

[Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 76; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21]

As we celebrate today the maternity of Mary, Mary being the Mother of God, we might hearken to a more sentimental “holiday” which is celebrated the second Sunday in May – Mother’s Day. What kind of “Mother’s Day” card would Jesus select for Mary? The first message that comes to mind is “To the Best Mother in the World – Ever!” That would be an understatement!

Jesus would probably “care enough to send the very best” as Hallmark touts. But being both God and man, Jesus might think of writing a personal note inside the card, instead of or in addition to offering a pre-printed one. Something like, “Blessed are you among women.” He might sign it, “With all My love, Jesus, the blessed fruit of your womb.” Perhaps sometime today you can think of what YOU would write inside a Mother’s Day card for Mary for HER Mother’s Day!

Look at the prayers offered at the Mass for today’s Feast. We pray, not TO Mary, but THROUGH Mary. There is a big difference. Mary is not the Fourth Person of the Holy Trinity. She is a totally human being who was filled with grace; the fullness of God is within her, as when the angel Gabriel says, “Hail, full of grace.” The best way we honor Mary is to honor her Son. We address our prayers today to God our Father, asking that we might “profit by the prayers” of Mary. We can assume that when Mary was on earth, she prayed constantly.

Perhaps it was her example of making a holy place in a corner of her modest home that taught Jesus that when He really wanted to pray, He left the noise and the crowds and would go into solitude on a hillside, up a mountain, in a garden. Children learn how to pray by following the example of their parents.

Son of God though He was, Jesus must have relied in His humanity on Mary’s prayers during His public ministry when things got difficult. We can imagine Mary extending her hands over Jesus and singing the words which come from today’s First Reading from the Book of Numbers. It is a familiar blessing first pronounced when the wandering Jews finally made it to the Promised Land. “May the Lord bless and keep you...”

What a powerful and comforting image it is for us to think of Mary praying this way for us and for all of humanity. From her throne in Heaven, she looks down upon us, her children, and sings her blessing prayer to and for us. She intercedes for us like a good mother pleading to a compassionate Father when we have done wrong, or when we are struggling, or when we are in need.

She also teaches us to slow down, to stop, to listen and to think: "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." We see Mary's human but faithful response to a puzzling situation. The shepherds rush, then pause, then rush again to spread the Good News. They are reflecting, too.

For some reason, this Christmas, the Holy Spirit seems to be prompting me to reflect on my family, especially those members of my family who have passed on. I am thinking a lot these days about home, the home of my youth. Parenthetically, I do feel very much at home here at St. Martin de Porres. Since my arrival back in July, it only took me about six weeks to feel at home, and you are responsible for that. The rest of this year has been gravy and icing on the cake. Hoo-ray for YOU! Happy YOU and Happy ME!

The Prayer over the Gifts and the Preface for today's Mass speak of "the beginning of our salvation" through Mary and beg that "our salvation will be brought to fulfillment." Without Mary's "Yes" at the Annunciation, that fulfillment would not be possible.

Today's Second Reading from Galatians is the only time in ALL of St. Paul's letters that he refers to Mary, and even then he doesn't mention her by name! He simply says, Jesus was "born of a woman." But because of this, you and I are re-born through the waters of Baptism. That makes us sons and daughters of God, and heirs to the Kingdom. But God needed a human mother to cooperate in this plan of salvation. God "cared enough" to send us "the very best" in Jesus and Mary. Here is my "Mother's Day" message to Mary, the Mother of Jesus:

Thank you, Mary, our Blessed Mother, for being formed in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. For being prepared from the moment of your conception in the womb of Ann, your mother, to become the Mother of our Savior.

May we keep all the things that happen to us by the hand of God and by the realities of life, reflecting on them in our hearts. May we praise and glorify God like those poor but strong shepherds, for all that your Son does for us.

Thank you for being our Blessed and faithful and loving Mother. Bless us as we begin another year of faith, formation, stewardship, evangelization and discipleship in the service of your Son's people. Holy Mary, Mother of God and our Mother, pray for us! AMEN!

[Readings: Hebrews 5:1-10, Ps 110:1-4; Mark 2:18-22]

This is actually the first time in almost 33 years of priesthood that I am home and presiding at Mass on the National Holiday of Martin Luther King Day. Every other year, I was either still away on vacation, or the other assigned parish priest had Mass on Monday mornings.

Via another parish bulletin in another vicariate, the Holy Spirit sent me two reflections for this Martin Luther King Day, and I share them with you. The first is taken from "Love Drives Out Hate" (from Volume 46 of the Christophers' book *Three Minutes A Day*).

"The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. remains one of the most powerful and eloquent civil rights leaders in U.S. history. Here are just a few of his memorable statements:

"Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. . . . Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

"Let no man pull you low enough to hate him.

"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. That is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.

"Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it.

"The good neighbor looks beyond the external accidents and discerns those inner qualities that make all people human and, therefore, brothers and sisters."

America has gone a long way toward achieving the values enunciated by Dr. King in the early and mid-1960s; however, as recent events in Ferguson, Missouri, New York City, and elsewhere demonstrate, there is still a long road to travel before justice and equality reign in our land. God expects all His children to help make this a better world. Let us do our part by praying for the triumph of racial harmony, personal responsibility, and true Christian unity.

The second meditation comes from Ted Engstrom, in *The Pursuit of Excellence*:

“Cripple him, and you have Sir Walter Scott. Lock him in a prison cell, and you have a John Bunyan. Bury him in the snows of Valley Forge, and you have a George Washington.

“Raise him in abject poverty, and you have an Abraham Lincoln. Subject him to bitter prejudice, and you have a Benjamin Disraeli. Strike him down with infantile paralysis, and he becomes Franklin D. Roosevelt.

“Burn him so severely in a schoolhouse fire that the doctors say he will never walk again, and you have a Glenn Cunningham, who set the world’s record in 1934 for running a mile in four minutes and 6.7 seconds. Deafen a genius composer, and you have a Ludwig van Beethoven. Have him or her born black in a society filled with racial discrimination, and you have a Booker T. Washington, a George Washington Carver, or a Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Make him the first child to survive in a poor Italian family of eighteen children, and you have an Enrico Caruso. Have him born of parents who survived a Nazi concentration camp, paralyze him from the waist down when he is four, and you have incomparable concert violinist Itzhak Perlman. Call him a slow learner, ‘retarded,’ and write him off as uneducable, and you have an Albert Einstein.”

These inspirational reminders are important as we observe Right to Life Sunday, and as we begin the Week of Christian Unity. All people are made in the image and likeness of God, and thus have inherent human rights and an inner dignity that must be respected and defended. Our nation will be blessed by God only to the extent we care for the unborn, the disabled, the marginalized, the mentally challenged, and all those unable to care for themselves.

May each of us do our part in cherishing and defending God’s gift of life.
AMEN!

[Readings: Colossians 3:12-15; Matt 5:1-12]

It seems like such an ordinary event, the folding of an American flag, but here is the meaning of the Folding of the Flag. It may take a while to get through, but our war heroes went through much more for us, for our country and for our freedom.

Do you know that at military funerals, the 21-gun salute stands for the sum of the numbers in the year 1776?

Have you ever noticed the honor guard pays meticulous attention to correctly folding the United States of America Flag 13 times? You probably thought it was to symbolize the original 13 colonies, but we learn something new every day!

The 1st fold of the flag is a symbol of life.

The 2nd fold is a symbol of the belief in eternal life.

The 3rd fold is made in honor and remembrance of the veterans departing the ranks who gave a portion of their lives for the defense of the country to attain peace throughout the world.

