

The First Sunday of Advent [C]

Luke 21:25-28,34-36

November 29, 2015

“For that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth.” [Luke 21:35]

Long before his election, the first Roman Catholic to become president, John F. Kennedy, wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of essays called “Profiles in Courage”. The word “profile” is telling. A “profile” is not simply a biography, or a collection of anecdotes. A “profile” is a representation of a person through chief characteristics. Consider this illustration:

When I was in grade school in the 1970s, it seemed to be a fad once a year to line up all the children in a given classroom, and have each take turns sitting down sideways to a projector, while someone would draw an outline of the student’s head on a large sheet of paper. All the outlines were then posted around the room and decorated with drawings and fun facts, and after an Open House they were taken home and delivered to proud parents.

I do not know what the pedagogical goal of all this was—nor am I sure that there actually was one—but I have to admit that even all these many years later, I recall how striking it was just how easily one could recognize the various profiles posted around the room. “That’s obviously Julie with her long pony tail... There’s Bobby with his blunt little nose....” And so on. Each profile spoke more tellingly than you would think it capable.

So a “profile” is a representation of a person through certain chief characteristics. Kennedy’s profiles focused on the virtue of courage within those persons he chose. Someone else could, we might suppose, have written profiles of those same persons that were “profiles in humility” or “profiles in musical talent”. A profile is a profile not only because of its brevity, but also because it focuses on just one aspect, one dimension, of a set of persons.

If you think back to that scene from my grade school days, there’s little wonder as to why the outlines of the students were made of their heads and not their hands, or their elbows, or their feet. Of course, one would expect—for a variety of reasons—that one’s head would be much more recognizable to others than outlines of hands or elbows or feet.

Faces speak volumes. Faces are far more telling than any other physical part of the human person. Only the spiritual soul is more telling than the physical face. Of course, we’ve all heard the saying that “the eyes are the window to the soul”, but it would be closer to the truth to say that “the face is the window to the soul.”

This reflection on the word “profile” is simply by way of explaining the title for this set of Advent sermons. The set of four sermons is titled “Profiles in Mercy”.

Each sermon will focus on a different saint or blessed. Each sermon will consider mercy in that person’s life from two contrasting perspectives: first, how that person accepted mercy into his or her life, and second, how that person showed mercy to others from his or her heart. Each sermon, then, will show how each of these four persons became holy because he or she was unfailingly willing to come face-to-face with God’s own profile in mercy, which is the Holy Face of Jesus.

Each sermon is meant to help each of you recognize your own profile in the light of Jesus as Divine Mercy. Perhaps each of us, in some particular aspect of our life, needs to show mercy more willingly from our heart. Perhaps we even need more willingly to allow

Christ to flood our lives with His mercy from the depths of His Sacred Heart. May we see God's Divine Mercy at the heart of the Sacred Liturgy during Advent.

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“For that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth” [Luke 21:35].

“That day” described in the Gospel passage from Holy Mass on this First Sunday of Advent does not sound like a day to be longed for. Jesus describes *“that day”* in ominous terms. The *“signs”* of *“that day”* are cosmic in scale, appearing *“in the sun, the moon, and the stars”*. But these signs also show themselves here on earth, in *“the roaring of the sea and the waves”*, and these signs also show themselves within the human person, in hearts made *“drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life”*.

But in this passage, Jesus isn't wagging his finger at fallen man, as if to say, “Look at what a mess you've made of this world!” Nor are these apocalyptic signs warnings from God the Father of fallen man's immanent destruction. Rather, Jesus is staking out a contrast: given that *“that day”* will be so terrifying that *“people will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world”*, Jesus says to His disciples that they need not be frightened, if they would only take their attention off the world and turn it instead to *“the Son of Man coming in a cloud”*.

This *“Son of Man”* is the Divine Mercy. That's what the fearful and the anxious don't understand. That's what the carousers and the drunkards don't understand. God *“made”* His Only-Begotten Son *“to be sin”*¹ (in the words of Saint Paul), in order to destroy sin and death. This *“Son of Man [who is] coming in a cloud”* is Divine Mercy.

Every season of the Church's liturgical year presents a different facet of Divine Mercy: not just Holy Week and the Octave of Easter. Catholic catechists know the challenge of turning the minds and hearts of young people during December from Santa Claus, to Saint Nicholas, to the Christ Child, and finally to the Crucified Lord. Sometimes at school Masses during Advent I use the following saying in order to plant a seed in children's minds and hearts: “The wood of the crib is the wood of the Cross.” A similar saying: “The reason that Jesus was born into this world, was to die to this world.” It's not the *Summa*, but you have to start somewhere.

A great place to start is with Saint John Paul II. He is often popularly titled “the Great”. Apart from the matter of whether/when the Church will officially accord this title of “the Great” to him, we might ask what it was about his human life that would lead the common man to consider him great. Each of you here could give an answer without any of you repeating anyone else's answer, such as the breadth of his human life, both as a disciple and as the Pope. But consider now not the breadth of his life, but its depth, and in terms of Divine Mercy. On this First Sunday of Advent, Saint John Paul the Great will help us begin the Season of Advent and its focus on mercy in the Person of this *“Son of Man [who is] coming in a cloud”*.

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Although as just mentioned, we will not be looking at mercy across the breadth of Karol Wojtyla's earthly life, it would be very easy to do so. As one learns more of the story of his earthly sufferings, he seems like a character out of a Russian novel: dramatic and tragic in equal measures. The deaths of all his immediate family members by the time he

¹ *“For our sake [the Father] made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him”* [2 Corinthians 5:21].

was only twenty, the occupation of his homeland by the brutal regime of the Nazis, and then its control by the Soviet empire, would easily have led a lesser man to despair, resentment, rage, and utter pessimism about mankind, and firm doubts about the existence of God. Many persons have descended into such agonies on account of far less personal suffering.

