy individual. Saint John Chrysostom puts on Our Lord’s lips these words: I am not saying to you: solve all my problems for me, give me everything you have, even though I am poor for love of you. I only ask for some bread and clothes, some relief from my hunger. I am in prison. I do not ask you to free me. I only wish, that for your own good, you pay me a visit. That will be enough for me, and in return I will make you a gift of heaven. I have freed you from a prison a thousand times more harsh. But I am happy if you come and visit me from time to time.

I could in fact present you with your crown without asking any of this. But I do want to be grateful to you, so that afterwards you can come and receive your reward with confidence. That is why I, who am quite capable of feeding myself, prefer to dog your steps, asking, and to stretch out my hand at your door. My love is so great that I want you to feed me. That is why, as a friend, I prefer to sit at your table. I glory in that, and I can show you off to the whole world as the one who does good to me.[279]

The secret of overcoming differences of race or culture, or even of age or character, is to realize that the object of our charity is Jesus himself. When we look upon our fellow men, it is He whom we see: It is as if Christ himself were crying out through the mouths of these poor people to the charity of his disciples.[280]

21.3 Practical and real charity. Our own needs have to take second place to those of others.

The Gospel goes on: But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’

The Samaritan, in spite of the gulf between Jews and Samaritans, immediately felt sorry for the man’s misfortune: he had compassion. There are people who are blind to anything that would put them out, and there are people who have a quick intuition for the sorrow in another’s heart. What we need first of all is a readiness to see the misfortunes of others, and not hurry through life so much that, when we meet with need and suffering, we easily find an excuse for passing by on the other side.

The Samaritan’s compassion was not a purely theoretical and ineffective one. On the contrary, he managed to offer the man practical assistance. What he did was not perhaps very heroic in itself, but it was what the circumstances called for. Firstly, he went up to him. This is the first thing to be done
whenever we encounter misfortune or need: we have to get up close, we cannot just observe the situation from a distance. The Samaritan next did what had to be done: he took care of him. The charity Our Lord asks of us is shown in deeds; it consists in doing whatever needs to be done in each individual case.

God places our neighbour, and his needs, along the road of our life. Love is always ready to do whatever the immediate situation demands. It may not be anything particularly heroic or difficult; indeed, what is called for is very often something small and simple: This love is not something reserved for important matters, but must be exercised above all in the ordinary circumstances of daily life.[281] It may require offering some small service, perhaps trying to cheer someone up when we find him gloomy; or maybe a word of appreciation and thanks, or smiling, or giving a stranger directions courteously, or listening with interest to what someone has to say.

The business the good Samaritan had in hand was left to wait, and the urgent things he had to do were no longer all that important. He gave his time unstintingly to help the man in need. It is not only a question of time, though. Our interests, the things we like doing – not to mention any self-indulgence – must all take second place to the needs of others.

Jesus concludes the lesson with a friendly word to the doctor of the Law: Go and do likewise, He says to him: be understanding, involved and compassionate with whoever needs you. And now, as we come to the end of our meditation, we hear those words as spoken to each of us too. To put them into practice we need to have recourse to the Blessed Virgin. There is no heart more human than that of a person overflowing with supernatural sense. Think of our Mother Mary, who is full of grace, Daughter of God the Father, Mother of God the Son, Spouse of God the Holy Spirit. Her Heart has room for all humanity and makes no distinction or discrimination. Every person is her son or her daughter.[282]
22. PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN’S VOCATION

22.1 Complete freedom to follow Christ. A vocation is a great honour.

_He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me_, we read in the Gospel of today’s Mass.[283] When one freely decides to follow Christ completely it takes preference over other plans: one’s father or mother, one’s boy-friend or girl-friend. God’s call comes first, and everything else has to take second place to this.

Christ’s words don’t create any incompatibility between the First and Fourth Commandments, but rather highlight their mutual relationship. We should love God with all our strength, according to the vocation we have received. We should also love and respect the parents God has given us, both in theory and in practice, since we owe them so much. But love for our parents cannot take precedence over love for God. Ordinarily there will be little reason for conflict to arise, but should it ever happen, that would be the moment to recall the words of the adolescent Jesus in the Temple of Jerusalem: _How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?_ [284] Jesus’ reply to Mary and Joseph, who had sought him anxiously, is a very good example for both children and parents: for children it teaches them that they shouldn’t put affection for their family before love for God, especially when Our Lord asks them to follow him with a total self-giving; for parents, it helps them see that their children belong above all to God, and that He has a right to do with them as He wishes, even though in certain circumstances it may require considerable sacrifice on their part.[285]

It would be very sad if someone were to turn a deaf ear to God’s call so as not to upset his or her parents. And even worse would be the situation of the parents, for, as Saint Bernard says, _the source of their consolation is the death of their child._[286] It would be difficult to cause that son or daughter greater harm.

To follow Our Lord properly calls for a completely unfettered detachment, a freedom of heart that is not hampered by sadness or regret, which would only lead to a half-hearted self-giving; the person concerned also needs to have the necessary autonomy to fulfil God’s will. Nothing is gained by half measures, by a decision made with a divided heart. It could happen that in some cases a life of total dedication to Our Lord is not accepted by one’s own relations: having dreamed of other plans, quite reasonable in themselves, they do not understand this new development, or maybe they do not wish to be part of the renunciation it involves. We have to take this into account and realize that fidelity to Christ, even at the cost of causing sorrow for our parents, is in the long run much better both for ourselves and for our family. In all circumstances, we have to be very firm in following our vocation, and at the same time we have to love our parents even more than before. We have to pray a lot that they come to understand that _it is no ‘sacrifice’ for parents when God asks them for their children. Neither, for those whom He calls, is it a sacrifice to follow him._

_It is, on the contrary, an immense honour, a motive for a great and holy pride, a mark of predilection, a very special affection that God has shown at a particular time, but which has been in his mind from all eternity._[287] It is indeed a great honour and a great blessing from God to that family.

22.2 There comes a time for everyone when they have to leave home and parents.
When someone gives their heart completely to God, it is returned more youthful and enlarged, with a greater capacity to love others. Love for one’s parents, brothers and sisters is then enriched by being passed through the Heart of Christ. Saint Thomas Aquinas points out that James and John, in following Our Lord and abandoning their father, were praised. They were not praised because he had incited them to do something evil, but because they realised that their father would be able to spend his life some other way, while they followed Christ.[288] The Master passed by and called them, and, from that moment on, everything else paled into insignificance. In heaven their parents will surely have received a special reward, in large measure due to their sons’ response to the divine call: vocation is a blessing and a great good for all concerned.

Vocation is God’s initiative; He knows well what is best for the person called, and for the family. Many parents accept God’s will for their children joyfully and unconditionally and are happy when one of them is called to follow Christ. There are some, though, who react quite differently, for various reasons, some logical and understandable and others tainted by selfishness. With the excuse that their children are too young to answer God’s call – though not too young to undertake other commitments – or that they lack the necessary experience, they allow themselves to succumb to the temptation alluded to by Pope Pius XII: Even among those who boast of the Catholic faith, there are not lacking parents who do not resign themselves to the vocation of their children and fight without scruple the divine call, eliciting every type of argument. They may even use means that put in danger not only the vocation to a more perfect state, but conscience itself and the eternal salvation of those who ought to be their most dearly beloved.[289] They forget that they are God’s ‘collaborators’, and that it is inevitable that sooner or later their children will leave home anyway, either to form a family of their own, or for work or study reasons. Very often when young people leave home no great catastrophe occurs; at times indeed, it is the parents themselves who, for their children’s own good, are the prime movers in causing it to happen. Why then, in the case of someone seeking to follow Christ, should they create difficulties for them? Christ never separates souls.[290]

### 22.3 Wanting the best for one’s children.

Good parents always want the best for their children. Since they are capable of making great sacrifices for their material welfare, why not too in the case of their supernatural well-being? They sacrifice themselves so that their children grow up healthy, and do well at their studies, and have good friends; and likewise so that they live as God wants them to, leading a life that is Christian and honourable. This is the mission that God has called parents to in matrimony – the education of their children. It is the express will of God for them, and a consequence of the Natural Law.

In the Gospel we find many petitions in favour of children: the woman who follows Jesus perseveringly until she obtains a cure for her daughter;[291] the father who asks that the devil which torments his son be cast out;[292] Jairus, the ruler of the Capharnaum synagogue, who anxiously awaits Our Lord because his twelve year old daughter is at the point of death.[293] We admire the determination of the mother of James and John, who approached Our Lord to ask him for something that they themselves would not dare to request. Without thinking about herself, she approached Jesus, and kneeling before him she asked him for something.[294] How many are the fathers and mothers who, down through the ages have asked for their children special favours which they would never have dreamed of asking for themselves? Our Lord, understanding this motherly demonstration of affection, does not reject it, but instead turns to the two sons and promises them the greatest honour a person could receive: the invitation to share with him his own cup, his own destiny, his own mission.

Parents ought to ask for the best for their children, and the best is for them to follow the vocation
that God has foreseen for them. This is the great secret of being happy on earth and of attaining the boundless joy of Heaven. However, considering each calling in itself, the most elevated of all is the vocation to celibate chastity for the love of God. The Church, throughout her history, has always defended the superiority of this charism to that of marriage, by reason of the wholly singular link which it has with the Kingdom of God.[295] How many are the vocations to a complete self-giving that God has given to children because of the generosity and prayer of their parents! In fact Our Lord ordinarily makes use of parents to create a suitable climate in which the seed of vocation may develop and flourish. Christian couples are, for each other, for their children and their relatives, cooperators of grace and witnesses of the Faith. They are the first to pass on the Faith to their children and to educate them in it. By word and example they form them to a Christian and apostolic life; they offer them wise guidance in the choice of vocation, and if they discover in them a sacred vocation they encourage it with all care.[296] More they cannot do, for it is not within their competence to discern whether or not their children have a vocation. Their task is to help them form their consciences well and enable them to discover their own path without pressurizing them.

A vocation in a family is a special sign of God’s love and confidence for all its members. It is a privilege and a great treasure that ought to be protected, especially with prayer. God blesses the place where a faithful vocation is born: giving up one’s children to the service of God is not a sacrifice: it is an honour and a joy.[297]
FIFTEENTH WEEK: TUESDAY

23. SORROW FOR SIN

23.1 In spite of all Christ’s miracles, some Jewish towns didn’t do penance. We too are visited by Our Lord just as they were.

On leaving Nazareth, Jesus chose Capharnaum as his place of residence. At times the gospels refer to it as his city. From there his preaching spread to the whole of Galilee and all of Palestine. It is possible that Jesus stayed in Peter’s house and made it the base for his apostolic trips to the surrounding countryside. No other place in the gospel narrative witnessed as many of Christ’s miracles as did Capharnaum.

On the north shore of Lake Gennesareth, not far from Capharnaum, there were two flourishing towns – Chorazin and Bethsaida – where Jesus also did very many miracles; yet, in spite of all the signs and blessings, all those acts of mercy, the local inhabitants were not converted by Jesus’ presence among them. The Gospel of today’s Mass recalls the harsh words Our Lord had for those towns which weren’t prepared to do penance and repent of their sins: Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago ... And you, Capharnaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.[298]

So many graces, so many miracles! And yet many of the inhabitants didn’t change and didn’t repent of their sins. In fact, they actually rebelled against Christ: Dirumpamus vincula eorum, et proiciamus a nobis iugum ipsorum:[299] Let us break the commandments of the Lord and throw off his sweet yoke! How often have those words of Psalm 2 been repeated since!

Look now at Jesus as he passes by, pouring out upon us his grace and his compassion. How often it has been so! Think of the countless times and occasions Our Lord has stopped to cure us, to bless us, to encourage us to do good. He has given us so much care and attention. And, since he has lavished so much grace upon us, he expects us to respond in kind – with sincere repentance of our faults, total hatred of deliberate venial sin and of all that could in any way separate us from him. Jesus always listens to us, but particularly when we go to him completely ready to change, to rediscover our way and to begin once more with a broken and contrite heart.[300] This ought to be so always, because there are lots of occasions when, deliberately or otherwise, we reject his grace; and the offence we cause him is in proportion to the love He has shown us. Can anyone be so blind as to fail to recognize Christ in these repeated encounters of his with our fallen nature?

23.2 The fruits of sorrow.

A broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. The word ‘contrition’ comes from the Latin contritus – smashed in pieces, as of a rock, and has come to mean sorrow for one’s faults and sins in the sense that the heart hardened by sin can be said to shatter when stricken by sorrow at having offended God.[301] In everyday language we use the term ‘heartbroken’ to describe our reaction to some great tragedy that affects us to the depths of our being. Something similar should happen on contemplating our sins in the light of God’s holiness and the great love He has for us. In the soul that genuinely seeks God this reaction is attributable not so much to the sensation of failure produced by sin as to the remorse at having cut itself off from God to even the tiniest extent. This
sorrow for sin – contrition – consists essentially in a sense of remorse and a sincere detestation of the offence against God, and a firm resolution of not sinning again; it is a turning towards the good, which causes life to blossom anew in the soul.

It is love, above all, that should lead us to ask God very often for forgiveness for the countless times we don’t respond as we ought to the graces we receive. The friend recalled his sins, and through fear of hell he tried to weep but found he could not. He besought Love for tears, and Wisdom answered him that he ought to weep more out of reverence for his Beloved than for fear of the pains of hell, because tears shed for love please him more than those shed through fear. It is love that should lead us to the sacrament of Penance.

Contrition gives the Christian soul a special strength: it gives it back hope, peace and happiness, and makes it forget about itself and abandon itself in the Lord with greater interior refinement and sensitivity. To approach God with a contrite heart we need to acknowledge our faults and sins as they are, without making any lame excuses, and not be surprised and shocked on discovering defects and failings we thought had already been overcome. If we were to blame our failings on the environment or other such circumstances, we would forsake the path of humility and would not encounter God, who is so close to us precisely when we abandon him. On considering our failings in our daily examination of conscience, we have to see them primarily as offences against God rather than as personality defects. If we don’t measure them against the background of God’s love we will easily tend to find excuses for them and will eventually lose the good dispositions of contrition, repentance and atonement we need to have for our sins. With God we can never be ‘in the clear’: our condition is rather that of the debtor who could not pay; we will always be in need of his infinite mercy. God, be merciful to me a sinner, we say to him in the words of the tax-collector who, in all humility, recognized his own unworthiness when face to face with the holiness of God.

One thing we can’t do as regards our sins and failings is to accept them as something inevitable and natural, and ‘come to terms’ with them. What we have to do is always to ask for pardon, and begin again as often as necessary, saying to God Our Lord: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants. And God, who is close to the contrite of heart, always hears our prayer.

Again and again in life we meet Jesus passing by, as he did of old in those towns of Galilee, inviting us to come out to meet him and leave our sins behind. Let us not postpone this loving encounter. Nunc coepi: Now I begin, once more, with your help, O Lord.

23.3 Sorrow is a gift we must ask for. The works of penance.

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! We can imagine the disillusionment in Our Lord’s voice as he uttered those words, realizing that the grace he lavished so bountifully on his listeners was not taking root in their souls. From time to time they may have followed him all right, full of enthusiasm and expressing their appreciation on witnessing a cure, but at the bottom of their hearts they were never really with him.

We for our part have to ask the Holy Spirit for the marvellous gift of contrition. We should try to make many acts of love-sorrow, especially if we have offended Our Lord in something serious, and also whenever we go to Confession, when examining our conscience, and throughout the day. It can help a lot if we do the Stations of the Cross or meditate on Our Lord’s Passion. We should never tire of considering Jesus’ infinite love for us, and the insult and indignity that sin represents for him.

Sincere sorrow for sin does not necessarily require having to feel sorry. Just like love, sorrow is an act of the will, not a feeling. And in the same way as one can love God deeply without any
emotional reaction, one can also be truly sorry for sin without experiencing anything sentimental. Real sorrow is seen principally in the way one unhesitatingly avoids all occasions of offending God and is ready to do specific acts of penance for any infidelities committed. These are the things to help us atone for the punishment our sins deserve, to overcome bad inclinations, and to strengthen us in doing good.

What are the acts of penance that are pleasing to God? They are: prayer, fasting, almsgiving, small mortifications, putting up patiently with the disappointments and difficulties of life, being ready to accept the monotonous aspects of our job and the tiredness that is part and parcel of work. In particular, we should always be ready and eager to go to Confession well, truly sorry for our faults and sins. Turn to Our Lady and ask her – as a token of her love for you – for the gift of contrition. Ask that you may be sorry, with the sorrow of Love, for all your sins and for the sins of all men and women throughout the ages.

And with that same disposition, be bold enough to add: ‘Mother, my life, my hope, lead me by the hand. And if there is anything in me which is displeasing to my Father God grant that I may see it, so that, between you and me, the two of us, we may uproot it.’

Do not be afraid to continue, saying to her: ‘O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary, pray for me, that by fulfilling the most lovable Will of your Son, I may be worthy to obtain and enjoy what Our Lord Jesus has promised.’
24. OUR FATHER GOD

24.1 God is always by our side.
   As Moses tended the flock of his father-in-law Jethro near Mount Horeb, the holy mountain, God appeared to him in a burning bush. There Moses was given the extraordinary task – his life’s work – of leading the chosen people out of the slavery of Egypt into the Promised Land. God confirmed him in his mission with these words: I will be with you. Moses little imagined how closely God would be accompanying him and the people in the midst of the trials and tribulations that awaited them.

   In our lives too, God’s presence at every moment is something we can scarcely fathom. It takes on even greater definition when God sees us on the road to holiness. He is like a father minding a toddler. Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, is always reminding us in the Gospel of God’s paternal concern. He alone can do this, since no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him as He tells us in today’s gospel. The Son knows the Father in the very knowledge by which the Father knows him. There is no greater intimacy than that. This identity of knowing and knowledge bespeaks the unity of the divine nature. In claiming it, Jesus revealed that He was God.

   As the Son, one in substance with the Father, He is also able to reveal the Father’s relationship with and attitude towards us, and in particular his goodness in granting us the gift of the Holy Spirit. The mystery of the Blessed Trinity is at the heart of what He had to reveal to us, and with it and in it we find the wonder of God’s fatherhood. During that last evening in the upper room, when He seemed to be summing up those years of self-giving and trusting revelation, He said: I have manifested your name to the men whom you gave me.

   To manifest someone’s name really meant to reveal his mode of being. Our Lord has revealed to us the depths of the trinitarian mystery: the fact that God is a father, so close to us men. Jesus is always using the title ‘Father’, both in private conversations and in his preaching. He dwells on the goodness of the Father, who rewards our slightest action and recognises our good deeds, even the ones that no one sees, who bestows his bounty upon the just and the unjust and who is always aware of and concerned about what we need. The word ‘Father’ is like a constant refrain on Our Lord’s lips. This Father is never far away, no more than would be a father who sees his little toddler alone and in danger. If we try to please him we will find him by our side. When you really come to love God’s Will you will never, even in the worst state of agitation, lose sight of the fact that our Father in Heaven is always close to you, very close, right next to you, with his everlasting Love and with his unbounded affection.

24.2 Imitating Christ is the way to be true children of God the Father.
   God didn’t just make us and then leave us, like a painter with his painting. He is a father to us, and has even brought us to be partakers of the divine nature. The Father’s desire was that we should be called children of God; and so we are. Being children of God is not something we achieve on our own; it is a gift from God. Pondering this will make us thank him often every day. The sense of our divine filiation will be at the root of our joy and confidence in carrying out the mission God has given us. In it we find assurance in the face of difficulty and anguish. Father, my Father, we will find ourselves saying, savouring that gentle but strong word ‘Father’, be it at times of joy or of danger.
Call him ‘Father’ many times a day and tell him – alone, in your heart – that you love him, that you adore him, that you feel proud and strong because you are his son.[319]

It is through Christ that we share in this divine sonship, as we try to resemble him, the first-born among many brethren and the Only-begotten of the Father.

The more like Jesus we become, the more God the Father will see us as his children, if we try to work as He did, if we too have pity on the people we meet each day, if we make reparation for sin and show our thanks, as Jesus did. But we achieve this above all by imitating Christ’s prayer to his Father. This means bursting into praise and thanksgiving for the many expressions of God’s love we meet. *I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,* we read in today’s Gospel.[320] Thank you, we will say, for bringing that friend of mine back to the sacraments, for helping me with my family, for the chance I get to open my heart in spiritual direction, indeed for everything. If our minds and hearts turn to God often, in good times and in bad, then we are living as good sons and daughters of God should.

*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.*
*It is he who forgives all your guilt,*
*who heals every one of your ills,*
*who redeems your life from the grave,*
*who crowns you with love and compassion.*[321]

Let’s try to see people as Christ saw them. The world looks so different through his eyes! It is the Holy Spirit who configures us to the Master. *For all who are led by the spirit of God are sons of God.*[322] Saint John Chrysostom explains that it is *through the spirit that we belong to Christ, we possess him,* and *we vie with the angels. Through the spirit we crucify the flesh,* we *taste the joy of eternal life,* we *possess the pledge of the resurrection* and *make sure progress on the path of virtue.*[323] Divine filiation is the easiest way to reach the Blessed Trinity.

### 24.3 Union with Christ, a consequence of divine filiation.

How often we have reflected on God’s mercy, how He chose to become man so that man could, in a sense, become God,[324] sharing in God’s very life. The sanctifying grace which we receive in the sacraments and as a reward for our good works identifies us with Christ and makes us ‘sons in the Son,’ since God the Father has only one Son and it is only ‘in Christ’ that we can attain to this divine filiation. We become united and identified with him, as members of his Mystical Body, as Saint Paul wrote to the Galatians: *It is no longer I who live,* but *Christ who lives in me.*[325]

So when we turn to the Father it is really Christ who is praying in us. When we deny ourselves something for him, He it is who inspired this detachment of spirit. When we try to bring someone back to the sacraments, our apostolic spirit is a reflection of Jesus’ zeal for souls. Our work and our sufferings complete the works and sufferings which Our Lord took on for his Mystical Body the Church. Think of the value which our daily work and our sorrows assume in this light.

The interior struggle which brings us, with the help of grace, to be conformed to Christ, also moves us to *have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus;*[326] and this in turn makes us ‘more’ children of God, so to speak. In the ordinary way one can not be more or less the son of one’s father, though one could be a better or worse one. In the supernatural sphere, the holier one is, the more one is a son or daughter of God, not just a better one. This is the real goal of the Christian
life: a constant growth in divine filiation.

Our mother Mary is the perfect example of what divine grace can achieve when it is fully availed of. No one, excepting the sacred Humanity of Our Lord, was ever closer to God, and no created being could ever become the Daughter of God the Father that she was.

Let us ask her to make us seek the counsel of the Holy Spirit, who will get us to imitate Jesus. Under his influence we will feel the pressing need to turn to the Father at all times, but particularly at Mass, when we address him as *clementissime Pater – most merciful Father*,\[^{327}\] in union with the sacrifice of his Son. We will think of him as our Father, calling him *Abba*, anointed as we are by the spirit of his Son who cries out *Abba, Father*.\[^{328}\] He will also make us feel the hunger and thirst for God and for his glory which were so apparent in his Incarnate Son. The Father also receives glory from our growing more like his Only-begotten Son, *who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think*.\[^{329}\]  \[^{330}\]
25. OUR LORD’S YOKE IS LIGHT

25.1 Jesus Christ frees us from the heaviest burdens.

*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden,* Jesus declares to us in today’s Gospel,[331] and I will give you rest. He is speaking to the crowds following him, harassed and downtrodden, like sheep without a shepherd,[332] lifting the loads that oppressed them. The Pharisees were crushing them with a series of minute rules[333] which never brought peace to their hearts.

The heaviest weights that men carry are their sins, as Saint Augustine pointed out. *Jesus tells people who are sweating under heavy and useless burdens,* ‘Come to me ... and I will give you rest.’ *How could He relieve those weighed down by sin except by forgiving them?*

Every confession is a liberation, for sins – even venial ones – are a wearisome oppression. We come away from this sacrament at peace, ready to struggle afresh. It is as though He said: *All you who are tormented and afflicted, labouring beneath the burden of anxiety and desire,* cast it aside by coming unto Me, and I will refresh you; and your souls shall find that rest of which your desires rob you.[335]

Our Lord invites us to exchange his yoke for the burden of sin, pride and selfishness: *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.* *For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.* Saint Augustine remarks: *This burden is not a weight at all, it is wings to fly with.*[336] The commitments of our vocation and the share of the Cross we are asked to bear are a blessed weight which allows us to soar to God.

In any case, if we keep close to Christ we will find that the inevitable hitches and problems we encounter take on a different meaning. Instead of being our cross they become Christ’s, bringing us to co-redeem with him as we purify our evil inclinations and grow in virtue. But we will still hear the voices of those who see no need for sacrifice. They are good-living people, no doubt, but their faith is dead. *He told you that this way is very hard. And, on hearing it, you heartily agreed, remembering that bit about the Cross being a sure sign of the true way ... But your friend noticed only the rough part of the road, without bringing to mind Jesus’ promise: ‘My yoke is sweet.’*

*Remind him about it, because – perhaps when he realises it – he will give himself,*[337] and realise that he too has been called to holiness.

We must shout to the four winds that following Christ is a joyful road and even when it passes under the Cross it is marked with optimism and peace. The trials are the most fruitful stretches of all. *Bees live and feed on bitter food when making their honey; in the same way, we can never practise gentleness and patience or produce honey from such excellent virtues more surely than when eating the bread of bitterness and living in the midst of afflictions.*[338]

25.2 We have to be ready for sorrow, for difficulties and obstacles.

Nobody can expect to go through life without sorrow, pain or worry. A Christian cannot make the mistake which Saint Gregory the Great described as follows: *There are some who wish to be humble, but without being despised, who wish to be happy with their lot, but without being needy, who wish to be chaste, without mortifying the body, to be patient without suffering. They want both to acquire virtues and to avoid the sacrifices those virtues involve: they are like soldiers who flee the battlefield and try to win the war from the comfort of the city.*[339] Virtues cannot be had without effort and trials.

So there will always be problems, worries and sorrows. Sometimes they will seem easy and other
times hard to bear; but if we keep close to Our Lord we will always manage. Whether they are big or small, if we accept them and offer them to God they will not be a weight; in fact they will enable our soul to pray and to see God in everything that happens. Any problem that God permits can be solved and its burden borne if we turn to him for help. If a particularly serious difficulty should arise, God will provide more grace. *If it is God who lays the burden upon you, God will also give you the strength to bear it.*

In this life trials and tribulations are the normal thing. This was what Saint Peter warned the early Christians: *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you.* So we should not be surprised either, especially knowing that the Cross is the right road to happiness and effectiveness. God often permits tribulations to afflict those He loves to make them more fruitful. If a branch is joined to the vine and is giving fruit, that branch *He prunes that it may bear more fruit.* But He never leaves us to face it on our own, and he stays close to his friends when they feel themselves to be under pressure.

### 25.3 Facing adversity in a sensible and realistic way, with joyful courage. We are to flee from discouragement.

God gives only good gifts. If he permits pain or sorrow, financial or family problems, all this is for the sake of something better.

