

[Readings: Rev. 7:2-4, 9-14; Psalm 24; 1 John 3:1-3; Matt 5:1-12a]

What does it take to be a saint in this world? Two miracles and a lot of good press? Martyrdom for the right cause? Canonization can be achieved on these terms, but it takes a bit more to be actually counted among the blessed. Scripture goes on at length about the holy ones, but their identification always seems to boil down to a curious factor rarely considered: ***the condition of the human heart***. While we might look only to the "outer" criteria for sainthood -- the lame casting crutches aside, the cancer patient cured through timely intercession, or the firing squad shouting, "Recant your faith or die!" -- the biblical criterion is simpler: ***Live with a clean heart before God***. That opens up a new avenue of discernment. What makes for a clean heart?

Many of us grew up with the stain-of-sin metaphor impressed on us. If sin leaves a stain, then a clean heart is one free from sin. Fair enough. This idea, though, can paralyze us, because none of us is free from sin for more than minutes at a time -- unless you're a far better person than I. In my last two parishes, the parish secretary and I had a contest after I got back from my Confession to see how long I would stay in a "state of grace." I won't tell you how short or how long those times were, but it is humbling! If sainthood means being clean-hearted, and cleanliness equals sinlessness, knowledge of our sinfulness can demoralize us en route to sainthood. We're obliged to take the nearest exit and abandon that destination. We might give up the fight.

In the Bible, however, the clean heart is characterized as pure or focused. That points toward purity of intention more than action: recognizing that the horse needs to be in front of the cart or we're not going to get far. The clean-hearted don't aim at keeping their hands or even their noses clean, primarily. They have bigger fish to fry than managing exterior conditions, because they know exterior conditions inevitably result from interior ones. So the pure of heart focus on orienting themselves toward God: in prayer, in love, in purpose, linking themselves hour by hour with the will of God.

The habit of turning in a godly direction becomes their primary goal, not collecting good deeds like gold stars in the cause of righteousness.

All too often in the Bible we see what becomes of those who are righteous in deed but loveless in heart. Their offering before God remains inert and their hearts may fall more deeply into shadow, deprived of divine light. But those who move in the direction of God are deepening their relationship to the source of love, light, and life quite naturally. Only those who grow close enough to God to know themselves as God's children will embrace this identity effortlessly. This purity is within reach of us all.

Catholic citizens of the United States have the providential gift of celebrating the feast of All Saints on the Sunday before the 2020 presidential election. This campaign has once more manifested the divided nature of the American people. The possibility of post-election violence, even by a few, is a real threat within our cities. Even if such hostility does not unfold, there remains the violence of an interior and simmering hatred of the neighbor who is not like us. In a kind of anti-liturgy, this hidden violence causes us to think to ourselves, "It is their fault, their fault their most grievous fault." And somehow, some way, they must pay either through cold indifference or through violence expulsion from the human community. Into this fracas of hatred, injustice and the impossibility of forgiveness, comes the feast of All Saints.

We have overly-romanticized this feast. It is generally the day in which some children dress up as their favorite saint, imitating the virtues of their saintly forebears. The roots of this feast contradict this romanticization. The feast of All Saints originated as a devotion to relics in the city of Rome. The bodies of the saints, especially the martyrs, were venerated on this day.

In Catholicism, sainthood and martyrdom are inextricably linked. After all, in the Book of Revelation, who is the saint? It is the great multitude, standing beneath the altar of the Lamb once slain. This great multitude represents all the martyrs, those who have borne witness to the Lamb once slain even unto their own death. The great multitude does not perform an anti-liturgy of blame. No!

The great multitude does homage before the Lamb once slain, bending their knees before the living God. There is no hostility within this liturgical City of Saints. They act as one body, praising the living God.

What hope is there for us -- those of us trudging in this valley of tears and death -- to experience this saintly existence of love, unity and homage before God alone?

