

[Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 128; Hebrews 2:9-11; Mark 10:2-16]

Throughout the United States this weekend we observe our annual “Respect Life” Sunday. We also begin October as Respect Life Month, and the Month of Our Lady’s Holy Rosary. It is a reminder of the call each responsible Catholic has to address the moral dilemmas of how to care for our aging members, the value of the unborn, the rightful place of those who are mentally or physically different, the rights of the undocumented and our responsibility toward the economically disadvantaged.

This year in particular, in light of the Supreme Court decision regarding same sex couples, and the upcoming Vatican Synod on the Family to discuss this and the status of divorced and remarried couples receiving Holy Communion without the benefit of an annulment of their prior marriages, Respect Life Sunday takes on an added meaning.

To understand the Church’s teaching on marriage, we need to go back to the beginning, to the issue of complementarity which we find providentially in today’s First Reading and in today’s Gospel. We have to heal the rift in our mindset that some are born to win and others to lose; that one kind of person is intrinsically more valuable than another. This might be another one of our “original sins,” that we have failed at partnership in favor of power.

In a recent address at the Knights of Columbus Supreme Convention, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York, shared some great insights into a forgotten treasure in our midst: the sacramental marriages that we find in every parish community. That would be most of you folks! He said, “We still hold fast to the teaching of the Bible that God so esteems marriages that He compared His personal, passionate, eternal love for Israel to that between a husband and wife. St. Paul likewise tells us that the love of Jesus for us, His Church, is just like that of a groom for his bride.

He goes on, “The lofty, divine luster of marriage can at times be tarnished a bit in the day-in, day-out challenges of lifelong, life-giving, faithful love. Tension, trial, temptation, turmoil – they come indeed.

But just as Jesus worked His first miracle at the request of His Blessed Mother at Cana by turning water into wine, so too does Jesus transform those choppy waters of tension, trial, temptation and turmoil into a vintage wine of tried-and-true trust in marriage.” He then goes on to say that the vocations response crisis to the priesthood, diaconate and religious life can be reversed if we “pray for, promote and foster lifelong, faithful and life-giving marriages.”

He even proposes that as we often include a petition for vocations in the Universal Prayer – which used to be called the Prayer of the Faithful or the General Intercessions – we should also include a petition for a vocations response by those men and women called to such good and strong sacramental marriages. Historians, sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists all agree that the normative relationship for a man and woman’s existence is that of husband, wife, father and mother, and then home, industry, finance, culture, society and governing structures are more easily directed to virtue, responsibility and the restraint of the primitive lust and selfishness that wreck civilization.

Destroyed marriages mean destroyed families; destroyed families means destroyed neighborhoods; destroyed neighborhoods means destroyed cities, and destroyed cities means a destroyed nation.

Whenever I begin marriage preparation with an engaged couple, I ask them to begin praying the answer to these two questions: “Is God calling me at this time in my life to the sacrament of marriage?” And, “Is God calling me to the vocation of sacramental marriage with this person?” Divorce among Catholic couples is only about 1/3, whereas the national average is now 55% among couples in general.

I submit that if every engaged couple asked themselves these two questions, there would be far more sacramental marriages, and fewer divorces. Because you are doing not only what YOU want to do, but what God wants you to do. That is the secret to a valid, sacramental marriage!

A couple married 50 years was asked the secret of their marriage. He said, “To keep our relationship fresh, we go out twice a week. I go out on Tuesday nights, she goes out on Thursday nights!

To keep the flame of faith alive in your marriage, I ask you to consider the various retreat opportunities for married couples. There is Marriage Encounter.

You will learn why marriage is reflected in nature and in the Church as the union of one man (Christ) to one woman (the Church.) And how if that is truly a sacramental union, it can never be broken.

And here is the key. If through the annulment process, a marriage is proven not to be truly a sacramental union, even if it takes place in a Catholic church before three priests, then the Catholic parties are free to attempt marriage again in the Catholic Church. The annulment says that the union was a legal union; that all children of that union are very much legitimate offspring, and that the divorced person was not excommunicated as some people think.

For married couples and for everyone in anticipation of our parish mission next month, please consider attending "Come, Encounter Christ" which is a Eucharistic event taking place Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evening of this week at the St. Dorothy site in Warren of St. Mary, Our Lady Queen of Families Parish.

Finally a word about the health care mandate which is still being contested in the courts. Some Catholics are under the misunderstanding that the Catholic Church's opposition to the Health and Human Services Mandate is simply about abortion, contraception and sterilization practices. There is also a misunderstanding that the Catholic Church does not support health care services being provided by the government for those genuinely in need.

Both are wrong. What the Mandate says is that the government defines and determines who we are and what we can do as a religion.

If you read the mandate, it basically says this: Keep your religion in your churches, temples, synagogues and mosques. Minister and serve only to your own kind. Do not "force" your morals, ethics and standards on the state. Pregnancy and fertility in women are on the list of "preventive diseases."

Is this to be accepted by us Catholics and other believers of good will? It will be if we do not act and make our voices heard in Washington and in Lansing.

I ask all Catholic voters to educate themselves, beginning by reading the Declaration of Independence and the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. In it you will hear words like “unalienable rights given by the Creator” and that “all are created equal.” Our Founding Ancestors state most clearly that religion educates society, not that government gives us our basic rights. Our current American culture of death has it backwards and has it wrong.

A government without God or religion becomes totalitarian, dictatorial, fascist and without a soul. We’ve seen that in Germany, Russia and now in China. You and I and every American make up the body that is America. The Spirit of God and our religion are America’s and humanity’s soul. One cannot survive without the other.

This month, look at and pray our Joyful, Luminous, Sorrowful and Glorious Mysteries. Meditate on them. For they reflect events not only in the lives of Jesus and Mary but also parallel events in the lives of each one of us and of all who experience joy and light, sorrow and glory in this world and in the next.

May Mary, our Blessed Mother and the Protector of all life, pray for us, intercede for us, guide us and shield us with her motherly love. AMEN!

[Wisdom 7:7-11; Psalm 90; Hebrews 4:12-13; Mark 10:17-27]

It's a blessing that as part of our meetings of the Parish Pastoral Council and the Parish Finance Council, we pray and reflect on the Gospel reading for the upcoming Sunday Mass. This past week, we shared three things about the verse that says, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God. The first is that the "Eye of the Needle" for wandering Bedouin tribes in the desert was that narrow ridge where the base of two mountains or two hills come together. It is treacherous for a camel to walk through that very narrow, twisting area, like trying to pass through the eye of the needle, which is exactly what that area is called.

The second meaning comes from the ancient walled City of Jerusalem. The Old Town of current Jerusalem. There were four walls surrounding the city, and each wall had doors and gates of various heights and widths. The smallest and the narrowest was the Needle Gate. The camel literally had to scrape on its knees to enter, if that was the only gate available at the moment.

The third reminded me of the Chapel of the Nativity in Jerusalem. The exact spot where we believe Jesus was born is in a small chapel connected to a very elaborate basilica. In order to enter the Chapel of the Nativity, you have to enter a very modest door, about only four feet high. You have to humble yourself as the Eternal Word was humbled when He took on flesh and dwelt among us.