We often find that God blesses his favourites with the Cross and with the grace to carry it with spirit, from both the human and supernatural points of view. Towards the end of her life, when Saint Teresa was on her way to make a new foundation, she found the road blocked by extensive flooding. Having spent a night in an inn which offered such poor hospitality that there were no proper beds, she set off again the next morning, for this was the Lord’s will. He had told her: *Make no account of the cold, for I am true heat. The devil is making every effort to hinder this foundation. Do thou make every effort in its favour, and go in person without fail, for it will bring thee great advantage.* So when next day she decided to cross the river Arlanzon she found it was just an enormous sea of water, with the wooden pontoons scarcely visible. Those watching from the river-bank saw the carriage she was in swaying on the brink of the torrent. She jumped out awkwardly, up to her knees in water, and hurt herself in the process. Wryly she complained: *So much to put up with and you send me this!* Jesus replied: *Teresa, that’s how I treat my friends.* She was not lost for an answer: *Small wonder you have so few!* Soon her good humour and that of her travelling-companions returned, for *once the danger was passed, they enjoyed talking about it.*

God wants us to bear difficulties peacefully and firmly, being happy to place our trust in him. He never lets his friends down, especially when their only care is to do his will. When we kneel before the tabernacle, perhaps uttering the words *Adoro te devote, latens deitas* – Godhead here in hiding, whom I do adore – we realise that as long as we are with Christ the yoke is easy and the most awkward burden is light. He it is who helps us to bear up and tackle problems with spirit and confidence and with the good humour of the saints. This attitude does a great deal of good both to ourselves and our neighbour.

It is a matter of facing things which are unpleasant or painful, and which go against our plans, in a cheerful way, like an athlete. We also need a straightforward attitude which doesn’t invent imaginary problems and sorrows for us, or make us start suspecting the arrival of all sorts of complicated scenarios. For even when the problems are real enough we can find ourselves giving too much importance to them. We begin to think we are doing nothing right, that things are going from bad to worse, that our apostolate is getting nowhere and that we are unable to swim against the current. This
kind of attitude can creep in because we forget about the surest fact of all, that we are sons and daughters of God, and that from the difficulties of these situations his grace will always draw a greater good.

With his presence and the protection of Our Lady, *refugium nostrum et virtus* – our refuge and our strength – we will weigh up the problems and seek help in spiritual direction, and we will often find that what had seemed so difficult can easily be coped with. That sort of optimistic and cheerful spirit is absolutely essential for growing in God’s love and doing apostolate, and a soul which has faced adversity thereby becomes strong, generous and long-suffering. Such trials are our great opportunity to toughen ourselves up and to deepen our love.
26. OUR LORD’S PASSOVER

26.1 The Jewish Passover.

The Passover was the most solemn feast of the Jewish year; it had been instituted by God to commemorate the exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt and to recall annually their liberation from the slavery to which they had been subjected. The Lord established[348] that on the eve of the feast every family would sacrifice a lamb: it had to be one year old and with no blemish or disfigurement. The whole family would gather to eat the animal roasted on an open fire, along with bread that had not been leavened, and with bitter herbs. The unleavened bread symbolized the haste of their exodus from Egypt, fleeing from Pharaoh’s armies; the bitter herbs represented the bitterness of the many years of slavery. They had to eat it hurriedly, with their feet shod and with staves in their hands, like people ready to depart on a journey.

The feast began with the paschal meal shortly after sunset on the evening of the 14th of Nisan, the first month of the Hebrew year, and went on for a further seven days; during this time no yeast was used in baking bread, whence it became known as the Azymes, or Days of Unleavened Bread. All yeast was removed from the houses in the evening of the 14th; in this way the Hebrew people recalled that sudden exodus from the land in which they had suffered so much.

All this was a figure and image of the renewal which Christ would bring about in their souls, and of their liberation from the slavery of sin. *Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our paschal lamb has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*[349] The paschal lamb of the Jewish feast was a promise and figure of the true Lamb, Jesus Christ, immolated in the sacrifice of Calvary on behalf of the whole human race.[350] *He is the true Lamb who has taken away the sins of the world; by dying he has destroyed our death, and by rising, restored our life.*[351] He is the Lamb who, by his voluntary sacrifice, really obtains what the sacrifices of the Old Law merely symbolized, namely, satisfaction to God for the sins of mankind.

Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross, renewed each time Mass is celebrated, enables us to live in a continuous state of celebration. For that reason Saint Paul exhorted the Corinthians to cleanse out the old leaven, a symbol of all that is old and impure, so that they might lead an authentic Christian life.[352] The Mass, which we can also make present throughout our day, is a foretaste of heavenly glory. Having received so many benefits, *is it possible not to be in a state of continuous celebration during your earthly life?* asks Saint John Chrysostom. *Far from us be any flagging of spirit because of poverty, sickness or the persecutions which oppress us. The present life is a time for celebrating,*[353] a foretaste of everlasting glory and happiness.

26.2 Our Lord’s Last Supper with his disciples. The true Paschal Lamb.

Jesus signalled in advance, and with special emphasis, the last Passover He was to eat with his disciples;[354] and made them see how earnestly He desired to eat it with them.[355]

John and Peter prepared everything necessary – the unleavened bread, the bitter herbs, the cups for the wine, and the lamb, which had to be sacrificed that afternoon in the atrium of the Temple. That evening, probably in the house of Mary the mother of Mark, the institution of the Holy Eucharist took
place, and the New Covenant, which was to be fulfilled the following day, was brought forward sacramentally. At one table two Passovers are celebrated, that of the figure and that of the reality. Just as a painter, on the same surface, first traces the outline and then adds the colours, so too does Christ. Using the old rite, He established the true Passover, the feast par excellence, of which the former was only a figure. The bitter herbs now have a close link with the bitterness of the Passion which was about to take place.

The paschal meal was a sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover.[357] The Mass is also a sacrifice, being the unbloody but real renewal of the sacrifice of the Cross. At the Last Supper Jesus brought forward in a sacramental form – my body which will be given up for you, my blood shed for you – the sacrifice which he was to accomplish the following day on Calvary. Once and for all Jesus replaced the old rite with this redeeming sacrifice. That night in the Cenacle was fulfilled the event from which countless generations of people have obtained life, and which is the centre of our very existence. O happy place, exclaims Saint Ephraem, in which the paschal lamb comes out to meet the Lamb of Truth! ... O happy place! Never was there prepared a table like yours, neither in the house of kings, nor in the Tabernacle, nor in the Holy of Holies.[358]

With the words Do this in memory of me Our Lord made it possible for this mystery of love to be repeated until the end of time, granting the Apostles and their successors the power of performing it. How thankful we should be for this share in the countless benefits we receive in Holy Communion! How close to us is that same Jesus who gave himself up completely to his disciples and all mankind on that memorable night. We can now tell him, in the intimacy of our heart: I love you, Lord Jesus, with my whole heart, my whole soul and my whole strength; and if you see that I don’t love you as I ought, I desire at least to love you so; and if I don’t desire it sufficiently, I want at least to desire it in this way ... O most sacred Body torn open by five wounds, put yourself as a seal upon my heart and impress your charity upon it! Seal my feet, that I may follow your steps; seal my hands, that they may always do good works; seal my side that it may ever burn in fervent acts of love for you. O most precious Blood that washes clean and purifies all men! Wash my soul and put a sign on my face so that I may never love any one else but Thee.[360]

26.3 The Mass, centre of the interior life.

At that last Passover Jesus offered himself to his Father as a victim to be immolated, as the most pure Lamb. And both that Supper and the Mass constitute one single and perfect sacrifice with the oblation offered on Calvary, because in all three cases the victim offered and the priest who offers is the same, namely, Christ.[361]

We have to make the Mass the centre of our whole life. Keep trying, so that the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar really becomes the centre and the root of your interior life, and so your whole day will turn into an act of worship – an extension of the Mass you have attended and a preparation for the next. Your whole day will then be an act of worship that overflows in aspirations, visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the offering up to God of your daily work and your family life.[362]

Let us prepare ourselves for Mass as if Our Lord had invited us personally to that last Passover which He ate with his closest friends. Every day we have to hear in our heart, as if addressed to us, those words of Our Lord: Desiderio desideravi hoc Pascha manducare vobiscum, I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you.[363] Great is Jesus’ desire, many are the graces He is preparing for us.

The story is told of Saint John of the Cross that, on receiving the news of the death of a priest who had just been ordained, he asked if he had managed to say Mass at all before he died, and on hearing
that he had only been able to do so once, the saint is said to have remarked: ‘How much he will have to account to God for.’ Let us consider now during this period of prayer how well we celebrate or take part in the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar; and what can we say of our desires, our preparation, our efforts to prevent other matters occupying our mind, our acts of faith and of love, during that all too brief period of time we devote to hearing Mass and to making our thanksgiving after Holy Communion?

If, with the help of grace, we really work at it, the Mass will truly be for us the centre to which we refer all our practices of piety, our family and social duties, our work and our apostolate; it will also become the fountain where we recover our strength to begin again each day; the summit towards which we direct our steps, our works, our apostolic desires and the most intimate longings of our soul; it will also be the heart whence we learn to love others who have defects just like our own, and who like ourselves have their own less attractive features. If we manage to love the Mass a little more each day, we will be able to say to Our Lord during the thanksgiving after Holy Communion; *I’m leaving you now for a while, Lord Jesus, but I’m not going without you, who are my consolation, my joy and all the good of my soul ... From now on, whatever I do, I will do for you and through you, and nothing will be the object of all my words and actions save you, my love.* [364]
27. HE WILL NOT CRUSH THE BRUISED REED

27.1 The gentleness and mercy of Christ.

The Gospel of today’s Mass shows us Jesus drawing away from the Pharisees because they held counsel ... how to destroy him.[365] Although he withdrew to a safer place – perhaps in Galilee – many followed him, and he healed them all, and ordered them not to make him known.[366] This is the occasion which Saint Matthew, moved by the Holy Spirit, identifies as the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy about the Servant of Yahweh, in which the Messiah – Jesus – is prefigured in very clear terms. Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.[367]

The Messiah had been foreseen in his prophecy by Isaiah, not as a conquering king, but as serving and healing mankind. His mission is characterized by gentleness, faithfulness and mercy. The evangelist points out that this prophecy was being fulfilled in the person of Jesus.[368] By means of two very beautiful images the prophet describes the gentleness, sweetness and mercy of the Messiah. The bruised reed, the dimly burning wick, represent all types of miseries, sufferings and punishments which mankind suffers. He does not finally snap the broken reed; on the contrary, he bends over it, straightens it with exquisite care and gives it the strength and life it needs. Likewise he does not snuff out the wick of a lamp which is on the point of going out, but rather does all he can to restore its flame to burn brightly once more. This is Jesus’ way of dealing with people.

In everyday life we sometimes say that ‘there is no known cure’ for a particular disease, and healing is assumed to be out of the question. It is not like that in the spiritual life. Jesus is the Doctor who never considers those who are sick in soul to be irretrievably lost. For him nobody is a hopeless case. The most hardened criminal, the most inveterate sinner, is never abandoned by the Master; He comes to the rescue with a medicine that can heal. Christ can sense the openness to conversion which lies hidden in the soul of every individual. In his patience and love He never writes anybody off; we, for our part, could ask ourselves now if we ever think of anybody as being ‘beyond redemption’? If we ourselves are ever unfortunate enough to find we are apparently lost, are we going to abandon our confidence in the One who said He had come to seek and save what was lost?

Mary Magdalen was like the bruised reed, and so was the good thief, and the woman taken in adultery. Peter is won back when he is distraught by the denials of that unhappy night, and he is not even made to promise that he won’t deny Our Lord again. He is only asked: Simon, son of John, do you love me? That is the question we are all asked whenever we haven’t been faithful: Do you love me? Each Confession is also, and above all, an act of love. Today let us think about how we love, and how we respond to that question of Our Lord’s.

27.2 Jesus gives no one up for lost.

A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.

Jesus’ mercy for people never faltered for a moment, despite all the ingratitude, difficulties and hatred he encountered. His love for men is so great because He is concerned above all for their souls, and to bring them with his powerful help to eternal life; at the same time, it knows no bounds and
extends to all mankind. He is the Good Shepherd of our souls, who knows us all and calls each one of us by our name,[369] and leaves none abandoned on the mountainside. He has given his life for each man and woman. When a soul strays, Christ’s immediate reaction is to do all He can to help it return, and we can visualize him watching daily to catch a glimpse of it in the distance. Whenever someone offends him grievously, He tries to draw him to his merciful Heart. He doesn’t break the bruised reed, he doesn’t finally snap it off and throw it away. Instead, he mends it very carefully, giving it all the attention it needs.

What does He say to those who are devastated by sin, or who no longer give any light because the divine fire in their soul has gone out? Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.[370] He has pity on the great misfortune they have suffered on account of sin, and leads them to repentance without judging them harshly. He is the father who embraces his prodigal son after he has fallen into disgrace through his own fault. He it is who pardons the adulterous woman who is being threatened with stoning. He receives the repentant Magdalen and immediately opens to her the mystery of his intimate life. He speaks about eternal life to the Samaritan woman in spite of her waywardness; He promises heaven to the good thief. Truly in him are fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaiah: ‘A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly-burning wick he will not quench’.[371]

No one ever loved us, or will love us, as Christ does; no one understands us better than He. When the faithful of Corinth went about, divided, saying to one another: ‘I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos, I belong to Cephas, I belong to Christ,’ Saint Paul writes to them: Was Paul crucified for you?[372] That is the ultimate argument.

We can never lose hope. God wants us to be saints, and puts his power and his providence at the service of his mercy. Therefore, we cannot pass the time dwelling on our evil fortune, losing sight of God, getting discouraged by our failures, feeling tempted to say: ‘What’s the use of trying, considering how much I have sinned, how much I have failed my Lord?’ No, we must trust in the love and power of Our Father God, and in his Son, sent into the world to redeem and strengthen us.[373]

It is very good for our soul to see ourselves, in Our Lord’s sight, like a bruised reed which needs a lot of care, like a flickering wick which needs the oil of divine love in order to burn as God wants! We never lose hope as long as we realize that we are weak, full of defects and dirt. Our Lord never leaves us; we just need to use the means and not reject the hand that He offers us.

27.3 Our behaviour towards others has to be full of compassion, understanding and mercy.

Jesus’ meekness and mercy for the weak are for us a pointer to the path we should follow in order to bring our friends to him, for in his name will the Gentiles hope.[374] Christ is the saving hope of the world.

We cannot be surprised by the ignorance, the errors, hard-heartedness and resistance which characterize so many people’s journey towards God. Our attitude towards them has to be one of sincere esteem, understanding and patience. Because he breaks the bruised reed who does not give a hand to the sinner, nor carries his brother’s burden; and he puts out the smouldering torch who despises, in those who still believe but little, the tiny spark of the faith.[375]

Our friends, all the different people we come across, have to discover in our friendship or our attitude a firm support for their faith. If we want to be for them a source of strength, then we have to be close to them in their weakness. We have to look upon them with eyes of mercy, as Christ does, with genuine esteem, accepting the chiaroscuro – the interplay of light and shadow – of their strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, we should bear in mind that if we are to serve others, for Christ’s sake, we need to be very human ... We have to understand everyone; we must live peaceably with
everyone; we must forgive everyone.[376] On the other hand, we shall not call injustice, justice; we shall not say that an offence against God is not an offence against God, or that evil is good. When confronted by evil we shall not reply with another evil, but rather with sound doctrine and good actions: drowning evil in an abundance of good (cf Rom 12:21). That’s how Christ will reign in our souls and in the souls of the people around us.[377]

The fruits of this attitude of ours towards all the people we meet – very understanding, and at the same time very highly motivated – are so rewarding, both for us personally as well as for them, that they make it easy to see them as souls, when we find them so much in need, as Our Lord did.

It is not sufficient, writes a contemporary author, to value brilliant men because they are brilliant, or good men because they are good.[378] We must value each man because he is man, whether he be ignorant, or uneducated, or insignificant. And we will not be able to do that unless our conception of what man is makes him the object of our esteem. The Christian knows that every man is the image of God, that he has an immortal spirit and that Christ died for him. Frequent consideration of this truth will help us not to cut ourselves off from others, especially when their defects, their lack of good upbringing and their bad behaviour are more apparent. Following Our Lord’s example, we will never crush the bruised reed. Like the good Samaritan in the parable, we will approach the wounded wayfarer and bandage his wounds, and alleviate his sufferings with the balm of our charity. And one day we will hear these sweet words from Our Lord’s lips: As you did it to one of these the least of my brethren, you did it to me.[379]

Nobody knows the mystery of divine mercy as Mary does. She knows the price of it and how great it is. In that sense, we also call her Mother of mercy ... Mother of divine mercy.[380] We go to her now as we come to the end of our meditation, in the certainty that she always leads us to Jesus and urges us to be understanding and merciful, as her Son is.
28. THE COCKLE OF FALSE DOCTRINE

28.1 The relevance of the parable of the weeds.

In the Gospel of today’s Mass Our Lord teaches us the parable of the wheat and the cockle. The world is like a field where God is continually sowing the seed of his grace; this divine seed takes root in the soul and produces fruits of holiness. Jesus offers us his grace with such wonderful love! For him each of us is unique, and in order to redeem us He did not hesitate to assume our human nature. He prepared us like good soil and bestowed upon us his saving doctrine. But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away.

The weed in question – cockle-seed – is a plant that is often found growing in cereal crops in the Middle East. It resembles wheat so closely that even to the farmer’s practised eye it is impossible to tell the two plants apart until the stalks begin to mature, at which stage the cockle can be recognized by its slender ear and emaciated grain; it is quite toxic to humans, and if mixed with flour will ruin bread. Sowing cockle among the wheat was a form of revenge not unheard of in those countries. Periodic plagues of cockle were very much feared by the peasants, because they could cause them to lose their entire harvest.

The Fathers of the Church have understood the cockle to be a metaphor for false doctrine, which is not easy to distinguish from the truth, above all at the beginning, because it is proper to the devil to mix falsehood with truth; and if error is allowed to flourish it always has catastrophic effects on the people of God.

This parable has lost none of its relevance nowadays: we can see that many Christians have fallen asleep and have allowed the enemy to sow bad seed with total impunity. There is practically no truth of the Catholic Faith which hasn’t been called into question. We have to be very careful indeed, both with ourselves and with anybody we are responsible for, in the whole area of magazines, television, books and newspapers, all of which can be a real source of false doctrine and which require us to make a special effort to look after our on-going formation in the doctrinal area.

If we are to be faithful to all the requirements of the Christian vocation we have to be constantly watchful and not let ourselves be caught off guard, because once false doctrine manages to take root in the soul it quickly gives rise to sterility and to estrangement from God. We need to be watchful too in the area of our affections, and not fool ourselves with excuses about how at our time of life ‘things don’t affect us’; and we should be careful also about the effect of such false ideas on those whom God has entrusted to our care.

28.2 We have to give doctrine by every available means.

Error and ignorance have been the cause of many disasters. The prophet Hosea, on seeing the Chosen People far from the happiness to which they had been called, wrote: My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. We too can see great masses of our fellow men steeped in sin and misery, distraught and totally confused because they are bereft of divine truth. Many people are carried along by the latest fashions and by ideas dictated by a few very influential individuals, or let themselves be led astray by false logic, almost always with the connivance of their own lower nature.

The enemy of God and of souls makes use of every trick known to man. We hear about news reports being totally distorted, or even about certain major events that never get reported at all.
Television series watched by huge audiences night after night portray totally pagan lifestyles, ridiculing chastity and celibacy, promoting the notion that abortion and euthanasia are somehow acceptable, casting doubt on the value of the sacraments, and in general presenting an idea of life wholly incompatible with Christianity, as if Christ had never come to redeem us and remind us that our homeland is in Heaven. And all this is done with an astonishing energy and persistence. The ‘enemy’ never lets up.

If we want to follow in the Master’s footsteps we can’t stand idly by as if everything were irredeemably lost and as if nothing can be done about it. History is not in any way predetermined, certainly not in the direction of evil, and God has made us free in order that we may direct the world to him. This is a task for everyone: every single Christian is duty bound to dispel ignorance from men’s minds. And even though some professions have a greater influence than others in public life, all of us can and ought to sow the seed of good doctrine attractively and congenially at every opportunity, in the circle of our family or friends and among our colleagues at work: letting them see for themselves the attractiveness of truth; being ready to unmask falsehood; getting people to attend formative activities like retreats, circles and spiritual direction; recommending them good books on doctrinal topics; and inspiring them by our example to behave as good Christians. Thanks to our steady and unwavering attitude, many people will feel encouraged to tackle this avalanche of false doctrine that pours down around us, and they in turn will become an inspiration for others who are still in darkness. And we will experience the truth of that phrase of Tertullian’s in which he describes the pagan world which rejected Christ: they cease to hate who cease to be ignorant.[386]

We have to take advantage of the thousand and one opportunities we get in daily life to sow the good seed of Christ – when, for example, travelling, or reading a newspaper, or chatting with friends, or attending to our children’s education, or taking part in the activity of a professional association, or voting in an election. Many such opportunities will arise spontaneously, like life itself; and others we will create deliberately, with the help of grace and our native ability, all in the service of Christ: we are his voice in the world.

28.3 We have to smother the cockle in good seed, and not miss a single opportunity.

The spread of the cockle can only be countered by an even greater abundance of good doctrine: we have to overcome evil with good,[387] living out our convictions in daily life, which is the essence of naturalness. We are called to seek holiness in the middle of the world, in the fulfilment of ordinary duties; and this requires us to be actively present in the whole range of human experience. It is not enough to bemoan the evils of our time and all their powerful allies, above all at a time when a subtle persecution condemns the Church to die of starvation, putting it outside the sphere of public life, and above all obstructing its part in education, culture and family life.

These are not our rights; they are God’s rights. He has entrusted them to us Catholics so that we may exercise them![388]

It is time to come out boldly with all the means at our disposal, plentiful or not, and not to waste a single opportunity, as well as telling those friends of ours who have started to follow the Master’s footsteps that he needs them to help many people learn to know and love him. We can ask ourselves now in our prayer: What can I do – in my family, at work, in school, in the societies or sports clubs which I belong to, with my neighbours – to make Christ really present with his grace and his teaching? What formative activities are most suitable for my particular situation?

Fashions come and go, and, through our effort, our optimism, our holy human and supernatural stubbornness, we Christians will manage to change all the things that are steadfastly opposed to
Christ’s doctrine. The First Reading of today’s Mass encourages us to trust in God’s power: You show your strength when men doubt the completeness of your power, and you rebuke any insolence among those who know it.[389] Nothing is inevitable, everything can be changed, provided there are men and women who love Christ enough and are determined to make their surroundings conform to the will of God. For this we need the help of grace, which is not lacking, and to have each man and woman really to want to be God’s instrument in his or her place in society, and show with their word and example that Christ’s teaching is the only way to bring joy and happiness to the world. That is why you have to ... carry your own environment about with you in a natural manner, and so give your own ‘tone’ to the society in which you live.

And then, if you have acquired this spirit, I am sure you will tell me with the amazement of the disciples as they contemplated the first-fruits of the miracles being worked at their hands in Christ’s name: ‘There’s no denying our influence on the environment!’[390]
SIXTEENTH SUNDAY: YEAR B

29. REST AND RECREATION

29.1 Sanctifying rest and recreation.

In the First Reading[391] the prophet Jeremiah tells us: *I will gather the remnant of my flock ... and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.* The prophecy is referring to the Messiah’s careful attention to every member of the human race. *Near restful waters he leads me, to revive my drooping spirit,* we read in the Responsorial Psalm.[392]

The Gospel[393] on this Sunday shows us Jesus’ solicitude for his disciples, tired out as they are after an apostolic mission to the neighbouring towns and villages. *Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest awhile,* He says to them. And the Evangelist explains that there were so many people coming and going at that time that *they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves. What marvellous things Jesus must have asked them and told them!*[394]

Our life, like theirs, is one of service to Christ, to our family and to society; it is a life of work and of dedication to souls. And so we shouldn’t be surprised if we sometimes feel tired and need a rest. In our free time we need to recuperate our energies if we are to serve better and also avoid injuring our health. If this latter were to happen it would, among other considerations, have repercussions on the people around us, on the quality of what we offer to God and on our apostolic task; it would affect the proper attention to children, to husband or wife, to our brothers or sisters, to our friends; our apostolate, and the attention and formation of the people whom Our Lord has placed under our care, would all suffer as a result.

On occasion we may be seriously obliged to take a rest. Saint Gregory Nazianzen comments that *a cord cannot endure constant tension, and an archer needs to loosen the ends of a bow if he wants to be able to draw it again later on.*[395] God wills that as far as we ourselves are concerned we should take care to be in good physical condition, because He expects a lot of us. *See how much God loves us, my brethren,* says Saint Augustine, *because when we rest, it is really He who rests!*[396] But we have to rest like good Christians, in the first place by sanctifying our loss of energy and loving God in our tiredness when circumstances force us to work without a break for a long period. In situations of this sort we can draw special comfort from having recourse to Jesus Our Lord, who himself so often ended his day exhausted. He understands us well.

29.2 The Christian attitude to recreation.

Very often, perhaps for long stretches at a time, we may not feel in great form and yet have to soldier on at our business, housework or study. This shouldn’t upset us: it is part of the human condition and very often simply a sign that we are working hard. *There come days,* says Saint Teresa in all simplicity, *when a single word distresses me and I long to leave the world altogether, for everything in it seems to weary me.*[397] Moments like these are for turning to God, because it means that Our Lord is very close to us and wants us to take the appropriate remedy: to go to the doctor perhaps, and do what he tells us; to get a little more sleep; to go for a walk or maybe read a good book. God allows things like this to happen to us to make us more detached from our health, or to get us to grow in charity, to make the effort to smile even though it may be hard – perhaps very hard. Offering this situation to God can be extremely meritorious, even though we may feel totally dry and
with no appetite for devotional practices.

Come away ... and rest awhile, says the Master. Far from being an excuse to get wrapped up in ourselves, relaxation is an occasion to seek Christ, because there are no holidays in Love. Saint Augustine tells us that whichever way the soul of man turns, if it be not towards thee it encounters pain – at the very least, the pain of having pushed God aside.

Holiday time isn’t meant to be a time for doing nothing. Rest means recuperation – to gain strength, to form ideals and make plans. In other words, it means a change of occupation, so that you can come back later to your daily job with a renewed energy. It has to be a time of interior enrichment, a time when love of God is given a chance to grow in a climate of careful attention to our devotional practices and self-effacing acts of service, and when we try in a special way to make life more pleasant for the people around us; their contentment and happiness can contribute greatly to our own relaxation.

Nowadays one gets the impression that many people leave their supernatural life totally to one side when planning where to go for their holidays: they often choose resorts which are so paganized that no good-living Christian should be seen there. It would be very silly of someone who normally tries to live in the presence of God, to tacitly endorse that sort of environment by holidaying there, not to mention the danger of leaving themselves open to offending God grievously. It would be even worse in the case of parents allowing their children and other dependants to do so, and as a result suffering what will possibly be irreparable damage to their souls: they would then have on their consciences their own sins and the sins of their children.