The Beatitudes, in the Gospel of Matthew, are the Constitution for this City of Saints. Who are the blessed, the citizens of heaven? The poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the clean of heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted and the insulted.

It is not those with power and prestige who have prominence in the City of God. Might does not make right, power politics do not conquer. It is those who lack, who are empty before God and neighbor, who are the blessed.

Whatever happens on Nov. 3, the politics of the saints may be exercised. The great lie of the earthly city is that the only politics that matter unfolds in the halls of power in Washington, D.C. Although we do have the power to vote for life, to vote for marriage, to vote for religious freedom in our country.

But politics is about the communion of the city, the cultivating of friendship between men and women, young adults and youth in day-to-day life.

We, Catholics, must practice this saintly politics, especially now. We must be poor like Christ, mourn with those who mourn, not seek our own will at every cost, remember those who are forgotten, forgive those who offend, recognize our poverty before God, make peace, and be willing to suffer for doing all of this.

Everything that we do, every decision we make, every thought we have, must be infused with this Beatific Constitution.

On Nov. 3, and well after, let us witness to the politics of the saints, of the martyrs who spilled their blood for the love of the Lamb once slain.

All holy men and women, all holy young people and children, pray for us, especially now. AMEN! *(Taken from a meditation by Timothy P. O'Malley, Ph.D.)*

[Readings: Wisdom 3:1-9; Psalm 23; Romans 6:3-9; John 6:37-40]

There is nothing that will cause more labor and weariness than sin. It makes us weak and almost helpless. Jesus offers the best rest which is forgiveness. Jesus summons the sinner to conversion.

It becomes harder when one dies with the sin. But God can still save us. God's mercy can still be availed of. We believe in the existence of Purgatory. It is a state where souls who are still unworthy of Heaven undergoes cleansing through suffering.

The Communion of Saints, which we profess in the Creed, tells us that we, the living here on earth, the saints who are in Heaven, and the poor souls who are in Purgatory are connected and can help each other in prayer. That is why we offer masses for those who are in Purgatory. We are encouraged to do it. We thank those who never forget to pray for those souls.

This is an expression of our faith in God who is merciful. As Jesus promised to His Father, "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day." (John 6:39). True to His promise and obedience to His Father, He saved everyone, sinner or saint, when He died on the cross. All Creation is God's. He loves each and every one of us. His offering of His only begotten Son to die for us is a testimony to it.

Recalling the death of our loved ones, we are confronted with a perhaps startling reality, that we too shall die. That our life has bounds marked all about by birth and thus also by death. There was a time when we were not on this earth, and there will come a time when we are not again of this earth. And it is part of our vocation as Christians, I believe, to proclaim the reality of death itself.

*Memento mori* --"remember that you must die" -- is not simply a medieval invention but is a central focus of Holy Scripture. For to proclaim death as a central part of our human existence (that we have an ending as we have a beginning) is to be reminded that we are creatures. And if we are creatures, then to proclaim this in proclaiming the reality of death is to proclaim God, the Supreme Creator. That's what we hear in today's Second Reading.

And so we are called to serve God in our own generation. As our loved ones did in theirs and to which their lives bear witness even (especially!) if they do so imperfectly. To fear God is to know who God is -- and to know who we are as His creatures -- and such fear is articulated in a life that is marked not necessarily by moral perfection but by reverence, a pilgrimage towards God.

And where have our loved ones gone now that they have reached the threshold of their pilgrimage here on earth? We do not know. We do not know where they have gone, nor where we will go when we too die. For even though Christians have spoken much about Heaven and Hell and dreamed up all sorts of images of their reality, the truth is that the threshold of death opens us up to something that must stay hidden from us now and about which we cannot say much.

“But the souls of the just, the righteous are in the hand of God...” we hear in our First Reading. To be confronted by the reality of the threshold of death is to freely entrust ourselves into the hands of God, or to attempt to withhold ourselves from that which will take us anyway. Whatever the case, it is to enter into a reality from which we cannot run.