We could reflect on the depth of St. John Paul's encounter with Divine Mercy by focusing on any number of events in his life as a priest, bishop, and Pope. There was a great constancy throughout his entire life. Cardinal Robert Sarah, the current prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, notes this constancy in a book-length interview published earlier this year, titled *God or Nothing*.²

Cardinal Sarah first met Pope John Paul II soon after the appointment of the 34-year-old Sarah to the episcopacy. There was immediately a bond felt between them, not only because they both had become bishops at relatively young ages, but also because the native countries of both were controlled and manipulated by Communist governments. The Church in both countries was constantly pressured to bow to the authority of the Communists.

In *God or Nothing*, Cardinal Sarah insists that St. John Paul the Great's life was founded on "the three pillars of his interior life, which were the Cross, the Eucharist, and the Blessed Virgin, *Crux, Hostia, et Virgo*. His extraordinary faith sought the foundations for its strength only in the most ordinary tools of the Christian life." Karol Wojtyla learned from his parents, Karol and Emilia, how to wield these "tools". These are the same "tools" that you teach to your little saints in the classroom, and when you take them over to church: *Crux, Hostia, et Virgo*. You teach these three out of your own experiences of mercy. You teach these three by your examples towards others, and your words and actions before others. *Crux, Hostia, et Virgo*.

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Perhaps the most obvious of these three in St. John Paul's life was *Crux*. It's likely then to be the one least understood by those who reflect on his life without the virtue of faith. One example would be the suffering that marked the end of his earthly life. His last days and months are little understood by those who look at him from the perspective of worldly power. But to those with the eyes of faith, those last days and months speak very boldly of St. John Paul's faith in Christ, and his adherence to the gift of Divine Mercy.

Those without faith might have advised Pope John Paul to resign from the papacy because of his decline of physical health. Here a contrast in Church history highlights St. John Paul's faith.

As you know, there are many examples of canonized saints whose lives intermingled and directly influenced each other. Consider Monica and Augustine, Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross, and Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen. You could discuss among yourselves your own favorites. Such examples are a beautiful witness to God's Providence in forming the Communion of Saints.

Someday after our Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI is canonized, there will be a great deal more study and reflection on how Pope St. John Paul and Pope St. Benedict were another example of saints who inspired and encouraged each other. Holding up the earthly lives of both of them in the light of faith, we see many similarities, but also many contrasts. The similarities and contrasts both emerged from the one Faith.

² Robert Cardinal Sarah, *God or Nothing: A Conversation on Faith with Nicolas Diat* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015).

One contrast is seen between St. John Paul's determined refusal to resign the papacy, and Pope Emeritus Benedict's discerned decision to resign the papacy. Both St. John Paul's refusal, and Pope Emeritus Benedict's decision were rooted in the same fidelity to the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Those without faith might have advised Pope John Paul to resign from the papacy because of his decline of physical health. Can you imagine a Public Relations firm from New York or Los Angeles advising a corporate CEO to remain in office while so physically disabled? To those who see life through the eyes of the world, Pope John Paul in his final days displayed all that undermines worldly power and leadership. Were worldly leaders to listen to St. Paul, they could not make either heads or tails of these words:

"...we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies."³

But Saint John Paul the Great saw his final illnesses and infirmities as opportunities to conform his self more closely to the Divine Mercy, and through his Petrine office to share this gift with the Church, and also with those in the world outside the Church, whether or not they understood this as gift. St. John Paul the Great formed his final illnesses and infirmities into a *Signum Crucis*, offering to the Church and the world a "profile in mercy".

Those with faith perceived this profile in mercy by means of the light of faith, a light shining upon and from within Karol Wojtyla. Regarding St. John Paul's gift of himself at the end of his earthly pilgrimage, allow me to quote Cardinal Sarah at greater length:

"I think that his last moments on earth were a sort of unwritten encyclical. The pope was carrying the Gospel in his broken body, which was more luminous than ever. While his sickness was leading him to the gates of eternity, he had to make his last Way of the Cross, on that Good Friday in 2005, in his private chapel. We could see him only from the back. Deprived of all physical strength, he was literally fastened to the Cross, as though to invite us to focus, no longer on him, but on the 'sign' that reveals God and His love.

"That Good Friday summed up the whole life of John Paul II, who wanted to be totally configured to Christ and to live in profound communion with [Christ's] sufferings, to be conformed to Him in His death....

"On Sunday, March 27, 2005 [Easter Sunday], he had already entered into the silence of the 'passage' that prepares for the rising of new life. That day he wanted to speak a few final words to us from his window, but not a word came out of his mouth. He had entered into the silence of God."⁴

Silence. School teachers who have constant contact with young people know how filled modern culture is with noise: not just sounds, but noise. Silence is at a premium in the lives of students today.

³ 2 Corinthians 4:7-10.

⁴ *God or Nothing*, 94.

If you think back to “*that day*” described by Jesus in today’s Gospel passage, there is a lot of noise being caused by those cosmic, seismic, and inner personal conflicts. But as in the story of Elijah on Mount Horeb,⁵ God is not in the noise. We might draw also to our imagination the Gospel scene in the home of Martha and Mary: Martha was a whirling dervish of noisy activity, while Mary sat in silence at the feet of Divine Mercy in the flesh. Silence is where we first encounter Divine Mercy. That’s why so many people in the world never encounter Divine Mercy: because they will not enter into the experience of silence.

On Friday, January 14, 2000, in my first semester of study in Rome, through an unexpected series of events, I had the privilege of concelebrating Holy Mass with St. John Paul II in his private chapel. That chapel seats about 30 people. There were only three of us priests concelebrating Holy Mass with the Pope. The other persons present were laypersons, including one layperson from the Diocese of Wichita.