For situations like these one could quote the words of Saint Augustine: What mean you thus to travail and trudge on through these hard and painful ways? There is no rest where you are seeking it. Seek still that which you seek, but seek it not there where you seek it. You seek for a happy life in the very region of death. Not there is it to be found. For how can a happy life be found there, where there is not so much as any life at all?

In some environments people seem to be totally unaware of the morality of cooperation in evil, and so if we want to live like good Christians, and to have others do so too, we need to refresh their minds about it as the occasion arises, always putting things to them very positively. We shouldn’t forget that the obligation to rest is not something absolute, because our spiritual welfare – and our neighbour’s – comes before bodily well-being. The unity that there should be in a Christian’s life between faith and behaviour demands that the time spent recovering physical energies should not cause the soul to become sick and paralyzed, or at least enfeebled. Moreover, with a little bit of good will it is always possible to find or to set up ways and means of taking a break while having God very close to us in our soul in grace, and to make good use of the time to deepen friendships and to do a fruitful apostolate.

29.3 Observance of Holy Days.

Christians ... should cooperate in the cultural framework and collective activity characteristic of our times, to humanize them and imbue them with a Christian spirit. In present-day society many people enjoy more free time thanks to the tendency to shorten the working week with longer weekends and holiday periods, and it is up to us to offer them upright and attractive alternatives in the use of such additional leisure. We also have to get across to them the essentially religious nature of Holy Days of obligation, without which those very special times would lose their meaning – Christmas, Holy Week, Sundays and the other feasts of Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin. This is an urgent apostolate, because as time goes on more and more people are making use of these days to
take a break from their daily duties, and perhaps also from God.

Holy Days have a decisive rôle in helping Christians receive better the action of divine grace and in enabling them to respond to it more generously.\[402\] The Mass is the heart of the Christian feast,\[403\] and in it we offer Our Lord everything that makes up our day. Nothing else can have any meaning if we neglect this, our first duty to God, or if it is left to be ‘fitted in’ at some spare moment, and the rest of the day filled with things which are reckoned to be more important. In a Christian who wants God to be the centre of his or her life, to behave like this would, at the very least, be a sign of lukewarmness. We have to give Him the best we have, especially on feast days, even if to do so means having to make some changes in our plans. If we are generous, we will experience the deep joy that always comes from responding to the love of our Father God.

When Jesus headed off in the boat with his disciples to get away from it all, the Gospel of the Mass continues to tell us that many saw where they were making for and went there on foot and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed He saw a great throng, and He had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things. That day neither Jesus nor his disciples managed to get any rest. Our Lord’s example teaches us here that the needs of others come before our own. On many occasions we too have to forgo our rest, postponing it till later because of people who are expecting care and attention from us. Let us do it as readily as Our Lord looked after that multitude who needed him, putting to one side the plans He had made. It is a good example of detachment for us to apply to our own situation.
SIXTEENTH SUNDAY: YEAR C

30. MARTHA’S WORK

30.1 The Lord is well taken care of in Bethany. Friendship with Jesus.

My lord, if I have found favour in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I fetch a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant.[404] When the Lord appeared as a pilgrim to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, this is how Abraham gave him welcome. God never forgot Abraham’s hospitality.

Today’s Gospel recounts the arrival of Jesus and his disciples at the house of their friends Martha, Mary and Lazarus in Bethany.[405] (On a later occasion, Jesus wept when he learned that Lazarus had died. He then brought him back to life). Bethany lies about two miles from Jerusalem. Jesus would stop there to rest in the home of his friends before going on up to the holy city. He felt at home in that place, surrounded as he was by joy and affection. This is how we ought to welcome Jesus, who is in the Tabernacle. We have no more faithful friend than He. He deserves our loving attention more than anyone else.

In this warm family environment the sisters behaved with naturalness and simplicity, even as they revealed different attitudes. Martha was distracted with much serving. She seems to have been the elder of the two – Saint Luke says, a woman named Martha received him into her house. She was completely taken up with the work of tending to the Lord and his disciples. Certainly, there would have been plenty to keep her occupied. To receive such a numerous group was no easy task, especially since they had arrived so unexpectedly. Understandably, Martha wants to welcome the Lord in an appropriate manner. We know that at a certain point she lost her equanimity and became frustrated due to her misreading of the situation. Mary, on the other hand, sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. Martha was distracted from her task of preparing the meal. In her eagerness to get the meal ready for the Lord, Martha becomes preoccupied by a million little details. Her sister Mary prefers instead to devote herself to their guest. She forgets about her sister and sits before him, doing nothing else but listen to his word.[406] With the help of divine grace, we have to learn how to live a unity of life, which consists of the union of Martha’s and Mary’s attitudes. Our love of God should be inseparable from our apostolic zeal, and our work be well done for the glory of God.

30.2 Working with the knowledge that the Lord is by our side. Presence of God in the workplace.

Showing a real sense of trust in her guest, the elder sister complained to Jesus, Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.

For many centuries these two sisters have been held to represent two rival lifestyles. According to this traditional interpretation Mary exemplifies the way of contemplation, the life of union with God. Similarly, Martha is seen as the personification of an active life of work. But the contemplative life does not consist in simply being at the feet of Jesus doing nothing. That would be a disorder, if not pure and simple indolence.[407] For we must find God in our daily job, transforming our professional work into the hinge on which our calling to sanctity rests and turns.[408] We show our love for God through the exercise of the human as well as the supernatural virtues. It is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to have a deep interior life and at the same time live a vibrant apostolate if we lack a
serious commitment to our daily work.

For too long a time there has been a mistaken insistence on the supposed incompatibility between secular work and the interior life. Nevertheless, it is there in the midst of daily work and by means of it, not in spite of it, that God wants to call most Christians to lives of holiness. We are to sanctify the world and sanctify ourselves with a life of prayer that gives divine meaning to earthly tasks.[409] This was the constant message of the Founder of Opus Dei, who taught thousands to find God in their ordinary lives. On one occasion, while speaking to a large number of people, he said, You must understand now more clearly that God is calling you to serve him ‘in and from’ the ordinary, material and secular activities of human life. He waits for us every day, in the laboratory, in the operating theatre, in the army barracks, in the university lecture room, in the factory, in the workshop, in the fields, in the home and in all the immense panorama of work. Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it. There is no other way. Either we learn to find our Lord in ordinary, everyday life, or else we shall never find him. That is why I can tell you that our age needs to give back to matter and to the most trivial occurrences and situations their noble and original meaning. It needs to restore them to the service of the Kingdom of God, to spiritualize them, turning them into a means and an occasion for a continuous meeting with Jesus Christ.[410] This involves combining the love of Mary with the ‘work ethic’ of Martha.

Jesus responds to Martha with that affectionate counsel, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.

It is as if He had said, ‘Martha, you are worried about worldly affairs, but you are forgetting about me. You are deeply concerned about important tasks, but you are neglecting the most important one of all, which is union with God, personal sanctity. If your worries lead you to lose presence of God while you work, those worries are not good for you, even though your work itself be good and necessary.’

Jesus does not pass sweeping judgment upon Martha or Mary. He responds to Martha’s question with profundity by pointing to what is most important in life, that being the presence of Christ in the house. How often might not the Lord make the same reproach to us? Nothing can justify forgetting Jesus in our daily work, not even the most important of concerns. We cannot put him who is the Lord of all things aside for the sake of the things of the Lord. We certainly cannot minimize the importance of prayer with the excuse that we are too busy with apostolate, with activities of formation, with works of charity, etc.[411]

30.3 Work and prayer.

We need to have a unity of life which is so vibrantly integral that work itself will lead us to be in the presence of God. At the same time, those periods we devote to prayer will help us to work better. We cannot expect to reach an ‘armistice’ of some kind between temporal occupations and the spiritual life, between work and prayer. Work feeds prayer and prayer feeds work. This is true even to the point where work in and of itself, as a service done in a professional manner for man and society, becomes an acceptable offering to God.[412]

To maintain the presence of God while we work we need to resort to simple reminders, little things that will help us remember that our work is for God. He is there next to us as our companion, watching us as we work. It may help us to recall that he is physically quite close to us in the nearest oratory or church. From there, where you are working, let your heart escape to the Lord, right close to
the Tabernacle, to tell him, without doing anything odd, ‘My Jesus, I love You’. Don’t be afraid to call him so – my Jesus – and to say it to him often.

All worldly occupations, when engaged in with the right intention, allow us the opportunity to put into practice charity, mortification, a spirit of service to others, joy and optimism, understanding and an apostolate of friendship and confidence. We sanctify ourselves through our work. This is what really matters – to find Jesus in the midst of our daily concerns, not to forget about the Lord of all things. And when our daily tasks are in some way directly related to him, we should make an even greater effort to live this unity of life. Otherwise, we will end up doing what is, in fact, his work for ourselves, thereby neglecting the Master.

As we finish this time of prayer, we ask the Virgin to give us the diligence of Martha as well as the presence of God of Mary.
SIXTEENTH WEEK: MONDAY

31. FAITH AND MIRACLES

31.1 The need for good dispositions in order to receive Christ’s message.

We read in today’s Gospel that certain of the Scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus to work a miracle so as to prove that He was the long-awaited Messiah.[414] They wanted Jesus to confirm with dramatic display what he was preaching with simplicity. Instead of serving them up a miracle, the Lord tells his critics that they will have their proof in his death and Resurrection. Drawing upon the figure of Jonah, he affirms that an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. With this reference to the three days which Jonah spent in the belly of the whale Christ makes clear that the definitive proof of his divine Sonship will occur with his glorious Resurrection on the third day.[415]

Jonah was sent by God to convert the city of Nineveh. Moved by the preaching of the prophet, the city’s inhabitants did penance for their sins.[416] Yet when Jesus tried to win over Jerusalem, the city would not accept his message. Jesus recalls how when the Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon she was amazed at the extent of his wisdom. Like Jonah, Solomon is a figure of Christ. By alluding to the example of these pagans who had become converted, Christ makes his reproach all the more forceful: Something greater than Jonah is here ... something greater than Solomon is here. This something greater is, in fact, infinitely greater, but Jesus seems intent on making his point by understatement.[417]

For the time being, Jesus will not give his critics any more signs and miracles. These people are not disposed to believe, no matter how many sermons or signs they receive from God’s Son. Despite the great lessons contained in the miracles, if people lack good dispositions those miracles are capable of being misinterpreted. As the old adage goes, lessons are received ad modum recipientis recipitur, according to the nature of the recipient. In his Gospel, Saint John teaches us that though he had done so many signs before them, yet they did not believe in him.[418] Miracles can help our human reason to believe. But if a person lacks good dispositions and is full of prejudices, then that person will see only darkness.

We ask Jesus in our prayer to give us a clean heart so that we may see him in the midst of our daily concerns. We ask him for a clear mind free of prejudice so that we may better understand other people, ever mindful of avoiding negative judgments.

31.2 Wanting to know the truth.

To hear the word of Christ one has to be listening to him. One has to draw near to him with a clean mind and heart, being totally open to God’s message.

One example of bad dispositions is the case of the Pharisees who questioned the man born blind after Jesus had miraculously healed him. What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes? The man blind from birth sees that his interrogators are deaf to his explanations. I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again?[419]

The same thing happens with Pilate. Jesus says to him, For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice. The Roman Procurator then utters his famous response, What is truth? Having asked the question he does not bother to wait for a reply: After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again.[420] He turns his back on the answer to his question. He turns his back on Truth. Without a doubt, Pilate had no interest in an
answer because he had no interest in the truth. He is only interested in his own interests, in making the best of a bad situation.

If we are well disposed the Lord will give us abundant light to help us persevere on our journey to him. We will have the joy of contemplating him in the created things around us. There he has left his signature as Creator. We will see him in our work, in joy, in sickness ... The history of every person is full of these signs. There will be many times when we shall receive the grace to see him in the intimacy of our prayer. At other times we will see him by means of our spiritual director.

As for those who did not want to see, the majority of the Pharisees, we know that they did not change. They did not convert to the Messiah despite the fact that they had been eyewitnesses to so many of his miracles. Their pride blinded them to what is most essential. They went so far as to claim that He casts out demons by the prince of demons. In today’s world, many people are blind to the supernatural because of pride, because of prejudice, because of attachment to earthly things, because of inordinate desires for comfort and security, because of hedonism and sensuality. I heard some people I knew talking about their radio sets. Almost without realising it, I brought the subject round to the spiritual area: we have got a strong earth, too strong, and we have forgotten to put up the aerial of the interior life. That is why there are so few souls who keep in touch with God. May we never be without our supernatural aerial. [421]

31.3 Purifying the heart so as to see clearly. Allowing ourselves to be led in moments of obscurity.

Something greater than Jonah is here ... something greater than Solomon is here. Christ himself is at our side! He beckons to man not as a stranger, but as a friend eager to share his thoughts, even his life. He wants to give us the divine solution to those problems which worry us and sometimes tear us to pieces.

Yet much as sound-waves can interfere with good reception, so it is with obstacles to our life of faith. These obstacles can affect even those who have spent many years in Christ’s service, to the extent that they can become disconcerted and disoriented, unable to see the beauty of their self-giving. Here are some questions for the examination of conscience of someone in this situation: Do I truly want to see? Am I fully disposed to want to see, to affirm at the very least that God’s presence can be found in the circumstances of my life? Do I allow myself to be helped? Do I explain my situation clearly? Do I reveal my inmost self without any hesitation?

Pride is the principle obstacle in our struggle. But there are other obstacles such as a comfort-seeking environment with its instinctive aversion to sacrifice and the Cross. This environment brings with it subtle tempting attachments which will provide plenty of human reasons for not doing the will of God. Following God’s will is a joyful way, but it also requires constant effort and self-surrender. It means being ‘savagely sincere’ in spiritual direction. It means keeping a lock on our heart and a brake on our will. We need to purify the heart from its wayward affections so that it can be filled with the true love of Christ. It is indeed very hard to appreciate the light when one’s vision is clouded.

Laziness and love of comfort are two other obstacles which can affect our struggle. As in the case of every true love, a personal commitment to the faith and to a vocation involves a complete self-giving. Laziness and love of comfort tend to compromise and weaken our commitment of love.

We may experience times when the Lord seems hidden from our view. He probably wants us to look for him with greater love, with greater humility, with greater abandonment to the counsels of our spiritual director. If we make the effort required we will always come to discover the most lovable face of Christ.
The word ‘faith’ has its roots in the notion of a person’s placing himself in the care of someone who is stronger, trusting in this other person’s assistance. We put our trust in God. But He wants us to rely on those He has put by our side to help us see. God frequently gives light through his creatures.

The Lord passes by so close to us that we should be able to find him and follow him. Frequent recourse to the sacrament of Penance is an excellent way to ensure that we see God more clearly in ourselves and in those around us. We ask the Blessed Virgin to help us purify our mind and heart so that we can find God in the circumstances of every day.

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith. I trust in you: strengthen my trust. I love you: let me love you more and more.
32. THE NEW FAMILY OF JESUS

32.1 Our union with Christ is stronger than any human bond. The bonds we have uniting us to our Lord are stronger than those we have to our natural family.

In today’s Gospel we find Jesus preaching in a house so full of people that even his Mother and other relatives cannot manage to get in. So they send him a message. While He was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brethren stood outside, asking to speak to him. But He replied to the man who told him, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brethren?’ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples He said, ‘Here are my mother and my brethren! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.’

On another occasion a peasant woman commented on the teachings of Jesus with words of praise for Mary, Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked! But the Lord gives the impression of rejecting these words when he replies, Blessed, rather, are those who hear the word of God and keep it!

Blessed John Paul II analysed the meaning of these words in relation to what Jesus said to Mary and Joseph when they found him in the Temple after their three-day search. Jesus tells them with an infinite love and total clarity, How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house? From his earliest days Jesus was dedicated to his relationship with his Father. He announced the Kingdom: the ‘Kingdom of God’ and ‘his Father’s business’, which add a new dimension and meaning to everything human, and therefore to every human bond, insofar as these things relate to the goals and tasks assigned to every human being. Within this new dimension, a bond such as that of ‘brotherhood’ also means something different from ‘brotherhood according to the flesh’ deriving from a common origin from the same set of parents. ‘Motherhood’, too, in the dimension of the Kingdom of God and in the radius of the fatherhood of God himself, takes on another meaning.

The Lord teaches us repeatedly that doing the Will of God transcends the demands of every human bond or authority, even that of the family. Jesus tells us that as we follow him the more closely in our vocation we will find that our bonds to him are indeed stronger than those to our natural family. Saint Thomas explains that everyone who does the Will of the Father becomes like unto a brother to Christ, He who did the will of his Father. He who not only obeys Christ but works to convert others, to beget Christ in them, becomes like unto the Mother of Christ. The bonds of blood are certainly strong, but stronger still are the bonds originating in a deep love for Christ. There is no human relationship, no matter how close it might be, that is stronger than our union with Jesus and with those who follow him.

32.2 We need to have a sense of detachment and personal responsibility in order to fulfil the demands of our vocation.

‘Who is my mother?’ Is Jesus thereby distancing himself from his mother according to the flesh? Does he perhaps wish to leave her in the hidden obscurity which she herself has chosen? If this seems to be the case from the tone of those words, one must nevertheless note that the new and different motherhood which Jesus speaks of to his disciples refers precisely to Mary in a very special way. She is loved by Jesus in a singular way since she is indeed his Mother according to the flesh. But Jesus loves her even more and is more intimately united with her because of her faithfulness to her
vocation, to the Will of the Father. For this reason the Church reminds us that the Blessed Virgin Mary received the words whereby, in extolling a kingdom beyond the calculations and bonds of flesh and blood, He declared blessed those who heard and kept the word of God, as she was faithfully doing.

In living out our vocation we should find that we are developing an even greater love for our parents, our children, our brothers and sisters. God expands and refines the heart even as He requires our detachment from the things of this world. We need this bigger heart so as to fulfil our vocation, although we should be forewarned that our vocation can provoke suffering in those we love the most. So it was that Mary and Joseph went three days looking for him, anxiously. Mary, she who was full of grace, and Joseph, the just man, did not understand Christ’s words to them, in spite of all their holiness. Later on, they understood more while witnessing the events of Christ’s life, with Mary enjoying a deeper understanding than Joseph. It should not surprise us, then, when at times our relatives do not understand our vocation.

What a joy it is to take part ourselves in those strong bonds of union with the new family of Jesus! How we have to love and help those who are united with us in the bonds of faith and vocation! It is then that we will understand those words of Holy Scripture: Frater qui adiuvatur a fratre quasi civitas firma. A brother helped by his brother is like a strong city. Nothing can overcome a charity and a fraternity which are well lived. The power of charity! If you live that blessed brotherly spirit, your mutual weakness will also be a support to keep you upright in the fulfilment of duty – just as in a house of cards, one card supports the other.

32.3 Mary, the Mother of the new family of Jesus – the Church – is also the Mother of each one of us.

For whoever does the Will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother. Perhaps the Blessed Mother actually heard him say these words or some one may have repeated them to her. She knew very well the strong bonds which united her Son and herself. They were bonds of nature and, even more, they were bonds predicated on her perfect union with the Holy Trinity. She knew in an ever more perfect manner that she had been called from all eternity to be the Mother of this new family of Jesus. As Blessed John Paul II has written, If ‘through faith’ Mary became the bearer of the Son given to her by the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit, while preserving her virginity intact, in that same faith she ‘discovered and accepted the other dimension of motherhood’ revealed by Jesus during his messianic mission. One can say that this dimension of motherhood belonged to Mary from the beginning, that is to say from the moment of the conception and birth of her Son. From that time she was ‘the one who believed’. But as the messianic mission of her Son grew clearer to her eyes and spirit, she herself as a mother became ever more open ‘to that new dimension of motherhood’ which was to constitute her ‘part’ beside her Son.

Much later, at Calvary, Christ reveals to Mary the totality of her spiritual motherhood for all centuries to come: Woman, behold, your son! Jesus points to John, the one who is a representative for all mankind. Mary’s maternity extends in a particular way to all those who are baptized and to those who are en route to the fullness of the faith. This is because Mary is the Mother of the whole Church, the great family of the Lord which will continue until the end of time.

There is a correlation between the moment of the Incarnation and the moment of the birth of the Church at Pentecost. The person who links these two moments is Mary: ‘Mary at Nazareth’ and ‘Mary in the Upper Room at Jerusalem’. In both cases her discreet yet essential presence indicates the path of ‘birth from the Holy Spirit’. Thus she who is present in the mystery of Christ as Mother becomes – by the will of the Son and the power of the Holy Spirit – present in the mystery of the Church.
presence of Mary in the Church is a maternal presence. Just as in a family the relation of motherhood
and sonship is unique and unrepeatable, so is the relationship of Mary to each Christian unique and
unrepeatable. In imitation of John, who ‘took her to his own home’, the Christian seeks to be taken into
that ‘maternal charity’ with which the Redeemer’s Mother ‘cares for the brethren of her Son ...’ [438]

She cares for each one of us as if we were her only child. She watches out for our sanctity and our
salvation as if she had no other children on earth. We have to call to her many times a day. Mother! As
we finish this time of prayer, we must say to her from the bottom of our heart, ‘Mother of mine, don’t
leave my side! Help me to be always near your Son.’
33. HUMAN VIRTUES

33.1 Human virtues act as the foundation for the supernatural virtues.

In today’s Gospel we learn how the seed of divine grace falls upon different types of terrain – among thorns, on the roadway worn down by many travellers, on rocky ground and on good soil. God wants us to be like good soil which receives the seed and in due time brings forth much fruit. The human virtues can be thought of as the terrain in each person. If the land is well worked, if a person is well disposed, then the action of divine grace can foster the development of the supernatural virtues. Many virtuous persons who perhaps through ignorance have lived apart from God do have the capacity to receive the grace of faith. Noble human conduct is the foundation for the supernatural edifice. Grace builds on nature.

The life of grace in each Christian is not superimposed on human reality. On the contrary, grace penetrates, enriches and perfects human nature. That is why the Church requires its saints to be heroic in practising not only the theological virtues but also the moral or human ones; and it is why people who are truly united to God through the theological virtues of faith, hope and love also perfect themselves humanly: they are refined in their relationships with others; they are loyal, affable, well-mannered, generous, sincere, precisely because they have placed all their affections in God.

The supernatural order does not overwhelm or destroy the natural order. The supernatural order lifts up and perfects the natural order, working in a manner which is suitable to its proper dignity and nature. This is so because both orders proceed from God, who cannot be at odds with himself.

Although grace in and of itself can transform people, God normally prefers to have grace work in concert with human virtues. How is the cardinal virtue of fortitude to be sown in a Christian who will not struggle against small habits of laziness or comfort-seeking, who is unduly preoccupied with the outside temperature, who habitually gives in to his moods, who is completely taken up with his own plans and belongings? How is a person supposed to face life’s difficulties with optimism, with eyes of faith, when that person behaves like a grouchy pessimist in ordinary life? None of the essentials, none of the good qualities in human nature must be changed. To suppress any of the good qualities in a man – and there are many – is the worst thing a Christian can do. Develop your character, your human faculties: develop them to the utmost degree. Everything which curtails your expansion, which limits your development, which makes you narrow-minded, which you back for fear of something, is not in any way Christian. The complete purification from sin and evil inclinations which, with the help of God, man has to accomplish, is a very different process from suppressing any part of his true personality.

The Lord wants each of us to have a unique and well-developed personality. Our personality will be the result of our understanding and appreciation for the talents God has given to us, as well as of our effort to bring those talents to fruition.

It is the good soil (these human virtues) that allows the divine seed to take root, to grow and develop unhindered. The work of grace acts to improve the soil itself. The practice of Christian life perfects human conditions because it gives them a greater finality. Man is more human insofar as he is the more Christian.

33.2 Jesus Christ possessed all the virtues in a perfect way.

The Lord wants us to practise all the human virtues – optimism, generosity, order, fortitude,
cheerfulness, cordiality, sincerity, honesty. Christ wants us to imitate him, perfect God and perfect Man. The human virtues find their plenitude in his person. When God became Man, He did so in a most perfect way. He dressed according to the fashion of his age, he ate as everybody else did, he behaved according to the customs of the time, place and nation to which he belonged. He imposed hands, he ordained, got angry, smiled, wept, talked, became tired, was sleepy and exhausted, felt hunger and thirst, grief and joy. And the union, the fusion, of the divine and human was so complete and so perfect that every one of his actions was both divine and human. He was God, yet he liked to call himself the Son of Man. Christ taught his disciples to aim for human perfection according to the natural law. He formed his disciples not only in the supernatural virtues but also in social decorum, in sincerity, in human elegance. He urged them to be men of good judgment. Christ himself showed regret at the lack of gratitude in those lepers he had cured. He reacted to bad manners and to any lack of hospitality on the part of educated people. Jesus attached so much importance to the human virtues that he went so far as to tell his disciples, If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

Whenever we make an effort to be sincere, loyal, hard-working, compassionate, even-tempered, we are imitating Christ, the perfect Model for our behaviour. We thereby make ourselves into good soil which the supernatural virtues can take root in. We should often contemplate the Master and observe in him the fullness of everything human. We have in Jesus our human and divine ideal.

33.3 The need for human virtues in the apostolate.

The Christian in the middle of the world is like a light shining out from a lampstand, like a city set on top of a hill. The first thing one notices is the humanity of the Christian – the good example of integrity, loyalty, decency, bravery. This is what gets people’s attention. The human virtues thus serve as instruments in the apostolate of bringing others closer to God. One’s professional prestige, friendliness, sincerity, can prepare souls to listen to the message of Christ. The human virtues are necessary in the apostolate. If our friends are unable to see our virtues as reality, much less will they be able to discern supernatural truths. If a Christian were not honest, why would his friends trust him? How can we introduce others to the most lovable face of Christ if we do not follow him in the basics? The human virtues may be thought of as the lampstand, as the hill upon which the city is set. Many people will appreciate supernatural life once they see it made real in normal human conduct.

We have to let others know that Christ is alive by our sense of peace and joy in the midst of difficult and even painful circumstances, by our work well done, by our sobriety and temperance, by our human warmth extended to everyone. When lived to the full, the Christian vocation should affect every aspect of our existence. All the people who deal with us or know us in one way or another should be able to sense the joy within our heart. We have to act in such a way that others will be able to say, when they meet us: this man is a Christian, because he does not hate, because he is willing to understand, because he is not a fanatic, because he is willing to make sacrifices, because he shows that he is a man of peace, because he knows how to love, because he is generous with his time, because he doesn’t complain, because he knows how to overlook what is superfluous ...

The world desperately needs the testimony of outstanding men and women who carry Christ in their hearts. There has perhaps been no other time when there has been so much talk about the rights of man and human achievements. Humanity has rarely been so conscious of its own accomplishments. Yet, at the same time, never have the rights of the individual been more brutally pushed aside than today. Those rights derive from the fact that man has been made in the image of God.