I'm also reminded of that bulletin announcement that said, "Overeaters Anonymous meets every Tuesday evening at 7 PM in the parish center. Please use the wide double doors on the side of the building.

Wide creatures require wide doors! So here's the problem: You and have become wide-load creatures if we possess a lot of stuff, or even when our egos swell to the size of our imagined self-importance. When the whole of our attention is captured by the self – our feelings, our worries, our projects, our desire for attention to be paid -- we're not going to be able to force that swollen self-absorption through the door of humility. And that tiny door, Jesus tells us, is the entrance to his Kingdom.

Such a door is entered best on one's knees. Much like the door going into the Church of the Nativity in Jerusalem. This is why the small and the poor, the rejected, despised, and forgotten ones, will find it easier to crawl through that opening than the rest of us. If we're looking for wisdom, this wide enough to admit everyone in the world.

If you're not poor yourself, then make it your business to befriend those who are. Use your "bigness" in the service of those who are small. If you have wealth, you can follow reports every day of places where there is great need. If you have influence, you know without much research who the powerless are. If you're skilled or knowledgeable, teach the ignorant. If you have time, lend it by volunteering. If you have love to give, seek out the lonely. If you have passion, embrace a cause. If you're a prayer warrior, pray your way through the headlines regularly. If you're a great talker, resolve to listen.

Because the alternative is the fallen face and the sad deflation of the man who sought wisdom from Jesus and couldn't bear to accept it. Our consumer society encourages us to overeat, over-party, and over-pamper ourselves, stocking our lives with more goods than our drawers and our dwellings can reasonably hold. Our hoarder culture makes us swell to a size too great to fit through the narrow gate to the only true happiness.

A couple of my friends admit that when they are depressed, they "go shopping." But there are two things wrong with this solution. Eventually, the problem returns... along with the new monthly credit card bill!

We risk losing our spiritual connection with God and with the Church. Look at how much "stuff" fills our homes and our lives, things that we never really needed. Today's readings say, "Let Wisdom be your guide. Let God's Word be your guide. Let Jesus Christ be your guide." Our young people who go on mission trips say, "Everyone should have this experience. It teaches you what you can live without, and what you really need to have joy and lasting peace."

Other parishioners, those who have lost their jobs, who have run out of their unemployment benefits or who had to downsize their living arrangements

have shared the same observation with me. “You learn real fast what you can live without... all the ‘stuff’ that I thought I could never live without. Now I can. Because now I have to.” Lessons learned the hard way.

This is the dilemma facing the rich young man. He lived a virtuous life. He kept all the commandments. He followed all the rules and regulations of his faith, his religion. But Jesus looks at him, with great love in His eyes and in His heart, and tells him the one thing – the one last thing – he needs to do to find lasting peace and complete joy.

Riches are nothing compared to Wisdom. It is not money that is the root of all evil. It is the LOVE of money that is the root of all evil. The Word of God is a two-edged sword cutting us from those things, those people and those situations that keep us from knowing and loving and serving God completely. If you haven’t been cut by a sword, think of that knife on the kitchen table or on the cutting board. Most of us have nicked ourselves once or twice. I know I have nicked myself on the chin and come to morning Mass with little bits of tissue still on my face. As painful as that boo-boo on our finger or our chin is, imagine the sword of God’s Word slicing and dicing our selfishness, our pride, our greed.

Whether you are among the wealthiest members of this parish or among the poorest, whether you still have a job or are just hanging on by the skin of your teeth, whether you have a spouse or are a single parent, today’s readings are meant for each of us. Prioritize. Give to God generously. Make a leap of faith. God can never be outdone in generosity. Let us see the wisdom in that. AMEN!

[Isaiah 53:10-11; Psalm 33; Hebrews 4:14-16 Mark 10:35-45]

Recently, I received an e-mail message that was entitled “Things I Really Don’t Understand.” It had a list of questions for which there seems to be no clear-cut answer. Here are a few of them:

- Why do doctors and lawyers call what they do “practice?”
- Why is “abbreviation” such a long word? Why is a boxing ring square?
- What was the best thing BEFORE sliced bread?
- How do they get the deer to cross the highway at those yellow signs?
- How did a fool and his money get together in the first place?

These questions represent a lighthearted humorous reminder that there are indeed a lot of things in this life that we just really don’t understand. There are so many things in this life that we just can’t comprehend. We don’t really understand disease. Why is a youngster perfectly healthy for 13 years of his life... and then suddenly just happens to be in a place where he suddenly encounters some germ or bacteria that invades his body and destroys it?

And we don’t understand accidents. They are so random and indiscriminate. You start out a day that is like any other day... and then something happens in a matter of seconds... and life is forever different. You can never go back beyond that accident. On and on we could go with our list... of things we don’t really understand.

- Why is there so much pain in our world?
- Why do good people suffer?
- Why do we hurt one another?
- Why can’t people get along?
- And why do some of the best prayers seem to go unanswered?

All of these difficult questions prompt us to raise yet another crucial question: What can we count on from God? When we face the troubles of the world, the heartaches of life, and the tough challenges of this existence... what can we count on from God?

The verses of our First Reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah have some of the verses which are described as the Fourth Suffering Servant Song.

The people of Israel knew that a Messiah was on his way, but they were hundreds of years away from realizing His arrival on earth in the person of Jesus Christ. Isaiah himself suffered so much for his community of faith that the faithful followers knew that if their Suffering Servant would die, he would live in “fullness of days.” He would live forever in the lives of his descendants, or at least in the lives of the new generations of believers who would be taught his teachings.

That first line of today’s First Reading has always been a problem to me. “The Lord was pleased to crush him in infirmity.”

It would lead people to say those very harmful words in the face of suffering, pain, loss or death, “It must be God’s will.” That God somehow sadistically enjoys making us suffer and squirm.

It sounds like God is like someone in a back yard holding a magnifying glass over an ant to watch it fry in the intensified heat, or like pulling the wings off of a common house fly and see it struggling to escape before it eventually dies. No, my God doesn’t operate like that.

When an automobile accident claimed the life of his son back in 1983, someone tried to comfort a Protestant minister with the cliché: “It is God’s will.” He thundered back, “The heck it is! When my boy was killed, God was the first one who cried!” Now THAT sounds like my kind of God!

No wonder that after Jesus Christ died, rose and went to Heaven that the first Christians would rely heavily on this passage from Sacred Scripture, especially during times of their own persecution, imprisonment, torture and death. Our passage from the Letter to the Hebrews echoes the sentiment that we DO have a high priest who IS able to sympathize with our weaknesses; one who has been tested in every way yet did not sin. We CAN approach Jesus with confidence to receive the mercy and the grace we need from His Cross and Resurrection to help us on our pilgrim way.

So it ISN'T God's will when bad things happen to good people: illness and death, unemployment, changing schools, or when the car breaks down. LIFE happens. And Jesus helps us to deal with it, because the same LIFE happened to HIM, in many of the same ways.

Today is World Mission Sunday. Three powerful words. "Sunday:" the Day of the Lord when we remember and we become what Jesus did for us. "Mission:" we gather to scatter, to go out to all the places where we live and work and pray and play, giving witness to others of our love for Jesus by meeting the spiritual, physical and mental needs of others. "World:" to remind ourselves that what we do is not just for A parish, AN archdiocese or A country.