And yet the Scriptures attest to another reality that we CAN know something about. That just here, in death, God Himself has crossed the limits of our creaturely lives from His own side (from eternity) and has moved toward us in the nothingness of death. And where else is this made possible but in the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming again of Jesus Christ our Lord? “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day,” we hear in today’s Gospel. Lose nothing, not even to the nothingness of death, because into this very nothingness Jesus himself entered as He lay in the tomb for three days and through this nothingness, He went in the victory of the Resurrection!

And it is just here, to the awesome reality of resurrected life, that Christ will bring with and in Himself all the faithful departed and those of us faithful pilgrims with them: “This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son

and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day," (John 6:40).

Their hope is full of immortality, Wisdom tells us (Wisdom 3:4) and it is this very same hope, a living hope, that we have been born into through our baptism into the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:3). A hope that St. Peter tells us is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. That is, not a creaturely hope. A salvation that will be revealed on that last day but which we, along with the faithful departed, are receiving even now in Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:9). And every time we share in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

So let us rejoice even as we face various trials in our life, and let us pray for those of our loved ones who have departed this life in faith, and for ourselves as well, that the good work which God did begin in them -- and has begun in us -- may be perfected unto the day of Jesus Christ. God's mercy and compassion, hopefully will be enough for us to endure and accept our suffering for the sake of being worthy to enter the Kingdom.

On this day/night, offer a prayer for the souls in Purgatory. Think of the positive memories. Remember those who helped you grow in faith and in your practice of the faith. Give praise to God for His mercy. And never lose hope!

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. May their souls and all the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. AMEN!

[Readings: Wisdom 6:12-16: 63; 1 Thess.4:13-18; Matt. 25:1-13]

Boy, this has been some week, huh? I didn't know which was going to last longer: the pandemic, or counting the votes for President!

Now that the dust seems to have settled, where do we go from here? We still fight for life. We still fight for religious freedom of assembly AND expression in the public square. Finally, we remember that our American citizenship is temporary. Our heavenly citizenship is forever! And we continue the campaign of living like Christ, so that we may end up in Heaven. Because as He tells us in today's Gospel, we do not know the day or the hour!

Here is a more contemporary version of the Gospel we just heard.

At an adventure camp for teens, the campers were divided into teams to test their camping skills. When the earnest instructor tried to demonstrate safety practices, one group of guys sitting behind him mimicked him and spent their time laughing and joking. After they got their gear, these guys ran ahead to grab the best spot -- a rock ledge that hung over the lake.

They didn't bother to set up their tents. One of the guys discovered it was cool to light the "Blue Tip" matches off his teeth, his belt, his boots, or other guys' jeans, and then flip the lit match over the ledge and into the water, where it would make a hissing sound. Every guy in the group thought this was great, and they fought over the box of matches, spilling some into the lake, and lighting the rest until they were all gone.

Night came faster than they expected. Soon it was dark. And cold. And they had no firewood. And no fire. And no matches. They called out to other groups down the shore and asked for matches, but those groups had seen them flicking all their matches into the lake and simply laughed.

The woeful group sat in the darkness, slapping away mosquitoes and watching the campfires that flickered all around the shoreline in the distance. One of them asked, "Do you think we could start a fire with a lightning bug?"

Today's readings speak of wisdom, the end times and to be prepared.

When I am ready to leave my man-cave for another day of ministry and service, I still ask the Holy Spirit to give me the wisdom to make the right decisions, to say the right words and to act as Jesus would have me act. I still ask for “an understanding heart” when confronted with the day’s challenges.

During the month of November, Catholics turn their thoughts and reflections to the Four Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell. St. Paul adds his “Nick”el’s Worth about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in today’s Second Reading. Are we ready for that day? What will that look like? Because as Jesus tells us in today’s Gospel: we do not know the day or the hour.