Humanity is waiting for Christians to proclaim once again that most fundamental teaching – that we
are all called to be children of God. To reach that goal we first have to develop our God-given human nature. We must become very human so as to become very Christ-like. Grace will never be lacking to those men and women who prove by their lives that they want to be children of God.
34. BROKEN CISTERNS. THE EFFECTS OF SIN

34.1 Sin is the greatest deception to which man can fall prey.

After their long and difficult experience in the desert the Jewish people were well aware of the importance of water. To discover water in the desert was to come across a great treasure. Wells were guarded more closely than jewels. Lives depended upon their security. It is fitting, therefore, that Holy Scripture should refer to God as a fountain of living waters. The just man is described as a tree planted by streams of water, which bears fruit in the year of drought.

In his conversation with the Samaritan woman Jesus reveals that He is capable of giving souls living water. During the feast of the Tabernacles or Tents, when the Jews commemorated their passage through the desert, Jesus once again spoke of himself as water. On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, ‘If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water’. Only Christ can satisfy man’s thirst for eternity, a thirst which God has placed in our heart. Only Christ can give fulfilment to our life. Many of the Fathers of the Church considered the open side of Christ, that gave forth blood and water, as the origin of the sacraments which impart supernatural life.

It is in this context that the words of the Prophet Jeremiah carry a special force in today’s prayer. The Prophet laments how the chosen people have abandoned their Lord. In a more symbolic reading, he is speaking about sin, about the effect of our sins. Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.

Every sinful act involves a separation from God. Sin means making a choice between nothing and the living water that springs up to eternal life. This is the greatest deception a man can fall prey to. This is true evil. Sin takes away sanctifying grace, the life of God in the soul, that which is the most precious gift we possess. Sin always entails the squandering of our most precious values. This is the hard reality, even though sin may occasionally allow us to achieve successes. Our distancing ourselves from the Father brings with it great harm to those involved, to those who give their consent. Sin leads to the dissipation of our inheritance, which is the dignity proper to each human person, the inheritance of grace. Sin converts the soul into stony ground where it is impossible for grace to take root or human virtues to develop. This is the parched ground, the beaten-down ground full of thorns which we heard about in yesterday’s Gospel, which we shall consider again tomorrow. Sin constitutes the ruin of man, the abandonment of the fountain of living waters for the sake of broken cisterns.

34.2 The effects of sin.

Apart from God, man will find only unhappiness and death. Sin is the vain attempt to hold water in broken cisterns. Help me repeat in the ear of this person and of that other one ... and of everyone: a sinner who has faith, even if he were to obtain all the blessings of this earth, will necessarily be unhappy and wretched. It is true that the motive that leads us (and should lead everyone) to hate sin, even venial sin, ought to be a supernatural one: that God abhors sin from the depths of his infiniteness, with a supreme, eternal and necessary hatred, as an evil opposed to the infinite good. But
the first reason I mentioned to you can lead us to this other one. The solitude sin leaves in the soul should be enough to lead us away from it. The road to hell is itself a living hell.

Sin separates the soul from the things of God. In today’s Gospel Jesus quotes the Prophet Isaiah, You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart. We need only look round about us to see the reality of these words of the Lord. So many people have lost their sense of sin and have become indifferent to supernatural realities.

Mortal sin causes a radical break between God and man because it deprives the soul of sanctifying grace. The sinner loses all the merit previously acquired by his good works. The soul is unable to receive any new merit. In a certain sense the soul falls under the power of the devil. The sinner’s natural inclination to do good is diminished in such a way that it becomes increasingly difficult to perform good works. Sometimes a person who falls into mortal sin will suffer physical effects – discontent, bad humour, indolence, a weak will. This state of soul leads to disorder in the sentiments. It produces harm to the whole Church and to all men, even though externally it may go undetected. Just as every just man who does his best to love God and his fellow man elevates the world, every sin drags down with itself the Church and, in some way, the whole world. In other words, there is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family.

Every sin is intimately and mysteriously related to the Passion of Christ. Our sins were present and were the cause of that suffering. We have the power to crucify the Son of God all over again. How much must He have loved us! What did it cost him to save us? What message for us have the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary, the stations of the cross, the crucifix, the nails, the lance, the corpse in the lap of the Mother? All this for us – suffered for every one of us. All this simply to bestow upon us the grace of being God's children, with all the accompanying graces we require. We sin. What does the price He paid matter to us? That was his most bitter reflection on the Mount of Olives. With divine clarity He foresaw all our ingratitude.

With the help of divine mercy, because there is no right to grace, the Christian who follows Christ closely will not fall habitually into grave faults. But the knowledge of our weakness should lead us to avoid any occasion of sin, even the most remote. We do so by mortifying our senses, by not trusting in our own judgment or our years of faithfulness or our excellent formation. We have to ask the Lord to make us abhor every sin and every deliberate fault, to give us a conscience sensitive enough to detect the smallest sins. We need to purify our soul with frequent Confession so that we do not lose our sense of sin, that sense which seems so absent from our society.

We will tell Jesus, Help us to conquer our indifference and our sloth! Give us a sense of sin. Create in us, O Lord, a pure heart, and renew a willing spirit in our minds.

34.3 The struggle against venial sins. Love for Confession.

In order to begin well a serious struggle against sin, we have to face up to our daily faults without excuses, without seeking justifications that would weaken our sorrow and contrition. These faults include omissions in fulfilling our professional responsibilities, lack of fraternity, neglect in our dealings with God, negative judgments towards others, envy, mistreatment of others, neglect of family, our more ignoble and disordered ambitions to be the centre of attention, to be supreme, to have more than we need. These are authentic venial sins because they are moments when the will
refuses to follow the will of God, even though this refusal does not constitute a complete separation from him. Our desire to be every day closer to Jesus is incompatible with actions or desires that separate us from him. Every deliberate venial sin is a step backwards on our way to God. Venial sin hinders the action of the Holy Spirit in our soul.

Knowing our desire to abhor mortal sin and avoid all venial sin, Jesus gives us this invitation: *If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink.*

The Lord promises to give us *living water.* We certainly cannot keep it in *broken cisterns.* The sacrament of Penance restores the soul, purifies it and fills it with grace. Let us go to this sacrament with real contrition. Then we will be able to say with the Psalmist, *My eyes shed streams of tears, because men do not keep thy law.*

We go to Our Mother Mary, *Refuge of sinners,* to ask that she win us the grace to detest every venial sin. We also ask her for a great love for the sacrament of divine Mercy. Let us examine ourselves as we end this time of prayer to see how often we receive this sacrament, with what love and with what purpose of amendment.
35. THE VIRTUE OF TEMPERANCE

35.1 The dignity of the body and all created things. The need for this virtue.

The Church has always recognized the dignity of the body and of all created things. In the Creation narrative, the inspired author points out how God was pleased with his work. Following the creation of man, God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. God honoured man by placing him at the head of all creation. The dignity of man was further enhanced when the Second Person of the Holy Trinity took to himself a human nature and accomplished his task of redemption. No teaching could be further from Christian doctrine than the notion of a radical opposition between the soul and the body. For it is the human person in his entirety, soul and body, who is called to attain eternal life. The Church has been a constant and pre-eminent witness to the dignity and respect due to the human body. As Saint Paul writes, Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Notwithstanding his God-given prestige, man has constantly to struggle to avoid falling prisoner to the things of this world which God created for his legitimate use. This is because of the disorder in creation caused by sin. It seems characteristic of our age that there are many who would treat created things, their acquisition and enjoyment, as man’s final end, when their true purpose is to serve as a means to man’s final end, which is God. As a result of this mistaken view of reality, many people choose to set aside God’s laws, and in doing so contradict the nature of man and human dignity itself. Regrettably, this process of so-called ‘liberation’ inevitably leads people to degradation and enslavement. To counteract this threat to human dignity we need to exercise the virtue of temperance. Temperance ensures that the body and the senses fulfil their proper function in our human nature, a function which has been ordained by God.

He who will not struggle to achieve unity within himself will have a hard time achieving unity with God. Whoever makes easy concessions to his feelings or whims, who has no self-control, turns himself into ground where the divine seed cannot take root. Such a person may even become incapable of making progress in human virtues. As the Lord teaches us in today’s Gospel, As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. The Christian life will not flourish among people who worship their bodies, their health, their appearance. God’s goods have been converted into thorns which suffocate what is most noble in man and obstruct his salvation. When the body becomes heavy and satiated, the soul finds its mount in poor condition for the ride to heaven.

We need to be vigilant that we not be carried away by the siren song of our ‘consumer culture’. Many people in today’s world believe that the highest aim in life is to have more than others, while making sure they let these others know that this is the case. Yet true success lies in being faithful to God and to his plans for us to be with him forever in Heaven. We know that our hearts can only be filled by God. Temporal goods will always leave us empty and forlorn.

35.2 Through the exercise of temperance man becomes more human. Detachment from worldly goods. Giving good example.

Our Mother the Church has always taught her children the need for temperance. Temperance
requires self-control, sacrifice and mortification. By practising temperance we ensure that the divine seed will take root in our soul, that it will not be suffocated. We have to be ever-watchful, since the orientation of modern culture is tending towards a kind of hedonism, a headlong pursuit of the easy life, marked by a desire to erase the cross from the aspirations of peoples. This phenomenon threatens many of our contemporaries.

Through the exercise of temperance man becomes more human. He who abandons himself to the satisfaction of his instincts becomes not unlike a runaway train. It hurtles along out of control, jumps the tracks and ends up wrecked, unable to proceed ahead. In this sad state man’s noblest attributes, his intelligence and will, are swamped by his animal powers of instinct and his passions. One acquires the virtue of temperance by performing many small actions which moderate our desires and direct our senses towards man’s final end. The person who lives this virtue knows how to do without those things that may harm his soul, and also comes to realise that his sacrifice is more apparent than real; for living this way, with a spirit of sacrifice, means freeing oneself from many kinds of slavery, savouring instead, in the depths of one’s heart, the fullness of God’s love.

Life then takes on again shades and tones which intemperance had tended to blur. We find ourselves able to care for the needs of others, to share what is ours with everyone, to devote our energies to great causes.

To live temperance well means to be detached from earthly things, to give them the importance which they merit and nothing more, to avoid creating personal needs, to exercise moderation with regard to food and drink, to rein in our whims and passions ... The Lord asks us to give testimony of temperance in the middle of the world. If we were to compromise in this area, we would find it more difficult to follow Christ as one of his apostles. With the example of our lives we have to teach many people that man is more precious for what he is than for what he has. In a special way, parents have to instruct their children to believe in the essential values of human life. Children must grow up with a correct attitude of freedom with regard to material goods, by adopting a simple and austere life style. And everyone has to make an effort to exercise self-control over the senses.

35.3 Some manifestations of temperance.

The virtue of temperance ought to inform and impregnate every aspect of our Christian life – from our conveniences at home to the instruments of our work and relaxation. For example, when we rest we usually do not need to run up unnecessary expense or allocate to our leisure an inordinate amount of time. One area where we can give good example in this virtue relates to our use of television and all the other means of comfortable pastime offered by modern technology.

It is unfortunate that so many people have come to live their lives strictly for the sake of ‘having a good time’. Specifically, it can be said of many of our contemporaries that their god is the belly. The person who lives temperance will try to avoid eating between meals, will not yearn for rare delicacies and expensive repasts, will not consume excessive quantities ... Ordinarily you eat more than you need. And the natural result, a heavy fullness and discomfort, benumbs your mind and renders you unfit to savour supernatural treasures. What a fine virtue temperance is, even by earthly standards!

Although most of these manifestations of gluttony are not serious sins, they are, nevertheless, offences against God which weaken the will. Such behaviour can lead us away from the austere, joyful and detached way of life required of Christ’s followers. It can act as the thorns that suffocate the divine seed, leaving us to wallow in lives of lukewarmness and regret.
To grow in this virtue we have to practise mortification in eating and drinking. Sometimes we will find it necessary to deny ourselves in the matter of desires which are completely licit. The Church gives sobriety a higher meaning when she reminds us that food is a gift of God which should be blessed by him. The Church recommends that Christians pray before and after meals. Saint Thomas teaches that although sobriety and temperance are necessary for everyone, these virtues are especially important for the young (who are the most inclined to err in this realm), for women, for the elderly (that they give good example), for the ministers of the Church and public officials (so that they carry out their duties with wisdom).[477]

Temperance also has to do with the moderation of our curiosity, of our sense of humour, of our fondness for hearing the sound of our own voice ... Blessed John Paul II had said, *I think that this virtue requires of each person a specific humility with regard to the gifts which God has given to us in human nature. I would recommend a ‘humility of the body’ and a ‘humility of the heart’.*[478] We should put aside temptations related in any such way to ostentation and vanity.

Temperance is an excellent defence in the face of the aggressive tactics of our ‘consumer culture’. Temperance prepares us to be *good soil* ready to receive the divine seed, the action of the Holy Spirit. This virtue is an indispensable means towards our realizing an effective apostolate in the middle of the world.
36. THE NEW COVENANT

36.1 The covenant of Sinai and the New Covenant of Christ on the Cross.

We read in the first book of *Exodus* that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai he gave God’s commandments to the chosen people.[479] The Israelites were obliged to obey the commandments, and Moses put them into writing. On the following morning the people built an altar at the base of the mountain and raised twelve stones to symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel. The Jews offered sacrifice to Yahweh to ratify the covenant. Through this pact the Israelites pledged themselves to comply with the Ten Commandments and Yahweh promised to exercise paternal care over his chosen people. The sacrificial rite was confirmed in blood, symbol of the source of life. The blood was spilt upon the altar, which symbolized God. After Moses had read from *the book of the covenant*, he sprinkled the blood upon those who were present, thereby confirming the special union between Yahweh and his people.[480]

This event was of such great importance that it had to be recalled and renewed on many occasions.[481] The chosen people would time and time again break the covenant, but God never wearied of pardoning them and loving them. What is more, He not only pardoned them, but He promised to make them a more perfect gift of himself. Over and over again, God speaks through his Prophets of a ‘new Covenant’ which would express his infinite mercy.[482] This Covenant was sealed by the Blood of Christ hanging upon the Cross. The New Covenant unites God with his new people, all mankind, who are called to become part of the Church. The sacrifice of Calvary was one of infinite merit, opening up a new and definitive relationship between God and man.

*Do you wish to know ... the value of that blood?* asks Saint John Chrysostom. *See from where it springs and who is its source. It flowed from the Cross itself. Its source was the open side of the Lord.* The Gospel says, ‘When they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.’ *Water is the symbol of Baptism. Blood is the symbol of the Eucharist. The soldier who pierced his side opened up a breach in the wall of the holy temple. I have found a hidden treasure there and I rejoice at my newfound wealth.*[483] We encounter this wealth every day at Holy Mass, where, before the astonished gaze of the angels themselves, heaven seems to come down to earth. In this sacrifice we are closely united with Christ. The chosen people could never have imagined anything so tremendous. The words of a traditional prayer of thanksgiving after Mass are here appropriate: *I beg of you, Sweet Jesus, that your Passion be my strength and deliverance, that your wounds be my food and drink, that the sprinkling of your blood be purification for my sins, that your death be my life eternal, that your Cross be my everlasting glory ...*[484]

36.2 The Holy Mass as renewal of the Covenant.

‘Behold, the days are coming’, says the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt ...’[485] During the Last Supper, Jesus anticipated what shortly thereafter he was to accomplish in his death. He showed his disciples what he was anxious to do, what he was soon to carry out – the sacrifice of his Body and Blood for everyone. The Last Supper is an anticipation of the sacrifice of the Cross.[486] Twenty-seven years later, Saint Paul...
would quote these words of Jesus in the First Letter to the Corinthians: *This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.*

The word *commemoration* harkens back to the Hebrew word which signifies the Jewish feast recalling the flight from Egypt and the Covenant made on Mount Sinai. During this feast the Jews not only remember the past event but they continually renew it, generation after generation. When the Lord commands the Apostles, *Do this in remembrance of me*, he is not just asking them to remember a single moment. He is asking them to renew the sacrifice of Calvary.

This Covenant is renewed each and every day throughout the entire world whenever the Holy Mass is celebrated. The priest performing each Mass *re-presents*, that is to say, he makes present once again, in a mysterious manner, the same sacrifice which Christ offered on Calvary. The work of our Redemption takes place here and now. It is as if the twenty centuries separating us from Calvary had disappeared. The New Covenant of the Eucharistic Sacrifice becomes especially manifest in the moment of Consecration. It is at this moment that we should make heartfelt acts of faith and love.

Let us take advantage of some guidelines given to priests on how to celebrate the Mass, in order to help us live the sacrifice with ever greater devotion: After uttering the words which bring Christ down upon the altar, look at the sacramental species with the eyes of faith. As you kneel, see the legions of angels which surround Christ and adore him with profound reverence. This sight should make you exceedingly humble. In the elevation, contemplate Christ elevated on the Cross. Ask Him to bring all things to Himself. Make fervent acts of faith, hope, love, adoration, humility, saying with the mind, ‘Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me! My Lord and my God. I love you, my God. I adore you with my whole heart and soul’. You may also renew the intention of the Mass which you are celebrating, offering up the Eucharist according to its four ends. But when you lift up the chalice, make sure to remember in a very contrite way that the blood of Christ has been shed for you, even though you have oftentimes despised it. Adore him so as to make up for your past neglect.

We have to fortify our faith and love in these moments of the Consecration.

### 36.3 Love for the Holy Sacrifice.

*How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, yea, faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.* With what love and reverence we should approach Holy Mass! There, in this Holy Sacrifice, is to be found the sublime spring of grace to which every generation will repair for strength as man makes his way towards eternity. There we will find not only grace, but the Author of all grace.

Whenever we prepare to celebrate or participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the altar, we have to do so with an intensity that binds us closer and closer to Jesus Christ, the High Priest. As Saint Paul tells us: *Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus.* We offer the Supreme Sacrifice through him and with him and in him. We offer up ourselves. One detail which will help us foster this union with Jesus Christ in the Mass has to do with our manner of participating in the Liturgy. We need to be serious, pious and active, recollected in spirit, our soul united with our body in prayerful harmony. We have to give our full attention to the readings and the acclamations. During the times reserved for silent prayer, we ought to make acts of faith and love. We should ask the Blessed Virgin to teach us how to be lovingly attentive at the moment of Consecration, when we receive Jesus in Communion ... Other details to keep in mind relate to our punctuality and the way we dress. A man who fails to love the Mass fails to love Christ. We must make an effort to ‘live’ the Mass with calm and serenity, with devotion and affection. Those who love acquire a finesse, a sensitivity of soul that makes them notice details that are sometimes very small, but that are important because they express the love
of a passionate heart. This is how we should attend the Holy Mass. And this is why I have always suspected that those who want the Mass to be over quickly show, with this insensitive attitude, that they have not yet realized what the sacrifice of the altar means.

Our time of thanksgiving after Mass sums up these very special moments of the day which can have such a decisive influence on our work, on our family life, on our cheerful dealings with others, on our peace and joy. Lived in this fashion, the Mass will never be an isolated event, but instead will serve us as real spiritual nourishment. The Mass will give to our actions an eternal meaning. The Mass will help us to live as children of God and co-Redeemers with Christ.

We should try to be at the side of Our Lady during the holy Mass, just as she stood by her Son on Calvary. As we offer up Jesus to the Father, we offer ourselves with him through the intercession of Mary. Most holy Father! Through the Immaculate Heart of Mary I offer you Jesus, your beloved Son. I offer myself through him, with him and in him for all his intentions, in the name of all creatures.
37. THE GREAT NET

37.1 The net is an image of the Church, containing as it does both the just and sinners.

Today’s Gospel contains a number of parables concerning the Kingdom of Heaven – the hidden treasure, the pearl of great value found by an enterprising merchant, the great net thrown into the sea which brings in all kinds of fish, some good and others bad. The fishermen throw the good fish into vessels. The bad fish are discarded. The net thrown into the sea is an image of the Church which holds both the just and sinners. The Lord teaches this same idea on other occasions. His Church contains saints as well as sinners, his friends and those others who abandon the house of the Father to waste the inheritance received in Baptism. Yet all belong to the Church, though in different ways.

Christ ‘holy, innocent and undefiled’ (Heb 7:26) knew nothing of sin (2 Cor 5:21), but came only to expiate the sins of the people (cf Heb 2:17). The Church, however, clasping sinners to her bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal. No matter what sins they commit, sinners continue to belong to the Church since spiritual goods still subsist in them – goods such as the indelible character received in Baptism and Confirmation, the theological virtues of faith and hope ... along with the charity that reaches them by reason of all the Christians struggling to be saints. Just as a sick or paralysed part of the body receives assistance from the rest of the body, so it is with the Mystical Body of Christ.

The Church continues to live in her children who are not in the state of grace. The Church seeks to work against the evil that corrupts their souls. She struggles to keep them in her fold, to bring them back to life with her love. She conserves them as one conserves a treasure not easily parted from. And it is not because she wants to carry around dead weight. She only hopes that through the power of patience, gentleness and pardon the sinner will make his return to her. It is like the withered branch which for lack of sap is allowed time to regain health and flower once more. The Church does not forget for one single day that she is a Mother. She continually prays for her children who are ill. She waits with infinite patience. She seeks to help them with abundant charity. We ought to bring to the Lord our prayers, works, joys and sufferings for the sake of those who belong to the Church but who do not participate fully in the life of grace. We should especially keep in mind those we happen to know personally who may need to return to the fullness of spiritual life.

37.2 The Church is made up of sinners, but it is without sin. The Church ought not to be judged on the basis of those who have not lived up to their Christian vocation.

The Church is made up of sinners, in some cases great sinners, yet she herself is free from sin. Just as one can say of Christ that he came from above and not from below, so also does the Church have a divine origin. Christ joined her to himself as his body and endowed her with the gift of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God ... This holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful and so it must be; it is expressed in many ways by the individuals who, each in his own state of life, tend to the perfection of love, thus sanctifying others. The Church knows that she is not a creature of this world. She is not a cultural phenomenon, nor a political institution, nor a scientific school, but a creation of the heavenly Father by means of Jesus Christ. Christ has given the Church his words and works, his life and salvation. She has been entrusted with this treasure for all generations to come.
Sinners belong to the Church, despite their sins. They still can return to the house of their Father, even if it be at the last moment of life. Having received Baptism, they carry within themselves the hope of reconciliation which not even the most grievous of sins can erase. The sin which the Church finds in her children does not belong to her. It belongs to her enemy. It would be a shame if we allowed people to judge the Church on the basis of what she is not.

According to Blessed John Paul II, the Church is a Mother, through whom we are born to a new life in God. A mother should be loved. She is holy with regard to her Founder, her works and her doctrine, but she is, nevertheless, composed of sinful men. It is our duty to make a positive contribution to the life of the Church, to help her progress along the way of faithful renewal. This is not accomplished by negative criticisms.[504]

When people speak of the so-called defects of the Church in days gone by or in the present, they betray a mistaken understanding of the nature of this supernatural institution. Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of the Lord which he obtained with his own blood.[505] Christ has watched over the Church from its foundation, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.[506] As Saint Paul writes to Timothy, the Church is the household of God ... the pillar and bulwark of the truth.[507]

If we love the Church, there will never arise in us a morbid interest in airing, as the faults of the Mother, the weaknesses of some of her children. The Church, the spouse of Christ, does not have to intone any ‘mea culpa’. But we do: ‘mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa’. The only true ‘mea culpa’ is a personal one, not the one which attacks the Church, pointing out and exaggerating the human defects which, in this holy mother, result from the presence in her of men whose actions can go far astray, but which can never destroy – nor even touch – that which we call the original and constitutive holiness of the Church.[508]

37.3 The fruits of sanctity.

The Church is the source of sanctity in the world. She continually offers to men the means for drawing close to God. Certainly our Holy Mother shines out spotless in her sacraments by means of which she brings forth her children and nourishes them; in her faith, which has never suffered contamination; in her most holy laws, by which she commands all men; and in her evangelical counsels which she proposes to all men; finally, in her heavenly gifts and charisms, by means of which, with inexhaustible fecundity, she brings forth armies of martyrs and virgins and confessors,[509]

As the fountain of sanctity, the Church has produced many saints down through the centuries. First there were the martyrs who gave their lives for the faith. Later, history records the testimony of innumerable men and women who have spent their lives for the love of God to help others in need. Has there ever been a human want for which the Church has not shown a maternal solicitude? Countless parents have led heroic lives of silent sacrifice while faithfully fulfilling the demands of their divine vocation. Similarly, there are those many men and women who strive to achieve holiness in the middle of the world by living apostolic celibacy. In sum, the Church is holy because all in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness.[510]

By virtue of the holiness of her Founder, the Church, the Bride of Christ, is forever young and beautiful, without spot or ... blemish.[511] She is always worthy of divine favour. The holiness of the Church is an inherent characteristic, part of her nature which does not depend upon the number of Christians nor upon the depth of their commitment to her. The Church is holy due to the constant
action of the Holy Spirit and not because of the behaviour of her human members. *I would also like you to consider that even if human failings were to outnumber acts of valour, the clear undeniable mystical reality of the Church, though unperceived by the senses, would still remain. The Church would still be the Body of Christ, Our Lord himself, the action of the Holy Spirit and the loving presence of the Father.*

As devout members of the People of God, we ask the Lord to increase our desire for personal sanctity so that we might be worthy sons of his Church. *For this sublime mission aimed at the flowering of a new age of evangelization in Europe, evangelizers with a special preparation are required today. There is a need for heralds of the Gospel who are experts in humanity, who have a profound knowledge of the heart of present-day man, participating in his joys and hopes, anguish and sadness, and who are at the same time contemplatives in love with God. For this we need new saints. ‘The great evangelizers of Europe have been the saints’. We must supplicate the Lord to increase the Church’s spirit of holiness and send us new saints to evangelize today’s world.*
38. FAITHFULNESS IN LITTLE THINGS

38.1 Jesus is always attentive to our needs. He teaches us to sanctify temporal realities.

Along the shores of the Sea of Galilee people from the surrounding villages gathered to hear the Lord. While Jesus was speaking, no one had given a thought to their weariness, to the hours they had been without food, to their lack of provisions and to the impossibility of procuring any. The people had become captivated by the words of the Lord. They had forgotten their hunger as well as their travel plans. Nevertheless, Jesus had the material needs of his audience in mind. He took pity on those exhausted people who had been following him for a number of days. So, he worked the splendid miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. After everyone had eaten, Jesus took advantage of the opportunity to teach a lesson to his Apostles – and to us – about the importance of little things. And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, that nothing may be lost’. So they gathered up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten. Jesus shows us his magnanimity in two ways: first by giving to the people as much as they wanted and secondly by making sure that no food was wasted. He educates by means of dramatic action as well as through insignificant detail.

