

Sunday, November 6, 2022: Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Christ in today's Gospel invites us to contemplate Heaven. Looking forward to Heaven is an essential part of the Christian life. Jesus became man and gave His life so that we could have access to Heaven. Yet, we do not often think about and live in light of this wonderful gift.

The Sadducees, skeptics about the afterlife, approach Jesus with a sticky trap. Humanly speaking it is a good argument. If there is a resurrection and the woman had been married to all these men at different times, whose wife will she be in the afterlife? Even though they try their best to trip Jesus up with their clever problem, it is not really a fair fight. Jesus is God. He knows. He sees Heaven and He describes it to them. In Heaven people "neither marry nor are given in marriage.... They no longer die, for they are like angels; they are the children of God." Jesus vanquishes the Sadducees' argument with divine knowledge about what He gives us in Heaven.

This sparse description of Heaven may not spark our interest. It is so brief and does not seem appealing or that beautiful. Christ is not going to describe Heaven in detail to these skeptics who are not interested. But is clear from all that the Scriptures say about Heaven that it is amazing, the fulfillment of all we could desire. St. Paul tells us that the "eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9). It is beyond our comprehension. We can dream our wildest dreams of happiness and they will fall short.

God wants us to think about Heaven and look forward to it. To live in light of it. Scripture uses images of Heaven to give us something for our minds to grasp. It calls Heaven *life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father's house, the heavenly Jerusalem, and paradise* (CCC 1027). These descriptions communicate to us that in Heaven Christ makes us part of His Heavenly glory, His happiness beyond compare. "Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness... [where we] find, [our] true identity, own name" (CCC 1024). All that we love and hold dear will be purified and enjoyed without end. Our families and all people and all the things of this world we will love and enjoy with perfect affection as we see God face to face in Heaven. And this will last forever. We need to remember that this happiness will be eternal, a permanent eternal state. Please God, a million years from now we will just be getting started in this joyful life.

Contemplating Heaven brings us to better understand the almost horrifying scene that we see in the first reading from Maccabees. We marvel in awe at the courage and even carelessness of the brothers and shrink from the thought that that could be expected of us. Their bravery and endurance are the results of their looking forward to a future in heaven. They will not throw away eternity for a few moments of relief. What they do makes sense. They are not giving up their lives because the world is a bad place and they hate it, or because they do not value life. The exact opposite. They value and understand the fullness of life and the totality of what it means to live. The brothers are choosing life, eternal life. They have the true perspective.

Today we begin Vocations Awareness Week in the Church in the United States. Many of us worry about vocations in the Church. Will we have enough priests? Will there be sisters and brothers and consecrated men and women to serve the Church? Some call it a crisis. In some

ways it is but maybe it is part of a larger crisis of a loss of perspective. The vast majority of our existence as human beings will be spent in the afterlife. Our life here determines our future life in Heaven or Hell. If we live in the life and grace of God in this life, the life and grace will bloom into an eternal life of happiness in Heaven. God has a plan for each of us to be happy with Him in Heaven. His plan starts in this life with the mission that He gives each one of us. Maybe the first step for each one of us to renew vocations is to regain the true perspective about our life. To live our lives and make decisions about our lives in light of Heaven and God's will for us to join Him there. This is the true perspective that allows a young person to contemplate a vocation. If we can renew this sense of our life here in light of our eternal destiny, we may find that vocations will come from young people who are walking in this life by the light of Heaven.

Mary always lived her life with her eyes on God and His will for her. We ask her to pray with us at this Mass. That as we receive the living Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of the Risen Jesus in the Eucharist and touch Him in Heaven, we may allow Him to give us this renewed perspective of life that has Heaven always in our minds.

Monday, November 7th, 2022: Thirty-second Week in Ordinary Time

“Increase our faith!” cry the apostles today. “I believe, help my unbelief” the father prays begging Jesus to heal his son. “Where is your faith?” Christ asks his water-logged, storm-shaken, apostles. “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail” Jesus reassures Peter before His passion. And to Thomas after the resurrection, “do not be faithless, but believing”. Again and again throughout the Gospels we find Our Lord desiring to build-up His disciples’ faith and delighting when they desire that grace for themselves.