The 4th fold represents the weaker nature, for as American citizens trusting in God, it is to Him we turn in times of peace as well as in time of war for His divine guidance.

The 5th fold is a tribute to the country, for in the words of Stephen Decatur, 'Our Country, in dealing with other countries, may she always be right.'

The 6th fold is for where people's hearts lie. It is with their heart that they pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States Of America, and to the Republic for which it stands.

The 7th fold is a tribute to its Armed Forces, for it is through the Armed Forces that they protect their country and their flag against all her enemies, whether they are found within or outside the boundaries of their republic.

The 8th fold is a tribute to the one who entered into the valley of the shadow of death, that we might see the light of day.

The 9th fold is a tribute to womanhood and to mothers. For it has been through their faith, their love, loyalty and devotion that the character of the men and women who have made this country great has been molded.

The 10th fold is a tribute to men and to fathers, for they, too, have given their sons and daughters for the defense of their country since they were first born.

The 11th fold represents the lower portion of the seal of King David and King Solomon and glorifies in the Hebrews eyes, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. No separation of Church and State here! Or in the next two folds!

The 12th fold represents an emblem of eternity and glorifies, in the Christians eyes, God the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit.

The 13th fold, or when the flag is completely folded, the stars are uppermost reminding them of their nation's motto, 'In God We Trust.'

After the flag is completely folded and tucked in, it takes on the appearance of a three-corner hat, ever reminding us of the soldiers who served under General George Washington, and the sailors and marines who served under Captain John Paul Jones, who were followed by their comrades and shipmates in the Armed Forces of the United States, preserving for them the rights, privileges and freedoms they enjoy today.

Now when you see American flags being folded, now you will know why.

God bless our Church. God give eternal rest to our deceased military.

God bless America. AMEN!

[Readings: Is. 57:15-19; Ps. 85 Phil. 4:6-9; Jn. 14:23-29]

Historically, speaking, the United States of America is on borrowed time. Most great empires have a shelf life of no longer than 200 years, and here we are at 239 years old. Our moral collapse has already begun; it is just a matter of time when our physical collapse will happen – unless we do something about it.

Back in 1971, before most of you were born, the Worldwide Church of God published a book called, “The Modern Romans.” I read it when I was a junior in high school and it scared me so badly, I still remember it to this day.

The book went into great historical detail to show how the Great Roman Empire collapsed from within, and how the United States of America, Great Britain and Europe are following the same pattern. How is this happening to us?

The lessons of history are being ignored. And those who fail to remember history are doomed to repeat it. The home has gone from being a foundation of greatness to one of decadence. How many families have the original spouses, the original parents and original children? Artificial birth control is rampant.

The failure of ancient and modern education. The basics have been thrown out in favor of progressive agendas which leave our children illiterate and uneducated. Religion in confusion. Fundamental basic Jewish and Christian beliefs and practices are being discarded, redefined or ignored.

The mad craze for pleasure. We now have two generations raised on the philosophy of instant gratification and the use of others as objects of our pleasure. Political paralysis. When was the last time the President and Congress agreed on anything? When was the last time Congress and Congress agreed on anything?

Militarism and our calculated risks. Look at the mess we made in the Middle East. Even Presidents and Defense Secretaries admit that we didn't do our homework. And who really are our allies in Europe, Asia and the Pacific? Former enemies have become allies with our allies. Our development of nuclear weapons is mind-boggling. Military entrance standards have been lowered.

Yet, in spite of all this, there is a reason for us to hope. Hope is what separates the cynical secularists from the hopeful believers. Human history has been a horrible chronicle of war, suffering, heartache, fear and death! The history of Rome is only another chapter continuing the same story. History repeats itself again and again with slightly varying forms, modified by national temperament and technological developments. The fruits of human behavior – strife, envy, jealousy, hatred, vanity, pride and prejudice – have run rampant both within and among nations. The record of history is not encouraging.

God says He is our Creator. And that He has permitted us to make our own choice – to follow a course of action that seems best – in order to prove that our ways end in suffering, war and death. Man has been allowed to prove, individually and nationally, that he cannot, apart from God, discover the way to *true* peace, enduring prosperity, radiant happiness, a full and meaningful life.

The choice set before mankind contained a promise of fantastic blessings to be heaped upon those who obeyed Him. It was also a warning: “See, I have set before you this day *life and good, and death and evil*; in that I command you this day to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to *keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments*, that you may live and multiply: and the Lord your God shall bless you in your land. I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you *life and death, blessing and cursing*: therefore *choose life*, that both you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:15-16, 19).

Abraham Lincoln recognized this fact and expressed it in a presidential proclamation in 1863. He said: “*We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown; but we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us;*

and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, *too proud to pray to the God that made us:*

“It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to *confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness:*

“Now, therefore, in compliance with the request, and fully concurring in the views, of the Senate, I do by this my proclamation designate and set apart *Thursday, the 30th day of April, 1863, as a day of national humiliation, fasting, and prayer* All this being done in sincerity and truth, let us then rest humbly in the hope authorized by the divine teachings, that the united cry of the nation will be heard on high, and answered with blessings no less than the pardon of our national sins, and the restoration of our now divided and suffering country to its former happy condition of unity and peace.”

Isaiah says in other words: “I will give full comfort to them and to those who mourn for them, I the Creator, who gave them life. Peace, peace to the far and the near, says the Lord; and I will heal them.”

St. Paul tells us in our Second Reading to his favorite community, the Philippians, to “have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition and with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God... Keep on doing what you have learned and received.” I truly love the poetic discourse he gives us in this reading: “Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely and gracious, think about these things.” The United States of America is our home. But an even greater home is each of our human hearts. Jesus tells us through the words of John: “Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our dwelling with them.” May the Father, the Son, and the promised Holy Spirit truly find a home in our hearts, in this community and in our nation. God bless America! AMEN!

[Readings: 2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145; Ephesians 4:1-6; John 6:1-15]

There is a cartoon series in some American newspapers called “Stone Soup.” It is written and drawn by cartoonist Jan Elliot. In a recent series of episodes, April 27 through May 9, things are disappearing from Jan’s sister Valerie’s house: food from the pantry, clothes from the closet, even the spare tire on Val’s car. The mystery is solved when the mother of one of 10-year-old Alix’s friends comes to return the tire. The woman has lost her job and she and her kids have been forced to live in their van. When Alix discovers why her friend was suddenly missing school, Alix did what she could to help out – even taking the spare tire from her mom’s car.

After explaining to her mom what she had done and why, Alix asks, “Compared to them, we’re rich aren’t we?” Val is so moved by her daughter’s heartfelt compassion she can barely hold back her tears. She replies, “Billionaires.” Later, Val is telling her brother-in-law what Alix had done. After a pause, Wally says, “How did you raise such a great kid?” Val says, “Now we all have to try and live up to her.” Holly, the pre-teen drama queen of the family can’t understand how homelessness happens.

“It’s easy,” her mom says, “You lose your job, you lose your insurance, your car breaks down. If you don’t have a safety net, things can go downhill fast. It can happen to the best of us.” Holly cries out, “Are you trying to freak me out?” “No,” her mom says lovingly, “I’m trying to keep you humble.” Those are the two keys of today’s three readings. To realize that we are “billionaires.” And the challenge to try to live up to what Alix, Elisha, Paul and Jesus are showing us to do.

The little obscure reading from the Second Book of Kings shows that Elisha is one busy guy. He, like Jesus, works wonders for the poor. He purifies a spring of water; he supplies oil to a widow; he gives a son to a barren woman, and then raises that son to life years later when he dies; he even purifies a pot of poisoned stew. Today, he feeds 100 people with a small amount of barley bread.