Once we priests were vested for Holy Mass, we were shown to chairs at the front of the chapel, just a few feet from the living saint, John Paul the Great, kneeling at his priedeux, leaning forward over the top of it in intense, silent prayer. This was a lesson for me in the profundity of silence.

So what, we might wonder, does the reflection on silence have to do with mercy in the life of St. John Paul II? What does all this have to do with the Season of Advent?

Silence, mercy, and Advent are all related to each other in the Person of Jesus Christ, who came into this world to be for us men and for our salvation that “Suffering Servant” of whom the Prophet Isaiah preached. “[L]ike a lamb that is led to the slaughter, / and like a sheep that before its shear-ers is dumb, / so He opened not His mouth.” The Suffering Servant might seem more fitting as a focus of Lent, but the Suffering Servant is a focus of Advent as well because He was conceived and born in order to be “*made sin*” for us, so as to destroy sin and the power of death from within.

In thanksgiving, please join in chanting a passage from *Isaiah*, using the sheets that have been distributed.⁶ At the beginning of the canticle, the antiphon will be chanted only by myself. Then, all the strophes of the canticle and the antiphon at the end will be chanted by all of us together. On those long lines where there is a backslash dividing the line in two, we’ll pause briefly at the backslash. Also, for your reflection either today or later in Advent is a passage on the back of the page that’s from *Dives in Misericordia*, reflecting on Divine Mercy in the Old Testament, that time of silent waiting for the Messiah.⁷

⁵ I Kings 19.

⁶ Isaiah 53:1-7.

⁷ St. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* 4.



ANTIPHON (*Leader*): “He who has seen me has seen the Father.”

The Church professes the mer-cy of God,
the Church lives by it in her faith and in her teaching,
contemplating Christ, His cross and resurrection, His whole mystery.

[cf. *Dives in Misericordia* 13]

ISAIAH 53:1-7
The Silent, Suffering Lamb

(*All*): Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been re-vealed?
For He grew up before him like a young plant, / and like a root out of dry ground;
He had no form or comeliness that we should look at Him, / and no beauty that we should
de-sire Him.

(*All*): He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquaint-ed with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.

(*All*): Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and af-flicted.
But He was wounded for our transgressions, / He was bruised for our in-iquities;
upon Him was the chastisement that made us whole, / and with His stripes we are healed.

(*All*): All we like sheep have gone a-stray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on Him
the iniquity of us all.

(*All*): He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He
opened not His mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shear-ers is dumb,
so He opened not His mouth.

(*All*): Glory to the Father, and to the Son,
and to the Ho-ly Spirit,
as it was in the begin-ning, is now,
and will be for ever. A-men.



ANTIPHON (*All*): “He who has seen me has seen the Father.”

The Church professes the mer-cy of God,
the Church lives by it in her faith and in her teaching,
contemplating Christ, His cross and resurrection, His whole mystery.

from *Dives in Misericordia*, Encyclical of Pope St. John Paul II (30 Nov. 1980)

III. THE OLD TESTAMENT

4. The Concept of “Mercy” in the Old Testament

The concept of “mercy” in the Old Testament has a long and rich history. We have to refer back to it in order that the mercy revealed by Christ may shine forth more clearly. By revealing that mercy both through His actions and through His teaching, Christ addressed Himself to people who not only knew the concept of mercy, but who also, as the People of God of the Old Covenant, had drawn from their age-long history a special experience of the mercy of God. This experience was social and communal, as well as individual and interior.

Israel was, in fact, the people of the covenant with God, a covenant that it broke many times. Whenever it became aware of its infidelity—and in the history of Israel there was no lack of prophets and others who awakened this awareness—it appealed to mercy. In this regard, the books of the Old Testament give us very many examples. Among the events and texts of greater importance one may recall: the beginning of the history of the Judges,³¹ the prayer of Solomon at the inauguration of the Temple,³² part of the prophetic work of Micah,³³ the consoling assurances given by Isaiah,³⁴ the cry of the Jews in exile,³⁵ and the renewal of the covenant after the return from exile.³⁶

It is significant that in their preaching the prophets link mercy, which they often refer to because of the people’s sins, with the incisive image of love on God’s part. The Lord loves Israel with the love of a special choosing, much like the love of a spouse,³⁷ and for this reason He pardons its sins and even its infidelities and betrayals. When He finds repentance and true conversion, He brings His people back to grace.³⁸ In the preaching of the prophets, mercy signifies a special power of love, which prevails over the sin and infidelity of the chosen people.

In this broad “social” context, mercy appears as a correlative to the interior experience of individuals languishing in a state of guilt or enduring every kind of suffering and misfortune. Both physical evil and moral evil, namely sin, cause the sons and daughters of Israel to turn to the Lord and beseech His mercy. In this way David turns to Him, conscious of the seriousness of his guilt³⁹; Job too, after his rebellion, turns to Him in his tremendous misfortune⁴⁰; so also does Esther, knowing the mortal threat to her own people.⁴¹ And we find still other examples in the books of the Old Testament.⁴²

At the root of this many-sided conviction, which is both communal and personal, and which is demonstrated by the whole of the Old Testament down the centuries, is the basic experience of the chosen people at the Exodus: the Lord saw the affliction of His people reduced to slavery, heard their cry, knew their sufferings and decided to deliver them.⁴³ In this act of salvation by the Lord, the prophet perceived his love and compassion.⁴⁴ This is precisely the grounds upon which the people and each of its members based their certainty of the mercy of God, which can be invoked whenever tragedy strikes.