Our mission is to near-saints and big sinners, rich and poor, men and women, young and old and in-between. Ours is a world-wide mission to make Jesus known and visible.

True masters know how to serve. On this World Mission Sunday, we recall what we often forget: That even today, missionaries around the world are tramping through forests and deserts and mountains of self-denial both near and far for the sake of the Gospel and in the name of the Church, sometimes even to the point of suffering and death. They do this on our behalf, and with our prayers and our funds. Their "pain" is gain for everyone.

That's what we are called to do: to approach God with confidence and with boldness. Because we know that Jesus Christ went ahead of us. Because we believe that we can accept the baptism and drink from the cup of communion with God, the cup of Christ's passion, death and resurrection, the cup of salvation. And then we can receive God's grace and mercy and peace. Because THIS is God's will for us! AMEN!

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

This past week, I visited most of our religious education/Christian Formation students. The prayer leader led us in a reflection on today's Gospel, the Beatitudes. I liked one of the catechist's outfit – she was dressed up like a bumble bee. Reminded me of a skit from Saturday Night Live, but that's another homily! She cleverly played on the word "Beatitude," which means, "blessed, happy, holy, set apart." She talked about the Be-attitude which every Christian should have. An attitude to "be kind," to "be obedient," to "be-have." That reminded me of one of the final scenes in the movie, Nanny McPhee, but that's another homily, too! The proper attitudes were what made the saints stand out from the rest of us. We honor all of those men and women, children and teens, whose ordinary lives were filled with extraordinary grace and blessings.

One of the more obscure saints was St. Justa. It turns out that she and her father were potters – they shaped and heated clay objects which would become clay bowls, pitchers and flower pots. Being strong Christians in the early church, they refused to allow their clay vessels to be used to hold the food and drink which were to be offered to the pagan gods which the Romans worshipped. As a result, they smashed all of their clay vessels and were put to death for it.

You and I are living between our baptism and our Funeral Mass. This is the in-between time, the present moment, when the Divine Potter – God – melts us, molds us, shapes us and uses us for His divine purpose, as a potter shapes clay. The potter has a definite design in mind. "What shall I make of this lump of clay?" the Potter asks. If we are pliable, if we allow ourselves to be shaped by God, we become the precious work of art He wants us to be. If we are stubborn, hardened or uncooperative, the Potter smashes us on the wheel and starts all over. When life smashes us, God's poor but beloved clay, we look to the Potter to help make things right.

In the song, "Abba, Father," we acknowledge that He is the potter and that we are the clay, the work of His hands. We pray that God molds us and fashions us into the very image of Jesus Christ, His Son.

St. John reminds us in our Second Reading today that even though we have feet and hearts of clay, we too are sons and daughters of God, His children. So we can call God, "Abba," "Daddy," as well as the Master Potter. We are clay, the work of God's hands.

The Beatitudes which we heard proclaimed in today's Gospel, shows us the method, the "how" of being molded and shaped into God's image and likeness. Realizing our need for God. Being sad with those who are sad. Controlling our ego and pride. Showing mercy. Having only one purpose in life: to know God, to love God, and to serve God. To strive, to celebrate and to serve, as we say in our parish mission statement.

Today's celebration of All Saints is an emphatic reminder that our faith heroes are the people we now honor as saints. Our First Reading from Revelation makes two attempts to give us the number of our "holy heroes." John tells us he "heard the number of those who had been marked by the seal, one hundred and forty-four thousand." This is not a literal number. This multiple of a decade, a dozen and a thousand are numbers signifying completeness and is meant to be all-inclusive.

Even if it was to be taken literally, the Roman Catholic Church has officially acknowledged only twelve thousand of them. We still have a way to go!

Then, to make sure that nobody is left out of the count, John writes that he has a "vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people and tongue." We cannot possibly know all of them. But it is possible and important that we get to know some of them, even those who lived among us and with us in our time and in our place. Who knows, the list might even include you and me one day!

I conclude with a contemporary interpretation of the Beatitudes from "The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition" published last year:

When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, He climbed a hillside. They committed climbed with Him. Arriving at a quiet place, He sat down and taught His climbing companions. This is what he said:

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you

there is more of God and His rule.

“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

“You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are -- no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

“You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.

“You’re blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and heart -- put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.

“Count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit Me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens -- give a cheer, even! -- for though they don’t like it, I do!

And all heaven applauds” AMEN!

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

Once upon a time, an older man enjoying his breakfast and was startled to read in his morning newspaper that he had died. There was his obituary on Page A-6. Obviously, it was a mistake. He decided to phone his closest friends to tell them of the error. The first person he phoned was his pastor. "Fr. Browne?" "Yes." "This is Sam Jones, whose obituary appeared in this morning's newspaper. Did you see it?" "Yes, I did... Where are you calling from?"

Today's observance of the Feast of All the Faithful Departed, "All Souls," is a time to speak to our beloved dead in our thoughts and prayers. Maybe they speak to us as well, and we might want to ask, "Where are you calling from?"

It is a teaching of our Catholic faith that every Mass we offer is for everyone: We honor the Church Triumphant by recalling the names of the angels and saints in Heaven. We remember the Church Militant, which is you and me, and everyone on this planet who is struggling, surviving and celebrating the fact that we can work with Jesus Christ in achieving our salvation. He died for us and for all, but in the new English translation, a more literal and faithful translation of the Roman Missal, the words of consecration say, "the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will poured out for you and for *many* for the forgiveness of sins." What does that mean? "*Many*?"

Yes, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was for every person, past, present and future. But it also means that some of us choose not to work with Jesus for the salvation of the world. It means that if one freely chooses to reject Jesus Christ, his eternal salvation is at risk. Some say that the "unforgiveable sin" that St. Paul speaks of is the utter despair in thinking that Jesus Christ *cannot* forgive all of our sins, even the most despicable ones in the deepest recesses of our heart.

The folks we pray for today are those who in their heart of hearts truly wanted to be faithful followers of Jesus, who have departed from this life in the grace and favor of God, but who are still in Purgatory, waiting for entrance into Heaven. They will eventually make it to Heaven, but still need some purification.

The Book of Revelation speaks of the New Jerusalem, which is Heaven. It describes Heaven in all of its glory, but with the warning that “nothing unclean will enter it.” (Rev. 21:27) Entrance into Heaven requires purity of the soul, as we heard yesterday: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God.” (Mt. 5:8) It is sin that stains the heart, which is why we try to avoid sin and why we go to confession if we fall into sin.

But sin also has a ripple effect. While confession cleanses the heart and the soul, the damage caused by sin has already been done. We have to try and make amends for that damage. That’s where penance comes in, but it also explains the reason for Purgatory.

Let’s say that you and I get involved in a traffic accident, and it is clearly my fault. I have crunched your bumper. That’s the sin. I tell you I am sorry. That’s the confession. You forgive me. That’s the absolution. That’s great, but there’s still a broken bumper that needs to be repaired and paid for.

Penance is our way of paying off the debt, but if we die not having finished repairing the damage, there needs to be a way that we can continue doing so before we are able to enter Heaven. This is what takes place in Purgatory. In Purgatory, a soul is purified and prepared so that it is ready for entrance into Heaven. This is where praying for those who have died comes in.