Elisha is also very active on the political scene as well. He provides water for an army of men; he warns the king of enemy plans and offers military advice. His intent is not to be known as a miracle worker or a political wizard, but to lure a sinful monarchy back to recognition of God's sovereignty over Israel and over the whole world.

Jesus knows the feeling of relief when the hungry are fed. Anyone who has served in a soup kitchen sees sad, uncomfortable and even ashamed people holding empty plates. Then they see a transformation take place. The plates, now brimming with food, don't hold only food; they also carry a sense of renewed hope for another day. They see faces that say, "Someone cares. Someone cares enough to feed me."

How much more does Jesus Christ Himself care for us! It is no accident that John puts specific details in his Gospel, details which are not found in the other three Gospels. He puts this "sign" smack dab in the middle of his "seven signs" or miracles.

You and I are nourished. You and I are "billionaires!" But we are not called to sit passively and rest in our comfort and pleasure. You and I are the "fragments" left over from the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the fish. The terms to "gather up" and "fragments" in the original Greek will be repeated in the oldest preaching of the early Christian Church, the Didache, the "Teachings." With Jesus Christ as the Bread of Life, a great gathering of the human family will take place when Jesus Christ is broken and "fragmented" on the cross. Then, nourished by His Body and Blood every time we gather around the table of the Eucharist, we become His hands and feet, His eyes and ears, His heart and soul in a Church and a world that is very, very hungry indeed.

That's where St. Paul's reading from the Letter to the Ephesians comes in. It's the end of the letter, and as usual, Paul makes his final point of the letter his hope, his dream and his heartfelt prayers for the infant Church. This is what he says:

Abused people are hungry for that kind of gentleness which only you can provide. Feed them with your gentleness.

There are those whose bodies and spirits are giving in to the hunger of illness, disease and old age. They need to be nourished with the food of your patience. Feed them with your patience.

Those who feel unloved, unvalued and unwanted need to be fed with the great love you have kept hidden in your heart. Feed them with your love.

Those who seek to divide and conquer need to know and experience the peace that only you can bring. Feed them with your peace.

Paul's ultimate hope, dream and prayer is that everyone who calls themselves "Christian" will be united in one body, one Spirit, one call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism. "One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

This week, you will encounter someone whose eyes are begging for your spiritual or physical help. It's real and it's desperate. Multiply that encounter by hundreds, by thousands, by millions. Who says that Jesus Christ cannot do signs and miracles in our day and age? He has us. Will you help Him feed the hungry? The power is in your heart and in your hands. In your home and in your wallet. In your own lingering hunger, which will only be satisfied and only be filled in no other way than this. AMEN!

[Readings: Ex. 16:2-4, 12-15; Ps. 69; Eph. 4:17, 20-24; John 6:24-35]

We live in a 24-hour society. Life never stops. Someone is always up and doing something. And it is never dark. Our cities light up the night. But it starts getting darker as we get older. We get afflicted with night blindness and find it hard to drive at night. It seems as though there is darkness inside now that intensifies the darkness outside. Being “in the dark” can happen in broad daylight. Certainly the people talking to Jesus today are in the dark. They have not only seen the miracle of the loaves but also have been fed by that miracle. Yet they do not see the signs, says Jesus. Well, the signs are right there in front of them: the miracle itself.

It is hard to explain such blindness, but not at all hard to prove its existence. Moses is faced with it again and again in the desert. The escapees from Egypt see marvelous things in the desert – the cloud of fire, the smoke on Mount Sinai, the water from the rock, and yes, their very freedom from slavery. Yet they do not sense the presence of God among them, caring for them. And so they complain, and about what? Food, of course! So God gives them manna. After the dew evaporates in the morning, something like coriander seed, from the carrot family, appears. God gives them “carrot cake!” And still they complain about “this wretched food.” So God, aware of the laws of nature, guides the quail returning from their spring migration to Europe exhausted on the desert sands. Easily scooped up, they provide ready food for the traveler. The word “manna” comes from the Hebrew question, “What is this?” What is this, indeed that God provides for the people day in and day out? Today’s responsorial psalm says that God “rained manna upon them for food and gave them heavenly bread.” Think of that at Communion time when you return to your pew. You have just received the Bread of Angels. The Bread from Heaven.

And think of what we are going to do while you are still wherever you are, before you head for church. Imagine the anticipation of coming to meet Jesus, the Bread of Life. Do you remember the anticipation of your wedding day? Your First Communion? Your Confirmation? Your first rock concert? Such excitement. Reminds me of the back-to-school commercial with the kids jumping up and down about buying school supplies and going to the dentist. Who DOES that?

We do that before coming to church. We look at what we are going to wear. Do our clothes say, we are going to meet Jesus? Are they modest enough so that when we sit, stand and kneel, we do not become a moment of temptation or scandal? Do we cover up those parts of the body that need to be covered up?

Do we look at the readings for Mass before coming to church, so that when we hear them, they are familiar to us? Older folks have this luxury of a quiet home to read and pray and meditate. But what about our younger families? I appreciate and I say Thank You to be able to get the kids dressed, organized and in the car ahead of time so you are not late for Mass. I know that it isn't easy, Sunday after Sunday. So thank you. Maybe in the chaos of the ride to and from church, you can prepare the younger children by explaining what is going to happen at Mass, in church. Make a little game about noticing certain actions and certain words. Talk about the homily on the way home. Bring a little note pad and a pen to take notes during the homily. Thank you for being attentive in your preparation for Mass.

When we get to the parish grounds, do we park sensibly in the parking lot? Do we allow room for emergency vehicles to be able make it down the lane? Do we avoid parking near the sidewalks and the yellow lines are marked? This is not only a problem here but in every parish.

Do we assist the elderly and the handicapped as they enter the church? Do we keep our voices low before Mass and after Mass as a sign of respect to those who are praying before Mass begins? Do we genuflect at the tabernacle or at least bow before we enter the pew?

Do we slide down the pew, so that all those who need, can sit at the ends of the pew? Do we keep our feet off the kneelers and avoid marks on the pews? Do we leave the area cleaner than we found it, removing all used tissue, bulletins and other garbage? Do we place the hymnals back properly? Do we settle ourselves down before Mass begins, closing our eyes in wonder and anticipation at what will happen in Word and Sacrament?

God once again feeds the people of Israel. Ironically, the name "Israel" can be translated as "the people who contended and fought with God." They are aptly named. And for being so stiff-necked and complaining, God allows them to wander in the desert for forty years. Why forty years? Because this insures that everyone from the original refugees from Egypt would die or would eventually die in the desert. Thankfully, Jesus Christ does not let us wander aimlessly in the worldly darkness. The bread, the miraculous bread that He gives to the crowds and that He gives to us, is the sign that we all want, that we all need, to see that He is here with us, and that we need to prevent the inner darkness from matching and melding with the darkness outside. This celebration keeps our eyes open and clear so that we can always be sure of the road to the Kingdom of God.

"Sir, give us the bread always!" AMEN!

[Readings: I Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34; Ephesians 4:30-5:2; John 6:41-51]

When undertaking a journey -- whether it is a vacation, a pilgrimage, relocation, or your life-voyage as a whole -- you need to prepare appropriately. Under-packing is perilous. Over-packing is burdensome. Lugging the wrong equipment is frustrating. Every inch and every ounce of luggage has to be made to count. Some things are always useful, no matter where you're headed.

Maybe Elijah failed to bring humor along that day he fled into the desert. Ahab and Jezebel were out for his blood, true, but throwing himself under a broom tree and praying for death was not a helpful response to his dilemma. Also, he went on a day's journey into the desert without water and food. While accustomed to living by a spring with ravens bringing him sustenance, he might have been pushing his luck this time. Evidently Elijah was unfamiliar with the saying: God helps those who help themselves.