Trying to figure out all of this, and trying to cope with all of life’s trials with the endurance of faith, we have a powerful advocate in Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Of all Mary’s many, many titles, I have some favorites. One of them is Mary, Untier of Knots. Because that’s usually what I need her for. A mom to get me out of jams. After all, she’s like the wise virgins ready with oil for their lamps for the unexpected arrival of the bridegroom, while I’m like the ones running last minute to get some. I turn to Mary, Untier of Knots for physical, mental, emotional and spiritual healing. I pray that I may be utterly released and unburdened. In that moment, I like to thank Mary for helping me to work through the knots I create in my life and for always giving me the sweet relief of her unbounded love for untying the knots given to me by others or by life itself.

St. Bonaventure once wrote: “When Mary holds you up, you do not fall; when she protects you, you need not fear; when she leads you, you do not tire; and when she is favorable to you, you arrive at the harbor of safety.

What are YOUR most reliable sources of wisdom? Do you seek out these resources (human and otherwise) as often as you should?

In what ways do you understand the end times to be NOW? As you wait for the coming of the Lord, in what ways do you see the Lord is already near and feel the Lord's presence?

When I was a child, our parish priest used to say, "Don't wait till you die to go to Heaven." This is the spirit of end-times that won't occur only at the end of the line. Purgation, preparing our souls for Heaven, is something we consciously



choose now, just as we might also choose the way of justice, peace, joy, gratefulness, humility, and love. We don't have to worry about the so-called Rapture, salvation and damnation, Heaven and Hell, and what's going to happen after we die. What rightfully concerns us is the choices we're making in the present hour, the oil we have in our lamps today, and whether we carry the Bridegroom in our hearts. If we are in Christ TODAY, we are in Christ forever.  
AMEN!

[Readings: Prov. 31:10-13; 19-20; 30-31; Ps.128; 1 Thess. 5:1-6; Matt. 25:14-30]

We know what the parable means, don't we? God has given us talents, and we should use them for the stewardship of the Church. Short homily!

And yet, let us remember that the parable of the [talents](#) follows an end times parable of the delayed bridegroom. The emphasis of the parable is upon God's coming at the end of time. And the parable of talents is related to the final judgment of Our Lord.

For Jesus, a [talent](#) is not about skills or abilities. It is about money. And not a small quantity of money. In fact, it is a weighty barrel full of cash. 75 to 100 pounds of silver and gold equal to 20 years of annual income! To even receive one talent for Jesus' audience would be wealth beyond imagination. The language of talent points to the generosity of God. The servants are given talents not because they have earned them. The master bestows [talents on loan](#).

And yet the servant given but one talent is incapable of recognizing this divine economy. He absurdly buries his barrel full of cash in what must have been a sizable hole. Worse, he accuses his master of being harsh, rather than generous. The fault of the man possessing a single talent is the incapacity to recognize the generosity of God. What has been given to him in that talent is not for his own possession. God gives, so that we might also give. Nothing is ours, all things come from God alone. And when we give out of what we have received, the divine investment doubles.

That is the proper attitude of the disciple awaiting the coming of Our Lord at the end of time. Yet the [bridegroom](#) has not left us bereft of gifts. We possess the gift of creation, the Scriptures, the sacraments, prayer and the works of mercy. God has given us [wealth beyond wealth!](#) What are we doing with it?

The conversion that Jesus is calling us toward is a return to a total "attitude of gratitude" for the God who gives. We, too, must become those who give, offering our whole selves back to God.

The Church evangelizes when she lives as one who has received everything from God, offering this divine gift to the world.

Our parishes require a renewal according to the generous economy of gift revealed by Jesus Christ. It is not enough to fulfill Sunday obligations, to give but a bit of cash away in the Sunday offering, to pray a little when we must, or to think about the hungry and thirsty on Mission Sunday. This is not the attitude of one who has received the stunning gift of redemption, the impossibly powerful liberation from sin and death, and the surprising offer of sanctification in the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

The oil in our lamps is the gratitude we possess for the gift of the bridegroom to the Church, to the world, to you and me!