Added to this is the fact that sin too constitutes man’s misery. The people of the Old Covenant experienced this misery from the time of the Exodus, when they set up the golden calf. The Lord Himself triumphed over this act of breaking the covenant when He solemnly declared to Moses that He was a “God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”⁴⁵ It is in this central revelation that the chosen people, and each of its members, will find, every time that they have sinned, the strength and the motive for turning to the Lord to remind Him of what He had exactly revealed about Himself⁴⁶ and to beseech His forgiveness.

The Second Sunday of Advent [C]

Luke 3:1-6

December 6, 2015

“...the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.” [Luke 3:2]

Consider this Sunday’s Gospel passage through the first of the four senses of Scripture. The first of the four is the Literal Sense. The Literal Sense, also at times called the Historical Sense, stands in contrast to the three spiritual senses of Scripture. But the role of the Literal Sense is often distorted: sometimes to one extreme, and at other times to the opposite extreme.

On the one hand, there are those (mostly scholars) who inflate the Literal Sense. In other words, they reduce the fullness of Scripture’s meaning down to the Literal Sense. Our beloved Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has taught at length both about the importance of the Literal Sense, but also about the place of the Literal Sense within the larger context of all four senses of Scripture.

On the other hand, the Literal Sense is deflated by those who believe that human history is of little importance compared to the spiritual realities that the latter three senses of Scripture point us towards. However, the Church has consistently taught that the three spiritual “senses of Scripture are based upon the literal.”⁸ This is, in the field of Sacred Scripture, an example of the general theological principle that *gratia supponit naturam*: “grace builds upon nature”. The three spiritual senses of Scripture build upon the one literal sense.

God in His divine Providence chooses to work through the finite, natural order of Creation. The Incarnation is the supreme instance of this principle at work in God’s economy of salvation. The inner logic of Scripture, however, reveals the same principle at work, so that finally, the Word of God speaks through the harmony of all four senses.

Consider, then, the Literal Sense of this Sunday’s Gospel passage through the phrase that stands at the center of this passage: *“...the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.”* This phrase is the heart of the entire passage, and the heart of all four of the senses of this scripture: *“the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.”*

This phrase has four elements to it: first, *“the word of God”*; second, *“came”*; third, *“John the son of Zechariah”*; and fourth, *“in the desert”*. What do these four elements convey to us?

To begin, we ask what the Literal Sense of *“the word of God”* is. When the evangelist writes that *“the word of God came to John”*, is he saying that a copy of the Bible flew through the air until it reached John? Or is he meaning that John recalled the word of God, the way that you might explain to someone that the name of a former student “came to you” after several hours of trying to recall it? Is this how *“the word of God came to John”*: as a recollection, recalling, or remembering? Or did the *“word of God [come] to John”* anew, as an original inspiration, as when the Word of God came to St. Luke the Evangelist, so that Luke might record the words of his Gospel account and *Acts of the Apostles*?

It’s very important for us to recognize that the Literal Sense of Scripture is not always as transparent as we might imagine. This ought to help us appreciate the wisdom of God in giving us a Magisterium, the Sacred Tradition of the Church, and also the treasury of the writings of the Doctors of the Church: in order to foster understanding of Sacred Scripture.

⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church 115, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I,1,10.

Here, consider that the Literal Sense of this phrase is a direct encounter between two persons: “*the word of God*” and “*John the son of Zechariah*”. More specifically, this was a face-to-face encounter between “*the word of God*” and “*John the son of Zechariah*”. More specifically yet, the first of these two persons was the face of Divine Mercy: namely, the Holy Face of Jesus. This encounter is the initial breaking of the dawn of the Son of God: the advent of the Divine Mercy. Remember that the literal meaning of the word “advent” is “a coming towards”. The liturgical Season of Advent focuses our spiritual lives on this coming of the Lord, and today’s Gospel passage evokes this spiritual dynamic in noting “*the word of God [coming] to John*”.

Regarding this encounter, to speak of “*the word of God*” is to take on the theology of the Beloved Disciple, who in the prologue to his Gospel account explains that “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*” This is the divine Person who came to John in the desert in today’s Gospel passage.

This brings us to the second element of the phrase at the heart of today’s Gospel passage: that is, the verb “*came*”. The “*word of God came*”. That is to say, the encounter between “*the word of God*” and “*John the son of Zechariah*” is due to the initiative of “*the word of God*”. It’s He who comes to John, not vice versa. This reminds us of a point from the Beloved Disciple’s first epistle: that “*in this is love: not that we have loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son.*”⁹ The encounter between the Word and John the Baptist, based as it is on the initiative of “*the word of God*”, also reminds us of another point from the prologue of *John*. Speaking of the divine Word, the evangelist tells us that “*He came to His own home, and His own people received Him not. But to all who received Him, who believed in His Name, He gave power to become children of God*”.¹⁰ Who are these “*children of God*”?

In the fullness of time, “*the word of God came to*” Mary the daughter of Joachim in the desert of her womb. God chose our Blessed Mother to be the Ark of the Covenant. Within her, the Beloved Disciple tells us, “*the word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” Later, “*the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah*”. Consider these two “*children of God*”, Mary and John the Baptist. Reflect on how *John* says they responded when “*the word of God*” came to them. Mary and John the Baptist “*received Him [and] believed in His Name, [and so] He gave power to become children of God*”.