Elijah was despairing -- again. This time it wasn't only famine and drought. His land and king had gone bad, the prophets who might have pointed things in a better direction were dead, and someone wanted to kill him, and so he decided to lie down under a tree and wait to die. "Enough, Lord, I've had enough. Take me."

God, however, doesn't let him -- also again. Twice, an angel awakens him and feeds him, not only to keep him alive but also to prepare him for a long walk to meet his God.

In what ways do you want to chuck it all, sit under a tree of despair and pray for death? And the, how does God send you an angel to nudge you forward and give you strength and hope for life's journey? Who is that angel for you?

It could be in the form of an unanticipated reprieve, a phone call or a sudden visitor, a friend, a stranger's kind word, or what we often call a "lucky break." Grace arrives and a bridge appears over troubled waters, enabling us to cross to the other side unscathed. It's the hour when we might remember to say:

"Taste and see the goodness of the Lord!"

St. Paul reminds us of the excess baggage that weighs us down on the journey: bitterness, fury, anger, shouting and reviling. He also reminds us what items we DO need to pack before we leave, or to discover on the way: kindness, compassion, forgiveness. We bring both to church when we assemble for Sunday Mass. And we place them on God's altar along with bread and wine for God to bless and to transform into life-giving grace.

As we prepare to celebrate the coming of the Lord to us at Sunday Mass in Word and Sacrament, do we take a moment before Mass begins to quiet ourselves down, asking the Lord to touch our ears, our eyes, our minds and our hearts to actively participate in the Mass? Do we bring noiseless toys or books for the little ones? Do we give example to our older children by our participation? By the way, I thank parents for bringing their infants and toddlers to church. Even when they are vocal or animated during Mass. It says we have young, new blood in our congregation, and that this parish has a future.

Thank you also parents for knowing when to take your child out if necessary. Once a child was being very unruly, so the parents had to struggle as they carried him out. As he passed by, he shouted at the people, "Pray for me!" Another time, I really got into my homily asking questions about what Jesus would do. I almost shouted, "Is that what we are supposed to do? Is that what Jesus would have us do?" And a little child screamed out, "NO!" I said, "That's right!" I also like when we finish singing and the little ones say "YAY!" and they applaud the music we make for the Lord. That's the Holy Spirit talking through them.

During the Liturgy of the Word, the first half of the Mass, do we sing the opening hymn, the Gloria, the Responsorial Psalm, and the Gospel acclamation I have to tell you that you do a great job at singing here at St. Martin's. After a year here, I finally have the knack of the many songs I didn't know when I first arrived. Don't be afraid to "test drive" songs you don't know. Sing with feeling.

If we arrive late for Mass, do we wait until the assembly is standing before looking for a place to sit? The best time to look for a place to sit, or to return to your pew is when everyone is standing or after the reading/homily. This avoids us becoming distractions to others, and a distraction to me during the homily.

Do we actively listen to the inspired Word of God as it is proclaimed to us by the lectors? Do key words touch our ears and our hearts? Do we jot them down? Bring a pen and a pad of paper with you to church.

Are we attentive to the priest or deacon when he preaches the homily? Some people ask why I have notes for my Sunday homilies, but not for Daily Mass, weddings, funerals or baptisms. It's because the crowds for these occasions are smaller and more controlled, and I am not so easily distracted.

On Sundays we have a much larger congregation with far more possible distractions. Also, I have a text because I want to make sure that I present to you the best, most prepared message I can give. Studies show that Sunday Mass is often the only time Catholics receive catechesis, proper teaching, at the beginning of a busy week. I also want to make sure that the message I give is consistent at all the weekend Masses. Sometimes I am challenged by someone as to the content, so I have in black and white what I say. Also, I have learned that I preach twice as long on Sundays, if I do not have a text in front of me!

We also remember the need for periods of silence during the Mass. The proper place for silence is after the first two readings, after the homily, and after Holy Communion is received. Thank you for praying and reflecting during those periods of silence. Our silent prayer at those times can be powerful.

As we journey together after Mass, the single most critical item to take -- on any journey -- is confidence in God. Confidence literally means, "With faith." I do not go on this journey through life alone. God is our co-pilot, or at least God is somewhere in the car with us! In traffic, I saw a bumper sticker that says, "God is my co-pilot." Then both our cars passed a church where the marquis sign read, "If God is your co-pilot, you need to change seats!" God will provide the bread for us, as well as the road we're on when God is our ultimate destination. AMEN!

[Readings: Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 34; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58]

In the time that the Bible was written, before we had fast food restaurants and people eating alone in their homes, people ate around a common table. With WHOM you ate was just as important as WHAT you ate. Certain legal restrictions defined membership in the Hebrew camp: no pork or shellfish. Nor did you sit down to dinner with just anybody. You ate with family. You ate with people who embraced your laws and customs.

If you invited a stranger to your table you were implicitly offering not only a meal but shelter, protection, and extended-family status, and once you did, it was more or less for keeps. Yet here is Lady Wisdom, calling out in the streets: Anybody hungry? Come and get it! She sets her table in advance of a guest list. She anticipates multitudes sight unseen. The only requirement is that her guests come wanting what she's prepared: wisdom and understanding. How many will dine with her tonight? How many of us would accept her invitation?

It's possible that there are two kinds of people, as the Bible's wisdom literature suggests: the wise and the foolish. The wise want to learn, understand, and appreciate more about the world and their place in it. The foolish want to be entertained, pleased, distracted, and numbed. They eat at different tables. The wise seek nourishment while the foolish hope to get drunk and stuffed. It may well be that most places set at Wisdom's table will go empty. Perhaps she can confidently issue her broad invitation, knowing that only the few will respond.

What IS wisdom? Wisdom is practical instructions on how to live: how to run your household and business, how to worship, and how to deal with your relationships and with your neighbor. They may tell you what TO do, what NOT to do, or contrast the actions of a fool to one who is wise. The wisdom God once shared through intermediaries is now a Word delivered in the flesh.

Jesus issues a similarly wide-ranging invitation to dine at his table. He Himself is the meal: eat and drink and live. His flesh is for the life of the world, no exceptions made. He offers us shelter, protection and family status.

There's plenty of room around this table, and once shared, this life is for keeps. How many will come? Of those who accept the invitation, how many will truly understand it? Do you really understand Who you receive at Communion?

Absenting ourselves from that table is still a deliberate and telling decision. When we come forward today, we are choosing a shared life: with a rich history, a responsible present, and a future at the Heavenly Banquet.

Before we come to the Table of the Lord, we reflect on the words of Sacred Scripture as explained to us in the homily of the bishop, priest or deacon. Do we see how we can apply the words of the Bible and of the preacher to our own lives, our own unique situation, and our own relationships? We take a silent moment after the homily to do this.

Then we stand and profess the items of the Faith that make us uniquely Catholic. Ironically, almost the exact same words appear in the English Book of Prayer which the Episcopalians use, and the Lutheran Book of Prayer. Our profession of faith is followed by the Universal Prayer, because they include petitions that are world-wide as well as personally precise. When the reader pauses for our silent petitions, do we add them? There is strength in numbers, and there is strength when we bring our special needs together in prayer. Then we are seated.

We have officially concluded the Liturgy of the Word. Now we are ready for the Liturgy of the Eucharist. In most churches, the ushers come by with baskets to collect our financial sacrifice for the support of the parish. Here at St. Martin's, as soon as we enter the body of the church, we deposit our church support envelope in one of the baskets behind the last pews. These baskets are gathered and the collection is brought up first, followed by the bread and wine.