So we must prepare ourselves. Our preparation is a formation into a Eucharistic gratitude for the sacrificial love of the Word made flesh, more precious than silver or gold.

After all, that sacrifice of love unto the end is the talent of all talents that we have been given by the supremely prodigal God.

When it comes to our skills and abilities, God simply did not make us all the same. There are some people who can handle five talents; there are some who can handle only one or two. There are some persons who are really smart and some who are smart in other ways.

There are some who are musical or artistic, or handy in the repair shop, the kitchen or spiritually, and there are some who are not. There are some who have physical athletic ability and attractive looks, and there are some who do not.

The important thing to remember is that each servant is given something. No one is rejected or forgotten. You may not be a five-talent person, but you have some talent. I think that there are a whole lot more one- and two- talent people in this world than there are five-talent people.

Whatever gifts we have, “to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.” Sounds like some kind of “Voodoo Economics” to me! What do Jesus’ words mean? First and foremost, all that we have comes from God. And we are to put it to good use. Secondly, if we are self-centered hoarders, we keep what little we have close to our chest. We hug it tightly so we don’t lose it. But, alas, it

WILL be taken away. Don't put your stock in what little you have. Be open to receive much from God, Who has splendid plans for you and your future!

What are we doing with our talents? In high school, all of us had to take an aptitude/vocations test. Guess what I was best qualified for? A librarian or a bookkeeper! Isn't THAT exciting, boys and girls? But as I entered college and began to see more of what God wanted me to be and to become, I discovered other talents: writing, speaking, acting, humor, compassion, listening, praying. Put all that together, and you can see how priesthood was a logical choice!

Each of us, no matter how mundane our lives might seem, bears the potential for great things. Hidden in every young shepherd boy could be a king (David), and every teenage girl might bring Christ into the world. Any thief could buy his way into Paradise in the eleventh hour with a single act of kindness ("Remember me, Lord, when you come into your kingdom."). A very old couple might well be the parents of a new and blessed nation even though their lives seem almost over (Abraham and Sarah). An abused and forsaken single mother could encounter an angel and through that experience learn that God sees and knows her and is preparing a way for her and her rejected child. It would not be wrong to say that we have a religious obligation to believe these things and to bring these divine surprises to life within us. We are all talented.

Some of us can dance and some of us can paint or cook or think brilliant thoughts or fix anything that's broken. But that's not the whole story of how God grants talents far and wide to those who would be servants of the divine will.

We are each "talented" by the God who gifts us and provides us with every grace and blessing. Those talents may naturally lead us into a specific vocation to scientific endeavors or teaching; working with our hands or our head; community service or civic leadership; marriage and family life; priesthood or religious life. Yet our job or our role is only one expression of the divine talent that has been given to us.

Your Questions for Reflection this week:

How able am I to trust God and follow what God sets before me?

What are the outcomes when I try to control or manipulate a situation?  
What can I do to be more trusting that “all shall be well” without my interference?

What are my greatest fears and struggles? Do I have the courage or  
desire to let God help me through them?

Our best friends help get us to Heaven, and we help them get to Heaven.  
Faith, hope and love are three talents God gives all of us. We just need to tap  
into them and use them, with the help of our friends on earth, and our oldest and  
newest friends in Heaven. AMEN!

[Readings: Ez. 34:11-12, 15-17; Psalm 23; 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28; Matt 25:31-46]

As sons and daughters of God, we are made to be in communion with God and with one another. We make up a spiritual family. We are all members of the Kingdom of God, with Christ as our King. As the Catechism teaches, we are all called to the same end -- that is God. But, there is a certain resemblance between the human and the divine. "Love of neighbor is inseparable from the love of God" (CCC 1878). It is in living together as one that we respond to our vocation (CCC 1879), and that unity goes beyond each one of us (CCC 1880). Through this society, we are each established as "heirs" and receive talents to give back to our society (CCC 1880). So, as one Church, we come together as heirs, and as heirs, family; we come together to live in unity for the sake of Christ.