Here we can reflect on the third element in that phrase at the heart of today’s Gospel passage. As God the Father chose His child Mary to serve Him as the Ark of the Covenant, so He chose His child “*John the son of Zechariah*” to serve Him as the preacher of repentance, and the herald of the Lamb. As Mary’s vocation serves the “*Word made flesh*” as the Ark of the Covenant, so John’s vocation serves the “*Word made flesh*” as His voice, as St. Augustine preaches about so dynamically in the sermon he gave on the feast of the Birth of John the Baptist in the year 407 (and from which we will pray in the Office of Readings next Sunday).¹¹

At the initiative of God, John encounters “*the word of God*”, who appoints him “*in the desert*” to the vocation of preacher of repentance, and herald of the Lamb. Consider, with today’s Gospel passage as a backdrop, how Blessed John Henry Newman encountered the Divine Mercy, and was called by Him to serve His Church in the vocation of preacher and herald.

⁹ 1 John 4:10.

¹⁰ John 1:11-12.

¹¹ St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 293A, in vol. III/11 of *The Works of Saint Augustine*, translation and notes by Edmund Hill, editor John Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 253-263.

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In order to enter into Newman's life, listen and reflect on the following words that he wrote while on a retreat, in a journal he meant to remain private. Consider whether his self-assessment bears any similarity to your own:

"In almost everything I like my own way of acting. I do not want to change the place or business in which I find myself, to undertake the affairs of others, to walk, to go on a journey to visit others, since I prefer to remain at home. I am querulous, timid, lazy, suspicious. I crawl along the ground, feeble, downcast, and despondent."

"I feel acutely that I am no longer young, but that my best years are spent, and I am sad at the thought of the years that have gone by, and I see myself fit for nothing, a useless log."

"I am always languid in the contemplation of divine things, like a man walking with his feet bound together. ... I am held, as it were, by a fetter, by a sort of physical law, so that I cannot be forcible in preaching or speaking, nor fervent in praying and meditating."¹²

Had I read you those words without telling you who had written them, I venture to say that it's unlikely that you would have thought them written by a future Blessed of the Church. But let me ask you this: when—at what point in his life—do you think Newman wrote these words?

In fact, Newman wrote them in 1847, in preparation for his ordination to the Sacred Priesthood. Knowing all we do about his eminence, sanctity and learning, we might shake our heads at Newman's description of himself in terms of so many vices, and in terms of such ineptitude at prayer and preaching. We might shake our heads at Newman writing that his best years are spent, given that he was 46 years old at this time, and would live to the age of 89.

Newman, of course, did not know what lay ahead. However, a great part of his sanctity lay in this very fact: that he never sought to know what lay ahead. His faith in the Divine Mercy of Jesus Christ was rooted in humility, patience, and a profound sense of God's Providential Will. Newman expressed this in what we today consider one of his finest poems/hymns, "Lead, Kindly Light". Though Newman composed this poem in 1833, consider the words of the first verse in terms of what he wrote as he prepared for ordination:

*Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom, / Lead thou me on;
The night is dark, and I am far from home, / Lead thou me on.
Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.*

"Keep thou my feet... one step enough for me." One step was enough for Newman, given the "kindly Light" of Christ. Picture this "kindly Light" in your imagination. Granted our focus on the Divine Mercy in this Holy Year, we might imagine this "kindly Light" as being the rays of red and white light shining forth from the Sacred Heart of the Risen Christ. Are not the words inscribed below the Divine Mercy image what Newman is confessing in this

¹² John Henry Newman, *Autobiographical Writings*, Edited by Henry Tristram (London: Sheed & Ward, 1956), 246, 247-8.

poem: “Jesus, I trust in Thee”? In the second and third verses, is Newman not contrasting his sinful past with the trust that he places presently in the “kindly Light” of the Divine Mercy?

*I was not ever thus, nor prayed that thou / Shouldst lead me on;
I loved to choose and see my path; but now / Lead thou me on.
I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,
Pride ruled my will: remember not past years.*

*So long thy power hath blessed me, sure it still / Will lead me on
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till / The night is gone,
And with the morn those Angel faces smile,
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.*

To summarize John Henry Newman’s experiences of accepting Divine Mercy, one would need to look at both his on-going need for forgiveness as a disciple, and more specifically at the process of his conversion to the Catholic Faith. Whole books have been written about Newman’s process of conversion to the Faith, so it would be foolish to try to sum it up during a Holy Hour. But it might be helpful to point out a comparison between John the Baptist and John Henry Newman.

Specifically, we could turn back to that encounter at the heart of today’s Gospel passage, and ask how that encounter echoed in Newman’s life. When we hear that “**the word of God came to John... in the desert**”, what echo sounds in Newman’s life and the vocation to which God called him?

We might hear that echo through the fourth and final element of that Scripture phrase at the heart of today’s Gospel: “**in the desert**”. The Literal (historical) Sense of that phrase is clear enough to those who have visited the Holy Land, or are familiar by study with its terrain. But in the Spiritual Senses of this scripture, especially in their echo in Newman’s life, what does “**in the desert**” signify?

Put extremely simply, the three Spiritual Senses of Sacred Scripture focus on the health of the human soul, on that soul’s relationship with Christ and His Church, and on that soul’s destiny in Heaven. The common technical names for these three Spiritual Senses are the moral, the allegorical, and the anagogical.¹³ So then, what might the phrase “**in the desert**” signify through these three Spiritual Senses about Newman’s life?

Newman describes a moral desert in his life in the lines of “Lead, Kindly Light”: “*I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears, / Pride ruled my will: remember not past years.*” Yet out of this desert Newman emerged by following the light of Divine Mercy, one step at a time. Newman speaks here to emerging out of the darkness which shrouds the Season of Advent: “*The night is gone, / And with the morn those Angel faces smile, / Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.*”

Newman also describes a desert in his life as He strides towards Heaven, to which the Anagogical Sense refers. This is what he speaks to in the first verse of “Lead, Kindly Light”. We could call this “the desert of faith”, similar to what St. John of the Cross calls “the dark night of faith”. That phrase of the Carmelite reformer is part and parcel, in fact, of the first verse when it’s considered in terms of the disciple’s life of faith as a pilgrim journeying towards Heaven: “*Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom, / Lead thou me on; / The night is dark, and I am far from home, / Lead thou me on.*” Faith is a light, but one that requires that its bearer keep very close to it. Faith is not like turning on the switch to stadium lights that

¹³ Catechism of the Catholic Church 117.

flood everything surrounding one, but rather is like lighting a candle that one must bear with one's hands and even shield, lest it be blown out. But this light of faith also calls for our dependence upon it, as Newman says at the end of the first verse: "Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see / The distant scene; one step enough for me.