We are the Church Militant, the souls still fighting the good fight here on Earth. We pray through the intercession of the Church Triumphant (the angels and saints in Heaven) to help us get through this life. We pray for the Church Suffering (the Souls in Purgatory) so that their entrance into Heaven may be swift. We do penances for them to help them fulfill their time in Purgatory. And we offer Masses for them because nothing is more valuable, no prayer more powerful than the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. One theologian suggests that if they are already with God, our prayers deepen their intimacy with God, and our prayers make their prayers for us more powerful. A visionary says that if they are in hell, our good deeds and prayer actually add to their hellish torment.

And what is that “hellish torment?” Often, hell is described in terms of fire and pain. If Heaven is eternal love, peace and joy in the presence of God for all

eternity, then Hell is the absolute and total and irreversible separation from the presence of God. It is a place of the opposite of God – it is eternal darkness, despair and anxiety.

Maybe that's why some describe Purgatory as a place or a state of existence that so closely resembles Hell. The BIG difference is that Hell is permanent; Purgatory is temporary.

Has this happened to you? You are so in love, you are so loved, or you so love someone else that to be separated from them is an agony? Your heart actually hurts. I can remember two occasions when this happened to me.

Once was when a dear married couple, friends of mine, moved from Michigan to Florida. We had shared some very good times together. We had shared our faith stories and our life struggles together. We had the luxury of seeing each other at church every Sunday, and sharing a meal every other month. Now, they are in Florida, and I only see them when they visit Michigan.

The second experience was when I was sent as a seminarian to Rome by the Archbishop of Detroit. We American students would only be allowed to come home twice in four years: after our second year of studies, and at the completion of our four years. My first year was filled with great homesickness, but with God's grace and help, I made it through. But it was "hell!"

Gathering for Mass keeps us all united, wherever we may be: Michigan, Florida, Heaven or Purgatory. We are still united through baptism to those who have gone before us. Catholics don't just "remember" the dead; we remain united with them and with those in Purgatory. Another good way to remember our dead is to visit the cemetery where they are buried. Or to pray when we think of them: 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: Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:11-14, 18; Mark 13:24-32]

The month of November is the month when Catholics are called to think about and meditate on what we call "The Four Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell." Our First Reading paints a rather dramatic scene with St. Michael the great Archangel coming with his fiery sword to separate the good souls from the evil ones; a time of bright light for the saved and of great distress for the condemned; the final rising of the dead and the final establishment of God's eternal kingdom on earth and in heaven. Are you ready?

November 1st recalled the men, women and children who have lived lives of faithfulness and love. November 2nd recalled the passing of our beloved dead, whose souls may have to undergo still some sort of purification and preparation to see God face to face. As we come close to the end of another year of grace and another liturgical year, our readings give us a sober hope that all is not lost.

Judgment is real. Our Catholic faith tells us this in the Profession of Faith we proclaim every Sunday: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." We call it Heaven. But there is also a state of existence called Hell. I believe that we have had a taste of both here on earth.

When we are at absolute peace with God in our hearts, when we experience the love, the joy and the laughter of each other, when we sacrifice and give of ourselves so much that it hurts, when our pets love us unconditionally and our friends are there for us, this is only a taste of what Heaven is like.

But when we experience hate, abuse, abandonment and alienation; when we are misunderstood, rejected and shunned by others whom we trusted and loved and thought loved us; when our hearts ache following the death of a child, a spouse, a parent, a dear friend; when we do not seem to have any purpose in life, and all life seems to be one great empty waste; when there is no hope, no health, no income, and no one around who loves us, this is a taste of Hell.

Now take both experiences of Heaven and Hell on earth, and multiply it by eternity, by infinity. Put God into this equation and we can conclude that one day

we will be either eternally happy or eternally full of the unending pain of anxiety.

The choice is not God's. The judgment is not God's. The choice is ours. And we bring judgment upon ourselves. This too can be Heaven or Hell.

Jesus speaks of the great tribulation in today's Gospel, but believe it or not, this is not a gloom and doom prophecy. It is a message of hope. Jesus calls these apocalyptic, end-of-the-world special effects the "beginning of the birth pangs." All of creation will just be going into labor. It is time for the Great Birth to take place. This is the moment of the Resurrection of the Dead.

This is what Catholic theology calls the Day of Judgment.

A whole series of books was written based on the prediction of Jesus Christ saying in the Gospel of Luke that, "one will be taken, the other will be left behind." The series inspired the totally fictionally "Left Behind" series. The books imply that the souls of the just will be taken from earth in the middle of its earthly existence, with the poor lost souls battling Satan for power here on earth. But Jesus is speaking of the last days. The "Rapture" as some call it, again, with no actual basis in Scripture, will not happen as they think in earth time, but at the end of time. When Jesus returns, time and space are over.

As I said about my ticket to Heaven being number 144,006 – close, but no cigar! – I imagined me and another priest working side by side preparing an inspiring homily for the following Sunday. He is taken up in glory and I am left behind at my desk. I wave my arms in the air and say, "Aw nuts!"

So when the Lord comes at the end of time, you might call it our Second Birthday, or the Day of Our Rebirth. Jesus says in the Gospel of John: Jesus tells His disciples "I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you (John 16:21-22)."

There is no joy or peace in Paris, France this weekend. We remember and pray for our brothers and sisters who were innocent victims of the six coordinated terrorist acts committed throughout the city last Friday. Pope Francis gave words to what many are feeling: "I do not understand how someone can do such a thing. There is no religious or human reason for these

acts.” Pope Francis also generated some reaction when he said that this latest terrorist attack and all such attacks are “a piecemeal World War III.”

Famous secular prophets and political pundits have predicted that if and when we engage in World War III, it will begin with unrest in the Middle East. Look around us and around the world to see if that is not in fact happening now.

Reading the Signs of the Times may lead us to think that the return of the Lord is imminent. In one way that should scare us, but only if we are not ready and prepared to meet Him. He certainly will come at the last day of our earthly life, whenever that will be. Will we be ready to meet Him? Let us stay in the race. Let us win the game. Let us receive the crown of eternal life. AMEN!

[Readings: Daniel 7:13-14; Ps. 93; Rev. 1:5-8; John 18:33b-37]

Do you remember the old television situation comedy of the 1950's, "The Honeymooners?" It starred Jackie Gleason, Art Carney, Audrey Meadows and Joyce Randolph. Jackie played the bus driver with a dream, Ralph Kramden, and Audrey Meadows was his long-suffering wife, Alice. In more than one episode, Ralph declares his philosophy of who runs the home: "I'm the King! You're nuthin'! Ya got that? I'm the KING!" And Alice would have something clever to say in return, like, "Yes, and your 'kingdom' is two rooms with peeling paint and a leaky faucet!" or "Your head is fat enough to wear any size crown!"

There certainly is no doubt in our First and Second Readings that Jesus Christ is a king, but not just any king -- Jesus Christ is the King of Kings. I took offense at a wrestling entertainment franchise that used this title, "King of Kings" to showcase one of its up and rising wrestlers, Triple H. Fortunately, they have stopped doing that because of our protests! There is only ONE King of Kings!