Juxtaposed next to this work of His grace, we find throughout the Gospels that Jesus is just as constant in encouraging His disciples: acknowledging the littleness of their faith, but then reminding them that even the smallest of faith – the littlest of seeds of His Word – is enough to do great things and bear abundant divine fruit. Jesus looks at His disciples in today’s Gospel, and we gathered here today, and like them, He knows the fears and inadequacies and uncertainties that attack our hearts; He knows the sins and temptations and attacks that face us, and to us, Our *LORD* says “If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be rooted up and be planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” Notice that at precisely the moment when the apostles succumb to discouragement and feel inadequate to the call Christ places before them, He intervenes to reassure them that His grace is enough.

The image Jesus gives is unforgettable: not only the uprooting of a mulberry tree but the planting of it in the ocean. For anyone who has tried to pull up even a small bush with only a few roots, the task we know is an arduous one. For a larger tree, as was the mulberry that Our Lord references (a type of tree prevalent around Jerusalem, and notorious for its substantial root-systems), this transplanting would be well-nigh impossible. Furthermore, the impossibility of the task is amplified when we recall that Jesus proposes this tree be *planted in the sea*. Not just thrown into the sea, not just relocated to the coast, it is to be *planted* within the ocean. No amount of human effort or ingenuity in Jesus’ time, or our own, is capable of this task! *But* this is because the task that Jesus offers each one of us, His disciples, is *not* a human one, it is a divine one!

Through the Old Testament, the planting of trees is often used to describe God’s work of cultivating and restoring His people, Israel. Recall His promise through Isaiah: “I will plant in the wilderness the cedar”, and Ezekiel: “I the LORD have ... made the dry tree flourish.” The prophets point us back further, to the very beginning, when God brings forth from the sterile ground “every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food”. There, as God created the heavens and the earth, *He* was able to plant trees where the seas had previously covered. *God*, and only God, can plant trees in oceans, and bear fruit in deserts. And God, *and only God*, can do so in our feeble hearts: bringing perfection forth from weakness, fruitfulness from a timid fiat, and fidelity despite our own feeling of insufficiency.

This week, Catholics around the world reflect on Christ’s call to all of us – the *vocation* He has given particularly to you and me – and today His words are a gentle reminder to each of us that fear or timidity has no place in a heart which relies on Him, and the task that He has crafted for us, no matter how impossible based on our own capacities or readiness, is one that He, the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth, can make possible in us by His grace.

Our task is twofold: to humbly place our hearts, broken as they are, in Christ's secure grasp. He opens His own heart to each of us at this Mass, entrusting to us His Body and Blood, let us not fear to boldly open our hearts to Him, and to His ever-sufficient love.

Tuesday, November 8th, 2022: Thirty-second Week in Ordinary Time

We are the Lord's servants, and our work is never done. There's a part of us that really likes what this parable has to say because we like the idea that we work for the Lord. It's important work, it needs to be done, and we will never run out of work to do. We like this because it gives us a sense of importance. We who are priests, or religious, or consecrated, or who do some specific work for the Church, or those who are discerning a call to any of those can be especially delighted to think of ourselves as "in the Lord's service." We like to be needed, to be helpful, to be important.

But there's a part of today's Gospel that is more likely not to delight us. When we have done all we have been commanded to do, we are to say, "We are unprofitable servants." That applies to all of us — priests, religious, consecrated, and everyone else — we are all *unprofitable* servants of the Lord. Ouch. There goes that sense of importance.

Why do all this work if we are unprofitable? Why exert all this effort if there is no profit to be gained from it?

The Lord does not profit from our work, and this is simply because He is God, and we are creatures. God has a plan from all eternity, and it cannot be thwarted. No evil deed, nor the sum of all evil in the world, can thwart God's will. A part of our creatureliness is that God is not dependent on us. He doesn't *need* us. See, the truth that God's plan cannot be thwarted also means that His plan can't be thwarted *by us*. His plan can't be thwarted by our failures or our shortcomings. He doesn't need us for profit. Our doing all this work doesn't add anything to His greatness, nor do our failures subtract from His greatness. God is God. So, thank God we are His unprofitable servants. What a relief! It all isn't riding on us.

This does not mean the work is not important, or that it doesn't need to get done, but the Lord only "needs" us because He chooses to need us. More precisely, He invites us to share in His work. He invites us to become a part of His work, and so we too are "worked on" when we cooperate with His work.