The grandeur of the heart of Christ is revealed in both the large and small happenings of each day. \textit{The collecting of the left-overs is a way of showing us the value of little things done out of love for God – orderliness, cleanliness, finishing things completely.} Christ spent the better part of thirty years immersed in ordinary, everyday life. While He occupied himself in a simple workshop, the Son of Man was engaged in the Redemption of humanity. According to the Gospels, during the years of his public life Jesus remained in continual conversation with his heavenly Father. Yet Jesus was fully aware of what was going on all around him. Having brought the daughter of Jairus back to life, He asked that she be given something to eat. Right after performing the miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus, He told the bewildered spectators: \textit{Unbind him, and let him go.} Jesus sensed when it was time for his disciples to get some rest. He teaches us to treat human situations according to their proper importance. We have to sanctify our daily concerns. We cannot live in the clouds. We should be actively involved in the lives of others.

In the Second Reading of the Mass, Saint Paul reminds us of how we should behave towards the people around us: \textit{with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love.} The Lord is calling us to live those virtues which make life pleasant for others. This is how we will demonstrate our love of God.

38.2 Drawing close to the Lord through the faithful fulfilment of our duties. The value of little things.

\textit{Gather up the fragments left over ...} This would seem to be a detail of little importance in comparison with the spectacular miracle, but it is the Lord who makes the request. Our entire life is made up of many things which are very simple and mundane. We develop virtues by our habitual, day-to-day struggle. It is in this struggle that we forge our sanctity. \textit{‘Love means deeds and not sweet words.’} Deeds, deeds! And a resolution: \textit{I will continue to tell you often, Lord, that I love you. How often have I repeated this today!} But, with your grace, it will be my conduct above all that shows it. It
will be the little things of each day which, with silent eloquence, will cry out before you, showing you my Love.

The Lord values order, punctuality, care for the books we use and the instruments we work with, our friendliness towards colleagues, our dedication to spouse, children, friends. We have to fight against any sense of routine in our relationships or in our work. We have to want to give new meaning to each day and each hour, even though we may have been doing the same thing for years on end. Life becomes a bore when we give in to any sense of routine. We can find a broad field for living mortification in our daily work – not putting people down, working with intensity, carrying out our tasks with a spirit of service ...

It is possible that we might some day be challenged to save someone else’s life at the risk of our own. It’s possible, but not very likely. Yet we do find opportunities virtually every single day to give of ourselves for others. This may involve having a smile for someone we don’t really like, giving a word of encouragement to a member of the family who seems tired or out of sorts, a willingness to withhold our opinion for the sake of avoiding an argument, a conscious effort to listen with interest to someone we don’t find very interesting. It can happen that an action of little consequence (a friendly greeting, a tiny favour, a thank-you note) can produce in others a good result out of all proportion to what we might have expected. These simple courtesies help others to feel wanted and appreciated. Social life thus becomes a reflection of God himself. This is in marked contrast to those situations where people treat one another as mere objects, with careless disregard for the most fundamental aspects of human dignity.

Little things are essential to our struggle to live all of the virtues. Faith can be expressed with a momentary act of love when we pass by a Tabernacle in the middle of a city. Fortitude can be lived whenever we interrupt an impure conversation, whenever we take a stand for our beliefs, for Jesus Christ and his Church.

Christ awaits us in everyday life. This is the ‘real world’ to which we belong, which we need to sanctify by our diligence and ‘sporting spirit’. It is here that we will learn to appreciate what He appreciates – those treasures which last on into eternal life. Our hope is that we will be fortunate enough to win the Master’s praise: Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much.

38.3 Whatever God may ask of us is within our reach. We need to be faithful even in those areas that seem of little importance.

Our life is made up of many small actions. If we channel all these actions in the direction of God’s Will, they will carry us very far. Many small steps will take us to the end of our journey. Faithfulness in little things will steel us in the face of any great temptation. As we read in the book of Sirach: A workman who is a drunkard will not become rich; he who despises small things will fail little by little.

God is asking something of us at every moment, and that something is always well within our reach. As a consequence of our initial correspondence to grace, there follow more graces for the second challenge. If we are faithful, one grace succeeds upon another.

By focussing on little things, we enjoy the added advantage of diminishing our vanity. Who will honour us for giving up our seat on the bus? What testimonial will we receive for having kept order in our work area? Who will build a statue to the mother who smiles, to the professor who carefully prepares each lecture, to the student who really studies for an exam, to the doctor who treats a patient with respect for his dignity?
When we offer up our work we transform little things into big things, human details into supernatural events. Every morning we should make our morning offering with greater and greater devotion. We will see the human and divine come together in a unity of life which will allow us to win Heaven little by little. To be faithful in little things we need to have a great love for the Lord. We have to foster an ardent desire to be united with him, to find him in the normal circumstances of daily life. This constant care for little things will nourish our love for God.

Our Blessed Mother will teach us to appreciate what seems to be of little importance, to care for details. This should be our approach in family life, in social relations, in the fulfilment of our duties and in our dealings with God.
SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY: YEAR C

39. LEARNING TO ASK

39.1 We should pray frequently about our divine filiation.

Jesus had the habit of praying early in the morning in out-of-the-way places. His disciples would often find the Lord thoroughly absorbed in conversation with his heavenly Father. *He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray ...’* We ought to make the same request: Jesus, teach me how to deal with you, tell me what I should ask you for ... We should do this because we can frequently find ourselves in front of God without knowing what to say to him or how we should speak to him.

The Lord answered his disciple’s request with the perfect prayer, the *Our Father*. He pronounced every word with care. He taught them how to put all their trust in prayer to their Father God. *Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’ ... I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs.* Whenever we talk to God we are most probably asking him for something. This is because we are children of God, children in need. For his part, God wants only to spend himself on us. *What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?*

The Lord solemnly promises to be attentive to our requests: *For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.* Jesus cannot be more emphatic. We are simply deluding ourselves if we think that we have no need of God, having grown accustomed to our faults and failures. *He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.* We should go to the Tabernacle exactly as the sick and the suffering used to go to Jesus in the New Testament. In the words of Blessed John Paul II, *What does praying mean? Prayer means feeling one’s own insufficiency through the various necessities which man has to face, necessities that are part of his life. Such as, for example, the need for bread to which Christ refers in the example of that man who wakes up his friend at midnight to ask him for bread. Similar necessities are numerous. The need for bread is, in a way, a symbol of all material necessities, the necessities of the human body, the necessities of this existence which springs from the fact that man is a body. But the range of these necessities is wider.*

Humility is a prerequisite to confident conversation with God. We need to realise our limitations before we can appreciate how much we depend on our Father God. Again, from the Pope, *To learn to pray means ‘to learn the Father’. If we learn the ‘Father’ reality in the full sense of the word, in its full dimension, we have learned everything ... To learn who the Father is means learning what absolute trust is. To learn the Father means acquiring the certainty that he absolutely cannot refuse anything. This is all said in today’s Gospel. He does not refuse you even when everything, materially and psychologically, seems to indicate refusal. He never refuses you.* He will never abandon us. In our conversation with God we have to keep in mind our divine filiation and our human limitations.

39.2 We should ask for spiritual and material goods insofar as they bring us closer to God.

*For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.* In our prayer to God, the first things we should seek from him are spiritual goods – the grace to
love him more each day, to have an authentic desire for sanctity. We should also ask God for material goods insofar as they serve to bring us closer to him. These goods can include good health, economic well-being, getting a job ...

Saint Augustine advises us: *Pray for temporal goods in private, and rest in the knowledge that they come to us from him who knows what is best for us. Did you ask and not get what you wanted? Trust in your Father. If it would have been good for you, you would have received it. Before God, you are much as a little child is before you. All day long, the child cries his eyes out so that you will give him a knife to play with. You wisely refuse his plea and pay no attention to his wailing. When the child demands to ride your horse, you won't let him. The child doesn't know how to ride, and may get injured or even killed as a result. You deny him in little things so as to preserve more important things. You want the child to grow up safely and possess all his own goods without danger.*[528] This is how the Lord is with us. So many times we are like the child who doesn’t realise what it is he is asking for.

God always wants what is best for us. Man’s happiness, therefore, is always to be found in his full identification with the Divine Will. Even though what God wills may sometimes not seem so appealing from a human point of view, it necessarily leads to what is in our best interests. Blessed John Paul II once recalled how impressed he was by the cheerfulness of a man he met in a hospital during the Warsaw Uprising. *This man achieved happiness by some other way because visibly, judging his physical state from the medical point of view, there was no reason to be so happy, to feel so well, and to consider himself heard by God. Yet he was heard in another aspect of his humanity.*[529] This aspect was the identification of his human will with the Divine Will. We have to want the Will of God: *thy Will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* This is the best path to follow. It is the one prepared for us by the Lord. *Tell him: Lord, I want nothing other than what You want. Even those things I am asking you for at present, if they take me an inch away from your Will, don’t give them to me.*[530] If you don’t want these things, why should I? You know best. Your Will be done.

### 39.3 The prayer of Abraham.

The First Reading in today’s Mass presents us with a moving example – the prayer of Abraham, *the friend of God*, for those cities which had offended God. *Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? 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?* Abraham tries to save the cities from destruction by giving his beloved God a hard time. He makes his case to God that even a small number of holy people are an *immense treasure*.

The Lord takes such great pleasure in those who love him that He is ready to forgive thousands of sinners for the sake of a handful of just men. God is willing to forget the sins and iniquities of entire cities for the sake of the love and adoration of ten people. This is an unmistakable teaching for all of us who seek to follow the Lord closely. We may at times be tempted to question the merit of our struggle when there are so many people around us who live without a care for God and his rights. One day the Lord will show us the enormous efficacy of our humble prayers, of the sacrifices made by a mother for her family’s welfare, of the suffering offered up by a sick person for the Church, of the merit of an hour of study or work converted into prayer ...

Yahweh was willing to save Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of only ten just men. According to divine logic, the good works of a few people can outweigh in value the sins of thousands. When we struggle to be faithful to the Lord we are bound to experience the joy of knowing that we are pleasing him. For God listens attentively to our prayer. We ought to pray every day for our society, a society which seems to be moving farther and farther away from its Creator. As Blessed John Paul II pointed
out in this regard, *I think that Abraham’s prayer and its content is very relevant in the times in which we live. Such a prayer is so necessary, to negotiate with God for every just man, to redeem the world from injustice.*

We finish today’s prayer with this resolve, that we must learn to pray as sons of the Father. We have to go to the Lord frequently each day. Truly, like those many sick people in the Gospels, we need to be brought to Jesus to be cured. The Blessed Virgin will teach us how to be daring in our petitions. We ask her to help us do an effective apostolate where we live and work.
SEVENTEENTH WEEK: MONDAY

40. LEAVEN IN THE DOUGH

40.1 Christians, like leaven in dough, are called to transform the world from within.

The Lord teaches us in today’s Gospel that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened. The people listening to our Lord were quite familiar with this phenomenon. They had witnessed it many times in their own homes. By mixing a tiny quantity of yeast into a mass of dough, one would soon have a good loaf of bread.

In reflecting upon this comparison, we should first consider how little leaven is needed in order to transform the mass of dough. Despite outside appearances, the effect of the small portion of yeast is surprisingly great. This thought should lead us to be daring in the apostolate, since the power behind the Christian ferment is not merely human; it is the power of the Holy Spirit acting in the Church. In addition, the Lord takes our limitations and frailties into account. Is yeast, by its nature, better than dough? No. But it is what makes the dough rise and become good and nourishing food. Reflect a moment, even if only in general terms, on the way yeast works in the making of bread— that simple, staple food which is available to everyone. In many places (you yourselves may have seen it done) the baking process is like a real ceremonial, ending up with a splendid product that you can almost taste with your eyes. They start with good flour, of top quality if possible. Then the dough is worked in the kneading-trough and the yeast is mixed in. It is a long and patient job. The dough must now be left to rest; this is essential for the leaven to do its work and make the dough rise. Meanwhile, the oven is made ready, its temperature rising as the logs of wood burn bright. The risen dough is placed in the glowing oven and turns into high quality bread, wonderfully light and fresh. This result would never have been possible had it not been for the small amount of leaven, which dissolved and disappeared among the other ingredients, working effectively and passing unnoticed. Without this little bit of leavening yeast, the mass of dough would have been something useless and inedible. In the course of our daily lives we can be the cause of light or darkness, joy or sadness, peace or anxiety. We can be a dead weight holding people back or the ferment that transforms the mass of dough. Our lifetime on earth is not something indifferent. We can bring others closer to Christ. We can also drive people away from him.

The Lord sends us out to proclaim his message to the ends of the earth. We are to bring it to those who do not know him personally, on a one-to-one basis, just as the first Christians did with their families, their colleagues and their neighbours. To do this apostolate, we need not resort to strange behaviour. And when they see that we live the same life as they do, they will ask us, ‘Why are you so happy? How do you manage to overcome selfishness and comfort-seeking? Who has taught you to understand others, to live well and to spend yourself in the service of others?’ Then we must disclose to them the divine secret of Christian existence. We must speak to them about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, Mary. The time has come for us to use our poor words to communicate the depth of God’s love which grace has poured into our souls.

Are we leaven in our family, in our place of work or study? Do we show by our spirit of peace and joy that Christ is alive?

40.2 Good example.

We should also consider the fact that the leaven has an effect only when it is in contact with the
dough. Without being distinguishable from the dough, but working from within, the leaven does the work of transformation. The woman not only inserts the leaven, but she also kneads it into the mass and hides its presence. In like manner, you have to mix in with other people and become identified with them … Just as the leaven is hidden but does not disappear, so, little by little, all of the mass is transformed to the proper degree.[535] Only in the middle of the world can we bring all things to be renewed by God. It is for this task that we have been called by divine vocation.

The first Christians acted as a fermenting yeast in a world that was in decay. In a short space of time they were able to spread the faith to their families, to the Senate, to the army and even to the Imperial Palace itself. We started only a short while ago and now we fill the world and everything that belongs to it – houses, cities, islands, towns, assemblies, even unto the army barracks, the clans and the classrooms, the palaces, the Senate, the Forum.[536]

Without eccentricities, as ordinary faithful, we can show what it means to follow Christ closely. We should be known as persons who are loyal, sincere, cheerful and hard-working. We should behave in an exemplary manner in family and social life, fulfilling our duties with the serenity befitting sons and daughters of God. Our life, with all our weaknesses, should be a sign that brings people to Christ. Our example should lead people to think, ‘This is the way to reach God’.

Ordinary customs and courtesies, for example, can be the first steps towards intimacy with God for many persons. These customs make life in society more amenable, but they frequently represent only the appearance of friendship. Christians should practise these customs as the fruit of true charity, as manifestations of a deep concern for the welfare of others. They should be the external reflection of an intimate union with God.

One of the most convincing and attractive aspects of a Christian’s life is to be found in the practice of temperance. No matter where we find ourselves, we ought always to give good example in this virtue. It should be shown in our sincerity. Genuine sincerity has attracted many people to begin their encounter with God. Our temperance should be apparent at meals, in the way we spend our money, in the way we choose to relax and find entertainment. Christ has put us on earth to act as beacons that give light, as doctors who teach, so that we might fulfil our duty as leaven … It would certainly not be necessary to preach doctrine if your lives were so radiant, nor would it be necessary to have recourse to words if your works gave testimony. There would not be a single pagan if we conducted ourselves like true Christians.[537]

With this focus on our good example of peace and joy, of small but frequent acts of service, of work well done, it will be easier to bring those who live and work around us to the Lord. This is especially true with regard to our apostolate of Confession, which the Church says is so urgently needed in these times. All one’s cares and efforts are of little value compared to the interests of a single soul. He who brings back a lost sheep to the fold has won for himself a powerful intercessor before God.[538] We should seek to gain many such ‘powerful intercessors’ by means of our patient and constant labours.

40.3 Union with Christ makes us apostles.

To be vibrant, to act as ferment, we need to be united to Christ. We cannot afford to allow our love for the Lord to weaken, since it is the interior strength which drives our apostolate. Without this union, all of our work and effort will be without fruit. There have always been those who believed they could transform the world by their own efforts. How quickly have their hopes been dashed to the ground! It is as if to fulfil the words of the Lord: Apart from me you can do nothing.[539]

If leaven is not used for fermenting, it rots. There are two ways leaven can disappear, either by
giving life to dough, or by being wasted, a perfect tribute to selfishness and barrenness. The Christian wastes away when he gives in to lukewarmness, that being a distaste for the things of God and a preoccupation with self. A Christian acts as leaven when his faith is proved by deeds. Love for Christ is the source of all apostolate; it is what makes the Christian into leaven. We have to foster this love continually through personal prayer and the frequent reception of the sacraments. 

We might measure our love for God by the amount of effort we put into influencing others at work, at home, and all around us. If we want to become daring in our ordinary life we need only look to Our Lady. The perfect example of this type of spiritual and apostolic life is the most Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Apostles, who while leading the life common to all here on earth, one filled with family concerns and labours, was always intimately united with her Son and in an entirely unique way cooperated in the work of the Saviour.
41. THE FRIENDS OF GOD

41.1 Friendship with Jesus.

During their long journey through the desert, the chosen people would set up the tent of meeting outside of their camp. It was a holy site, away from the business of the world. To visit the Lord one had to leave the camp. It was there that Moses went to plead for his people before the Lord: Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. There a number of occasions when Holy Scripture reveals God to be a friend of men. Through the Prophet Isaiah God speaks of Abraham, my friend. The chosen people rely on this friendship to obtain pardon and divine protection. Even more, all of Revelation tends towards the formation of a people who are friends with God, bound to him by an intimate Covenant which is continually renewed. Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of his love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with himself. This divine plan came to fruition in the fullness of time when the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, became man. Friendship presupposes a certain equality and personal contact, but the distance between God and man is infinite. God took on a human nature so that man could take a part in his divinity by means of sanctifying grace.

Friendship requires mutual love. God reached out to us, and, thus, we were able to correspond. We love him because he first loved us. Man corresponds by accepting God’s love, opening his soul to him, allowing himself to be loved and expressing his own love in deeds.

The essence of the friendship between God and men is to be found in the nature of charity, which is a supernatural gift. God’s love has been poured into our hearts. This gift allows us to love God with the same love by which he loves us. Jesus says to us, As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. Jesus prays to his Father: That the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them. The Christian’s joy is rooted in the sure knowledge that God loves him. For God said: You are my friends ...

In the course of his earthly life Our Lord was always open to friendship with those who approached him. On some occasions it was He who took the initiative to bring people to himself, as in the cases of Zacchaeus and that of the Samaritan woman. He was a friend to his disciples, and they were quite aware of his concern. When they didn’t understand something, they would draw close to him with confidence, as is shown in today’s Gospel. They ask the Lord: Explain to us the parable ... So the Lord takes them apart and reveals to them the meaning of his teachings. The disciples joined in Christ’s happiness and in Christ’s worries. Christ encouraged them whenever necessary.

In a like manner the Lord now offers his friendship to us from the Tabernacle. There He will console us, encourage us, pardon us. From the Tabernacle, as in the tent of meeting, the Lord speaks with everyone face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. Here there is the great difference that our temples house the God made Man, Jesus, the same one who was born of the Blessed Virgin Mary; he who was to die for us on a cross.

41.2 Jesus Christ, the perfect model of true friendship.

Jesus enjoyed speaking with everyone who came to see him, and with those he met along the road.
He took advantage of those moments to enter into souls, to raise up hearts to a higher plane. If the person concerned was well disposed, Jesus would give him or her the grace to be converted and make a commitment to his service. He also wants to speak with us in the time of prayer. For this to happen, we have to be willing to talk and be open to real friendship. *He himself has changed us from being servants to being friends, as he clearly stated: ‘You are my friends if you do what I command you’* (John 15:14). He has given us a model which we should imitate. As a result, we have to give our willingness as a friend, telling him what we have in our soul and paying close attention to what He carries in his heart. Once we open up our soul, He will reveal his own. The Lord has declared: ‘I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you’ (John 15:14). The true friend hides nothing from his friend. He reveals all of his spirit, just as Jesus poured into the hearts of the Apostles the mysteries of the Father.[554]

Christians should be men and women with a great capacity for friendship, because close contact with Jesus Christ prepares us to put aside our egoism, our excessive preoccupation with personal problems. We can thus be open to all those who meet us along the way, even though they be of different ages, interests, cultures or positions. Real friendship is not born of a mere occasional meeting, or simply from mutual need of assistance. Not even camaraderie, a shared task or the same roof will necessarily lead to friendship. Two people who cross paths every day on the same escalator or the same bus, or in the same office, are not thought to be friends. Neither is mutual sympathy, in itself, a proof of genuine friendship.

According to Saint Thomas,[555] not all love equals friendship, but only that love which involves benevolence. This is the attitude where we care for someone in such a way that we want that person’s good. There is a greater possibility of friendship when there is a greater reason to share the good which one possesses. *True friends are those who have something to give and, at the same time, have sufficient humility to receive. This behaviour is proper to virtuous men. When vice is shared it does not produce friendship, but complicity, which is not the same thing. Evil can never be legitimised by a fake friendship.[556]* Sin never joins people together in friendship or love.

We Christians should give our friends understanding, attention, encouragement, consolation, optimism and joy, along with many acts of service. But, above all, we should give them the greatest good we have, which is Christ himself, the ‘Best Friend’ of all. True friendship leads to apostolate, we share the wonderful goods of the faith.

### 41.3 Fostering friendship with the people around us. Apostolate and friendship.

*Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.* He who lives in friendship with God will understand more readily the value of friendship in itself, and, without instrumentalizing it, will be the cause of a vibrant apostolate.

A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter – he that has found one has found a treasure. *There is nothing so precious as a faithful friend, and no scales can measure his excellence.*[557] Friendship has to be protected and defended against the forgetfulness which comes with the passage of time. It also has to be safeguarded from envy, which is usually what is the most corruptive force.[558] Hopefully, we will one day be able to echo those words at the close of one man’s autobiography, *Of one thing I can boast. I believe that I have never lost a single friend.*

Friends are expected to be loyal, to be faithful in difficulties, to overcome the test of time and contradictions, to come to the defence of one another in the hour of need. As Saint Ambrose counsels, *Be steadfast in true friendship, because there is nothing so precious in human relations. It is a great consolation in this life to have a friend to whom we can open our heart. It helps a lot to have a friend*
to share our joys and sorrows, and to sustain us in hard times.[559]

We should foster sincere friendships with our neighbours, with our partners at work, with those persons we run into on a frequent basis. We should strive to be friends with our Guardian Angel. We all need a lot of company, company from Heaven and company on earth. Have great devotion to the Holy Angels! Friendship is a very human thing, but it is also very much a thing of God; just as our life is both human and divine.[560] Our Guardian Angel will not be put off by our moods and defects. He knows our weaknesses, and in spite of them he loves us very much.[561]

Over and above all friendships we must work to strengthen our bonds with that great friend, who will never fail you.[562] We can find him with ease. He is always ready to receive us, to stay with us as long as we desire. Go about the world as you will, change your home as often as you will, in the nearest Catholic Church your Friend is always there, and day by day He is at home to you.[563] There we can speak with him face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. He is forever waiting for us. He wants us to come and visit him ... and listen to him. In him we will truly learn how to be friends of our friends. We will be open to every sincere friendship, knowing that this is the natural road for Christ, our Friend, to enter into souls.
SEVENTEENTH WEEK: WEDNESDAY

42. THE TREASURE AND THE PEARL OF GREAT VALUE

42.1 A divine vocation is something of immense value and a proof of special love by God.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

With these two parables from today’s Gospel Jesus describes the great worth of the Kingdom of Heaven, as well as how people should pursue it. The treasure and the pearl are images which have been traditionally used to express the grandeur of divine vocation, the way to follow Christ in this life so as to be with him forever in the next.

The treasure signifies that abundance of gifts which one receives with a vocation – grace to overcome obstacles, to grow in fidelity day by day, to do apostolate. The pearl represents the beauty and splendour of the call. Not only is it something of great worth, but it is also the most perfect ideal which a person can follow.

There is a key difference between the two parables with respect to the prizes. The discovery of the pearl presupposes a great amount of effort, a search, while the treasure buried in the field seems to have been discovered almost by accident. This is how it is with Jesus and the way He calls people. Many find their vocation almost without looking. Other people are restless in their hearts until they find the pearl of great value. In the latter case, it is God who sows the restlessness in the soul. Many have said to our Lord in the intimacy of their souls, All these I have observed; what do I still lack? Whether the search has been a rapid one or long-drawn-out, the prize is of enormous worth. It is an immense honour, a motive for a great and holy pride, a mark of predilection, a very special affection that God has shown at a particular time, but which has been in his mind from all eternity.

Once a person has discovered his vocation he has to make an effort to live up to it. The Lord calls and invites, but He will not force our will.

After the pearl has been discovered or the treasure found, one more step is required. It is the personal response – which is identical in both parables. The man went and sold all that he had and bought it. Generosity and detachment are indispensable conditions for perseverance in a vocation. You wrote ... This passage from the Gospel has taken root in my soul. I had read it so many times before, without grasping its meaning, its divine flavour. Yes, ‘everything’. The prudent man has to sell everything to obtain the treasure – the precious pearl of Glory. There is nothing in the whole wide world of such great value!

42.2 God plays a part in the life of every person. He beckons to everyone.

As soon as someone has discovered his divine vocation, the disparate pieces of his past life seem to come together. What had previously been a riddle or a mystery is now clearly understood – why we got to know a certain person, the special helps we experienced at different moments ... The vocation also casts its light upon our future life, which we now see to be full of meaning.

Neither of the protagonists in the parables showed hesitation or regret at the thought of selling all that they possessed. Their new wealth was so tremendous that nothing could put it in the shade. The same reaction holds true for those who give all of their love to Christ. They give all and they get all.
The Lord makes a point in order to emphasise the joy that accompanies the sale of the goods. We might wonder what these men were selling – a house, furniture, ornaments ... things that represented years of work. But they sold everything, without haggling, without a lot of ‘hemming and hawing’, with joy. They sold everything because they knew very well the worth of the treasure they would be getting in exchange. Beside this wealth, all things pale in importance.

God plays a part in the life of every person, and does so in a concrete way, at a certain age, in a special situation ... He challenges us according to the nature of these circumstances, foreseen by him from all eternity. Jesus passes by and beckons. To some, He calls at the first hour,[570] when they are young. He asks them for their ambitions, their hopes and dreams, all of which seem so full of promise. Others are called when they have reached an age of maturity. Still others are called in their final years. The Lord finds the majority of these men and women immersed in the middle of the world. He prefers them to remain in the world, that they may sanctify the world through the exercise of their professional work. The Lord finds others who are married. He asks them to sanctify the family, with all its joys and sorrows.

Regardless of what our age happens to be when we receive our vocation, we will find that the Lord will give it to us along with a wonderful interior youthfulness. Ecce nova facio omnia,[571] says the Lord. I can renew all things. I can teach you to throw off routine in your life, to raise your vision to a higher plane. What, then, is the best age at which to give oneself to the Lord? The age when God calls. The most important thing is to be generous with him, without questioning God’s timetable. It is never too late to follow him. And it is never too soon.