Finally, then, there is the Allegorical Sense of "*the desert*" where "*the word of God [comes] to John*" in today's Gospel passage. This perhaps is the richest spiritual sense of a "*desert*" in John Henry Newman's life. The Allegorical Sense relates the literal truths of Scripture to the life of Christ and the members of His Mystical Body, the Church. Where, then, did Newman experience a desert as a member of Christ's Body?

The 89 years of Newman's life on this earth were fairly evenly divided by his entrance into the Catholic Church at the age of 44. For the sake of time, we'll look only at the first half of his life. Although he was baptized an Anglican a month and a half after his birth, at the age of fifteen he had a profound experience of the Lord's presence by which he committed himself to Christ with an Evangelical faith influenced doctrinally by British Calvinism. But at Oxford at the age of 24 he was ordained an Anglican priest. In Newman's early adulthood, Oxford and Anglicanism were bound together.

At Oxford, Newman served as scholar, chaplain, and tutor. He approached these roles from the viewpoint of faith. He and the provost of his college, Oriel College, had a row—at least, as fierce a row as two English gentlemen can get into—because Newman insisted that his role as tutor included the care for the souls of his pupils. The provost insisted that faith and reason must be separated. This was only one example of Newman's struggle to bring faith into arenas that others wanted to remain spiritual deserts.

Within Newman's early adulthood, perhaps the clearest example of a desert that he experienced within the Church was his labors on behalf of the Oxford Movement. When Newman published Tract XC, he undoubtedly thought it the crowning of his work in the Oxford Movement. He argued in Tract XC that the Thirty-Nine Articles that lay at the heart of Anglicanism were utterly compatible doctrinally with the canons of the Council of Trent. But instead of acclaim, Tract XC brought Newman condemnation from Anglican bishops and heads of Oxford houses. As Newman later put it, he was after this "on his deathbed as regards membership with" Anglicanism. He retreated into a "desert", we might say, in seclusion within a semi-monastic setting. He did not know what lay ahead, but he persevered for four years in this desert, ending with his entrance into the Catholic Church. "Four years" is a simple phrase to speak, but it's an intensely hot and dry desert to live within when your life as you've known it has come to an end.

As you no doubt know, Cardinal Newman's epitaph is *Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*, which may be translated into English as "from the shadows and imaginations into truth". These "shadows" that his epitaph speaks of might also be called "deserts". They consist in shadows that darken the life of every disciple, and some that were unique to Newman. They consist in deserts that every disciple must journey through, and some that were unique to Newman's place within salvation history, which is to say, divine Providence. Every disciple of Jesus is called to the role of prophet, and some disciples are called to a vocation that leads them to a classroom or sanctuary pulpit. May the intercession of St. John the Baptist and Blessed John Henry Newman lead us to greater holiness and fidelity to our own places within divine Providence.

from Sermon 1. *Holiness Necessary for Future Blessedness,*
in Vol. I of *Parochial and Plain Sermons* by John Henry Newman

“Holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.” [Hebrews xii. 14.]

IN THIS TEXT IT HAS SEEMED GOOD TO THE HOLY SPIRIT to convey a chief truth of religion in a few words. It is this circumstance which makes it especially impressive; for the truth itself is declared in one form or other in every part of Scripture. It is told us again and again, that to make sinful creatures holy was the great end which our Lord had in view in taking upon Him our nature, and thus none but the holy will be accepted for His sake at the last day. The whole history of redemption, the covenant of mercy in all its parts and provisions, attests the necessity of holiness in order to salvation; as indeed even our natural conscience bears witness also. But in the text what is elsewhere implied in history, and enjoined by precept, is stated doctrinally, as a momentous and necessary fact, the result of some awful irreversible law in the nature of things, and the inscrutable determination of the Divine Will.

NOW SOME ONE MAY ASK, “Why is it that holiness is a necessary qualification for our being received into heaven? why is it that the Bible enjoins upon us so strictly to love, fear, and obey God, to be just, honest, meek, pure in heart, forgiving, heavenly-minded, self-denying, humble, and resigned? Man is confessedly weak and corrupt; why then is he enjoined to be so religious, so unearthly? why is he required (in the strong language of Scripture) to become ‘a new creature’? Since he is by nature what he is, would it not be an act of greater mercy in God to save him altogether without this holiness, which it is so difficult, yet (as it appears) so necessary for him to possess?” ...

I ANSWER AS FOLLOWS: That, even supposing a man of unholy life were suffered to enter heaven, he would not be happy there; so that it would be no mercy to permit him to enter.

WE ARE APT TO DECEIVE OURSELVES, and to consider heaven a place like this earth; I mean, a place where every one may choose and take his own pleasure. We see that in this world, active men have their own enjoyments, and domestic men have theirs; men of literature, of science, of political talent, have their respective pursuits and pleasures. Hence we are led to act as if it will be the same in another world. The only difference we put between this world and the next, is that here, (as we know well,) men are not always sure, but there, we suppose they will be always sure, of obtaining what they seek after. And accordingly we conclude, that any man, whatever his habits, tastes, or manner of life, if once admitted into heaven, would be happy there. ...