This parable should make it perfectly clear that we ought to work, and we will be held accountable for our laziness or refusal to do what we are commanded. But knowing that we are unprofitable servants helps purify how we see that work. It helps us to have the right attitude toward working for the Lord. Maybe you have felt an attraction to the priesthood, to religious life, to some form of consecrated life, or to some apostolate in the Church, and maybe what has attracted you is the sense of self-importance it would give you or the sense of admiration from others you might get for the work you could do for the Lord. You might be attracted to a vocation for the wrong reason. That doesn't mean you aren't called. But this Gospel invites you to purify your intention.

Why do all this work if we are unprofitable? Not because it may give us a sense of self-importance, but because of *love*. Our labor is to be one of love, not one for profit. It is love for God and the love of God that transforms us, which is the "product" of our labor if we cooperate

with it. God is inviting us to share in His work, and that means that He is inviting us to live among the company of the Saints, who are His great masterpieces.

Wednesday, November 9th, 2022: Feast of the Dedication of the Basilica of St. John Lateran

Today we celebrate the feast of the dedication of the Basilica of Saint John Lateran in Rome. The purpose of this feast is not just to remember a particular church—even though that church is an important one. In fact, this basilica is the cathedral of the Pope. On the facade of this church there is an inscription that states that this church is the mother and head of all the churches in the city and in the whole world. As the see of the Vicar of Christ who is the earthly head of the universal Church, St. John's can claim to be the most important church in the whole world. Even still, the purpose of this feast is not to remember just one church. This feast calls to mind what Church means.

In the first reading, we see Ezekiel's vision of water flowing out of the temple. Now for the Jews, the temple was the one place in the entire world where they could come into God's presence. And that is precisely what the Lord intends for the Church to be today, a place where we can encounter God. But here is where the vision would be striking to the people who first heard it: Ezekiel sees water flowing out of the side of the temple. If it comes out of the temple it must be a pure, sacred water. This water gives life to the whole countryside around it. In God there is life, and he wants to share this life with all around him and not only with those who were allowed to enter the temple. This water flows into the driest parts of Israel and turns them into a garden, a garden like the garden of Eden, a garden like what God had planned the world to be. It even turns the waters of the Dead Sea fresh! Already in this Old Testament prophecy, we see the beginning of what God is planning to do in the Church. No longer are a select few ritually pure people the only ones who are able to come into contact with God. God's presence is beginning to flow out from the temple and give life to all who come into contact with it. So, the Church shouldn't be just a place for people to come to see God, but it should be a dynamic reality that expands and comes to meet every person wherever they may be.

The second reading adds another layer of meaning to what it means to be a Church. Saint Paul says, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and God's spirit dwells within you?" For Saint Paul, the Church is not just a building. Instead, church, which means "assembly" in Greek, is the whole of the new people of God. And it's important to note that this temple—God's people—is a holy temple. If the Church is God's temple and the temple is the place of God's presence, then every member of the Church is called to make God present in the world. We are that dynamic reality we reflected on before; we are made to be that place out of which God's life-giving water flows.

In the Gospel, we hear how Christ purifies the temple. As he reminds us, his Father's house is meant to be a house of prayer. And so, he must come in and throw out everything that would get in the way of our relationship with his Father. We, the Church, are in constant need of purification. But Christ adds something even more interesting when he speaks to the Pharisees about his actions; he speaks of destroying the temple and raising it up in three days. It was the apostle John who understood later that he was speaking of the temple of his body. God's temple is the body of Christ. Christ was the embodiment of the presence of God in the world. Christ's body *is* the embodiment of God's presence in the world. And we celebrate this every time we come to Mass: the presence of Christ's body in his Church. When we receive the body of Christ

in Mass, we become more fully the Church. We become that place of God's presence in the world. We become the source of life-giving grace that is offered to the whole world. We become those new people of God that Saint Paul worked so hard to build up and that all priests and bishops have worked to continually construct under the guidance of the one architect, Jesus Christ. When we receive the Eucharist, we become that true body of Christ, the mystical body of Christ united perfectly to Christ the head. This is what it means to be the Church.

This week is National Vocations Awareness Week when we reflect more deeply on the need to promote and pray for vocations in our church. In a special way, we pray for those who are discerning the call to priestly life. Without priests to give us the sacraments we would not be able to fulfill our mission, our calling, and the gift we have received in our baptism: to be the Church. Let us follow what Christ asked us in the gospel: “pray therefore to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers to his harvest”.