42.3 Generosity in response to God’s call.

... the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. Saint Gregory the Great has written that nothing has the slightest value compared to that one pearl. The soul gives up everything for the sake of that treasure, forsaking all that it had found beautiful in the world. The splendour of that finest of pearls has captured the soul’s complete attention.[572]

Whoever is called, no matter what his or her personal circumstances, ought to give the Lord all He asks for. Since circumstances vary, giving everything often does not mean that everyone gives in the same way. For example, a married person cannot abandon what belongs to his family – love for the spouse, dedication to the welfare and the education of the children ... On the contrary, giving everything for this person entails living the same life in an entirely new manner, which means doing a better job of fulfilling one’s ordinary duties. In the real world of the husband and wife who belatedly discover the vocational meaning of matrimony, this ‘discovery’ always appears as part of their Christian vocation. Their response is an important aspect of their total obedience in faith.[573]

To follow our Lord more closely we cannot be content to remain in our own little world. There should be no doubt in our minds that clarity has to be brought to souls. It is necessary that we enter into our environment so as to transform it from within. We should increase the number of our friendships, giving light to many souls.

The greatest event of our life is our receiving the calling from our Lord, just as it was for those he called on the shores of the lake. Yet to follow Christ wholeheartedly is never easy. The person who enjoys a more or less steady job, who thinks that the pattern of his life is ‘set’, should recognize the danger lurking in this false tranquillity, which may even be considered one’s rightful due. Christ asks us to break with routine, to cast aside the mediocre, to go beyond a life of compromise. With the divine vocation Christ challenges us to undergo a profound change in our daily conduct. God asks
for everything, including whatever we may have been reserving for ourselves. He gives us light to
see our failings, which we may have up till now looked upon as beyond reforming, but which turn out
to be the price for securing the pearl of great value. It is Christ himself who seeks us out, saying, *You
did not choose me, but I chose you.* And when Christ calls, He gives at the same time the graces we
will need to follow him, from the beginning of the way and throughout the rest of our life.

Saint Joseph, our Father and Lord, found the treasure of his life and the *pearl of great value* in his
mission of watching over Jesus and Mary here on earth. Today we ask him to help us to live up to
whatever God wants of us, and that we do so with generosity and joy. We rest in the knowledge that
nothing is so worthwhile as the fulfilment of one’s proper vocation.
43. CHRIST’S PRESENCE IN THE TABERNACLE

43.1 God lives in our midst.

Throughout the Old Testament God makes known his intention of having an ongoing presence among men. The tent of meeting was the first temple to God in the desert. Upon the tent there came to rest a cloud which symbolized the glory of God and his presence. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. The cloud was a sign of the divine presence.

Much later, the Temple of Jerusalem was the place where the Israelites worshipped God. It was the place they had been longing for while they were in the desert. They would recall the enthusiasm of old when they would go to the house of the Lord singing songs of joy and praise: How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, yea, faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. To be far from the sanctuary was to be deprived of true happiness. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

In the fullness of time, the Word became flesh. In the moment of the Incarnation the power of the Most High overshadowed Our Lady. This is an expression of the omnipotence of God. Following upon the Incarnation, the Virgin became the Tabernacle of God. The Word of God dwelt among us.

Saint John uses a Greek verb for ‘dwelt’ which originally meant ‘to pitch one’s tent’, hence, to live in a place. The careful reader of Scripture will immediately think of the tabernacle, or tent, in the period of the exodus from Egypt, where God showed his presence before all the people of Israel through certain signs of his glory such as the cloud covering the tent ... In many passages of the Old Testament it is announced that God ‘will dwell in the midst of the people’ (cf for example, Jer 7:3; Ezek 43:9; Sir 24:8). These signs of God’s presence, first in the pilgrim Tent of the Ark in the desert and then in the Temple of Jerusalem, are followed by the most wonderful form of God’s presence among us – Jesus Christ, perfect God and perfect Man, in whom the ancient promise is fulfilled in a way that far exceeded men’s greatest expectations. Also the promise made through Isaiah about the ‘Emmanuel’ or ‘God-with-us’ (Is 7:14; cf Matt 1:23) is completely fulfilled through this dwelling of the Incarnate Son of God among us.

From that time onwards, we can say with exactitude that God lives among us. We can be next to him every day, closer to him than anyone might imagine possible. God truly dwells among us!

43.2 Christ is present in the Tabernacle.

From the moment of the Incarnation we can affirm that God is with us in the personal presence of Jesus Christ. As both true God and true Man, Jesus is closer to us than any other being. Jesus is God-with-us. In earlier times the Israelites would say that God was ‘with them’. Now we can say this in a very literal sense. When Christ travelled about Palestine, He made an effort to preach in many towns. And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, we read in today’s Gospel. God left one town to go and meet other people. When the priest consecrates the host during Holy Mass, he brings Christ to the altar with his Holy Humanity. He is there in the Eucharist with a special presence for as long as the sacramental species last. This presence affects the Body of Christ in a direct way and the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity in an indirect way. The Word is tied to Christ’s
Humanity, while the Father and the Holy Spirit are related by the mutual immanence of their divine Persons. Christ is really present in the Tabernacle with his Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. It can be said quite literally that ‘God is here’, close to me. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me ...

Down through the centuries the Church has developed a precise way of describing this eucharistic presence, often requiring such exact definition to counter erroneous beliefs. The eucharistic presence is a real presence. It is not symbolic, nor does it signify or insinuate any image. The eucharistic presence is a true presence. It is not fictitious or merely the product of the imagination or the will. It is substantial, because the words of the consecration spoken by the priest change the substance of the bread and the wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. Every theological explanation which seeks some understanding of this mystery must, in order to be in accord with Catholic faith, maintain that in the reality itself, independently of our mind, the bread and wine have ceased to exist after the Consecration, so that it is the adorable Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus that from then on are really before us under the sacramental species of bread and wine...

As a result of transubstantiation, the species of bread and wine ... contain a new ‘reality’ which we may justly term ‘ontological’. Not that there lies under those species what was already there before, but something quite different; and that not only because of the faith of the Church, but in objective reality ...

Jesus is present in our Tabernacles whether or not we take advantage of this ineffable wonder. He is there, with his Body, his Blood, his Soul and his Divinity. God made Man. He could not be closer. The Church possesses the Author of all grace and the cause of our sanctification. We may venture to say that the eucharistic presence of Christ is the sacramental prolongation of the Incarnation.

From the Tabernacle Jesus invites us to bring to him our concerns and our petitions. In the visit to the Blessed Sacrament and other acts of worship offered to the Holy Eucharist we give thanks for this gift. There we can repair to find new strength, to tell Jesus that we miss him, to tell him that we need him very much. ...the Eucharist is reserved in the churches and oratories as in the spiritual centre of a religious community or of a parish, yes, of the universal Church and of all of humanity, since beneath the appearance of the species, Christ is contained, the invisible Head of the Church, the Redeemer of the World, the Centre of all hearts, ‘by whom all things are and by whom we exist’ (1 Cor 8:6).

43.3 Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. The hymn Adoro te devote.

It has been the constant practice of the Church to adore Christ present in the Tabernacle. If we recall how much reverence the Israelites had for their tent of meeting in the desert and for the Temple at Jerusalem, which were figures or images of reality, how much more reverence should we have for Christ truly present in the Tabernacle? In the first centuries of the Church the main reason for reserving the Sacred Species was for the sake of those who were not able to get to Holy Mass, especially the sick and the dying, and for those in prison due to religious persecution. The Sacrament of the Lord was brought with piety and fervour so that these Christians might also receive communion. Later, faith in the presence of Christ led to the cult of the Blessed Sacrament. The Church has authoritatively approved these practices. The Council of Trent declared, There is, therefore, no room left for doubt that all the faithful of Christ in accordance with a custom always received in the Catholic Church offer in veneration the worship of ‘latria’ which is due to the true God, to this most Holy Sacrament.

In the thirteenth century Saint Thomas Aquinas composed a eucharistic hymn which embodies the faith of the Church in a faithful and pious manner. We should make this hymn our own so as to
nourish our piety and give honour to the Blessed Sacrament. *Adoro te devote latens deitas* ...

*O Godhead hid, devoutly I adore thee,*
*Who truly art within the forms before me;*
*To thee my heart I bow with bended knee,*
*As failing quite in contemplating Thee.*

Here we have all the truths of the Faith. We have understanding with humility and thanksgiving, amazement before the power of God, surprise at the extent of his mercy. With the confidence gained by having him so close by, we ask the Lord for his grace to unite ourselves to his most holy Will.

Next to the Tabernacle we will learn how to love. There we will draw the strength necessary to remain faithful. There we will find consolation in times of sorrow. He waits for us always and He rejoices when we are next to him, even if only for a short while. There Jesus waits for his people who suffer the contradictions of this life. He comforts them with the warmth of his understanding and his love. It is in the Tabernacle that those words of our Lord come to life: *Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*[589] We will not fail to visit him. He is waiting for us. How many are the gifts He has prepared for us!
SEVENTEENTH WEEK: FRIDAY

44. WITHOUT HUMAN RESPECT

44.1 Having the courage to follow Christ in whatever environment we are in.

When Jesus began his public life many of his neighbours and relatives took him for a madman.[590] On his first visit to Nazareth, which we read about in today’s Gospel, his relatives deny seeing in him anything supernatural or extraordinary.[591] In their comments, one can see that their envy is barely concealed. Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter’s son? ... And they took offence at him.

Right from the start, Jesus faced a steady stream of insults and abuse born of cowardly egoism, because He proclaimed the Word without human respect. This ill-treatment increased steadily with time, until it broke out into calumny and open persecution, culminating in the death sentence. Christ’s fortitude was recognized even by his enemies, who said, Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men.[592]

Christ asks his disciples to imitate him in this practice. Christians should foster and defend their well-earned professional, moral and social prestige, since it belongs to the essence of human dignity. This prestige is also an important component of our personal apostolate. Yet we should not forget that our conduct will meet with opposition from those who openly oppose Christian morality and those who practise a watered-down version of the Faith. It is possible that the Lord will ask of us the sacrifice of our good name, and even of life itself. With the help of his grace we will struggle to do his Will. Everything we have belongs to the Lord.

Each Christian has to put aside any fears of ‘rocking the boat’ should his upright conduct provoke criticism or rejection. Whoever out of human respect would hide his Christian identity in the midst of a pagan environment would merit this denunciation of Jesus: Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.[593] Our Lord teaches us that confessing our faith is a requirement for being his disciple, no matter what the consequences may be.

This is the way many of Christ’s first disciples conducted themselves. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were hidden disciples of the Lord, but they stepped forward as Christians at the hour when all seemed lost. Unlike many others, they are courageous in the face of authority, declaring their love for Christ ‘audacter’ – ‘boldly’ – in the hour of cowardice.[594] This is how the Apostles behaved before the Sanhedrin and the pagan persecutions. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.[595] As the dauntless Saint Paul wrote to his disciple Timothy, for 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 ...[596] These are words which are directed at us today, as we seek to be faithful to the Master even though the environment may seem to be against us.

44.2 Overcoming human respect is part of the virtue of fortitude.

The life of a Christian should develop in a fairly ordinary manner in normal circumstances. Yet frequently this way of life will stand in stark contrast to other ‘lifestyles’ more or less Christian, as well as to a kind of behaviour which is beneath human dignity and is therefore anti-Christian. In these latter cases it is not surprising that the contrast will be striking. We should not be surprised that non-believers or the indifferent may unjustly criticize a follower of Christ, perhaps even to the extent of
resorting to ridicule. The same thing happened to Our Lord.

In the course of day-to-day living, we are probably not talking about suffering physical harm for the sake of the Gospel. What a Christian may well have to put up with are rumours and calumnies, mockery, discrimination at work, the loss of economic opportunities or superficial friendships ... At times, perhaps in our family or among friends, it may be necessary to exercise supernatural fortitude in order to be consistent with our beliefs. In these uncomfortable circumstances it may be tempting to take the easy way out and ‘give in’. By such means we could avoid rejection, misunderstanding and ridicule. We could become concerned at the thought of losing friends, of ‘closing doors’ which we will later be unable to re-open. This is the temptation to be influenced by human respect, hiding one’s true identity and forsaking our commitment to live as disciples of Christ.

In such difficult circumstances the Christian ought not to wonder which path is the most opportune to follow, but, rather, which path is the most faithful to Christ. Certainly, our desire for popularity is the direct consequence of self-love. It may be that the Lord is waiting for us in just this kind of sacrifice, and this is the time we must choose between his way and our own. This choice may ultimately be expressed by our silence, by a few words, by a gesture or an attitude ... Our behaviour will be the proving-ground of our deepest convictions. This firmness in the Faith is often an excellent testimony to the beliefs of the Christian. In some cases it can cause people to begin their return to the House of the Father.

For many who begin to follow Christ, the necessity for this sacrifice is one of the major obstacles in their path. According to the saintly Curé d’Ars there is no doubt about it: *Do you know what the Devil’s first temptation is to the person who wants to serve God with dedication? It is human respect.* [597] We all have an inner aversion from being put to shame before others. But this sacrifice, if we make it, will be the cause of our greatest joy – to take a stand for Jesus Christ, whenever and wherever the circumstances require it. We can be assured that we will never regret being true to our Christian beliefs.

44.3 Many people are in need of our good example in this area.

There are many people around us who are waiting for clear testimony to the Christian Faith. How much we can accomplish by our good example! How much is the world in need of Christian workers who are friendly, cordial and firm in the Faith! Occasionally we hear of a ‘daring’ article in which somebody attacks the teaching of the Pope or defends abortion or artificial contraception ... Nevertheless, the real daring in our age is to defend the teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff in what pertains to faith and morals, to defend the right to life of every person, to have a large family if that be God’s Will, to defend the indissolubility of marriage. How many wavering hearts have been fortified by one person’s loyalty to principle!

In order to have the courage necessary to overcome our fears we need to rely on God’s help. We cannot allow that God be removed from society or ‘put into a parenthesis’, that misguided men relegate the universal moral law to the closet of individual ‘conscience’.

It should not surprise us that we may be tempted to pass unnoticed in certain disagreeable situations. Saint Peter himself, after having been confirmed as the Head of the Church, after having received the Holy Spirit, gave in to the human respect of his Jewish brethren. It took no less a man than Saint Paul to correct him in the matter.[598] This famous confrontation, far from disproving the holiness and unity of the Church, in fact demonstrates the perfect unity of the Apostles, the respect that Saint Paul had for the visible Head of the Church and the great humility of Saint Peter in changing his position. We can help one another in similar circumstances by practising fraternal correction with our fellow...
Christians, as was done in the earliest days of the Church.

The Lord gives us good example on how we should conduct ourselves. From that sad day in Nazareth He knew that many people were not in agreement with him. Yet He never based his actions upon the opinions of men. Only one thing matters to Jesus – the Will of his Father. For example, He never gave up curing people on the Sabbath even though spies were watching him.[599] Jesus knew what He wanted to do, and He knew that from the start. We never see him have second thoughts or hesitate, much less reverse a decision. Christ asks us to follow him with the same kind of fortitude. It is his own method quite personal to himself that he here enjoins on his disciples. Unconsidered, over-hasty action, vacillation, any coming to terms or compromising, these are not for him. His whole life and being are a Yea and Nay, nothing else. Jesus is always the complete man, always prepared, for he never speaks or acts except out of his whole clear consciousness and his own firm will.[600]

We ask Jesus for the strength to guide us at all times to do God’s unchanging Will rather than the fickle will of men.
45. KNOWING WHEN TO SPEAK

45.1 The silence of Jesus.

For thirty years Jesus lived a life of silence. Mary and Joseph were the only people who knew the mystery of the Son of God. During his public life, when He returned to his home town his relatives were disconcerted by his wisdom and his miracles. They had known him solely from his exemplary life of work.

During the three years of his public life we see how He retreats into the silence of prayer, to be alone with his Father God. He withdraws from the superficial clamour of the multitude that wants to make him their king. He performs his miracles without ostentation, asking the people He cures to refrain from publicising his powers.

The silence of Jesus before his enemies in the Passion is very moving: But he was silent and made no answer. In the face of so many false accusations He makes no defence. As Saint Jerome comments, Our God and Saviour, who because of his mercy had redeemed the world, allows himself to be led to his death like a lamb, without a word of complaint or self-defence. The silence of Jesus obtains pardon for the protest and excuse of Adam. Jesus says nothing during the hearings before Herod and Pilate. We see him standing silent at their preference for Barabbas in front of his hate-filled enemies: But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he made no answer. Then Pilate said to him, ‘Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?’ But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge; so that the governor wondered greatly.

The silence of God in the face of human passions, before the sins which are committed every day by humanity, is not a silence of anger. It is a silence full of patience and love. The silence of Calvary is that of a God who comes to redeem all men by his indescribable agony on the Cross. The silence of Jesus in the Tabernacle is that of a love which waits for a response. It is the patient silence of One who treasures our attentions.

Christ’s silence during his earthly life represents interior strength and sense of purpose. Those who complain continually about their misfortunes or their ‘bad luck’ should look to the example of Our Lord. Those who proclaim their problems to the four winds should consider the behaviour of Christ. Those who feel compelled to explain and excuse their actions, who wait anxiously for praise or approval, should take note of Christ, who says nothing. We will imitate him when we learn to accept life’s duties and worries without sterile complaints, when we confront our personal problems without dumping them in someone else’s lap, when we face squarely the consequences of our actions, when we do our work for the glory of God without looking for earthly praise ...

Jesus autem tacebat. Jesus says nothing. And we have to learn to say nothing on many occasions. At times, vanity will have us say things which should have been kept locked in the soul. The silent figure of Christ is the ever-present Model to reproach empty or useless words. His example will lead us to remain silent before calumny and rumour. In silentio et in spe erit fortitudo vestra. Through the Prophet Isaiah, the Holy Spirit advises us that our fortitude is grounded in silence and in hope.

45.2 Speaking out when necessary, with charity and fortitude. Avoiding the silence of consent.

Yet Jesus does not always remain silent. For there is a silence which can collaborate with lying, a silence which can cooperate with cowardice, a silence which springs from the love of comfort and the
fear of complicating one’s life. You can close your eyes to what is disagreeable. You can put off making a fraternal correction that ought to be made at home or at work. These are forms of silence too.

The word of Jesus is full of authority as He faces injustice and abuse: *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses and for a pretence you make long prayers ...* 

Saint John the Baptist, whose martyrdom is recounted in today’s Gospel,[607] was *the voice of one crying in the wilderness*. He teaches us to say everything that must be said, even though it may seem as if we too are crying in the wilderness. Our Lord will not allow our words to be wasted. It is important that we say what has to be said, without worrying ourselves about the immediate consequences. If each Christian were to speak in conformity with the Faith, we would surely change the world. We cannot sit by silently in the face of such crimes as abortion and the degradation of marriage and the family. Nor can we surrender to those forces that would seek to remove God from the formation of the young. We cannot be silent at attacks upon the Pope and Our Lady, or upon institutions of the Church. To be silent when we should be speaking out can be a way of collaborating with evil, because others may think that our silence implies consent. If Catholics were to speak out when there is need, if they were to boycott anti-Catholic publications or literature, it would be more difficult for these enterprises to prosper.

We should speak out when necessary. At times, the occasion will be when we are with a little group of our friends, coming or going to school or work. In letters to the editor, we can write in praise of a good article or to criticise a bad one. We should always act with charity. It is worth while to remember that true charity goes hand in hand with fortitude. We need to exercise good manners, always working with the intention of bringing souls to Jesus Christ. Yet we should act at the same time with the fortitude of the Lord.

**45.3 Courage and strength in ordinary life. Living up to the full the demands of the Faith and of our vocation.**

If, upon realising that his life was in danger, the Baptist had remained silent or retired to the sidelines of public affairs, he would not have been beheaded by Herod. But John was not that kind of man. He was not like *a reed shaken by the wind*. He was true to his vocation and his principles to the end. If he had remained silent, he could have lived a few more years, but his disciples would not have been the first to follow Our Lord. He would not have prepared and made straight the way of the Lord, as prophesied by Isaiah. He would not have lived up to his vocation. His life would have been bereft of meaning.

Jesus is probably not asking us to suffer a martyr’s death for him. But He is asking us for courage and fortitude in facing up to the demands of ordinary life – to stop watching a bad television show, to cease putting off an apostolic conversation ... We cannot allow ourselves to hide behind excuses when there is so much apostolic work to be done. We have to act with optimism, loving the world and the good that is in it while seeking to increase that goodness. We can do this with the example of a joyful family and of the youthful love that is born of holy purity.

There are other kinds of cowardly silence which we have to struggle against. There is the silence we maintain with the person next to us. God has put him there so that we might be a beacon of light for him or her. In addition, it is hard to imagine that we can be courageous at all in this life if we are not first courageous with ourselves, especially when talking with our spiritual director.

Many of our friends, on seeing that we truly practise what we preach, will be attracted to the Faith.
Centuries ago, many people converted after witnessing the martyrdom of the first Christians.

We dedicate this day to Our Lady. We ask her to teach us when to be silent and when to speak out.
EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY: YEAR A

46. THE MESSIANIC GOODS

46.1 The multiplication of the loaves. Jesus cares for his followers.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in fatness.[608]

The Gospel of today’s Mass recounts how the Lord went off on a boat alone to a deserted place. But when the people found out where He was going, they followed him on foot from their towns. Upon disembarking, He saw before him a great multitude and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick. He cured them without being asked. After all, the fact that they had come so far bringing their sick with them was sufficient proof of a great faith. With regard to this passage, Saint Mark points out that Jesus spent a lot of time teaching this crowd because they were like sheep without a shepherd.[610] So it grew quite late. The disciples were somewhat anxious at the thought of their being in a deserted place at such a late hour. Send the crowds away, they urged the Master, to go into the villages and buy food for themselves. Jesus surprised them with his answer: They need not go away; you give them something to eat. The Apostles obeyed. They did what they could, finding five loaves and two fishes. It is worth noting that those present included about five thousand men, besides women and children. Jesus works the miracle with a few loaves and fishes, and with the obedience of his followers.

After telling the crowd to sit down upon the grass, Jesus, taking the five loaves and the two fish ... looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. The Lord takes care of his own, even in material necessities, but He counts on our cooperation, even though our contribution will be of comparatively minor importance. If you help him, even with a trifle, as the Apostles did, He is ready to work miracles; to multiply the bread, to reform wills, to give light to the most benighted minds, to enable those who have never been upright to be so, with an extraordinary grace. All this he will do ... and more, if you will help him with what you have.[611] Then we will better understand what Saint Paul writes in today’s Second Reading: Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.[612]

Nothing can separate us from Christ, our Teacher – neither adversities in one’s personal life (big and little failures, suffering, sickness ...) nor difficulties in the apostolate (resistance by some to receiving Christ’s teachings, hostility from an environment that flees from the Cross and all sacrifice ...). In Christ we will always find our strength.

46.2 This miracle is a figure of the Holy Eucharist, in which the Lord gives himself as food.

In the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes, Christ uses the same words and behaviour as He later employs for the institution of the Eucharist.[613] This miracle is not only a demonstration of divine mercy; it is also a prefiguring of the Holy Eucharist,[614] which the Lord explains in the synagogue of Capharnaum.[615] This is the interpretation given by many Fathers of the
The liturgy of the Mass recalls the gesture of the Lord when He lifted his eyes up to heaven. The words of the Roman Canon are as follows: *Et elevatis oculis in caelum, ad Te Deum Patrem suum omnipotentem*, and looking up to heaven, to you, his almighty Father … We remember that miracle as we prepare for an even greater miracle, that being the changing of bread into his Body, which is to be offered as spiritual food for all mankind.

The miracle by the lakeside showed to men the power and love of Jesus. That power and love are what allow us to find the Body of Christ under the sacramental species. Down through the centuries it is the Eucharist that can feed the multitude of the faithful. As Saint Thomas put it in the sequence which he composed for the Mass of ‘Corpus Christi’, *Sumit unus, sumunt mille* … Whether one receives or a thousand do, each receives the same as the other, He cannot be exhausted … This is how the miracle acquires its significance, without losing any of its reality. It is wondrous in itself, but it ends up being even more wonderful than expected. It evokes the image of the Good Shepherd who feeds his sheep. It can be seen as a foreshadowing of the new order. Enormous multitudes will come to join in the eucharistic feast, where they will be fed in a miraculous way with an incredibly superior food.

The crowds that seek out our Lord are evidence of the strong impression his Person makes on people. Many go so far as to follow Jesus into the desert itself, quite a way from the main roads and towns. They travel without provisions. They don’t want to lose any time in their haste to get a glimpse of the Lord. This is a good example for us whenever we face some difficulty in receiving Communion or visiting the Blessed Sacrament. To have an encounter with the Master is worth any sacrifice.

Saint John reports that the multitude grew very excited as a result of the miracle.[617] *If all those people became so enthusiastic and were ready to acclaim you over a piece of bread, even granting that the multiplication of loaves was a very great miracle, shouldn’t we be doing much more for all the many gifts you have granted us, and especially for giving us your very self unreservedly in the Eucharist?*[618]

In Holy Communion we receive Jesus, the Son of Mary, the One who performed that great miracle many years ago. *In the Host we possess the Christ of all the mysteries of Redemption – the Christ of Mary Magdalene, of the Prodigal Son, of the Samaritan woman, the Christ resurrected from the dead, seated at the right hand of the Father … The marvellous presence of Christ in our midst should completely transform our life … He is here with us – in every city, in every town …*[619] He waits for us. He misses us when we are tardy in coming.

**46.3 We should look for our Lord in Communion. We should prepare for each Communion as if it were the only one of our life.**

*The eyes of all look to thee, and thou givest them their food in due season. Thou openest thy hand, thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing.* This is today’s Responsorial Psalm.[620]

Jesus, really present in the Holy Eucharist, gives this sacrament an infinite supernatural efficacy. Whenever we want to express our love for someone, we give presents, we do favours, we make ourselves available to the person in question … But we always come up against one limitation, namely, that we cannot give away our very self. Jesus Christ can do that. He gives us his very self. And we can unite ourselves to him. We can identify ourselves with him. And we can find him every day in Holy Communion. He waits for us. He is there waiting for each one of us. He does not wait for us to ask for things. He cures us of our weaknesses. He protects us against danger, against temptations that would separate us from him. He lifts up our spirits. Each Communion is a fountain of graces, new light and
a new impulse that strengthens us in handling daily life with human elegance and supernatural outlook.

How much we partake of these benefits depends in good measure upon the quality of our interior dispositions. The sacraments produce a greater effect in proportion to the good dispositions of the recipient. We improve our disposition, our desires for greater holiness, by going to Confession frequently. It is our love which will lead us to a greater eucharistic piety. As Blessed John Paul II said during his first papal journey to Spain, This love will bring you ever closer to the Lord. I ask you to make good use of the sacrament of Confession, which leads us to the Eucharist, just as the Eucharist leads us to Confession. Both these sacraments help the soul to love in a more delicate, refined and pure manner.