If you want to know one of the places where we get the traditional image of God the Father -- aged and with flowing white hair, such as we see in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescos -- look no further than the "Ancient One" holding heavenly court in the reading from the Book of Revelation. While ultimately God is beyond all names and depictions, Christian tradition favors the image of a father for the first person of the Trinity

And as grandiose as our first two readings are and gives us hope and confidence, today's Gospel seems to sober us up and paint a darker picture. Here you have a weak and waffling representative of an earthly emperor going toe to toe with our beloved Jesus. Pontius Pilate walks back and forth between his private quarters and the public courtyard no fewer than seven times. He cannot make up his mind. He is indecisive about what to do with Jesus.

We have to admit that Jesus does look pathetically weak in this scene, standing with a bloodied and torn robe over His shoulders, and wearing a crown of sharp and unforgiving thorns on His head. Not much of a super-power here.

But looks can be deceiving.

There is so much more anxiety in our world it seems, than ever before. Our culture seems to be heading into a downward spiral of immorality and hatred. War and conflict have gone from identifiable enemies and battlefields to suicide bombers and random terrorist targets. It was very easy to identify our enemies; now they are homegrown anonymously and unassumingly in our very neighborhoods. Violence and murder in our schools are at an all-time high, and even road rage can turn into a homicide. Where is all of this taking us? What is our Christian response to terrorism and bullying and random violence?

I'll bet you feel a lot like Jesus in today's Gospel; standing before the powers that be, powerless. Today's feast is not about despair and defeat; it's about hope and ultimate victory. Satan may seem to be winning battle after battle, but Jesus Christ is not only going to be the Ultimate Victor, He already won two thousand years ago. You and I only need to plug into that victory.

During times of great stress and turmoil in the life of Jesus and in our own lives as well, we can experience the greatest sense of the closeness of God. When the need is the greatest, when we really have to have this spiritual help, God will certainly and eventually extend it to us.

Baseball legend Yogi Berra, who died at the age of 90, was revered for his wisdom-filled malapropisms as much as his baseball prowess. Among his more memorable observations: "If you don't know where you're going, you might wind up someplace else." Berra didn't want to end up anywhere else.

Jesus, too, was a beloved man of focus who knew where he was going: "For this I was born," he tells Pontius Pilate, "and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." Christians – you and I -- are called to listen to the voice of Jesus and learn where we are going; otherwise we're sure to end up someplace else. As we anticipate Thanksgiving this Thursday, let us truly give thanks to God our help in ages past, and to turn to Him first and always when we need help. Then we can use the gifts of God's great Holy Spirit of grace and wisdom with our own sweat equity to renew the face of the earth. AMEN!

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

What happens in Heaven when we pray? I came upon three different meditations that I hope to link together.

The first one is about a dream. I dreamed that I went to Heaven and an angel was showing me around. We walked side-by-side inside a large workroom filled with angels. My angel guide stopped in front of the first section and said, "This is the Receiving Section. Here, all petitions to God said in prayer are received." I looked around in this area, and it was terribly busy with so many angels sorting out petitions written on voluminous paper sheets and scraps from people all over the world.

Then we moved on down a long corridor until we reached the second section. The angel then said to me, "This is the Packaging and Delivery Section. Here, the graces and blessings the people asked for are processed and delivered to the living persons who asked for them." I noticed again how busy it was there. There were many angels working hard at that station, since so many blessings had been requested and were being packaged for delivery to Earth.

Finally at the farthest end of the long corridor we stopped at the door of a very small station. To my great surprise, only one angel was seated there, idly doing nothing. "This is the Acknowledgment Section," my angel friend quietly admitted to me. He seemed embarrassed. "How is it that there is no work going on here?" I asked. "So sad," the angel sighed. "After people receive the blessings that they asked for, very few send back acknowledgments." "How does one acknowledge God's blessings?" I asked. "Simple," the angel answered. Just say, "Thank you, Lord." "What blessings should they acknowledge?" I asked.

"If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead and a place to sleep, then you are richer than 75% of this world.

If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change in a dish, then you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy, and if you get this on your own computer, you are part of the 1% in the world who has that opportunity."

"If you woke up this morning with more health than illness, then you are more blessed than the many who will not even survive this day."

"If you have never experienced the fear of being in battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture, or the pangs of starvation, then you are ahead of 700 million people in the world."

"If you can attend a church without the fear of harassment, arrest, torture or death, then you are envied by, and more blessed than, three billion people in the world. If your parents are still alive and still married.... you are very rare."

"If you can hold your head up and smile, you are not the norm, you're unique to all those in doubt and despair....."

"Ok," I said. "What now? How can I start?"

The angel said, "You can start by giving. There are three ways that people give. The first group are the drudge-givers. They will help someone out, but they resent that they are being put upon to help. They give with a sour disposition and a bitter heart.

"The second group are the duty-givers. They give out of an objective sense of moral duty. They do not invest personally in those who receive their kindness, and they usually keep a physical distance from those who are poorer than they are, dirtier than they are, different than they are.

"The third group are the thanks-givers. They realize that all they have has been given to them by God. They know that nothing they have is theirs, from the clothes on their back, to the food on their table, to the paycheck in their bank and the car they drive to church in. They realize that they are stewards, not savers, and that anything above what they need to get by is not theirs, but to give away. They give with joyful spirit, and the Lord blesses them a hundredfold."

With that, the angel left me and I awoke from my dream.

As I stirred awake and sat at the side of my bed, I had to ask myself, am I a drudge-giver, a duty-giver or a thanks-giver? And which one are you?

HAPPY THANKSGIVING! AMEN!

[Readings: Jer 33:14-16; Psalm 25; 1 Thess 3:12-4:2; Luke: 21:25-28, 34-36]

That was a cheery Gospel, wasn't it? Reminds me of two bumper stickers: "Jesus is coming, and boy is He ticked off!" and "Jesus is coming, look busy!" I think this Advent, we should have "Get busy!" as our motto.

The season of Advent which we begin today, celebrates the three arrivals ("Adventus" means arrival or coming) of Jesus Christ. His first arrival to us was in human history. He also comes to us now in the mystery of our holy sacraments, especially in the Eucharist. His arrival in divine majesty and glory at the end of time is what we focus on for the first part of our Advent journey.

Our waiting for the festival of Christmas deepens our preparation for Christ's return in glory. But Advent is also a time of God's waiting. God is waiting for us -- to prepare our hearts, to prepare our minds, to prepare our lives, to prepare our homes for the arrival of God's only Son, Jesus Christ, in the Eucharist of Christmas and at the end of time.

Jesus tells us what to do in today's Gospel: "Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life" (Luke 21:34). More teens and young adults are indulging in alcohol, drug abuse and sexual immorality. The age of alcohol, drug and sex abuse is now junior high or even earlier. One third of all live births in our country are to unwed mothers. Socially transmitted diseases are at an all-time high among younger people. But there is a growing "holy remnant" of young people rising up with a new spiritual hunger and a spiritual revival. Some of them are in this parish.

Adults don't get away without guilt or shame. Hundreds of thousands of adults are turning to gambling, compulsive shopping and Internet pornography to fill the emotional holes in their hearts to the point turning these vices into billion dollar industries. There is more mental illness in our country than in any other country or any time in our nation's history. And I am speaking about the lack of self-worth, the lack of self-esteem, the anxiety of spreading ourselves too thin, and the pressures that society and our culture puts on us to pull us away from God, from religion, from our moral and ethical centers

These are the ways of thinking, speaking and acting that weaken our spiritual house from within and make us a less worthy temple for the Holy Spirit.