BUT AN OPINION LIKE THIS, though commonly acted on, is refuted as soon as put into words. For heaven, it is plain from Scripture, is not a place where many different and discordant pursuits can be carried on at once, as is the case in this world. Here every man can do his own pleasure, but there he must do God’s pleasure. ... Still so far we are distinctly told, that that future life will be spent in God’s presence, in a sense which does not apply to our present life; so that it may be best described as an endless and uninterrupted worship of the Eternal Father, Son, and Spirit. “They serve Him day and night in His temple, and He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them ... The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters.” ... [Rev. vii. 15, 17] ...

HEAVEN THEN IS NOT LIKE THIS WORLD; I will say what it is much more like,—a church. For in a place of public worship no language of this world is heard; there are no schemes brought forward for temporal objects, great or small; no information how to strengthen our worldly interests, extend our influence, or establish our credit. These things indeed may be right in their way, so that we do not set our hearts upon them; still (I repeat), it is certain that we hear nothing of them in a church. Here we hear solely and entirely of God. We praise Him, worship Him, sing to Him, thank Him, confess to Him, give ourselves up to Him, and ask His blessing. And therefore, a church is like heaven; viz. because both in the one and the other, there is one single sovereign subject—religion—brought before us.

The Third Sunday of Advent [C]

Luke 3:10-18

December 13, 2015

“Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ.”

Helena Kowalska was born in Poland on August 25, 1905. At the age of 19, while with her sister at a dance in a park, Helena had a vision of Christ suffering. Later the same day, He told her—with no other words of explanation—that she should leave immediately for Warsaw and join a convent.

Helena took Jesus at His word, but despite several weeks of approaching different convents in Warsaw asking permission to enter, she was refused by all of them. Finally, she was conditionally accepted by the superior of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy. In April 1926 at the age of 20, she received her habit and took the name “Sister Maria Faustina of the Blessed Sacrament”.

In April 1928, she took her first vows. She died ten years and some six months later, on October 5, 1938, at the age of 33. Her death occurred just 77 years ago. Since then, largely because of the efforts of St. John Paul the Great, the mission to which she was called by the suffering Jesus had spread throughout the world, and the importance of the message of Divine Mercy has been seen in sharper relief. How did the Lord use Sister Faustina’s life as His instrument during those ten and a half years between her first vows and her earthly death? How does the Lord take up His saints as instruments in His Providential Hand? Today’s Gospel passage can help us to see how.

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“**Expectation**” is a word that sums up Advent well, combining as it does the elements of waiting and hopefulness, not to mention the fact that in English, the word “expecting” is related to the experience of pregnancy. However, “**the people**” in today’s Gospel passage were not just “in expectation” of “**the Christ**”, but in fact “**were filled with expectation**”.

On the other hand, we need to recognize that there is also something out of kilter in this passage, given that the “**expectation**” of “**the people**” was actually focused on John the Baptist. They “**were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ.**” This is a little bittersweet, since we know that the expectation of the people, and the hope of their hearts, is misplaced. John is not the Christ for whom they longed.

To craft a frame within which to view Saint Faustina’s profile in mercy, linger on this false expectation of the people in today’s Gospel passage. We’ll ask the great Doctor, St. Augustine of Hippo, for his help in meditating on this mis-step of “**the people**”. Specifically, we want to ask: why does St. Luke the Evangelist include this scene in his Gospel account, and why does Holy Mother Church include this passage in the Missal for Gaudete Sunday? Is it so that we might witness St. John the Baptist’s humility, or his profession of who the Christ truly is? Or does the false expectation of “**the people**” in hoping that “**John might be the Christ**” hold something more for us to learn?

As mentioned in last Sunday’s conference, in today’s Office of Readings the patristic reading comes from St. Augustine. The sermon from which this *lectio* is taken was preached by him on June 24, the feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist, in the year 407. In a phrase, the focus of this sermon is the relationship between John the Baptist and the Christ. As

such, their relationship is echoed in the life of Sister Faustina. Both St. John the Baptist and St. Faustina model for us how to be bearers of Divine Mercy.

St. Augustine affirms that John came to “show the way of humility, so that human pretensions might diminish, [and] the glory of God increase.”¹⁴ During Advent we prepare to celebrate the initial epiphany of the Incarnation by reflecting on God’s “divine condescension”. We reflect on the infinite God becoming a helpless infant. St. John the Baptist calls us to reflect on the fact that our responsibility is to diminish ourselves. In the Incarnation, God empties Himself out into sinful humanity for us men and for our salvation. But we, in our discipleship, empty ourselves to make room to receive our salvation.

Certainly John the Baptist was a humble man. This very likely contributed to the mis-step of “*the people*” “*asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ.*” The people would have expected the Christ to be humble. But they mistook the humility of penance for the humility of divine condescension. Augustine takes from the Gospel account of John the imagery of a bridegroom and his “best man”, as we would say. Augustine declares: “far be it from the [bridegroom’s] friend... to wish to be loved [by the bride] instead of [the groom]. [John] confessed that he was not what in fact he was not, in order not to lose what he was.”¹⁵

What was he? John was chosen by the Word to be His voice. The section of Augustine’s sermon found in today’s Office of Readings focuses on this relationship between Jesus and John as being the relationship between the Word and a voice. Given that you’ve already prayed this passage this morning,¹⁶ there are two points from Augustine’s discussion about this relationship to stress in order to set the stage for St. Faustina’s profile in mercy.

First is that the divine Word chooses a human voice distinct from His own. After all, St. John the Evangelist tells us that this “*Word became flesh and dwelt among us*”. So if this divine Word took to Himself a human nature in the Incarnation, why could the Word made flesh not have used His own human voice? Why did the Word made flesh recruit the human voice of another, when He possessed His own human voice?