Do we realize that when the ushers gather the baskets, the bread and the wine, they also gather the assembly? Do we realize that we bring to the altar bread and wine, but also our very lives, our joys, our struggles, our pain? This is how our sacrifices in life tie in with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

When the priest offers the Sunday collection up to the Father, he says, “blessed be the gifts, and blessed be the givers.” The collection represents the first fruits, the best we can give to God with grateful hearts, knowing that God cannot be outdone in generosity. As the bread and wine are placed on the altar, place your hopes and dreams, your faith and your doubts on the altar as well.

Once we move from the offertory prayers to the Preface, do we wish the Lord to be with the spirit of the priest and each other? Do we lift up our hearts to the Lord? Do we give thanks to the Lord, Our God? We are about to go to the mountaintop. Are we ready for the trip?

During the Eucharistic Prayer, do we focus on the divine action on the altar? Do we realize that God Himself is going to make Himself present under the signs of bread and wine? Do we receive Jesus in the Eucharist with the devotion, respect and humility He deserves? A famous French philosopher and an atheist once said, “If you Catholics truly believed that Jesus Christ is really in the bread and wine, you would receive Him crawling on your hands and knees!”

After we return to our pew, do we watch others as they come to Holy Communion? The Communion we share is not only with God; it is with each other. We are a Eucharistic Community. Pray for those coming up to receive. Do we spend a few seconds in quiet prayer when all are seated, making our own personal act of thanksgiving for Jesus coming into our hearts and souls? I thank you for the almost deafening silence you show after communion. In another parish, I used to hear two things; silence, and people hunting for their car keys. That doesn't happen too often here! Do we stay until the concluding prayer, announcements, and final blessing? To “dine and dash” – without grave need or reason -- is an offense to the Blessed Sacrament and to the assembly at prayer.

“The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” Jesus speaks of the need to eat His flesh and drink His blood in the present, in order to “have life within you.” Those who are in a State of Grace and do that now will be raised “on the last day” and “will live forever.” AMEN!

[Readings: Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b; Psalm 34; Eph 5:21-32; Jn 6:60-69]

“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

“This saying is hard; who can accept it?” “Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray Him.” “As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.” “Do you also want to leave?” “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.”

The theologian Rudolf Bultmann didn't start it. But he was the one who stated it most memorably. Everything Jesus says or does is intended to lead us to the moment of decision where we choose Him or we refuse Him.

Surely we have choices to make every step along the journey of faith as His disciples. Come follow or stay behind. Seek peace or take up the sword. Serve God or money. Build on rock that lasts or on sand that slips away. Tend to the dead or choose the way of life. Open your eyes or remain blind. Get up and walk or stay where you are. Go up to Jerusalem or return to Galilee. Seek the Kingdom or settle for the world. Either we are for Christ or against him. Jesus doesn't allow a shift into neutral or a response of “no comment.” And let's be clear: Any decision we make has consequences, good or bad.

Look at how we still may be still “slaves” to our past, our resentments, our addictions, our bad habits. The only unacceptable answer to the challenge of faith is to say, “yes” and do “no.” The decisive question continues to be posed because each new generation has to address it. We can be baptized and still say “no.” We can receive our First Communion and have our faith ratified at Confirmation and still say “no.” We can journey with Jesus as members of His Church and determine one day that we'll go no further. We can be faithful churchgoers all our lives yet at the critical hour, when our testimony is called upon, we may waffle and stammer and look away, making a lie of it all. “Are you with me or do you want to leave?” Jesus asks. Saint Peter's answer remains the best, but we can only repeat it if we mean it.

Life is here. Love is here. Challenge is here. The cross is here. Forgiveness is here. The choice is ours. The choice begins when we are dismissed from Mass and walk to the church parking lot. Do we exit the parking lot with patience and courtesy? What is the mood inside the car? What is the tone of the conversation? Where does the car take us in terms of future choices?

There is one priest who concludes every Mass with the words, "The Mass is NEVER ended, go in peace." He is saying that we are to take the Body and Blood of Christ, which we have received HERE and bring it out THERE. We are to become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We are to be the eyes and ears, the hands and feet, the heart and soul of Jesus. The best compliment we can receive from strangers, from pilgrims, from atheists and from fallen away Catholics is: "See how they love one another!" "See how they help the poor." "See how they teach our children." "See how they help the sick, the dying, and the dead." And, to me, most importantly, "I want what they have!"

Eating Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament should change us, transform us, and leave its mark. It should be clear to the forces of evil, to the world, to our neighbors, and to ourselves that our decision to consume the Bread from Heaven is a powerful thing that leads to action. We follow the Precepts of the Church. I was taught that there are six, but the Catechism of the Catholic Church says there are seven: I. To attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation, and resting from servile works. II. To observe the days of abstinence and fasting.

III. To confess our sins to a priest, at least once a year.

IV. To receive Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist at least once a year during Easter Season. V. To contribute to the support of the Church.

VI. To obey the laws of the Church concerning Matrimony.

VII. To participate in the Church's mission of Evangelization of Souls.

This last one is important today for two reasons. First of all, our RCIA Director, Mr. Jack Dalzotto, will speak briefly about encouraging potential candidates to be fully initiated sacramentally in the Church.

Secondly, this weekend, we participate in the Missionary Cooperation Plan and support a poor diocese in Lima, Peru, the home of both St. Martin de Porres and St. Rose of Lima, whose feast day is August 23rd. Every parish in the Archdiocese, as part of our world-wide outreach to the poor and needy are given a chance to support a particular mission during the summer months, and a chance to support the entire missionary activity of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in a general collection in October. Envelopes of today's collection are on the tables next to the back pews.

Add to these Precepts of the Church the Ten Commandments, the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy and the Beatitudes found in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, and you pretty much have the Catholic blueprint and map for Catholic action at home and in the world! The best way to live out the Eucharist in every situation is to ask, "What would Jesus do?" "What is the most loving thing to do in this situation?" and "How will my reaction, my response and my choice bring Jesus here and now?"

Just a final word on the place of the family, especially based on today's Second Reading. St. Paul says that the head of a married couple and of the family is the husband/father. But as I also heard a wise woman say, "The man may be the head, but the woman is the neck, and the neck moves the head."

Parents are called to be steady, righteous examples to their children so that the children can develop spiritually, morally and physically. Children are a gift from God and not the property of parents. They are "on loan" from God. And parents will stand in judgment as to how they treat these gifts.

A Christian Catholic family should be a miniature Church.

Family members teach each other and strengthen each other in faith and they outdo each other in acts of charity. They pray for and with each other. They can learn the faith of their ancestors. And the Body of Christ is again born again and risen again and lives again for another generation! "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." AMEN!

If you had to list your favorite family traditions, what would they include? High on my list would be Christmas Eve and Thanksgiving Day. These would be special, once-in-a-while traditions. Sharing a meal with my immediate family.

What are the more usual, routine traditions your family enjoys? Do you share any meals in common? Is there a family "movie night?" Do you designate one meal or one day a week just to "sit and visit?" Before there were I-phones and telephones, Face Book and Twitter and Periscope, people interacted with each other in person, in the same location, and on a regular basis.

Before electricity, people went to bed at sundown and woke up at day break. I was surprised to read that the average American in the year 1909 slept ten to twelve hours a night. Maybe that's why families were so big back then!

We used to walk everywhere, even if it meant taking a bus or a streetcar or a commuter train. Exercise was natural for us. Kids played outside every evening after supper until... when? Do you remember what Mom told us? "When the street lights come on" or "when the church bell rings."