We are being called by God to come together as Families of Parishes. As you may have heard, our parish will be joining together with other parishes. These groupings will be announced by Archbishop Vigneron soon. It might be difficult at times, all change is. But it is clear that the Holy Spirit is moving us in this direction, at this time, in our Archdiocese. We have an exciting opportunity to unite as Church in a new way that will help us live out our Baptismal call to holiness as one, united Body of Christ. We trust in Jesus Christ, our King, to lead and care for us as we come together as Families of Parishes.

In today's Gospel, Jesus describes a parable comparing His followers to sheep. This is a common metaphor for Jesus, where we are His sheep and Jesus is our Good Shepherd. Today, Jesus explains that those who love Him will inherit the kingdom of God, sitting at His right and at His left in Heaven.

Remember that our Catechism teaches that we are "heirs". What are we heirs to, and who are we inheriting that from? What is so important that we inherit? In the Catechism and in this Gospel, we inherit the Kingdom of God. We inherit the eternal banquet of Heaven. To inherit, implies that one is a part of a family. As Christians we were reborn via our baptism into the family of God which is the Church. Thus, each of us are children of God and are brothers and sisters in Christ. When we treat each other as we would treat Christ, we do it to Him.

Jesus's words today remind us that we CHOOSE to follow or not to follow Him. On this feast day of Christ the King, we are especially reminded that Jesus is indeed the Lord of our lives. We are left with some big questions: Is Jesus really the Lord in my life? As a family of believers, is Jesus really the Lord in the life of our parish?

Sometimes it is easy to follow Jesus. Sometimes it isn't. Sometimes we are challenged in our discipleship in ways that we don't understand, or even in ways that we don't think we can accomplish. Jesus never said that it would be easy. But He promises that if we are faithful to the end, we will enjoy eternal life.

No one is on this journey alone. Families of Parishes will help us to work together as the people of God in our mission to unleash the Gospel. Not only as individuals, but as a parish family, we are invited and challenged to work out our salvation with Him, as St. Paul says, "with fear and trembling." Because we have been created to live in His Kingdom forever, we must begin living that Kingdom-centered life today!

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged us in ways we never would have guessed. But, our mission of bringing all people to Jesus, our King, has not changed. We are still sent on mission, and joining forces with other parishes will strengthen us in that mission. We will be better equipped to lead all souls to Jesus as one family, so that all of us may sit at His right and at His left.

We have reached the conclusion of another year in the Church's calendar. At this gateway between the old liturgical year and the new one, the Church places the figure of Jesus Christ our King. Jesus is no typical king – someone of worldly might, power and glory who lords it over others. Jesus is a King Who SERVES those He rules. He is a King Who commits Himself to serve, to suffer, to die for all His people, but above all, for those who were – and are – in any kind of need. We remember that Christ our King is bigger than any pandemic, any political division, any racial disharmony and any military power. While the battle on earth continues, Christ will bring all things under His feet, under His rule!

That is why both today's First Reading and Gospel give us the figure of the shepherd: One Who watches over the flock and protects the sheep from

danger and attack, even at the cost of His own life.

At the judgment that follows your death and mine, we probably won't be asked the questions some people might be expecting: How many Masses did you attend? How many prayers did you say? How many sins did you avoid?

I suspect the questions we will be asked when we stand before God will be more like these: Did you truly and actually try to love God above all else?

Did you try to love each human being as God loved you while you walked on this earth? Did you treat each created thing, including creation itself, with the reverence, the respect and the restraint God asked of us from the beginning of the world? How much have you done for others?

How will we answer THOSE questions? Our answers will determine whether we end up dancing with the sheep or suffering with the goats.

Have you ever done something good to someone who didn't deserve it? How did this affect your relationship with Jesus? What abundance do you see in each member of your family or faith sharing community that, when shared, blesses others? What makes you come back to St. Martin de Porres for Mass?