When the moment of receiving Communion draws near, our desires of reparation, of faith and of love should grow more fervent. Have you ever thought how you would prepare yourself to receive Our Lord if you could go to Communion only once in your life? We must be thankful to God that he makes it so easy for us to come to him; but we should show our gratitude by preparing ourselves to receive him very well. One day it will be our last time. Soon afterwards we will be meeting Jesus face to face, the Lord with whom we have been united sacramentally. How pleased Jesus must be by our acts of faith and love!
47. THE BREAD OF LIFE

47.1 Manna is the symbol and figure of the Holy Eucharist, which is the true spiritual food.

*I am the bread of life, says the Lord; whoever comes to me will not hunger, and whoever believes in me will not thirst.*

Following the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes, the enthusiastic multitude went again in search of Jesus. When they discovered that He and his disciples had already departed, they got into their boats and sailed for Capharnaum. According to Saint John in today’s Gospel it was there that the revelation of the Holy Eucharist took place.

With the miracle of the previous day, Jesus had awakened the crowd’s deepest hopes and longings. Thousands of people had left the comfort of their homes to come and hear him. They wanted to make him their king. But the Lord departed from them. Upon meeting them again, Jesus says to the people, *Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.* Saint Augustine comments: *You seek me for worldly motives, not for spiritual ones. How many people there are who seek Jesus solely for worldly ends! ... Rarely does someone look for Jesus for the sake of Jesus.* We want to be among those few.

This attachment to earthly goods is not what Jesus is looking for in men. With great courage and an infinite love, He presents to the people the ineffable treasure of the Holy Eucharist, in which He becomes food for us. It does not matter to Him that many of his loyal followers will abandon him as a result of this revelation. Jesus begins the discourse by hinting at the great mystery: *Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you ... Then they said to him, ‘What must we do, to be doing the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent’.*

Despite the fact that many of those present had only the previous day witnessed a great miracle, they said, *Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe in you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’.*

In today’s First Reading we are shown how Yahweh manifested his Providence to the Israelites in the desert. He sent down manna from heaven to feed them. This bread is a symbol and figure of the Holy Eucharist which Christ first announced in this small city on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus Christ is the true food which transforms us and gives us the strength to live our Christian vocation. Blessed John Paul II pointed out in this regard: *It is only by means of the Eucharist that we are able to live the heroic virtues of Christianity, such as charity to pardon one’s enemies, the love which enables us to suffer, the capacity to give one’s life for another; chastity at all times of life and in all situations; patience in the face of suffering and the apparent silence of God in human history or our very own existence. Therefore, strive to always be eucharistic souls so as to be authentic Christians.*

With the words of the poet Dante, we petition the Lord, *Give us this day the daily manna, without which he goes backward through this harsh wilderness who most labours to advance.* Truly, life without Christ is a harsh wilderness. It is a way of life where it is especially difficult to reach the journey’s end.

47.2 The bread of life.
When the Jews tell Jesus that Moses had given them the bread of heaven, Jesus replies that it was not Moses, but his Father who had given them the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.

The Lord presents himself as superior to Moses. Not even Moses had had the audacity to claim that he himself gave the food which never perishes, which lasts unto eternal life. Jesus promises much more than Moses. Moses promised a kingdom, a land of milk and honey, earthly peace, numerous sons, physical health and all the other earthly goods ... Thus you would fill your bodies here on earth with perishable goods. In contrast, Christ promised a food which would never perish but would last forever.

Those present at the synagogue of Capharnaum knew that the manna was a symbol of the messianic goods. It was for that reason that they asked Jesus to work a similar sign. Yet they had no idea that the manna was indeed a figure of that great messianic good, the Holy Eucharist.

Jesus tells the Jews that the manna in the desert was not the true bread from heaven since those who ate of it did die. He says that his Father will give them the true bread from heaven. They respond, ‘Lord, give us this bread always.’ Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst’. Our Lord leaves no room for doubt that this bread is a reality. He repeats the verb to eat eight times. Christ will become food so that we might gain a new life, the life which He has brought to us: The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh. This is not a bread from the earth. It is a bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever. In the Holy Eucharist we become flesh of his flesh and blood of his blood. The Eucharist is the supreme realisation of those words of Holy Scripture that have God rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men. The Blessed Sacrament is Emmanuel, ‘God with us’, the food of eternal life.

He was the greatest madman of all times. What greater madness could there be than to give oneself as he did, and for such people? It would have been mad enough to have chosen to become a helpless Child. But even then, many wicked men might have been softened, and would not have dared to harm him. So this was not enough for him. He wanted to make himself even less, to give himself more lavishly. He made himself food; he became Bread. Divine Madman! How do men treat you? How do I treat you?

How do I prepare to receive you, Lord? How is my faith, my joy, my desire? We should make some resolutions in preparation for our next Communion, perhaps within the next few minutes or hours. It cannot be like so many of the previous times. We have to receive with greater love.

47.3 We receive the same Christ in every Communion. His presence in the soul.

When we receive Communion, we receive Christ himself with his Body, his Blood, his Soul and his Divinity. He gives himself to us in an intimate union which binds us to him in a real way. Our life is transformed into his life. In Holy Communion Christ is not only God with us, but God in us.

After we receive Communion, Christ is truly, really, substantially present in our soul. We can apply here those words of the Lord to Saint Augustine: I am the food of grown men. Grow, and you shall feed upon me. You will not change me into yourself, as you change food into your flesh, but you will be changed into me. Christ gives us his life! He divinizes us! He transforms us into himself! The infinite merits of the Passion are poured out into our soul. He sends us strength and consolation. He leads us to his Most Sacred Heart, to transform our sentiments into his sentiments. The Eucharist holds all the graces and fruits of eternal life for humanity and for each individual soul. This is because the sacrament contains all the spiritual good of the Church. If we frequently consider the
effects which this sacrament can have on the soul we will come to treasure Holy Communion and spiritual communions. We will see the value of receiving our Lord as often as we can, on a daily basis if possible. We will prepare ourselves well for each Communion. Each and every day we will say to Jesus, *Lord, give us this bread always.*

The soul will be raised to a supernatural plane. Christ’s virtues will vivify it. Then we will be able to say with confidence, *It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*[637]

Those words of the Lord during the Last Supper are also fulfilled with every Communion: *If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*[638] The soul becomes the temple and tabernacle of the Holy Trinity. The life of the three Divine Persons will transform it, nurturing in it the divine seed that was implanted in Baptism.

When we draw near to receive him we should say, *Lord, I hope in you. I adore you, I love you, increase my faith. Be the support of my weakness. You, who have remained defenceless in the Eucharist so as to be the remedy for the weakness of your creatures.*[639] We go to Holy Mary. For thirty-three years she was in his physical presence. She treated him with the greatest respect and love imaginable. We unite ourselves to her sentiments of adoration and love.
48. TO BE RICH BEFORE GOD

48.1 Only God can fill our heart.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on things that are on earth, exhorts Saint Paul in the Second Reading of the Mass. Things of the world last a relatively short period of time and they cannot fulfill the longings of the human heart.

The life of man on earth is brief. The greater part of it is spent in pain and suffering. Every life passes like the wind; barely a trace is left behind. In the best of cases, one might amass a great fortune only for it soon to be left to others. What does all this pain and effort add up to? Is it all for nothing? As we are reminded in the first reading: Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

In the face of this emptiness and inconsistency, all this pointlessness, God is the rock of our salvation. Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

Nevertheless, the human heart has a tremendous capacity to seek the things of the world without paying any attention to the transcendent meaning of life. The human heart tends to become attached to worldly goods as the one and only goal in life, forgetting what is really important. In today’s Gospel, the Lord takes advantage of a question about inheritances to teach us about the true worth of things in the light of eternity. He brings up the subject of death, of our own death, to make his point: The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones ... And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry’.

The Lord teaches us that putting our hearts into the pursuit of wealth and worldly well-being is foolishness. Neither happiness nor authentic human life itself are founded on worldly goods. A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. The rich man discloses his ‘value system’ in his mental dialogue. He sees himself in a very secure position because he has great resources. He bases his stability and his happiness on this wealth. For him, as for many people, living is a matter of enjoying as much pleasure as possible. It is to do as little as need be, to eat, to drink, ‘to have a good time’, to lay up ample goods for many years. This is his ideal. In his life there is no reference to God, much less to other people. He sees no need to share his goods with others less fortunate than himself.

And how does he plan to maintain this thoroughly materialistic lifestyle? I will store ... Yet in the end, all of his calculations are for nothing. The things of this world give a fragile and insufficient security since our lives will never be fulfilled without God.

We can ask ourselves today during this time of prayer, ‘Where is my heart?’ Because we know that our destination is Heaven, we have to make positive and concrete acts of detachment with regard to what we own and what we use. How much do we share our goods with the needy? How much time and wealth do we contribute to apostolic works?

48.2 Our earthly life is short and fleeting. Taking advantage of the noble things of the earth so as to win Heaven.
Despite the fact that He has been overlooked, God interrupts the rich man in his ruminations to pass judgment on his chosen way of life: ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

Our passage upon the earth is a time of testing. The Lord himself has given it to us. As Saint Paul teaches, *For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.* On a certain day the Lord will come to settle accounts with us, to determine how well or ill we have administered his gifts. His gifts include intelligence, health, material goods, a capacity for friendship, the power to give joy to those around us … The Lord will come only once, perhaps when we least expect him, like a thief in the night, like lightning flashing across the sky. He ought to find us well prepared. Tying ourselves down to the world, forgetting that our end is in Heaven, will lead us to live a disoriented life of complete idiocy. *Fool* is precisely what God calls the man who lives only for the world. We certainly have to walk with our feet on the ground, taking care to safeguard our future and the future of those who depend upon us. But we cannot forget that we are pilgrims, no more than *actors in a show. No one is permanently made king or wealthy, since at the end of the performance we will all find ourselves as paupers.* Worldly goods are but the means for us to attain the goal which the Lord has pointed out. These goods can never become the ‘be-all and the end-all’ of our existence.

Our life on earth is short and limited: *This night your soul is required of you.* Perhaps we think of death in terms of something remote, as if we will live forever. Yet the Lord speaks of *this night.* Our days are numbered. We are in the hands of God. Within a few years, maybe not that many, we will find ourselves face to face with him.

Meditating on our final end should motivate us to sanctify our work – ‘redeeming the time’ – as we strive to make up for lost time. It should help us to take advantage of our circumstances in order to make reparation for sins and to become detached from earthly goods. One day like any other day will be our last day on earth. Today, thousands of people have died or will die in the most diverse of circumstances. Those people were probably unaware that their time was up, that they would have no more time to improve. Some have died with their hearts immersed in things of little or no importance in terms of eternal life. Others have died who have been involved in exactly the same activities but have kept their sights on God. It is these latter people who have come into possession of that marvellous treasure which *neither rust nor moth consumes …* 

### 48.3 Good use of time with respect to God. Detachment.

At the moment of death the state of the soul is fixed forever. Afterwards, it is impossible to change. The destiny which awaits us is the consequence of our behaviour on earth: *If a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.* This is the reason for the Lord’s frequent warnings to be on watch. Death is not the end of existence, but the beginning of a new life. Christians cannot ‘write off’ or minimise the importance of our temporal existence since it is the very means by which we prepare for our definitive life with God in Heaven. To yield a rich harvest before God we have to sanctify this same ordinary life and the use of material goods. Every other ‘lifestyle’ is built upon sand: *Surely every man stands as a mere breath! Surely man goes about as a shadow! … man heaps up, and knows not who will gather!* Inasmuch as the goods of this world are intended for the glory of God, we should use them with a sense of detachment, not complaining either when these goods may be lacking. The absence of some good, if it is God’s will, should not take away our peace. We should know how to be happy in times of prosperity and in adversity. Whether we are rich or poor, we should share what we have with others –
by creating new jobs, if that be in our power, by promoting works of culture and formation, by giving generously to the good works of the Church.

By considering our death we can also learn how to make good use of the days that remain to us. My children, the world is slipping through our fingers. We cannot lose any time, for the time is short ... I understand Saint Paul very well when he writes to the Corinthians: ‘Tempus breve est!’ How brief is our sojourn upon the earth! For a coherent Christian, these words ought to ring true in the depths of the soul. They are a reproach for our lack of generosity and a constant invitation to loyalty. Truly, we have so little time to love, to give, to do penance. Are we going to allow our hearts to be tied to the things of this world?

Meditation on the eternal truths is a good antidote against sin and a real help towards giving a Christian meaning to life. These thoughts can inspire us to pay proper attention to our daily work, to our relations with others and to our duties in charity towards those most in need. That will be our way into Heaven.
EIGHTEENTH WEEK: MONDAY

49. CHRISTIAN OPTIMISM

49.1 To be realistic in a supernatural way is to rely always on the grace of God.

A great multitude follow Jesus into the desert. They follow him without giving a thought to distance, heat or cold, because their needs are great. They sense that they are welcome. They listen attentively to those words which give meaning to their lives, so attentively that they neglect life’s necessities. They have brought no food to eat and there is no place to buy any food out there. This problem does not seem to have bothered them, nor does it seem to bother Jesus. When the disciples become aware of the situation at dusk, however, they go to the Master and say, This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves. This is a statement of fact which is evident to all. But Jesus knows of a higher reality, of possibilities which even his most intimate disciples cannot discern. And so he answers them, They need not go away; you give them something to eat. The disciples, being keenly aware of their lack of provisions, reply, We have only five loaves here and two fishes.

The disciples see objective reality. They know that this small amount of food will not suffice to feed the multitude. This is what may happen to us when we take stock of our own strengths and possibilities. The difficulties before us may appear larger than life and beyond our power to influence. Mere human objectivity can lead us to discouragement and pessimism. It can cause us to forget the radical optimism which is part and parcel of the Christian vocation. As popular wisdom would have it: He who fails to include God in his reckonings does not know how to add. He does not know how to add because he leaves out the most important factor. The Apostles made a very precise count of their resources. They counted up the exact number of loaves and fishes available. But they forgot to consider that Jesus was at their side. And this fact radically alters the situation. The real reality is something different from objective reality. In apostolic undertakings it’s very good – it’s a duty – to consider what means the world has to offer you (2 + 2 = 4). But don’t forget – ever – that your calculations must fortunately include another term: God + 2 + 2 ... To neglect this reality is to misread the true situation. To be supernaturally realistic, we need to count upon the grace of God which is an ineluctable fact.

Christian optimism is rooted in God, who says to us: I am with you always, to the close of the age. With him we can do anything. We are victorious even when we are defeated. This is the optimism so characteristic of the saints. Saint Teresa of Avila would often repeat, with her good humour and supernatural spirit: Teresa can do nothing alone. Teresa and a maravedí (a penny, say), less than nothing. But Teresa, a maravedí and God can do anything. It is the same with us. Cast away that despair produced by the realization of your weakness. It’s true: financially you are a zero, and socially another zero, and another in virtues, and another in talents ... But to the left of these zeros is Christ. And what an immeasurable figure it turns out to be. How this realization changes our entire outlook at the hour of beginning an apostolic work, at the moment of personal conversion, in the realities of ordinary life!

49.2 A Christian’s optimism is the result of faith.

Christian optimism is a result of faith, not of circumstances. The Christian knows that the Lord has his best interests in mind. The Lord knows how to draw fruit even from apparent failure. At the same
time, He asks us to use all of the human means at our disposal, leaving no stone unturned. We should count on the five loaves and the two fishes. By themselves they won’t make much of a meal for so many hungry people at the end of a long day, but they nevertheless play an indispensable part in the working of the miracle. The Lord sees it that failures in the apostolate (someone does not respond, someone turns his back on us, etc …) serve to sanctify us and sanctify others. Nothing is lost. On the other hand, what will never give any fruit are omissions and excuses, behaviour like throwing up our hands before a hostile environment. The Lord wants us to put our loaves and fishes to good use, while placing our trust in him with rectitude of intention. Some fruits will come at once. Other fruits will come at the time and in the way the Lord wants. One thing is beyond doubt – fruits will always be forthcoming. We have to convince ourselves that we are nothing, and that we can do nothing without Jesus at our side. He, to whose power and knowledge all things are given, protects us by means of his inspirations against all foolishness, ignorance, wild tantrums or hardness of heart.[662] A Christian’s optimism gets strong reinforcement from prayer. Christian optimism is not a sugary optimism; nor is it a mere human coincidence that everything will turn out all right. It is an optimism that sinks its roots in an awareness of our freedom, and in the sure knowledge of the power of grace. It is an optimism which leads us to make demands on ourselves, to struggle to respond at every moment to God’s calls.[663] It is not the optimism of the egoist who seeks only his personal tranquillity, who closes his eyes to reality, saying ‘Everything will work out in the end’. He uses that as an excuse so that he will not be bothered. He goes so far as to deny the evil in others in order to avoid worries and responsibility. The radical optimism of one who follows Christ closely does not delude him as to the nature of reality. Quite the contrary; the Christian is able to confront the whole truth without being demoralized by it. The Christian knows that his Father God will never leave him. He believes that abundant fruit will be harvested from that field – those circumstances, those friends – in which it seemed that only weeds could grow. The Christian is confident that the work of the good is never destroyed, but that in order to bring forth fruit, the ear of corn begins by dying in the earth. The Christian knows that the sacrifice of goods is never in vain.[664]

49.3 Our optimism is rooted in the Communion of Saints.

Monsignor Knox points out that Jesus worked this miracle not just for anybody, but rather for people who had been following him for days, people who had earnestly been searching for him. According to Knox, the multitude is a prefiguring of the Church. Those five thousand seated on the hillside were united as followers of Christ. They fed upon the same bread, that foreshadowing of the Holy Eucharist, which came from the hands of Christ. How naturally a common meal serves for a symbol of fraternity; how easily a scratch party of guests get on together if you take them out for a picnic in the open air! Just imagine what it must have meant, later on, if one of those five thousand met, by accident, one of the others; what fellowship must have been imposed on them by their common store of reminiscences! ‘Yes, don’t you remember, I was sitting about seven or eight off you, and Peter – or John, or James, or Judas – came round with the crust which looked as if it could never satisfy more than two; we both seemed to be in starvation corner, didn’t we? And then when he got to the end of the row the crust was still there’. [665]

We can take part at the same table, at the same Banquet. We can receive the same Bread, wherein Christ comes to us, which is multiplied without ceasing. Those who follow Christ are united by a very strong bond. Recognise in yourself a limb, a branch of Christ, (the body, the vine) living, grafted-on and ingrowing, nourished by his strength and grace.[666] The Communion of Saints teaches us that we all form one Body in Christ. Through this communion we can help one another in a most efficacious
way. Somewhere, at this very moment someone is praying for us, someone is helping us with sanctified work, with prayer, with suffering offered up. We are never alone.

The *Communion of Saints* serves as the constant fuel of our optimism because we can always count on the mysterious but very real help of those who partake of the same Bread.

*And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

We are moved by Christ’s generosity to appeal to him with confidence. We too have spent many days with him. *Ask him without any fear, and insist. Remember that scene of the multiplication of loaves we read about in the Gospel. Notice how magnanimously he says to the Apostles, How many loaves do you have? Five? ... How many are you asking for? And he gives six, a hundred, thousands ... Why? Because Christ sees all our needs with divine wisdom, and with his almighty power he can and does go far beyond our desires. Our Lord sees much farther than our poor minds can discern and he is infinitely generous.*[667] He will once again perform miracles as soon as we place the little we have at his disposal. He thinks in terms which greatly exceed our poor human calculations. What a shame if we were ever to hang on to the five loaves and two fishes with which the Lord would readily work miracles!
50. MEN OF FAITH

50.1 Faith in Christ. With him, we can do everything; without him we are incapable of taking a single step.

Immediately after the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, our Lord himself took leave of the crowds and ordered the disciples to set out in their boats. It must have been late in the evening. After a long day of work, attending to those who sought him out, Jesus felt compelled to pray. He walked up a nearby hill and, after nightfall, remained there alone, in conversation with His Father in Heaven.

From that hilltop Jesus saw the Apostles far offshore; and their boat – buffeted by the waves, the wind against them – was in danger. The Pasch was near and there was a full moon, so Jesus could make out the little craft in the middle of the lake. But in the fourth watch of the night, around three in the morning, well before sunrise, He came to them walking upon the sea. Seeing a vague figure coming over the surface of the sea toward the place where they were struggling, they were filled with fear. It is a ghost!, they said. And they began shouting out in terror. But then our Lord revealed himself. Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid. Christ always presents himself in this manner in the life of a Christian, giving encouragement and serenity. Peter takes courage; led on by his love, moved by his desire to be close to the Master, he makes an unexpected request: Lord, if it is thyself, bid me come to thee over the water. Love’s daring has no limits, and our Lord yields easily to the request. And He said, Come. Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. Those were stirring moments for all: Peter gave up the safety of the boat at Jesus’ word. He did not remain clinging to the side of the vessel, but went towards Jesus, who was now only a few yards away from his disciples. Awestruck, they contemplate the Apostle moving forward on the swirling waves. Peter walks on the water. Faith and confidence in his Master are all that sustain him – only that.

The difficulties that surround us don’t matter if we walk with faith and confidence toward Jesus, who is waiting for us. It doesn’t matter if the waves are high and the wind strong, or that it’s not natural for man to walk on water. If we look to Jesus, we can do anything; and looking at him is the virtue of piety. If through prayer and the sacraments we remain close to Jesus, we will remain on the right path. If our gaze wanders away from Jesus, we will sink; we will be incapable of even a single step, even on firm ground.

50.2 When faith diminishes, difficulties seem greater.

Peter’s faith, great at first, was soon to diminish. He realized the force of the waves and the wind (Saint John states that the wind was strong), that it was impossible for a man to walk on water. He worries about the difficulties and forgets the only thing that was keeping him afloat: the word of the Lord. He paid attention to the obstacles and his faith diminished: the miracle was linked to complete trust in Christ.

At times, God asks for things which seem apparently impossible, but which become a reality when we act with faith, with our sight fixed on the Lord. On a certain occasion, the Founder of Opus Dei, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, told a daughter of his who was going to another country where there would be difficulties inseparable from the beginning of the apostolic work: When I ask something of you, my daughter, don’t tell me that it’s impossible, because I know that already. Since I began the
Work, our Lord has asked me to do many impossible things ... and they’ve become a reality! And they have kept on happening!: so it was with their apostolic work in many countries ... and vocations came, and with them people who were willing to help out in that work with great generosity and detachment. In many ways he told them: *Men of faith are needed and the great works of scripture will be repeated.* Those great works are done each day on earth ... This is the way it has always been in the history of the Church.

It is God who keeps us afloat and makes us effective in the midst of those apparent *impossibilities*, of an environment which often goes against the Christian ideal. It is He who makes us walk on water – on one condition: we should keep our eyes set on Christ and not allow obstacles and temptations to distract us.

In his gospel commentary Saint John Chrysostom points out that Jesus taught Peter, through personal experience, that all his fortitude came from Him; left to his own devices, Peter could only expect weakness and misery. When our cooperation is lacking, he added, *God also ceases to help us.* That is why as soon as Peter began to fear and doubt he also began to sink.

When faith diminishes, difficulties seem greater: *Living faith depends on my ability to respond to God, who calls me and wants to treat me as a friend, as One who is the great witness of my life. So if I respond to him and love him, and if he is someone familiar in my life, if I live close to him, I am safeguarding my faith, because my faith is founded on God.* ... On the other hand, if I keep my distance from God, if I forget him, if I keep him outside my life and am submerged in merely human and material things, if I let myself be carried away by what is immediately in front of me and God fades from my soul, then how will I have a living faith? If I don’t speak with Christ, what is there left of my faith? That is why, in the final analysis, all obstacles to a life of faith may be reduced – in their root – to a withdrawal, a separation from God: we cease to deal with him face to face. Then it is that temptations and obstacles gain strength. Peter would have remained firm on the waters and would have reached the Lord if he had not separated his confident gaze from the Lord. All the tempests put together, those within the soul and those arising from outside, cannot shake us as long as we have firm recourse to prayer. To abandon prayer, to pray with little intimacy or sincerity, exposes us to sink into discouragement, pessimism and temptation.

Our faith should never falter even when the difficulties are enormous, even though they seem to crush us under their weight. *What does it matter if the whole world with all its power is against you? You ... go forward!*

*Repeat the words of the psalm: ‘The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? ... Si consistant adversum me castra, non timebit cor meum.’ Though my enemies surround me, my heart shall not waver.*

**50.3 Jesus always comes to our aid.**

Then Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water to come to Jesus. But seeing the wind was strong, he was afraid; and as he began to sink, he cried out, saying *Lord, save me!* And Jesus at once stretched forth his hand and took hold of him saying, *O thou of little faith, why didst thou doubt?* And when they got into the boat the wind fell.

Amidst dangers, obstacles and doubts we should look to Christ: let us run with patience to the fight set before us; looking toward the author and perfecter of faith, Jesus, we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Christ should be a clear, sharply-defined figure for us. We have contemplated him so many times that we cannot confuse him with a ghost, as the disciples did that night. His features, his voice, his gaze are unmistakable. He has looked at us so many times! He is the beginning and the
culmination of Christian life. If you want to be saved, writes Saint Thomas Aquinas, look upon the face of your Christ.[674] Dealing with him habitually, in prayer and through the sacraments, is the only guarantee of staying on our feet, as children of God, in the middle of the rough seas in which we live.

What’s more, together with Christ the conflicts and labours we confront almost daily strengthen our faith and hope, and unite us more closely to Him. The same occurs to the trees that grow in shady, sheltered places: while externally they appear to thrive, they are feeble and easily hurt. However, the trees that grow on the pinnacles of the tallest mountains, buffeted by many winds, constantly exposed to harsh conditions, beaten by fierce storms and covered by snow, these grow as strong as iron.[675]

Peter stopped looking at Christ and he sank. But he knew enough to return immediately to Him to whom all is submitted. Lord, save me!, he cried with all his strength when he felt all was lost. And Jesus, with infinite affection, stretched out his hand and pulled him up. If we see that we are sinking, that temptations and difficulties are overwhelming us, let us go to Jesus. He always stretches out his hand to us, for us to hold tight. He will never let us sink, if we do the little required of us. God has also placed our Guardian Angel next to us to help us in all adversity and to serve as a powerful aid on our road to Heaven. Let us deal with this friend confidently; let us ask his help in small things and great things, and we will find the fortitude we need for victory.
51. THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY

51.1 The humility of the Syrophoenician woman.

In the Gospel of today’s Mass,[676] Saint Matthew records that Jesus retired with his disciples to the lands of the gentiles, in the region of Sidon and Tyre. There, a woman came to them shouting loudly: Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is cruelly tormented by the devil. Jesus heard her but did not respond. Saint Augustine comments that He did not answer her precisely because He knew what she was to receive. He did not remain silent in order to refuse her, but so that she – through her humble perseverance – would merit the favour.[677]

The woman probably insisted for a long time, so that the disciples – tired of her efforts – told the Master: Send her away, for she is crying after us. Our Lord explained to her that He had come to preach first to the Jews. But the woman – despite the negative response – prostrated herself before him saying: Lord, help me!