St. Paul tells us in our Second Reading how to combat this downward spiral of self-destruction and anxiety. As we increase and abound in genuine love and respect for ourselves and for one another and for all, we grow stronger in our life of discipleship and become “blameless in holiness before our God and Father” (1 Thess. 3:13). This is the “home improvement” that God rejoices in and brings to completion, in God’s time and in God’s way, for each of us and for the Church as a whole.

I would ask that as we make our preparations for Christmas this year, we ask a different question than we might usually ask. Instead of asking, “What do I want for Christmas?” or “What am I GETTING for Christmas?” ask yourself this: “What can I GIVE for Christmas?” “What can I GIVE in terms of prayer, family, stewardship of time in ministry and service, and of material/financial blessings?”

My friends, our personal “end time” will come when death claims our own mortal bodies. The visions of today’s Gospel could easily describe our own death. The sun and the stars will be darkened by our own closing eyelids. The world we live in will slip away. The chaos and despair of this world may cause us to faint from fear. As people of faith, we must remember that what the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the Master calls a butterfly. In our new life, we pray and hope that we will stand and raise our heads, because our salvation indeed will be near. Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!

[Readings: Baruch 5:1-9; Psalm 126; Phil 1:4-6, 8-11; Luke 3:1-6]

When I first arrived here in July of 2014, it was easy for me to “sneak in the crowd” on my day off or if I was leaving for a break or retreat wearing a regular man’s shirt, jeans, tennis shoes and a canvas jacket. I could walk around the parish buildings undetected.

Now, I can no longer be anonymous like some “Clark Kent” when I am not vested as a liturgical “Superman” or wearing my Roman collar. I am easily recognized in local restaurants at lunch time, at the store, and even at Subway. A little boy raced up to me and hugged me and said, “I’ve never seen you outside of church! I didn’t know that you had legs!”

Running errands while dressed in civilian clothes in my former parish, a young mother a few years ago was stunned that I recognized her at Target. I remembered her from being in my communion line at Mass. “I’m sorry, Fr. Nick,” she said, “I didn’t recognize you with your clothes on!” What she MEANT to say was, “I’m sorry, Fr. Nick, I didn’t recognize you with regular street clothes on.”

As they ask celebrities on the red carpet: “What are you wearing?” “WHO are you wearing?” Our readings for this Second Sunday of Advent are all about clothing. More specifically, about putting on the right kind of clothing. During their wait for the Messiah, the Israelites wore various kinds of clothing. Their “spiritual wardrobe” reflected their historical circumstances as well. In the times of the patriarchs, they were dressed like nomads. When they were forced to work in Egypt, they were dressed like slaves. After their freedom and wandering in the desert, they wore a bride’s dress as the beloved one of God. And in the dark centuries of their routine unfaithfulness, they wore the dress of a harlot.

Now, Baruch is telling them to take off the dark and somber clothing of the widow, the “robe of mourning and misery” and put on the “splendor of glory from God forever.” They are told to be wrapped in the “cloak of justice” from God because of God’s intervention and intercession on their behalf.

In our Second Reading, St. Paul exhorts us to become people of visitation

and hospitality, living in a right relationship with God, with others and with oneself. He uses words which would become paraphrased in every official ceremony of the Roman Catholic Church for those admitted to Holy Orders and to the Consecrated Religious Life: "May God Who has begun this good work in you bring it to completion."

All of us are encouraged by St. Paul to increase "in knowledge and in every kind of perception." To discern what is of value. Pray to be set on fire with the Holy Spirit to be a light in the darkness of our world.

When St. Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians, he was in prison, again, in either Ephesus or in Rome and could have already been sentenced to death. This particular letter to the Philippians was his "love letter" to the community which was probably the closest to his heart, as this community, as you are to me.

As St. Luke composed HIS words, he is very specific about who was in political charge at the time. He gives us the VIP list of all the weak and misdirected actors who will play pivotal roles in the drama that Jesus Christ will bring, especially in his last days and weeks on earth. Luke wants us to know that both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ were real people in real time.

The clothing of St. John was camel hair – not quite cashmere! And he is calling on his audience to put on the clothing of repentance and conversion. John was incredibly brave to do what he did, to challenge the crowds to embrace a message of forgiveness and to accept a baptism of water.

In this Advent season, like St. John and like Jesus Christ, we are called to be prophetic voices in our modern-day desert of ignorance, apathy, neglect and violence. As our parish mission statement says: "To strive, to celebrate and to serve." In this way, we can become highway builders through difficult terrain, to make smooth a path so that by our lives, our witness and our example, we can lead others to see and to put on the salvation of our God.

So... Who are YOU wearing today? Come, Lord Jesus!" AMEN!

[Genesis 3:9-15, 20; Psalm 98; Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12; Luke 1:26-38]

The Gospel chosen by the liturgical council in the Vatican often leads us to a misunderstanding. It relates the “Immaculate Conception” of Jesus in the womb of Mary, but that act is better called the “Virgin Conception” leading to the “Virgin Birth” of Jesus at Christmas. There is no scripture, no bible passage that gives us historical certainty about the mystery we celebrate today: the conception of Mary without any stain of sin in the womb of HER mother, whom tradition calls “Good St. Anne.”

This particular year, this particular feast of the Immaculate Conception, we celebrate something that has not been celebrated since the year 2000 – a Great Jubilee Year. During that year, Pope St. John Paul II visited the Holy Land to pray at the Western Wall, the only remnant left of the great Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. During that year, in the name of the Roman Catholic Church, he publically apologized and asked forgiveness for all the sins committed by the Catholic Church over the centuries in the name of faith. His advisors counseled him against this, but that act of humility resulted in a groundswell of interest in the Catholic Church, and an increase in new members.

Today, his successor, Pope Francis, opened up the Holy Door of St. Peter’s Basilica in the symbolic gesture of opening all church doors, all confessional doors, and the doors of every heart to the movement of the Holy Spirit leading us all closer and more intensely into the merciful love of God. This reminds us of the many revelations given to St. Faustina, the Saint of God’s Divine Mercy: “I want the whole world to know my infinite Mercy. I want to give unimaginable grace to those who trust in my mercy.”

In his own words, Pope Francis says about the Jubilee Year of Mercy:

“How much I desire that the year to come will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bringing the goodness and tenderness of God,” said Pope Francis in proclaiming the Holy Year of Mercy, which begins today. “May the balm of mercy reach everyone.”

Our neighbors at St. Faustina Parish on 12 Mile Road invite us every Thursday evening at 7:00 PM during this Jubilee Year to join them in the public praying of the Divine Mercy Novena. And I invite you to join me here a week from Friday at 7:00 PM for our Vicariate-sponsored Communal Penance Service with Individual confession and absolution to celebrate God's merciful forgiveness.

A third event we celebrate today is the ongoing journey of Advent, leading us to the great and joyful day of Christmas. We are fast approaching the mid-point of this season. I challenge you to "think outside the box" and answer these spiritually-focused questions, as Mary asks the angel Gabriel in our Gospel:

How much time do you spend with the Lord each day? Are you making time to let the Holy Spirit overshadow you?