All of this has changed in our fast-paced, fast-food, fast-forward society. Everyone is rushing everywhere instead of taking time to savor the journey as well as the final destination. Is it no wonder then that the Number One spiritual concern people share with me is: "I don't know how to slow down and to pray." Number Two is, "I don't know my family anymore. We are like strangers living in a hotel." As families change, as they grow and relocate, and as years pass, traditions are bound to change. And this can create tension.

We get a sense of these difficulties in today's Scripture readings. In the Book of Deuteronomy, we hear part of Moses' first address to the Israelites. He is about to teach them the statutes and decrees they must obey in order to enter the Promised Land. He tells them up front: "you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it." This will have great importance later on when Jesus speaks about human tradition versus God's Law.

Moses is ready to set the whole Law of God before them and warns them ahead of time how important it is that they get it right. Following the Law of Moses, the teachings of Jesus and the traditions of the Church does not imprison us, it frees us. Because we know what is expected of us, and what is right and what is wrong. That is very freeing, indeed. No moral guesswork!

Following traditions was a means to the end of maintaining a loving covenant relationship with God. That could not happen if we were not in a right relationship with our neighbor... or ourselves. To be in right relationship with God, with others and with oneself, Moses says, is life-giving, a sign of wisdom and intelligence. Our outside choices mirror our inside commitments.

St. James challenges you and me in our Second Reading to humbly welcome the Word of God and to “Be doers of the Word and not hearers only.” Just to proclaim or listen to God’s Word without acting on it is empty indeed. We become what the Greeks call “hypocrites” – actors who portray one thing on the outside but are someone completely different on the inside.

What do we make of Jesus’ apparently negative response to the traditions of His own family, of His own religious culture? It might appear as if Jesus has simply outgrown those traditions and moved on to something entirely new. Jesus is not against tradition. He is against EMPTY traditions and rituals. True and lasting traditions are meant to help us, not to burden us. They are meant to set us apart, to remind us that we must continually face others in love – and in doing so turn toward God. If we get them right and let them change us, our rituals and traditions bind us closely to one another and to God.

What keeps us from genuine and sincere prayer? Jesus tells us that it’s because we let the sinful concerns of life get in the way. Perhaps this may be why you and I don’t have the strong prayer or strong family relationships for which we hunger. Jesus tells us what we need to get rid of before we can pray fully and without distraction. We have to wash the filth off the wall before we can apply the fresh paint. We need to come to the Sacrament of Reconciliation,

Jesus finds Himself in the kind of conflict that would eventually accelerate into His Passion: Going against the deeply-held beliefs of influential people. He and His disciples not only violated the traditional religious practices regarding eating and other matters of purity, but Jesus turns the whole episode into a stinging rebuke of the hypocrisy of his critics. No matter how hard you tried, He said, following the rules did not make you pure and righteous if your heart were otherwise. The practices of religion are important, but have we ever let observing them substitute for true faith? Do our outer actions reflect what's really going on inside?

The statutes and laws got longer and wider during the 13 centuries of history between Moses and Jesus. Devout teachers, eager to protect God's law, "built a fence around it" with additional decrees that ensured the community would commit no accidental offense. The purity codes of Israel were very sincere, and Jesus – a dedicated practicing Jew and big Moses fan -- doesn't dissolve those codes, but rather expands Mosaic Law even further. Jesus says it's not enough to refrain from killing, if you keep on hating. It's not enough to keeping from fornicating, if you're going to keep on fantasizing.

So Jesus isn't saying, "Jewish law bad, My law better." He too builds a fence around God's law, but His fence goes deep rather than wide. Jesus doesn't seek to control external behaviors. His fence is constructed around the heart, the seat of human will and character. Keeping the hands pure while the heart is crusty won't purify the whole person, Jesus says. But if you concentrate on the heart -- the will in the driver's seat of all human behavior -- then the whole person will be pure.

What would happen if we focused on purifying our hearts? We'd have to give up judgmentalism, gossip, envy, and bias. We'd have to discipline our thoughts and stop entertaining delicious resentments and nursing old injuries. Purity of heart demands vigilance, daily and hourly practice, and a lot of space for self-forgiveness. The sooner we begin, the sooner we'll get there. AMEN!

[Isaiah 35:4-7a; Ps. 146; James 2:1-5; Mark 7:31-37]

Looks can be deceiving. We look at a well-dressed man wearing a white coat and assume he is a doctor. We look at someone expensively dressed and assume that they are rich. We look at someone dressed inconspicuously and assume that they are middle income or even poor.

The first situation happened when a fellow seminarian and I travelled to Assisi many years ago. After a full morning of sight-seeing, we decided to share a small pizza with mushrooms. As we both dug in, Ron asked me what was on the pizza. I said, "Mushrooms." He said, "It tastes like fish, and I am deathly allergic to fish, and I don't have my antidote with me." Turned out that the mushrooms were, in fact, anchovies. Also turned out that if I didn't get Ron to the emergency room within a half hour, he would die. We frantically raced around the streets of Assisi looking for a hospital and a doctor. Ron told me not to run because it increased his blood pressure and spread the poison more quickly throughout his body. So we walked briskly like British joggers.

At the emergency room, in my best Italian, I spent five minutes trying to convince a man in a white coat that we needed immediate attention. After listening patiently, he said to me, "then you must see a doctor. I am the janitor." We finally got Ron the attention he needed. And he didn't die, thank God.

Two parishes ago, I commented on how elegant one of the older women parishioners looked. She did a perfect model sweep and said, "Oh, this? I picked it out at the Salvation Army for ten dollars!" Three parishes ago, at a Christmas party hosted by a wealthy member of the Altar Guild, I was making my excuses at the end of the evening and started heading for the door, a simple, unassuming man was picking through the hors d'oeuvres. I passed him quickly and said a perfunctory, "Hello and Good-bye, I'm Fr. Nick." He graciously shook my hand and said, "Hello, Father, I'm John Ricardo." I didn't realize until I got into my car that he was at that time, the chairman of Chrysler Corporation!

Our readings today remind us that looks can be deceiving. Isaiah is speaking a word of hope to a nation that has been invaded and conquered for the umpteenth time. He speaks of a time and a place where there will no longer be any physical disabilities. A land which will be filled with lush vegetation and refreshing waters. St. James reminds us not to judge by outward appearances. Someone dressed poorly may be rich in the Holy Spirit and God's good graces.

Today's Gospel has another miraculous healing by Jesus. But He heals not a blind man, not a cripple. This is the only story in all four of the Gospels where Jesus heals a man who is deaf. It is curious that this is the only healing of a deaf person. It is curious that Jesus uses the same medicine he uses on the blind man – spit. Yuk! More amazing is that Jesus creates the miracle with one word: "Ephphatha!" "Open up!" Good words to ponder.

When I had my final visit ten years ago with my dear friend and spiritual director Barbara, who was dying of cancer, I asked her for her final message to me. What words of wisdom can Barbara give me to help me on the rest of my journey of faith as she was about to end hers? She looked at me, puzzled by the question and said, "I hadn't thought about that." Then she closed her eyes, lowered her head and said simply the words that Jesus says to us today: "Be open." Be open. I took that to mean, be open to the message of the Gospel. Be open to the lessons of life. Be open to the surprises that God has in store for me. Be open.

I think of that whenever I officiate at a baptism. Be open. Be open to the Spirit. These words were said to each one of us on the day of our baptism. Our ears and our mouths were touched as the priest or deacon said these words of what is called the Ephphatha Prayer: "The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May He soon touch your ears to receive His Word, and your mouth to proclaim His faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father." Maybe Jesus is asking us again to "Be Open." To be open to learn our faith deeply. To HEAR His Word, to DO His Word through works of Mercy, and to BE His Word in our tired, lost and lonely world! AMEN!

