

[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. To protect the sanctity of marriage and family life. And to preserve the identity, the integrity, and the value of men and women.

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 more valuable than another. This might be another one of our “original sins” -- that we have failed at partnership in favor of power. Men and women are equal. But they are not identical. They are complementary. Our culture forgets that.

In an 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 compares 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 wreak civilization.

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

Divorce, when it occurs, is not a sin. Marriages end for a lot of reasons that may include occasions and habits of sin, but the civil action of divorce does not negate a Catholic’s standing with the church. (The Council of Baltimore in 1843 did call for excommunicating the divorced, but that censure was removed by the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884.) Anyone convicted by a sense of moral wrongdoing, including individuals whose marriages have ended, should feel welcome to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation.

Many believe they are automatically excommunicated if they remarry after divorce. The American bishops lifted that excommunication in 1977.

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 you are doing 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. The husband said, "To keep our relationship fresh, we go out twice a week. I go out on Tuesday nights, and 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, such as 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 automatically excommunicated as some people think.

This month, look at and pray our Joyful, Luminous, Sorrowful and Glorious Mysteries of the Most Holy Rosary. Meditate on them with a different twist. 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]

There are three perspectives about today's Gospel 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 Bethlehem. 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. You have to enter that sacred space on your hands and knees.

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 I 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 Chapel of the Nativity in Nazareth. 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 door is wide enough and low enough to admit everyone in the world. On their knees!

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 closets 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.

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. As painful as that boo-boo on our finger is, imagine the sword of God's Word slicing and dicing our selfishness, our pride, our greed.

How have you experienced God's word as "living and effective"? How has it helped you to figure out what God wants you to do with your life?

Have you ever thought it "hard" to enter the Kingdom of God? In what ways? What have been the obstacles you've faced?

All things are possible for God. Where has God done something "impossible" in your life?

What have you given up for sake of Christ and the Gospel? What is the "price" you've paid for wisdom? Have you been repaid many times over? How?

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 someone reasonably healthy, and then suddenly just happens to be in a place where he or she encounters some germ or bacteria or a virus like COVID-19 that invades their 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 and unhelpful 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 young son, 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 is NOT 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. This week's reflection questions:

- How does Christ know your weaknesses?
- When have you had to endure affliction for Jesus' sake?
- In what ways have you felt God's kindness?
- When and how has God rescued you?

Our mission – the same mission given to the first followers of Jesus Christ -- is for us as well. Whether we are near-saints or big sinners, rich or poor, men or women, young or old or in-between. Ours is a world-wide mission to make Jesus known and visible. To strive, to celebrate and to serve.

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: Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126; Hebrews 5:1-6; Mark 10:46-52]

Do you remember learning the Five Senses when you were in grade school? Hearing, seeing, smelling tasting and feeling. To lose any of our senses would be terrible. I think the worst sense to lose for me, would be the sense of sight. I am a very visual person. I like to look at things that delight the eyes. Certainly, looking at the sun shining through the autumn leaves in Michigan can leave us breathless at times.

Mark in today's Gospel, gives us the second story of a blind man healed of his blindness. The first miracle happens as Jesus leaves Jerusalem and begins His public ministry. Today's miracle happens as Jesus ends His three years of preaching, teaching and healing and He heads back home for what awaits Him.

Mark deliberately places these two miracles at the beginning and at the end of the public life of Jesus for a reason. He wants us to "see" and understand His Gospel message. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks. "Master, I want to see." This is the simplest yet most profound request you or I or Bartimaeus can ask. "I want to see." I want to see not only with the eyes of my head, but with the eyes of my mind, with the eyes of my heart, with the eyes of my soul. I want to understand. I want to believe.

Isn't this what you and I hope to achieve in our lifetimes? The wisdom, the knowledge, the understanding of life and how to handle its problems and its blessings? To find my own identity, to know who I am and what God expects of me. This request is easy to make, and much more difficult to accept when Jesus gives us the profound answer: "Go on your way; your faith has saved you." It can also be translated, "Your faith has healed you." Which is easier to receive, healing or salvation? He asks for something much deeper than mere physical eyesight. We can imagine him saying, "Lord Jesus, give me sight. Let me see again. Let me see the way in front of me. Heal me of whatever it is that is keeping me from seeing."

This is what Jesus "sees" in the man's heart, in his very soul.

He looks you and me right in the eye when He asks, “What do YOU want me to do for YOU?” What DO you want Jesus to do for you today? Take a silent moment to think about that... Now imagine one of the crowd saying to you today, “Take courage; get up, Jesus is calling you.” What cloaks of encumbrance do we need to shed? What is keeping us from “springing up” to come to Jesus today?

Jeremiah, our prophet from today’s First Reading, knew first-hand how it was to follow the Lord, and what it would cost him. He would be mocked, threatened and assaulted by those who wished to silence him and the truth he preached. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us of what priests must go through each day “beset” with our own weakness, struggles and sin.

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.

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.