If we want to inherit the Kingdom prepared for us since the dawn of time, the instructions are absurdly simple: Take care of one other. Love your neighbor. In doing so we participate in the love of God. THAT'S why we come back!

Families can be fun and beautiful. But they can also be messy and scattered. I once entertained having t-shirts printed for my immediate family members that says, "We put the fun in dysfunctional!" Even though this transition to Families of Parishes may be challenging, it is through our unity that we will best follow Jesus and lead all people to Him and to His Kingdom. That Kingdom begins now. This altar is His throne, and we are about to meet Him again in the Eucharist. Today, let us approach His throne with confidence, and then support each other on our journey to Heaven as one family in Christ. AMEN!



[Readings: Sir 50:22-24; Psalm 67; 1 Cor 1:3-9; Luke 17:11-19]

It's a story of sacrifice and survival; partnership and progress.

It was our country's very first Thanksgiving. Imagine the challenges the first settlers endured in 1620. They left everyone they knew and everything that was familiar. The Mayflower carried 102 voyagers across the Atlantic on a 66-day journey full of sickness and storms. That winter, nearly half of the voyagers died from disease and lack of shelter.

Yet, when the harvest season arrived, they set aside three full days to give thanks. In spite of the hardships, there was still much to be grateful for. They were alive. They were welcomed as strangers into a new land. The natives taught them how to grow their own crops. They had food to eat and friends to share it with. And they had religious freedom, which is the very reason they came.

The settlers' simple decision to be intentionally grateful led to centuries of Americans doing the same every November.

Let's be real though. In some seasons of life, being grateful is just plain hard. We find ourselves overwhelmed with circumstances and underwhelmed with relationships. With preoccupied minds and aching hearts, it goes against our nature to give thanks anyway. But that's exactly what the Lord asks of us.

But... How can we give thanks if we lost our job?

How can we give thanks if we've been diagnosed with a disease?

How can we give thanks if we can't conceive?

How can we give thanks if our friend refuses to talk to us?

How can we give thanks if we are spending the holidays alone...again?

How can we give thanks if our marriage is falling apart?

How can we give thanks if our child is suffering?

How can we give thanks if we lost a loved one?

How can we give thanks if we don't know what the future holds?

Because even though we are struggling, our God is still sacred.

In each difficult situation, our Creator gives us glimpses of hope in a sacred silver lining. It's the place where God is working all things together for good. It's where the hidden blessings are stored. They aren't always easy to find, but they're always there.

The secret to giving thanks in all circumstances is to find His sacred lining. We will find His sacred lining when we give thanks for what we do have, instead of complaining about what we don't have.

We will find His sacred lining when we give thanks for what is right instead of worrying about what is wrong.

We will find His sacred lining when we give thanks for the process instead of grumbling about the problem.

We will find His sacred lining when we give thanks to God first.

Before we gather around the table this year, and there may be fewer around the table because of the pandemic, let's be intentional about giving thanks no matter what. We can be personal about it by starting a gratitude journal, or we can share it with others in a prayer before dinner. Yes, circumstances can be challenging. Yes, relationships can be broken. But we serve a God who is for us, not against us. There is a holy gift waiting for us amidst the hardship. Let's look hard for His sacred lining and give thanks to God when we find it, not just on Thanksgiving, but every day.

The secret to giving thanks in all circumstances is to find His sacred lining.

This Thanksgiving Day, we gather here today because we want to give thanks, even in the midst of the struggles, the burdens and the crosses we are currently carrying. Regardless of our station in life: ordained, consecrated religious, single, married, separated or divorced, we come to this "Thanksgiving Table" to give thanks and praise to God.

Did you know that the more we say "thank you" the healthier we become? It is a scientifically proven fact that if we say "thank you" to God for not only the big things in life but also for the daily little things, we actually become healthier.