[Readings: Genesis 1:26-2:3; Ps. 90; 1 Thess.4:1b, 2, 9-12; Matt. 6:31-34]

Do you remember hearing about the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy? Maybe you had to memorize them in order to get a gold star in religion class. On this Labor Day, or day that we celebrate the gift of work, let's recall them now. Not only to list them, but to understand them. They are concrete ways to put the Gospel into action as laborers in the vineyard.

The Corporal (or bodily) Works of Mercy are: *to feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to shelter the homeless; to visit the sick; to ransom the captive; to bury the dead.* These are easy to comprehend. Maybe not so "to ransom the captive." Unless they are spiritual captives or emotional captives caught in their own private hell. We "ransom" them when we offer our compassion, our time and our efforts to be Christ to them in their need.

The Spiritual Works of Mercy may be a little more difficult to recall, to list and to understand. The Spiritual Works of Mercy are: *to instruct the ignorant; to counsel the doubtful; to admonish sinners; to bear wrongs patiently; to forgive offences willingly; to comfort the afflicted; to pray for the living and the dead.*

To instruct the ignorant. People may not be dumb or stupid in their understanding or with their choices. They may just lack the proper knowledge to believe and to choose rightly. That's where we need to know our faith well enough that we can get them back on track. If we don't know our faith, this upcoming "Year of mercy" may be just the time to brush up on it. To be able confidently to speak the truth in love.

To counsel the doubtful. Someone comes to you and doesn't know what to do, or is second-guessing their choice. You guide them with love to make the right decision. *To admonish sinners.* We are called to love sinners, but to hate the sin they commit. "But I don't want to hurt their feelings," we might say. Is a temporary sting better than a lifetime of regret or an eternity without God? The usual comeback is "Judge not, lest you be judged." That's only partly true. The Church judges what all kinds of thoughts, words and actions are virtuous or sinful, and instructs us about them.

What we cannot judge is another person's status or relationship with God, or what is in their heart. That status only God knows. That's what Pope Francis meant when he said, "Who am I to judge?"

In the past, some of our loved ones made unwise or immoral choices. I can simply point out what the Church says about their situation. Usually they already know themselves where they stand. While they may not agree with us, or with the Church, there is still a mutual respect and love. We don't disown them, and they don't disown us. We can still sit down together in friendship and fellowship. Isn't that what Jesus did in the Gospel? He eats with sinners...

To bear wrongs patiently. Our society totally disregards this. Look at how the media tells us to settle disputes. Take them to court. Attack them in the studio. Beat them senseless. Shoot them in the neighborhood. To bear wrongs patiently means that justice will be served ultimately, if not in a court on earth, then at the Tribunal Seat of Judgment Day.

To forgive offences willingly. There is a big difference between "forgive" and "forget." "Forgive" means that I no longer let the pain you caused me rule my life and color my decisions. "Forget" means, "let's pretend it never happened." We are called to forgive, not to forget. The scar is with us always.

To comfort the afflicted. You may think that God is sending all of His "special people" your way, but God may be sending His Own Son in what Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta called, "Jesus, in His most distressed disguise." We remember that we can assist, but we should never enable.

Assisting means we try to meet their real needs in a healthy way. It doesn't mean that they are to arbitrarily take advantage of us if they are able to do things themselves. *To pray for the living and the dead.* This speaks for itself. Remember all the living and the dead through our prayerful connection. We are still bonded to the "Communion of Saints" the souls of the faithful in Heaven, in Purgatory, and here on Earth. Blessed are those who rest in the Lord, for their good deeds go before them. Now, it's our turn to "get to work!" AMEN!

[Isaiah 50:4c-9a; Ps. 116; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35]

Once upon a time, the priest who taught our college speech class was preaching about this Gospel. He began by telling a true story about an incident that happened when he was the weekend associate at a Southfield parish. The pastor had just finished a Saturday afternoon wedding and went into the confessional to hear Saturday afternoon confessions. He heard the curtain rustle in the little cubicle where the person going to confession enters, so he slid the little wooden door covering the window to hear the confession.

“Go ahead,” the pastor said. There was no reply from the dark penitent’s closet, but he could hear something going on. Something like a metal box opening and then some clicking. So the pastor cleared his throat and again said, “Go ahead.” A voice came from the other side, “Who are you?” He answered, “I’m the priest, ready to hear your confession. Who are you?” The man replied, “I’m the photographer for the wedding, and I needed a dark room to change the film in my camera!”

Jesus asks us the same question today in our Gospel. But flipping the question a little bit, we can say, “Who are you, Jesus?” “Who are you for me?” When Jesus asks the question, He wants to get the pulse of the marketplace. These guys can give Him a pretty accurate opinion. But they, like that photographer, are in the dark. Their focus is a little off. They need some new film to record their life experiences and come up with a better answer.

Given the history of the Jewish people, the majority of believers in Jesus thought He was an up-and-coming political force to be reckoned with. Do we expect Jesus to be a miracle worker? Mr. Fix It? Santa Claus? How about a revolutionary, a prophet, a political leader, a superhero? Jesus changed the anticipated song, “Happy Days are Here Again,” with sad days, when He would suffer greatly, be rejected by his own Jewish leaders, and be killed. But then He adds five important words: “and rise after three days.” And those five words would make all the difference in the world, and in eternity. Everyone knew that normally, when you fell down dead, you die and you stay dead. “And rise?”

Peter, at that time, doesn't get it. He is looking for profit, not persecution, winning not losing, success, not failure. But the message of Jesus is different. Take up your cross. Follow Me. Lose your life for the sake of My eternal life. Suffering through our life's work, our homework, our church work gets us there.

We, like St. James, can show the faith which is the foundation of the "works" we do for ourselves, for others, for the Church, for the larger community.

The reason why we grow in faith as a Catholic Christian community is not only in the worship we give God here every week, but also in the work we do with our head, our hearts and our hands. Any responsible Christian steward who has sacrificed their time and talent for St. Martin's has grown spiritually from the experience. Their biological family becomes enriched with a new, larger spiritual family who turns out to support them in times of sorrow and need and to share their joys and celebrations. Many good and lasting friendships begin here.

Every one of us has a special gift, a special talent, or even several gifts and talents which we cannot keep hidden under a bushel barrel. We are invited, called and challenged to share those gifts with the community. We do this first as an expression of gratitude to God, Who cannot be outdone in generosity. We do this secondly, to show our personal value and worth as a baptized believer who puts their faith into action. Finally, we do this as a witness to others in the community who may be struggling with their own identity, with their own faith, with their own search for meaning in life.

I have heard stories of people in this community who were recipients of our ministry and service and who in turn share ministry and service with others. This is a very concrete and visible sign of the hope we bring to the world.

So, who is Jesus Christ for YOU? What is Jesus asking you and your household to do? How is Jesus asking you and your household to respond to His invitation to take up your cross and follow Him? The question is not, "Should I serve St. Martin's? But rather, "HOW am I, how are we, going to serve St. Martin's? And how much are we going to serve God through our parish? You are loved and you are needed! Say "Yes" when you are called! AMEN!

[Wisdom 2:12, 17-20; Ps. 54; James 3:16-4:3; Mark 9:30-37]

Today we are treated to one of the most memorable moments of the teachings of Jesus. Today Jesus gives His disciples the correct answer to their quarrelsome discussion of who is the greatest. So what does He choose as His audiovisual prop, His mind-boggling and heartwarming example to make His point? He chooses... a child! A child. To teach His prestige-and-popularity-seeking pupils that they have their pecking order all wrong. They wanted to start at the top with the best and the greatest. But Jesus reverses the order and starts at the bottom with the worst and the least, namely a child.