The largest number of martyrs in this century in our troubled world are Christians and Christian missionaries. They do this on our behalf, and with the support of our prayers and our funds. Their “pain” is gain for everyone.

Our reflection questions for this week: What are we afraid of? Why are we unwilling to ask to see things more clearly in our lives? What relationship needs to be reformed? What personal issue or concern needs to be confronted? What will change our lives dramatically if we are only able to see through it more clearly? God wants to help us, and waits patiently for us only to ask. AMEN!

[Readings: Deut. 6:2-6; Ps.18; Heb. 7:23-28; Mark 12:28-34]

There are many names for Jesus in the New Testament: Lord, Master, Friend, Christ. All of these point to a different aspect of the person and mission of Jesus. Today, Jesus is referred to as “Teacher.” Think about a great teacher you had in your life. What were their inspiring characteristics? I can think of four.

They were good at conveying the message – they helped us learn something new. They were passionate about their subject – not just imparting knowledge but imparting passion. They were challenging – they brought more out of us than we knew we had. Most importantly, they made us grow.

Jesus is called teacher because he *teaches* us something new. He conveys a new message – a new reality – to us. He touches not just our head but our hearts as well. And He calls us to grow; to be challenged in what the deepest meaning of life is. He says to the scribe: “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” What is missing in the scribe? He needs to move from *knowing* the commandments to *doing* the commandments with the love of God, others and self. The hardest journey for him and for all of us is the shortest distance from the head (knowledge) to the heart (decision-making). Until our faith takes root in our heart, we will not yet be at the Kingdom.

To be incorporated into the Kingdom of God is to be transformed by God’s love. This can only happen through baptism; but we must *receive* it. We must take on a new heart. This transformation happens through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus calls us to grow; to be challenged in what the deepest meaning of life is. So what does He teach us? He teaches us what it means to be a disciple; this involves two steps.

Step One is to: *Love God first, with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength.* Jesus reveals to us who God is. God’s heart is made known to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus, as we hear in the Second Reading, “offered himself” for us. God loves us to such a degree that He holds nothing back from us. His love for us is radical and intense.

And because God's gift to us is limitless – *ALL of Himself* – God can ask for ALL of us: our heart – the place of our decision-making and our soul – with our eternal destination in mind. Your mind – what you fill your mind with; the study and knowledge of God! And your strength – loving God is a battle against temptation; it requires a fight!

Step Two is to: *Love your neighbor as yourself*. St. John tells us, “Whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.” (1Jn 4:20). Disciples are called to follow Jesus; to love the people He loved. And He loved everyone. Because Jesus willingly gave Himself up for others, we are called to love them in deed, as well.

Our “Supreme Teacher” on earth – Pope Francis – met with President Joseph Biden on Friday of this past week. In a press conference following the meeting, President Biden was asked if the issue of abortion came up. President Biden said: “No, it didn't. It came up -- We just talked about the fact he was happy that I was a good Catholic, and I should keep receiving Communion.” He was then asked directly if the pope said he should continue receiving communion. President Biden responded: “Yes.”

Brian Burch, from CatholicVote.org is skeptical that this part of the conversation took place. The Vatican even issued their own statement summarizing the meeting and did not mention Communion. They also refused to confirm that Pope Francis discussed Communion with the president, calling it a “private conversation.” So what was really said? One guess: The pope might have made some comment to encourage Biden in his faith. Perhaps applauded him for his public gestures of piety. Maybe even encouraged him to attend Mass. But the pope most certainly did not say what the media (and Biden's Catholic backers) are suggesting, namely that Catholic public officials who aggressively advocate for killing innocent children are “good” Catholics who should continue receiving Communion. In fact, EVEN if the pope were to say this, it would be false. Church law, teaching, and tradition all say otherwise.

President Biden is in Rome as part of a European trip to press his agenda on climate change. According to sources, this is one of the things he discussed

with the pope. And contrary to what most of the left-sided media says, the defense of human life is not merely a side issue. It has everything to do with stewardship of the environment. Pope Francis wrote this in his own encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si*:

“When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities -- to offer just a few examples -- it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected.” He wrote that it is “clearly inconsistent” to seek to protect endangered species while remaining indifferent to the decision of many “to destroy another human being deemed unwanted.”

The pope has called abortion “murder.” He’s equated it to “hiring a hitman.” He’s defended true care for the environment as beginning with care for God’s greatest gift -- human life.

Brian Burch, again from CatholicVote.org, was scheduled to appear on CNN with Chris Cuomo on Friday night to discuss this meeting between Pope Francis and President Biden. But at the last minute on Friday afternoon, Brian Birch said the producer for the show cancelled the interview, because they “didn’t want to cover abortion tonight.” You can draw your own conclusions.

And Moses spoke to the people, saying: “Fear the Lord, your God, and keep throughout the days of your lives, all his statutes and commandments... that you may grow and prosper the more, in keeping with the promise of the Lord... to give you a land flowing with milk and honey.” And Jesus replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength... And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

May God keep us faithful to His teachings as we put His Words into action with courageous hearts and lives. AMEN!