Thursday, November 10, 2022: Memorial of Pope Saint Leo the Great

Jesus said in reply to the Pharisees: the coming of the Kingdom of God cannot be observed. I once met a well-educated man who privately assured me that the world was going to end in two months...he must have missed this passage from Luke because that encounter was 10 years ago. Thanks be to God.

Down through the centuries, from the time of Christ, there have been those who go beyond the words of Our Lord and claim to have private knowledge of the end times. We might think of those who—with the crumbling of the Roman empire and the invasion of barbarian tribes in the 5th century—thought that the end had come. In the middle of that century, and those times stands the ‘rock’ whom the church celebrates in the liturgy today: Saint Pope Leo the Great.

One of only three popes (so far) whom history has titled ‘great,’ Leo ascended the chair of Peter in the year 440 and served in a time fraught with threats from without and within. Pope Leo preached against the heresies tearing at the body of Christ: Manichaeism, Pelagianism, Priscillianism, and Nestorianism; he defended the divine and human natures in the one person of Jesus at the council of Chalcedon through his famous *tome*. His homilies are marvelous for their clarity and mystagogy. He famously met with Atilla the Hun to turn his Mongol horde back from invading Rome; he would also negotiate during the Vandal sack of Rome to save its citizens and temper the looting of the churches. With the eternal city at the brink of collapse, it was the *imperium* of spiritual power which Pope Leo commanded that carried the day.

The Kingdom of God is among you, Jesus told the Pharisees, and it was to be this obscure Judaic sect of the once-persecuted Christians who would be the legacy of the Roman empire. Pope Leo recognized this divine authority in the church and in his office. We will let him have the final word on the content of that eternal kingdom for which he labored:

“When [Jesus] says: *Blessed are the poor in spirit*, he shows that the kingdom of heaven is to be given to those who are distinguished by their humility of soul rather than by their lack of worldly goods... What kind of poverty, then, is blessed? The kind that is not in love with earthly things and does not seek worldly riches: the kind that longs to be filled with the blessings of heaven. After our Lord himself, the Apostles have given us the best example of this greatness of heart in poverty. When their Master called, they instantly left behind all that they possessed, and from catching fish they turned swiftly to fishing for men. Their example inspired many to emulate their faith and so become like them: it was at this time that these first sons of the Church were of one heart and there was one spirit among believers. With all their possessions stripped away, they received the riches of eternal blessings, and through the Apostles’ preaching they rejoiced at having nothing that the world could give and possessing all things with Christ.”

This week the Church in the United States marks National Vocation Awareness Week. Our Lord’s call to leave worldly riches behind did not end with the Apostles. It has continued throughout human history, even to today, as he calls some to serve him as priests, religious or

consecrated persons. While all of us are called to possess humility and poverty of spirit, priests, religious, and consecrated persons exemplify this humility in a special way by relinquishing “house or wife or brother or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God” (Lk. 18:29). While detaching ourselves from the world can be challenging, Jesus assures us that he who gives up earthly possessions and relationships out of love for Him, will “receive [back] an overabundant return in this present age and eternal life to come” (Lk. 18:30).

May Pope Saint Leo intercede for us, and especially those men and women discerning a vocation in the Church, that we may live lives of humility and holiness and may, by God’s grace, join his company with the Apostles in the eternal life to come.

Friday, November 11, 2022: Memorial of St. Martin of Tours, Bishop

When striving to prayerfully discern one's vocation, it can be easy to fall into the trap of thinking that the entire decision rests with me, and I must somehow figure out which decision is the right one and choose it. This paradigm can lead to an endless weighing of options and ultimately indecision. Of course, every vocation is beautiful and good in its own way. If we simply line them up, we could find ourselves with endless lists of pros and cons for each one. Our saint today paired with the Gospel, offer us deeper wisdom - one which cuts through superficial discernment and leads to the possibility of spiritual growth.

St. Martin of Tours was a soldier of the Roman Legions who fought for some time in Gaul. In addition to being a soldier, he was also a Catechumen. In those days people often prepared for baptism over many years, waiting until they were prepared to devote their lives wholly to Christ. The famous image of St. Martin of Tours that comes to us is of him dividing his cloak and sharing it with a beggar outside of the French town of Amiens. His biographer tells us that as he was entering the city, he saw the beggar in the shivering cold without a cloak. Having nothing but his own cloak to give him, he divided it in two with his sword and wrapped himself in the other half. That night he had a dream that Jesus appeared to him wrapped in half of the cloak that St. Martin had given the beggar. This dream drove him to baptism and to devote his life wholly to Christ. Martin eventually became the Bishop of Tours by popular acclaim and devoted himself to the conversion of those who worshiped the Roman gods. As he was sick and nearing death, his biographer tells us that his subjects begged him not to leave this world, but to stay and take care of them. He replied, "Lord, if your people still need me, I am ready for the task; your will be done." Thus St. Martin "neither feared to die nor refused to live."