What are you doing to make the Advent different from all the others?

What do you like the most about this time of year? What do you like the least?

If you had an extra 15 minutes a day, how would you spend them?

And finally, if you could eliminate one or two activities this Christmas to help you grow spiritually, what would they be, and why?

In case you missed any of these questions, they will be found online at smdeporres.com. Look under Fr. Nick's Homilies. And look up the corporal (physical) and spiritual works of mercy, to start forming your action plan for this graced Jubilee Year of Mercy. Let us say together with Mary, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!

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How much time do you spend with the Lord each day? Are you making time to let the Holy Spirit overshadow YOU?

What are you doing to make this Advent different from all the others in past years?

What do you like the most about this time of year? What do you like the least?

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And finally, if you could eliminate one or two activities this Christmas to help you grow spiritually, what would they be, and why?

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O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee.

Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!

[Zeph. 3:14-18a; Is 12:2-6; Phil. 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18]

You may have noticed that today, I am wearing vestments that aren't the usual colors of red, green, white or purple. They are not pink. They are rose, And they are not merely rose, they are "manly rose" and are worn only twice a year, taking a break from what used to be the hard seasons of Advent and Lent. We are reminded by the Church that even if we are sad, even if bad things are happening all around us, we remind ourselves and each other that we are people of joy and hope.

There is a difference between being joyful and being happy. Being happy only lasts a short time, like the twenty minutes after you open up your Christmas presents. But then we sometimes get bored and want to move on to the next thing that will make us happy.

But having joy, now that lasts a lifetime. We can even be in the middle of suffering, pain and death but we have an inner joy and peace because we know that this is not the end of the story. What is the end of the story is that Jesus is going to win, with or without us, over sickness, evil and death.

The difference between joy and happy is the same difference between preparing for Christmas and preparing for Christ. We prepare for Christmas when we clean our house, decorate it, put up the tree and wrap presents.

But we prepare for the coming of Christ, when we do the Three R's. In school, the Three R's used to be Readin', 'Ritin' and 'Rithamatic. But during the Advent season, as we prepare for Christ, I want us to do another set of Three R's: Repent, repair and rejoice. Repeat with me: Repent, repair and rejoice. Repent means to think again, to think about the way our lives have turned away from Jesus, and to turn back to him. Repair means to fix up – to fix up our lives, to fix up our relationships, to fix up whatever needs to be fixed up in our hearts so that Jesus can come and move in there. Rejoice means to be joyful again. Maybe it's been a while since we have known the joy of the Lord and the joy of the season. This is the time to rejoice. To take joy in the hope of Jesus who comes to us at Christmas and every time we welcome Him throughout the year.

Zephaniah, in today's First Reading, is a prophet of King Josiah. King Josiah back in the 700's B. C., was the Pope John XXIII of his day. He was trying to take Judaism back to its earliest roots, just as Pope St. John XXIII tried to get us back to our Catholic, Christian roots with Vatican II. But because big nations and empires like the Assyrians kept invading little Israel, things looked hopeless. That's why Zephaniah says what he says today. "Shout for joy!" "Sing joyfully." "The Lord has removed the judgment against you and has turned away your enemies." St. Paul echoes this sentiment in our Second Reading.

Two women who made a tremendous impression on me had every reason not to be happy. One was bedridden in a nursing home in a former parish, and one in my last parish, was severely physically handicapped and only went to church, to the doctors and home. Yet the two of them had the greatest inner peace. I asked them both what was the secret to their inner joy and peace in spite of often excruciating pain. Both of them told me, "Because this isn't the end of the story." Fifteen years separated the beginning of my friendship with both women, and they both taught me the same lesson. They were looking at their current pain and suffering through the lens of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

He was victorious over pain and suffering, evil and sin. The strong faith of these two women told me that one day, they too would be victorious. They have both since passed away. I am sure they both now experience Jesus Christ in His Resurrected glory.

In spite of the darkness around us. In spite of the suffering, the oppression, the fear, the anxiety, the uncertainty, the suspicion. Gaudete Sunday reminds us that one day there will be hope, there will be life, there will be freedom, there will be joy, there will be peace, there will be wonder, and there will be trust. Our retired religious priests, brothers and sisters have come to that holy and delightful place already. They outlive most people in any other profession or vocation because they are finally home: a community of faith and loving care where they can prepare for their final homecoming. That may be a rectory or convent, a monastery or a motherhouse.

This weekend is the annual collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious. Most of our senior priests, brothers and sisters were paid less than minimum wage for their ministry and service. Most were discouraged from participating in the Social Security pension fund. Many have the high medical bills that come along with old age and infirmity. Yet so many of them have that inner joy, knowing that they are rounding the corner and heading for the finish line of life. And that their eternal "retirement plan" is out of this world!

Think of those religious men and women who laid a foundation of faith in your heart and in your life. Those who inspired you to become the person and the professional you have become. Say a prayer for them. Write them a note if they are still living, and pray for and contribute to the Retirement Fund for Religious.

Our final Advent question this day for all of us is, "What should we do?" What is OUR role in the drama and the adventure of Christian faith? As we are only days away from Christmas, it's good to do an inventory like the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers. St. John addressed their particular situations and their particular lifestyles. Look at your specific life. Look at how you can improve it. Pray to Jesus for guidance in making your choices. Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you to people who can use your help. Keep your eyes open for the people the Holy Spirit sends to you. Repent, repair and rejoice!

Most importantly, have no anxiety at all about anything. You and I know how the story ends. And where. Come, Lord Jesus. AMEN!

[Readings: Micah 5:1-4a; Psalm 80; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45]

I mentioned at the Wednesday evening Mass that the Church in her wisdom always has a deep theological reason and a simple, practical reason for doing what she does and why things are. Someone asked about the blue hanging in church. Why blue? I said, "Because it symbolizes the changing sky, the setting sun with its purple, rose and blue colors, signaling the darkness of winter and the arrival of the Light of the World on Christmas." The practical reason for the blue? "We ran out of purple material!"

"People look east. The time is near." As Christmas approaches, our Advent hymn tells us where to direct our attention: to the east. Why there?

The east is the sunrise place, the place where each new day begins when the sun comes up. It is the place where the Garden of Eden was: Adam and Eve lived in a garden east of Eden. It is the place where the Magi set out to see the Christ Child. It is the place where Christ's return in glory was expected. St. Matthew has Jesus tell us: "For just as the lightning comes from the east and is seen as far as the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be (Matt. 24:27)."

In a sense, the Church is always standing on tiptoe and straining her eyes eastward as she longs for the final coming of Christ. When churches were built, for centuries the historical tradition was to place the altar facing east, so when the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is offered, the priest is facing east. I think this, our church faces east, so we honor a centuries-old tradition.

The night watchmen on the walls of ancient Jerusalem looked eagerly to the east for the first glimmering of the dawn so that their shift would end and they could punch out and go home. When Christ returns at the end of time, His radiant light will once and for all dispel the darkness that still fills our hearts, our minds and our souls. "East," the place of reborn light and fresh beginnings, is where we shall glimpse God's salvation, just as Elizabeth glimpsed it when her cousin Mary visited her, as we heard in today's Gospel. "East" is where the prophet Micah looked, for that is where the people of Israel had been exiled.