The Canaanite woman’s persistence led our Lord to repeat his answer using an image which she understood at once: It is not right to take the children’s bread and cast it to the dogs. Again He tells her that He has been sent to the sons of Israel and should not show preference for pagans. Our Lord’s loving and welcoming gesture would remove any hint of harshness from the expression He uses. His words filled the woman with confidence. With great humility, she replied: It is true Lord, but even the dogs can eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table. She recognized her true place; she confessed as her lords those whom He called children.[678] Saint Augustine himself says that the woman was transformed by humility, and deserved to sit at the table with the children.[679] She conquered the heart of God, receiving the favour she requested as well as a great compliment from our Lord: O woman! Great is your faith! Let it be done as you wish. And at that instant, her daughter was healed. Later, she would surely be one of the first gentile women to embrace the Faith, and she would preserve from that moment a lasting gratitude and love for our Lord.

We, who are far from the faith and humility of this woman, fervently ask the Master, Dear Jesus, if I have to be an apostle you will need to make me very humble.

Everything the sun touches is bathed in light. Lord, fill me with your clarity, bathe me in your divinity so that I may identify my will with your adorable Will and become the instrument you wish me to be. Give me the madness to undergo the humiliation you underwent, which led you to be born poor, to work in obscurity, to endure the shame of dying sewn by nails to a piece of wood, to your self-effacement in the Blessed Sacrament.

May I know myself: may I know myself and know you. I will then never lose sight of my nothingness.[680] Only thus will I be able to follow you as you wish, and as I wish: with a deep faith, a great love and without placing any obstacles in the way.

51.2 The active nature of humility.

In the account of the life of Saint Anthony, Abbot, it is said that God showed him the world beset with the snares the devil had prepared to entrap men. Following the vision, the saint was filled with fear, and asked, Lord, who can escape so many snares? And he heard a voice that answered, Anthony, he who is humble can escape, for God gives his grace to the humble, but the proud fall into all the traps the devil sets. Yet the devil does not dare to attack the humble man.
If we want to serve the Lord, we must desire and ask for the virtue of humility with insistence. To truly desire this virtue, we should keep in mind that the opposite of humility – the capital sin of pride – is the greatest obstacle to the vocation we have received from the Lord. It is what harms family life and friendship, what opposes our true happiness most of all. It is the devil’s foremost ally in our soul, with which he tries to undo the work that the Holy Spirit is constantly carrying out.

Living the virtue of humility is not only a matter rejecting the motions of pride, selfishness and vanity. In fact, Jesus and Mary, who possessed the virtue of humility to the full, never experienced any inclination toward pride. The word ‘humility’ derives from the Latin word humus (soil or earth). Etymologically, ‘humble’ signifies inclined towards the earth; the virtue of humility consists in bowing down before God and everything that is of God in creatures. In practical terms, it leads us to recognize our inferiority, our littleness and indigence before God. The saints experience great joy in becoming nothing before God, recognizing that only He is great and that all human greatness is, by comparison, empty and a lie.

Humility is based on truth, and above all on the great truth that the distance between the creature and the Creator is infinite. That is why we should frequently take time to remind and persuade ourselves that everything good in us is from God, that all the good that we have done has been suggested and brought to fruition by him, with the help of his grace. We do not say a single aspiration without the impulse and grace of the Holy Spirit. Ours are the defects, sins and selfishness. These miseries are less than nothing, because they are a disorder and reduce our soul to a truly deplorable state. Grace, on the other hand, makes our soul shine so that even the angels are awed by the brightness of the divine gift.

The Canaanese woman did not feel humiliated by Jesus’ comparison emphasizing the difference between Jews and pagans. She was humble and knew her place with respect to the chosen people. Because she was humble she was not ashamed to persevere, prostrating herself before Jesus in spite of the apparent rejection. Because of her humility, daring and perseverance, she obtained a great favour. Humility has nothing to do with timidity, with fickleness or with a mediocore life lacking in ambition. Humility discovers that everything good in us, both in the order of nature and in the order of grace, belongs to God for from his fullness we have all received. And such profusion of gifts moves us to be grateful.

51.3 The road to humility.

To the question, ‘How shall I become humble?’ corresponds the immediate answer, ‘Through the grace of God’. ... Only the grace of God can give us a clear vision of our true condition and the awareness of the dignity that comes from humility. That is why we should desire this virtue and ask for it incessantly, convinced that with it, we shall love God and be capable of great enterprises despite our weakness ...

Together with this petition we should accept the humiliations – usually small – that may arise each day in different ways: during our work and in our dealings with others, when we are conscious of our weakness or make mistakes, great or small. One day, it is said, Saint Thomas Aquinas was pulled up for a supposed grammatical error while reading. He corrected it as indicated. Later, his companions asked him why he had made the correction since he himself must have known that the original text was faultless. Before God, the saint replied, better a fault of grammar than a fault of obedience and of humility. We walk the way of humility when we accept humiliations, great or small, and when we accept our defects and struggle to overcome them.

He who is humble can do without praise or flattery in his work because his hope is in the Lord,
who is truly the source of all his riches and happiness and gives meaning to all he does. One of the reasons why men are so prone to praise one another, to overestimate their own value and abilities, to resent anything that tends to lower them in their own eyes or in the eyes of others, is that they see no hope for happiness outside themselves. That is why they are often so hyper-sensitive, so resentful when they are criticized, so upset by anyone who contradicts them, so insistent on getting their own way, so desirous of being well known, so anxious to be praised, so determined to control their surroundings. They secure themselves to themselves like a shipwrecked man holding on to a straw. And life goes on, and they move further and further away from happiness ...

He who struggles to be humble does not seek out praise, and if praises come, he tries to refer them instead to the glory of God, the author of all good things. Humility does not consist so much in despising oneself as in forgetting oneself, joyfully recognizing that we possess nothing that we have not received. It leads us to become God’s little children, who find all their strength in the strong hand of their Father.

We learn to be humble by meditating on the Passion of our Lord, by considering his greatness in the face of so many humiliations, allowing himself as He did to be led like a sheep to its shearsers, as had been prophesied; by considering his humility in the Holy Eucharist where He waits for us to visit him and speak with him, to be received by anyone who wants to attend the sacred Banquet He prepares for us daily; by considering his patience in the light of so many offences. We will learn to walk the path of humility if we pay attention to Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, who had no other desire than to do the Will of God. We can also approach Saint Joseph, who spent his life serving Jesus and Mary, fulfilling the task that God had entrusted to him.
52. YOU ARE THE CHRIST

52.1 You are the Christ, the son of the Living God: confess in this way the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was in Caesarea Philippi, in the northern confines of Jewish territory where the population was predominantly pagan. There He asked his disciples with complete confidence, Who do men say the Son of Man is? The Apostles, familiar with the opinions the people had of him, replied, Some say John the Baptist; and others Elias; and others Jeremias or one of the prophets. Many of those who listened to him thought highly of Him, but did not know who He really was. The Master turned to them and affectionately asked, But who do you say that I am? From his own – those who follow him closely – He seemed to demand a clear, uncompromising confession of faith. They should not conform to a superficial popular opinion, so subject to change. They should know him well and make him known, for they have left everything to live a new life with him.

Peter answered firmly: You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. It is a clear affirmation of his divinity, as confirmed by Jesus’ reply: Blessed are you Simon, son of John, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in Heaven. Peter must have been profoundly moved by the Master’s words.

Even today there are varying and divergent opinions concerning Jesus: there is a great deal of ignorance regarding his person and mission. Despite the preaching and apostolate of the Church over twenty centuries, many souls have still not discovered Jesus’ true identity. He still lives among us and asks, And you, who do you say that I am? With the help of God’s grace, which is never lacking, we too should proclaim with firmness – with the supernatural firmness of faith – ‘You, Lord, are my God and my King: perfect God and perfect Man, centre of the universe and of history, centre of my life and the motive and cause of all my actions.’

During his Passion, when He is about to complete his mission on earth, the Chief Priest asks Jesus, Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One? Jesus replies, I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Father, and coming with the clouds of heaven. With this response He not only affirms that He is the Messiah whom they await, but also declares the divine transcendence of his messianism, attributing to Himself Daniel’s prophecy of the Son of Man. The Lord uses the strongest possible words found in the Bible to declare his divinity. It is then and on this account that they condemn Him for blasphemy.

Only the clarity of supernatural faith allows us to know that Jesus is infinitely superior to all creatures: He is the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man ... He was begotten of the Father, but remains in full communion with him, because He has the same divine nature. In union with the Father, He will send the Holy Spirit, who will keep what He keeps, for He keeps as his own all that is of the Father.

He comes as supreme Law-giver: Before, it was said to the ancients ... But I say to you now ... In the old law, it was stated, Thus speaks Yahweh, but Jesus does not teach in another’s name: I tell you ... In his own name He imparts the divine teaching, and sets forth precepts that affect the essence of man. He exercises the power to forgive sins, any sin. As all Jews knew, this power pertains only...
to God. Not only does He personally forgive sins, but He gives the power of the keys, the power to rule and forgive, to Peter and the Twelve Apostles and their successors. He promises, at the end of the world, to sit as the only judge of the living and the dead. No one before or since has ever dared attribute to himself those awesome powers.

Jesus demanded – demands – of his disciples an unavering faith in his person, to the point of bearing the Cross on their shoulders: *he who does not pick up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.* What He asks for his heavenly Father, He also asks for himself: a solid faith, an unlimited love.

We who wish to follow him very closely, when we are before the Tabernacle say to him with Saint Peter: *Lord, you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Truly, he who finds Jesus finds a good treasure; truly, a good above all other good. He who loses Jesus loses a great deal, much more than the entire world. Very poor is he who lives without him, and very rich he who is with Jesus.* Let us not ever leave him. Let us make our love firm with many acts of faith, with the courage to make our faith and our love for the living Christ known in any environment.

### 52.2 Christ: perfect God and perfect Man.

Even after so many years Jesus remains for many, who lack the supernatural gift of faith or who live immersed in lukewarmness, a hazy and indistinct figure. Just as the apostles answered him that day, we too can tell him: some say you were a man of high ideals, while others ... The words of the Baptist ring true even today: *In the midst of you there has stood one whom you do not know.*

Only the divine gift of faith allows us to proclaim, in union with the Magisterium of the Church: *We believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God. He is the eternal Word, born of the Father before all things were made, and consubstantial with the Father ...* We believe that in Jesus Christ there are two natures – one divine and the other human, distinct yet inseparable. He is one Person, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, uncreated and eternal, who became man by the power of the Holy Spirit in the most pure womb of Mary. Born in the direst poverty, He was acclaimed by the angels in Heaven. He suffered hunger and thirst. He felt fatigue and at times needed to rest, on a rock or at the edge of a well. So tired was He that He fell asleep at sea on the fishermen’s boat. He wept at the tomb of his friend, Lazarus. He was overwhelmed with grief and feared death before suffering the humiliations of his crucifixion.

Jesus is also perfect Man. This most Holy Humanity of Jesus, equal to ours in everything but sin, has become our way to the Father. He lives today. Why do you seek the one who lives among the dead? He is the same today as then. *'Jesus Christus heri, et hodie, ipse et in saecula' (Heb 13:8). How I love to recall these words! Jesus Christ, the very Jesus who was alive yesterday for his apostles and the people who sought him out; this same Jesus lives today for us, and will live forever. Yet at times we poor men fail to recognize his ever-present features because our eyes are tired and our vision clouded.* Our vision is clouded because we lack love.

### 52.3 Christ: the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Christian life consists in loving, imitating and serving Christ. The heart has an important rôle in this life to such an extent that if, through lukewarmness or a hidden pride, our life of piety suffers it becomes almost impossible to move ahead. To follow Christ closely means to be his friends. That friendly, intimate union leads us to follow even the smallest of his precepts: love is expressed in deeds. After many attempts – all in vain – to find Christ, Saint Augustine shares with us his experience: *I looked all around for the strength I needed to delight in You and could not find it, until I
at last embraced the Mediator between God and man: the Man, Jesus Christ, who is above all things and blessed for all time. It is He who calls and tells us, ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life’ (John 14:6). We are to love a man – Jesus Christ!

Jesus Christ is the only Way. No one can go to the Father except through him. Only through him, with him and in him can we reach our supernatural destiny. The Church brings this to our attention each day in Holy Mass: Through Him, with Him, in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours ... Only through Christ, his Most Beloved Son, will the Father accept our love and homage.

Christ is also the Truth. He is the absolute and total truth, uncreated Wisdom, who reveals himself to us in his most Holy Humanity. Without Christ, our life would be a vast lie.

The Old Testament narrates that, at God’s command, Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock two times, and water came forth so abundantly that all his thirsty people drank their fill. That water symbolized the Life that pours forth from Christ and springs up unto life everlasting. He is our Life because He merited grace for us, supernatural life for our soul; because that life flows from him – in a special way – in the sacraments; because He communicates his life to us. All the grace we possess, that of all humanity – fallen and redeemed – is God’s grace given to us through Christ. We receive grace in many ways, but the spring from which it flows is one: Christ himself, his most Holy Humanity united to the Person of the Word, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

When in the intimacy of our hearts our Lord asks, And you, who do you say that I am?, we should respond with the faith of Peter: You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God, the Way, the Truth and the Life ... Without him my life would be completely empty and I would be lost.
53. LOVE AND THE CROSS

53.1 The greatest manifestation of love.
Jesus called his disciples, and leaving everything behind, they followed him. They accompanied the Master on the roads of Palestine, to villages and towns. They shared joys and fatigue and hunger. At times they risked their reputations and indeed their very lives for Jesus. At first they accompanied him externally, but little by little an interior disposition to follow him took root: their souls were transformed. This deeper disposition requires more than mere detachment, and even more than abandoning house and home, family and material possessions. In the Gospel[712] of today’s Mass our Lord says, *He who wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.*

Denying oneself means refusing to be the centre of one’s own attention. The true disciple must be centred on Christ, to whom must be directed all thoughts and cares, so that our entire day truly becomes an offering to God.

To carry the cross means that one is willing to die. Whoever picks up the cross and carries it squarely accepts his destiny and knows that his life will end on that cross. Carrying the cross means that a firm resolution has been made; it indicates that we are willing to follow him – if necessary unto death – that we wish to imitate him in everything without placing obstacles between us. To follow Christ we should identify our will with his; He took up his cross without hesitation. He carried it to Calvary, where He offered himself to God the Father in an offering of infinite merit and love.

We should consider frequently that His Passion and Death on the Cross are the greatest expression of his love for the Father and for us. Certainly, the smallest act of love He performed, his most insignificant work – even as a child – had infinite merit, sufficient to obtain for all men over all of time the grace of salvation; to obtain for them eternal life and all the grace they would need to obtain it. In spite of this He was still willing to suffer the horrors of his Passion and Death on the Cross to show us how much He loves the Father, and how much He loves each of us. Sometimes He expressed to his disciples the urgency that filled his soul: *I have a baptism to be baptised with, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished ...*[713] The Holy Spirit has written through Saint John: *God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son.*[714] Jesus freely gave up his life for us because He loved us, for *greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends.*[715]

Jesus Christ cannot restrain his desire to give his life for our love. If we want to follow him, not just externally but deeply, identifying ourselves with him, how can we reject the Cross, the sacrifice so intimately related with love and self-giving? Being close to Christ will lead us to complete self-surrender, to true love, to the greatest joy. Forgetting ourselves, identifying ourselves with his holy will in all things, cleans, purifies, makes transparent and divinizes our soul. *To have the Cross is to have joy: it is to have you Lord!*[716]

53.2 The meaning and fruits of suffering.
A holy soul once experienced difficult trials. One calamity after another befell her, and each succeeding disaster seemed worse than the one before. Finally, that soul turned affectionately to our Lord and asked, *But Lord, what have I done to you?* And in the depths of her heart came the reply, *You have loved me.* She thought of Calvary and understood a little better how our Lord wanted to purify her and draw her close to the salvation of many who were lost, far from God. She was then filled with
peace and joy.

In our lives we will encounter sorrows, as all men do. If you have difficulties, be assured that they are a proof of the fatherly love the Lord has for you. These are good moments to look with love upon Christ on the Cross, to understand that from the Cross He is telling us I love you more, from you I expect more. Perhaps it is a painful illness that disrupts the plans we have made, or a misfortune affecting those whom we love most, or some kind of professional failure. Lord, what have I done to you?, we will ask. And He will respond in silence that He loves us; that He wants an unlimited acceptance of his divine will; that his logic is different from human reasoning. Then, when we accept and abandon ourselves, we come to understand – though perhaps later – what a great good are those difficulties. How thankful will we then be to our Lord!

Often, though, we will find the Cross in the ordinary and even trivial things that we encounter in the course of run-of-the-mill days: fatigue; lacking the time we would like to do things; having to renounce a pleasant plan that we had made; bearing with love the defects of persons with whom we live and work or, in connection with them, some small, unexpected humiliation; aridity in prayer ... Our Lord awaits us there as well. He asks that we accept those contradictions – great or small – without sterile complaints, without bitterness or rebellion. He asks for our love, taking up that which goes against us and offering it as a valuable jewel. Our small contradictions united with those of Christ on the Cross acquire an infinite value to make reparation for the many sins committed daily the world over, and for our sins as well.

Sorrows borne with and for love bear many other rich fruits: they serve as satisfaction for our sins; they purify our soul; they deepen and strengthen our character and personality. They are the only way to acquire a certain special understanding and sympathy for our neighbour. In fact, they open us to Christ’s own interior life, and thus unite us more closely to him. Often, deep suffering sets its mark on a decisive moment in our lives and leads us to a renewed fervour and hope, to a new way – fuller and deeper – of understanding our own existence. But pain and suffering should not mean sadness. When we carry our Cross together with Christ, our soul is filled with peace and a deep joy amidst all its trials. The lives of the saints are full of joy, one which the world does not understand because the roots of such joy are sunk in God.

53.3 Seeking out mortifications.

If anyone will come after me ... We want nothing in the world but to follow Christ closely. No other thing – not even our own lives – do we love more than this: identifying ourselves with him; making the desires and sentiments that He had on earth our own. We are close to him not only when things are going well, but also when we accept adversities with patience, happy to be able to accompany him on the way of the Cross, uniting our sufferings with his.

If, however, we were only to await the trials and contradictions, the pain we cannot avoid, our love would lack generosity. We would be content with just getting by. We would have a reluctant disposition, that might be described in these words: Mortification? Life has enough sorrows! I have enough worries already!

However, interior life depends too much on mortification not to seek it out actively. Those mortifications which arise spontaneously are important and valuable, but should not serve as excuses to flee from generous voluntary sacrifices, the sign of a true spirit of penance. ‘I will freely offer you sacrifice; I will sing your name, O Yahweh, your name, because it is good’ (Ps 53:8).

The Church proposes that we consider the penitential aspect of our lives one day each week – on Fridays – by reflecting on the Passion of Christ. On this day, many Christians consider with greater
care the sorrowful mysteries of Christ’s life, or they accompany him on the Way of the Cross, or they read or meditate on his Passion. It is a good day to examine more carefully how we habitually bear contradictions and the generosity – fruit of love – with which we seek out voluntary mortifications in little things; or how we struggle against our selfishness, laziness or the desire to be well thought of, to be the centre of attention. Other points for examination might include the small mortifications that make the lives of others more enjoyable; being cordial in our dealings with others; not giving in to bad moods that perhaps will lead to brusque manners; smiling when we tend to be more serious; being punctual in our work or studies; eating a little less of what we like most or a little more of what we like least; not eating between meals; keeping our desk, wardrobe or room neat and orderly; not giving in to curiosity; guarding our senses with refinement; not complaining about excessive heat or cold or heavy traffic ...

As we finish today’s meditation on the words of Jesus, if anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me, we request of him in the intimacy of our prayer, Grant me, Jesus, the Cross with no Simon of Cyrene to help me. No, that’s not right; I need your grace, I need your help here as in everything. You must be my Simon of Cyrene. With you, my God, no trial can daunt me ... But what if my cross should consist of boredom or sadness? In that case I would say to you, Lord, with You I will gladly be sad. [723] As long as I don’t lose You, no sorrow will be a sorrow at all. [724]
54. THE POWER OF THE FAITH

54.1 Faith is able to move mountains. The greatest miracles occur daily in the Church.

From the great crowds awaiting Jesus’ arrival, a man came forward and threw himself on his knees before him saying, Lord, have pity on my son ...[725] The attitude and words of this father show that his prayer is humble. He appeals not to the power of Jesus, but to His compassion. He does not advance his own merits nor does he offer anything of value. He looks to Jesus’ mercy.

To seek out the merciful heart of Christ is to be heard always: the man’s son would be healed even though the apostles were unable to heal him earlier. Later, privately, the disciples asked our Lord why they couldn’t cure the possessed boy. He said to them, Because of your little faith, for amen I say to you, if you have faith like a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, remove from here, and it will remove. And nothing will be impossible to you.

When we truly live by faith, we participate in God’s omnipotence. Thus our Lord would say at another time, He who believes in me, the works that I do he also shall do, and greater than these he shall do, because I am going to the Father. And whatever you ask in my name, that I will do in order that the Father be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in name, I will do it.[726] And Saint Augustine comments, He who believes in me is not greater than I; but I will then do greater things than those I do now. I will do more through him who believes in me, than what I now do on my own.[727]

Our Lord told the apostles in this passage of the Gospel from today’s Mass that they would be able to move mountains from one place to another, an expression that has become proverbial. These words of our Lord – and more – are fulfilled each day in the Church. Some Fathers of the Church point out that ‘mountains are moved’ whenever a person – with the assistance of grace – attains what human strength alone cannot attain. Such is the case with the work of our personal sanctification that the Holy Spirit carries out in our soul and in the apostolate. Although it may pass unnoticed, this work is much more sublime than the moving of mountains, and is carried out daily in the lives of many holy souls.

The Apostles and other saints through the centuries have also performed wonderful miracles in the physical order; but the greatest and most important miracles have been, are and will be those of souls that have been submerged in the death of sin, in ignorance or spiritual mediocrity, and are reborn and grow up in the new life of the sons of God.[728] ’Si habueritis fidel, sicut granum sinapis ... If you have faith like the grain of a mustard seed ...’

What promises are contained in this exclamation of the Master!,[729] promises for our interior life, for the apostolate, for everything we need ...

54.2 The greater the obstacles, the greater the grace.

Lord, why could we not cure the boy? Why could we not do good in your name? Saint Mark[730] and many manuscripts which record this text, add these words of our Lord: This kind (of devil) can be cast out only by prayer and fasting.

The Apostles were unable to free this possessed boy because they lacked the faith required, a faith that should have been manifested in prayer and mortification. We too may encounter some who need these means to arouse them from the prostration of sin or religious ignorance ... Something similar occurs with different metals: they melt at different temperatures. The hard interior of some souls – perhaps more ingrained in bad habits – requires more energetic supernatural means. Let us not leave
these souls sunk in their lethargy for want of prayer and fasting.

Our Lord teaches us that faith as tiny as a mustard seed is capable of moving mountains. Let us ask frequently throughout this day and during this time of prayer for that faith that prompts us to use the supernatural and human means generously. This is the victory that overcomes the world: our faith. With this faith, the mountains – the most formidable obstacles we may encounter along our way – will crumble before us, because our God does not lose battles. Walk then, ‘in nomine Domini’, with joy and security in our Lord’s name. Without pessimism! If difficulties arise, God’s grace will abound. If more difficulties appear, from heaven we will have poured down on us even more of God’s grace. If there are many difficulties, we can count on all the greater access of grace. Divine assistance is proportional to the obstacles that the world and the devil erect against the apostolic work. That is why I dare to affirm that difficulties are good, because where they exist we will have more of God’s assistance: where the offence has abounded, grace has abounded yet more (Rom 5:20).

The greatest obstacles to the miracles that even today our Lord wishes – with our help – to work in souls arise above all from within us. With a human outlook, we can narrow the horizons that our Lord continually opens in the lives of our friends and acquaintances, relatives and colleagues. We should never think that anyone is a hopeless case in the apostolate. As the saints have demonstrated, the word ‘impossible’ does not exist in the vocabulary of one who truly lives by faith. God is always the same. It is men of faith that are needed: when He has them there will be a renewal of the wonders we have read of in the Holy Scriptures.

‘Ecce non est abbreviata manus Domini: The hand of God the Lord’, his power, ‘has not grown weaker!’ Even today He works the same marvels as He did then.

54.3 Faith with deeds.

Christ lays down one condition: we must live by faith; then we will be able to move mountains. And so many things need moving ... in the world, but first in our own hearts. So many obstacles placed in the way of grace! We have to have faith therefore: faith and good works, faith and sacrifice, faith and humility. For faith makes us all-powerful: ‘If you only will believe, every gift you ask for in your prayer will be granted’ (Matt 21:22).

Faith should be put into practice daily. ‘Estote factores verbi et non auditores tantum’ – Be doers of the word and not hearers only. Carry out in your life the word of God; do not limit yourselves to merely listening to it or acknowledging it, exhorts the Apostle James. This is not enough. It is necessary to live those truths, to fulfil them. Faith should generate a life of faith, which is a manifestation of friendship with Jesus Christ. We should approach God with our lives, our works, our sorrows and joys ...with everything!

All too often difficulties arise from or are exaggerated by our lack of faith. We may pay too much attention to attendant circumstances or we may become excessively prudent, an attitude that may result from a lack of rectitude of intention. There is nothing – however simple – that our lukewarmness won’t present to us as difficult and costly. Conversely, there is nothing – however difficult and costly – that our fervour and determination won’t present to us as pleasant and agreeable.

A life of faith leads to a healthy superiority complex, born of a deep personal humility because – as Saint Augustine recalls – faith belongs to the humble, not to the proud. Faith results from the deep conviction that one’s efficacy comes entirely from God, not from oneself. This confidence leads the Christian to confront the obstacles he may encounter in his soul or in his apostolate with a will to win, even though the fruits of his efforts may be late in coming. With prayer and mortification, with friendship and joy, we will be able to perform those great miracles in souls. We will be able to move
mountains, to bring down barriers which appeared insurmountable, to bring our friends to Confession, to help others regain the road that leads to our Lord. The faith that will enable us to move mountains is nurtured in an intimate relation with Jesus, in prayer and in the sacraments.

Our Mother Mary will show us how to be filled with faith and love and daring in that course our Lord has marked for us in the middle of the world. She is that good instrument, completely identified with the mission received. Once she learns of God’s plan, she makes it her own. Her plans are not something added on. In the just fulfilment of these plans, she completely disposes her intelligence and will and all her energies. She is never an inert puppet: not when she sets out joyfully through the mountains of Judaea to visit her cousin Elizabeth; not when, truly exercising her duty as mother, she seeks and finds the Child Jesus in the temple of Jerusalem; not when she causes our Lord’s first miracle; not when she appears – without being called – at the foot of the Cross on which her Son died ... By saying ‘Be it done’ she freely disposes her entire person to the fulfilment of her calling. This calling does not seem foreign to her: God’s interests are her own interests. She does not run the risk that Her plans might pose an obstacle to the plans of God; her plans are perfectly identified with his. [739]
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[61] cf Pius XII, Humani generis, Denz-Sch 2318/3891

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[64] Phil 2:15


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[81] cf St Bernard, On the Falseness and Brevity of Life. 6

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