We have to remember back then that a child was not seen as the clean, cute and cuddly kind. A child in the time of Jesus was the lowest of powerful humans. Powerless. Two thousand years ago, the infant death rate sometimes reached thirty percent of live births, and sixty percent of children were dead by the age of sixteen. Children were not even counted in the local census until they were twenty years old, and only then they counted only the males.

Yet, it is Jesus, the only begotten Child and Son of God, Who identifies Himself with the lowest and the least. And He says, "Whoever receives one such child as this in My name, receives Me." I should note here that the new translation uses the word "it" when referring to the child not out of disrespect, but to make the child "all-inclusive" – the child could be a boy or a girl, younger or older. Further on He will say, "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, that you do to me." On this Catechetical Sunday, we ponder the theme: "Safeguarding the Dignity of Every Human Life." Especially our young people.

When a fight breaks out in a school yard, a bar, a sports arena or a prison yard, more often than not, a crowd gathers not to break it up but to watch. Some even join in. We let our lower passions get the best of us and rule over us. Our human instincts of jealousy and ambition, envy and covetousness challenge our designs on peace, respect, and taking care of the needs of others.

If we dare to accept the challenge of Jesus to welcome the least ones, we are put on a sure collision course with contemporary culture.

It won't be easy. People will ridicule us, badger us, and even shame us into not doing what Jesus wants us to do. Look at the figure in today's First Reading. The Suffering Servant will do just that, suffer. But the evil ones who will do the inflicting of pain and suffering let words of truth slip out between their grinding teeth. "The just one is the son of God." "God will defend him and deliver him from the hand of his foes." "We have proof of his gentleness and patience." "God will take care of him."

In anticipation of our Holy Father's visit this week to the United States, the Franciscan Action Network is asking all of us to make the "F.R.A.N.C.I.S. Commitment to Civil Discourse" based on the letters in the name of Francis, and based on principles drawn from the life of St. Francis. In this commitment, one promises in every discussion; political, relational or ecclesiastical, to:

F: FACILITATE a forum for difficult discourse, and acknowledge that all dialogue can lead to new insight and mutual understanding.

R: RESPECT the dignity of all people, even those who hold an opposing view.

Their view may be wrong, but they are still children of God.

A: AUDIT one's self by using a vocabulary of faith to unite or reconcile rather than divide conflicting positions.

N: NEUTRALIZE inflamed conversations by presuming that those with whom we differ are acting in good faith.

C: COLLABORATE with others and recognize that all human engagement is an opportunity to promote peace.

I: IDENTIFY common ground such as similar values or concerns and use this as a foundation to build upon.

S: SUPPORT efforts to clean up provocative language by calling policymakers to personal integrity.

May St. Francis and Mary, Our Lady of Guadalupe and Queen of Peace, pray for us, bless our catechists and young people, open our hearts, and bless and keep safe our Holy Father as he visits us this week. AMEN!

[Numbers 11:25-29; Psalm 19; James 5:1-6; Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48]

God has blessed me with a very vivid and creative imagination. This can be both a blessing and a curse. I visualized the people in today's Gospel amputating their hand, their foot and their eye. If we had to do that because of the sins we commit with our hand (touching something we are not supposed to, taking something we are not supposed to, striking someone with our hand), or because of the sins we commit with our feet (that take us where we should not go or be, or kicking another), or our eye (looking at stuff we are not supposed to be looking at), I picture us limping along, with one arm missing, and with partial blindness.

One time when I was home for the weekend from the seminary, I was reviewing the Rite of Anointing of the Sick and the Last Rites. In the new ritual, all I anoint is the forehead and the palms of the hands. But in the old rite, all extremities had to be anointed as the following prayer was said, "May God deliver you from all the sins you have committed with your mind, your eyes, your ears, your hands, your feet and your nose. I asked my mom who sitting nearby, "What sin can you possibly commit with your nose?" Without missing a beat, she said, "Sticking it someone else's business!"

Two weeks ago, some 235 priests made it through the five hour trek to Boyne Highlands for our thirteenth Priests' Convocation. Convocation is a "call" given by the Archbishop of Detroit to "be with" him as we share friendship, fellowship and prayer, a lot of good meals, and listening to a few keynote speakers. For some priests, this is the only event, every two years, when the Lone Rangers who are all alone with one, two or three parishes join other brother priests to witness to their need for fraternity and support.

Two speakers spoke of the call to holiness and the call to mission. The theme was "Rekindle the Flame." They shared personal stories of witness and evangelization. It was obvious when looking around the room that we have fewer priests, more young priests, and priests like myself who are now on medication for various conditions and whose health is challenged daily.

My colleagues and I have gotten older-looking and heavier. Yet most of the newly-ordained and recently-ordained priests of Detroit are fit and look like they just graduated from high school! Oy! One of the issues we talked about was change. How priesthood has changed, how the Church has changed.

Changes in the Church cause division among believers. It is a painful experience, one that at first glance should be avoided, discouraged and perhaps even crushed. But having members in our Church that push for a clearer understanding of our teachings and practices may result in growth and development for the Body of Christ. Change is necessary for a growing body.

History has shown that change is usually difficult to accept, and those who push for radical change are often expelled, excommunicated or persecuted.

In two of our readings today we see changes happening in the outpouring and the action of the Holy Spirit. And we see how both Moses and Jesus are tolerant of those who do not fully fit the mold of the disciples. Moses and Jesus are entirely open to those who had not been recruited and trained in the “officially sanctioned and approved” methods and procedures of their religion.

These two great leaders both use the same criteria in judging whether to silence those who are accused of “rocking the boat” or to allow them to go on their own way. Were these “disturbers” doing harm or doing good by their activities? Were they hindering or promoting God’s work?

What are some changes that we clergy and lay people face today? In our day, there are some thirty million ex-Catholics in the United States. One in ten Americans once was a Catholic, but is no longer practicing the Catholic faith. We Catholics number the largest denomination of Christians in the United States. Former Catholics make up the second largest group. Why is that?

Yet, the Church in America continues to show signs of life and growth. There are more Catholics now per priest than there ever has been, largely due to the shortage of priests and an increase through participation in the RCIA – the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

This change from the American Church of the 1950's and 1960's can be seen as a great grace as more and more lay people step up to the plate to take on the legitimate ministry and service that is rightfully theirs by virtue of their baptism.

The Archbishop of Detroit, Allen Vigneron, in his wrap-up talk on the last day of the convocation, invoked the memory of Synod '69 – an Archdiocesan-wide gathering which radically changed the complexion of our diocese and turned it into the most innovative and progressive diocese in the country.

Being a practicing Catholic was no longer just about “pray, pay and obey.” Now, we are called to recognize that by virtue of our baptism, we have a dignity to pursue ministry and service in the Church. You should no longer see yourselves as mere volunteers and “Fathers Little Helpers,” but each of you is seen as a steward of God's generous kindness to humanity and to the world, called to holiness, called to live out your mission by being proclaimers of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God.

Who are the “little ones” Jesus is referring to in the Gospel? Pope Francis has been identifying them for us all week. What do you make of Jesus saying, “Whoever is not against us is with us?” How do we show that we are “for” Jesus? How have we witnessed, as individuals and as a faith community, to our beliefs, our Christian actions and our commitment to be disciples of the Lord?

Let us make our words the words of Saint Pope John XXIII:

“In essential matters, let there be unity;
in nonessential matters, liberty;
and in all matters, charity.”

And as Pope Francis says at the end of each of his talks and visits.

“Pray for me. I need it.” AMEN!