Micah rejoiced to know that it was in their midst that God would be revealed as a shepherd leading God's people home and who would be their peace forever. That God is our shepherd and our peace today.

The prophet Micah knew that peace is like a fine work of art. It must be imagined and then created in hope. It was this quality of peace that was associated with the person and the reign of the Messiah. Micah held hope for a ruler who was yet to be born, to be called the Prince of War, but Prince of Peace.

We sing that same hope in today's Responsorial Psalm refrain: "Lord, make us turn to You. Show us Your Face and we shall be saved." For us, looking eastward is looking God-ward, as we welcome God's light in Jesus Christ that scatters the darkness in our lives. We look God-ward for the vision and the strength to do the will of God, as Jesus did.

As our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews puts it: "Behold, I come to do your will, O God." Mary said it in our readings twelve days ago: "May it be done to me according to Your word." We join Mary and Elizabeth in looking eastward, looking God-ward if we are to serve God and each other faithfully and joyfully. So let us make our physical and spiritual houses fair as we are able, trim the hearth and set the table, as the song says. All of these are welcome "home improvement" projects to help us fix our gaze not on ourselves, but on the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ at Christmas.

During these Advent days, we pray that when we leave here during these final days of preparation for Christmas, we can be light in the mounting darkness, of evil and sin in the world, pointing others to the east by our acts of kindness and our words of peace.

We begin by blessing the images of the Christ Child, the small, vulnerable Baby through whom the salvation of all people has come. We remember that Jesus is "the reason for the season!" After the 11:00 AM Mass today, we will process out of church to bless our new outdoor Nativity Set. "People, look east. The time is near." There is still time to prepare! Come, Lord Jesus! AMEN!

[Isaiah 62: 1-5, Acts 13: 16-17, 22-25 / Isaiah 9:1-6; Titus 2:11-14 / Isaiah 62: 11-12, Titus 3: 4-7 / Isaiah 52: 7-10, Hebrews 1: 1-6, Luke 2:1-14]

Merry Christmas! Welcome to all who join us tonight/today: parishioners, especially those who join us from other parishes and for whom this is their first, second or third Christmas at St. Martin de Porres Parish; to students and military and former parishioners who have “come home for Christmas,” and to those who are searching for a spiritual home. “Everything you need is in this house.”

Merry Christmas! For some of us, it may be difficult to say these words, and other words like “Peace on Earth” or “Silent Night” when there is so much violence, terrorism and overall nastiness in our world and in our culture. Even Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy have called it quits in their relationship!

I have had more than one parishioner ask me, “Where is all this headed toward? And how do I respond to it?” My answer? Things probably will get worse before they get better. But that’s not the end of the story. We know that God knows how things will turn out. Some things God guides; other things God permits. We know that Jesus Christ took on human flesh in order to save us. We know that if we truly believe, the Holy Spirit will make you and me signs of light in the darkness, and instruments of hope in the midst of anxiety and distress. Your presence here tonight/today is such a sign of light and hope.

It is a challenge for us to get ready not only for Christmas, but to get ready for Christ, whose birth we celebrate today. As I decorated the Christmas tree in the living room of the rectory, the house next to this church, I couldn’t help but pause every time I held an ornament or a St. Nick figure that had a special memory or meaning for me. Then I started to think about the different houses I lived in from infancy, my growing up years, and the various rectories I’ve lived in over thirty years. It began to dawn on me that our Catholic faith and our Catholic faith practice are very much like a home.

Allen Hunt writes about this in his book, “Confessions of a Mega Church Pastor.” He writes about his Methodist background and ministry, and his journey toward and discovery of the Roman Catholic Church.

As he writes of his conversion and embracing of the Catholic faith, he summarizes it this way: “Everything you need is in this house.”

First and foremost, he says, when we gather for Catholic Mass, as we do today at this “Christ’s Mass,” or Christmas, we assemble in the living room to hear stories of our traditions. We share experiences in our family history. Some of the memories are not pleasant, but others are, some even filled with humor.

Then we move to the dining room. The table is set where we share and eat the same meal which Jesus Christ prepared for His disciples 2000 years ago. In the sharing of favorite Christmas foods, we remember Who gave us the First Meal of Holy Communion, the One for Whom it would become His Last Supper.

Some of the folks go into the kitchen, where basic human ingredients are blended into the experience of human life. The messiness of life, the raw materials that make life both bitter and sweet, the tears that sometimes come to our eyes as we peel the various layers of our personality and expose our vulnerability all blend into a pleasant aroma of family and relationships.

While the grown-ups reconvene in the living room, the kids venture down into the basement where they find a trunk full of hidden treasures. There on the top shelf are photographs of past generations. Some photos have names scrawled on the back; other subjects remain anonymous or forgotten.

These are the lives of the saints. We may be more or less familiar with their stories, and especially what made them saintly material – living ordinary lives in extraordinary ways. This past year, we saw Pope John XXIII, Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa of Calcutta raised as holy examples of saintly living. I’m sure you and I can name a handful of people whom we think are saints, giving us an example of living our faith, even in the midst of darkness. Where sin abounds, grace far surpasses it. As the younger members of the family scramble up the stairs, photos and photo albums in hand, they race to the grown-ups who explain who these people are. How they came to be in this town, in this house, and how they influenced their children and their children’s children. Parents are the first teachers of faith. “Everything you need is in this house.”

Christmas is a time of discovery and re-discovery. A time to rediscover the beauty, the joy and the wisdom of our Catholic Faith and the One Who started it all. Do YOU know Jesus Christ? Is there room for Him in the Inn of your hearts and lives? Do YOU know His Gospel message of hope and life? Do you realize what we celebrate every time we gather for Mass, for Eucharist? Do we appreciate the Mother of Jesus, Mary? That she is the ultimate model of the creature who praises her Creator, giving praise with her entire life and showing us how to get to Heaven through her Son?

We have a special Christmas present for you as you leave church today. A book written by Matthew Kelly called "Rediscover Jesus." Thumb through the book within the next week. Let the Holy Spirit stop you at a chapter, a sentence or a word which speaks to your soul. It only takes a couple minutes to read a chapter. Spend some time with Jesus Christ this Christmas. And then come back and share your story, your life, and your faith with us.

"Everything you need is in this house."

There is another thing we need in every house and which we hope you will find in this house – the gift of mercy. On December 8th, Our Holy Father Pope Francis opened the Holy Door at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and declared a Jubilee Year of Mercy. He challenges each one of us to be recipients of mercy and to be messengers of mercy. He challenges each one of us to do an honest self-assessment of our lives and to seek forgiveness where it is needed in the Sacrament of Confession, Penance and Reconciliation.

Then we are called to accept the challenge to be agents of mercy to others. To offer in love the gift of mercy and forgiveness to those who need it from us, and to seek mercy and forgiveness from those we have sinned against.

Welcome home. This is your faith-house. This is your Light-house. Bring your faith-light with you. If it is as small as a pilot light, we can make it brighter. If it shines brilliantly, come join us and we will help you carry that light to others.

Come and re-discover Jesus. Come and re-discover His Church.

Everything you need is in this house. AMEN!