In St. Martin's life, we see the living out of what we can call the great paradox. The great paradox as spoken by Christ in the Gospel today, "whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses it will save it." This paradox rings true because of the nature of the spiritual life. The spiritual life is first and foremost the action of our Divine Creator breaking through the barrier of our creatureliness. This means that as human beings we depend upon and wait upon Divine action. Our meager attempts at taking control of our lives and trying to live as the architects of our being and the arbitrators of meaning always fail, even if our attempts to bring about our own fulfillment, the so-called "preservation of our life," look grandiose like achieving worldly success through power, honor, popularity, etc. The history of the human race illustrates that these failures are not due to a lack of trying. The issue is rather the way that one seeks fulfillment. The paradox is that the only way to achieve fulfillment is to surrender pursuit.

Every human being bears the image of their Creator. An image that gives us, like the One who made us, the ability to know and to love. To exercise these abilities in a fruitful way, there is a surrender that must occur. This surrender is to our Creator. The ability to create my own meaning or build myself into whatever I want is fruitless. To become what we were made to be, to have a life that is preserved, we first must lose our lives. How we lose our lives matters. Or a better way to say it, *to whom* we lose our lives matters. We surrender our lives, but we surrender ourselves to the One who can build us into a creation of which we did not know we were capable.

As we continue to mark National Vocation Awareness Week, may each of us be inspired to answer Christ's call by embracing surrender. Jesus may not appear to us in a dream to spur us on to graced union with Himself, but the same desire that led Him to prompt St. Martin to get baptized burns within His heart for each one of us. He desires to bring the work He began in us on the day of our baptism to fulfillment. Our surrender, inspired by the grace and movement of the Spirit, allows this desire of Christ to take root in our hearts as He continues to draw us ever closer to Himself.

Saturday, November 12, 2022: Memorial of St. Josaphat, Bishop & Martyr

Today the Church celebrates St. Josaphat, 17th-century hero in the cause of union between the Roman and Eastern churches, whose priestly vocation brought thousands back into friendship with the Pope and paved the way for millions more in the following centuries to enjoy again the communion of the Catholic Church. His feast day gives us the occasion to consider what we might learn from his response to the Lord's call.

The first movement towards a priestly vocation for Josaphat came in the form of a mystical experience he had as a child. When still a young boy in what is now western Ukraine, around the year 1590, he would often pray in front of an image of the Crucifixion. Once, before that image, he claimed to feel a flaming spark fly from the heart of Christ to his own heart, bringing warmth, joy, courage, and love along with it. This experience marked him deeply and drew him definitively toward the Lord. As he grew up, he took no pleasure in the work of his father, that of being a merchant. Instead, after a few years of working in the world, he entered the monastic life as a layman. It was while serving as a lay monk that he learned the Catholic faith more deeply and eventually, received priestly ordination. He was ordained a bishop in 1617 and was martyred in 1623.

St. Josaphat's life and vocation communicate an insatiable desire for union with Christ and a willingness to receive whatever mission that union of love might entail. He encountered his priestly vocation not primarily in his own private discernment and self-reflection, although that is important, but also through the Church herself, having been persuaded by Jesuit scholars to discern the priesthood. St. Josaphat's vocation then, like all vocations, was the product of the Holy Spirit whose promptings come to us sometimes silently within our hearts or through the guidance of others.

Throughout the past week, the Church in the United States has been celebrating National Vocation Awareness Week. During this week, the Church asks us to pray for all vocations and especially for those discerning a call to the priesthood or consecrated life. As seen in the life of St. Josaphat, vocations are born within a community, and all of us here today have a role to play in increasing vocations, and in helping those around us, particularly our family and friends, come to know God's will for their lives. Like St. Josaphat, all of us have a mission from God. Whether you are still discerning or committed to a particular vocation, ask Jesus to touch your heart with the same flaming spark of love with which he filled the heart of St. Josaphat so that you may be, in the spirit of humility, open to "do whatever he tells you" (Jn. 2:5).