Nobody likes feeling taken for granted. And yet, we all take people, and things, and opportunities, and even God for granted from time to time.

As we begin Advent this Sunday, I would like to issue a gratitude challenge. Every day for the next 30 days, I challenge you to do two things:

1. Take two minutes to reflect on all you have to be grateful for. Two minutes goes by awfully slow when you turn all the noisemakers off – the ear pods, the TV, the cell phone. After two minutes, or after only one minute, if it's really driving you crazy, simply thank God in your own words.

2. With that "attitude of gratitude," express your gratitude to someone in your life. Simply say, "thank you" to at least one person each day, and make a mental note of who that person was.

Do these two things each day for the next month, and you will be amazed how these simple exercises can have such a powerful impact on your life and relationships.

As we thank God in a world that seems to be falling down around us with no hope, let us once again thank Him for who we are and for what we have, that our spiritual faith may lead to true and lasting freedom, and that we may draw ever closer to Him and to one another. AMEN!

[Readings: Is 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7; Psalm 80; 1 Cor. 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37]

Some of you know that the month of December and the season of Advent which we begin today, is a time of mixed emotions for me. Over the course of the years, since 1990, I have lost significant people in my life during this time: my Dad, my Mom, my priest mentor, my best parishioner friend from my last parish, my twin sister, and my younger sister, Kathy. It's been three years since her passing. And the day after Thanksgiving this past week, we received word that Fr. Mike Cooney, the longtime pastor of St. Peter Parish in Mt. Clemens, passed away on Thanksgiving Day at age 72. Eternal rest grant unto him...

As I prepared for their transition from this life to eternal life, the readings of the Sundays of Advent bore a much deeper meaning and importance in my life. They speak of preparing ourselves – preparing ourselves to meet the Lord in time and in eternity. Watch! Be ready! For you do not know when the Lord will come into your lives and at the end of time.

Our First Reading for the First Sunday of Advent wrestles with the human condition and the place of sin in our lives. It sounds almost as if Isaiah is blaming God for the bad things we do, the evil people we follow, and the loneliness that comes from being separated from God. He doesn't say, "The devil made me do it!" Rather, Isaiah seems to be saying, "God made me do it!" But at the end of the reading, the blame and the guilt are placed where they should be: in our human hearts. In the dangerous free will given to each one of us.

Our Second Reading is a providential one. Because it says what I think of each one of you on my good days of priestly ministry, when each one of you is the best version of yourselves to me and to each other, as Matthew Kelly says. I repeat the words of St. Paul, "I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way -- with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge -- God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed." I call upon that same grace and wisdom as we enter Advent and the Families of Parishes process.

The prophet Isaiah is our premier daily Advent guide for most of the season. We celebrate the patronal feast of our country on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception (December 8), as well as the hemispheric-significant feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12). Did you know that the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe is at the exact geographic center of the Western Hemisphere? No wonder Our Lady is the Patroness of the Americas – she is the maternal center of our universe!

Advent begins with the encouragement to stay awake and be ready for the coming of our savior. There are no short cuts or artificial ways to do this. And we have only four weeks to prepare ourselves. It's a short period of time, especially when we are so busy with all the preparations for what we are trying to celebrate.

So what are we to do? We need to take the time to remember why we have all of our Christmas traditions, and why all of this must be put in their context. Our reflection questions for this week:

Do I see myself as the work of God's hands? What changes could I make to help shape myself into one who is better prepared to receive the Lord?

When have I been unconscious to the feelings of others or ignored their importance in my life?

When I really listen to my own heart and the deepest thoughts of others, what common refrains do I hear? How can I remember them when I begin to judge others?

What do I see as I look ahead? Am I growing impatient? What can I do to ensure that God is in my future?

We can make the conscious choice as Advent begins to pray and reflect on what the birth of Jesus means to us and to our world and how we can make the presence of Jesus more real for ourselves, our loved ones, and people of good will. Today we have the time. But we know how quickly this time will pass. Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!