Did the voice with which John preached repentance differ completely from Jesus’ own human voice? Did Jesus in His earthly ministry never preach repentance? No one could argue that He never preached repentance: the four Gospel accounts bear ample examples of the Word made flesh preaching repentance, and extending this particular mission of preaching repentance to His disciples. Consider just a few examples.

In the very first chapter of the *Gospel according to Mark*, “*after John was arrested, Jesus*” declared: “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel.*”¹⁷ In the ninth chapter of *Matthew* Jesus, after calling the tax-collector Matthew to follow Him, puts the vocation of Matthew into context by declaring: “*I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*”¹⁸ In the account of the Last Supper, the *Gospel according to John* records Jesus’ testimony about His own words and works as they relate to sin: “*If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father.*”¹⁹

¹⁴ St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 293A, in vol. III/11 of *The Works of Saint Augustine*, translation and notes by Edmund Hill, editor John Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 254.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁶ *The Liturgy of the Hours*, Vol. I (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 1975), 261-2.

¹⁷ *Mark 1:14,15.*

¹⁸ *Matthew 9:13.*

¹⁹ *John 15:22-24.*

But we see throughout the Gospel that while the Word made flesh does use His own human voice to preach repentance, He also calls others to do the same. In the last chapter of the *Gospel according to Luke*, before His Ascension the Risen Lord commissions the Apostles in accord with the Old Testament when He declares: **“Thus it is written... that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in [the Christ’s] name to all nations”**.²⁰

Repentance lies at the heart of God’s message for fallen man, from the Old Testament, through the Gospel, to the work of the Church until the end of the age. As the Messiah was foretold through the prophets of the Old Testament, so He calls prophets within the Church to continue preaching the message of repentance. Some preach this message from pulpits; some in the classroom; some in the confessional; some in the marketplace. But all preach repentance in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that the Christ may enter the heart of a penitent.

The Word made Flesh calls members of His Body to serve Him in the role of prophet, so that His Good News might spread to **“all nations”** unto **“the end of the age”**. So was Helena Kowalska called during the twentieth century. So was John the Baptist called at the horizon of the Son’s advent into this fallen world.

Second, granted that the Word made Flesh calls disciples to serve as the voice of repentance in specific ways, St. Augustine in his sermon points out that the voice diminishes to nothingness as the Word grows. All four Gospel accounts note this about John the Baptist; the life of St. Faustina gives witness to this truth; and the life of each of us as a disciple ought to bear that same witness. What points does St. Augustine make in this regard?

Augustine uses a simple example from human discourse. You’ll be able to relate this to the experience of teaching in the classroom. Here is what he explains to the assembly listening to his sermon about him speaking to them the single word “God”:

“... first I conceived in my mind what I would say, then this single syllable made a sound and passed away. What I conceived in my mind didn’t pass away with it, surely? [From your perspective as a listener], when I said ‘God,’ it came about in your mind that you should think [of] God. It came first in my mind for me to say it, and the thought of God was produced in your mind when you heard this one syllable. This one syllable performed its service and passed away.

“So then, brothers and sisters, the service of the man John was going to pass away like a voice.”²¹

Speaking from my own experience, I cannot remember which of my grade school teachers taught me what two times five equals. Nor I can remember which teacher taught me how to spell the word “remember”, nor which teacher taught me who the second president of the United States was. But I do remember that two times five equals ten, and how to spell “remember”, and that the second president was John Adams. Of course, strictly speaking, I don’t need to remember who taught me which lessons: the point of the lesson was to learn the truths being taught, not the teachers. The teachers may well diminish out of memory completely, while the lessons that they taught always remain.

²⁰ Luke 24:46,47.

²¹ St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 293A, 258.

However, in a Christian classroom—whether in a school building or in a home—what’s remembered about a good teacher is the love which motivated her teaching. Perhaps that’s an even more important reality for every student to learn. St. Faustina will have more to show us about this point.

Anyhow, in addition to Augustine noting how a voice by its nature is transitory, he points out how the diminishment of the voice serves the growth of the Word within a disciple. He explains that:

“the more progress we make in God, so much the more do voices diminish, and the Word grow in us. ... there is going to be a time when we shall see the Word as He is seen by the angels, and there will be no need of voices. ... it’s because the more we make progress toward understanding the less need there will be for voices... John himself said, “***He must grow, while I must diminish***” (Jn 3:30). ... The Word itself, after all, doesn’t grow, but it’s we who grow in Him, we who make progress in Him, we who increase in Him, until we no longer find voices necessary.”²²

Here is the end—the goal and purpose—of the voice that speaks the divine Word: the transformation and growth of the Christian soul in the Word.

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Saint John Paul II, when he canonized Sister Faustina as the first saint of the third millennium, referred in his homily back to the historical setting within which the Divine Mercy spoke to Sr. Faustina. He noted that “it was between the First and Second World Wars that Christ entrusted His message of mercy to her.” St. John Paul continued: “Those who remember, who were witnesses and participants in the events of those years and the horrible sufferings they caused for millions of people, know well how necessary was the message of mercy.”²³

However, after situating the historical context in which the message of Divine Mercy was given to mankind, St. John Paul in that homily looked to the future. He promulgated his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, written less than five months after his election, in the year 1979. However, despite being more than twenty years out from the dawn of the new century and millennium, he referred specifically to the Jubilee that would be celebrated in the Holy Year 2000, insisting that:

“[w]e are already approaching that date, which... will recall and reawaken in us in a special way our awareness of the key truth of faith which Saint John expressed at the beginning of his Gospel: ‘***The Word became flesh and dwelt among us***’ [Jn 1:14], and elsewhere: ‘***God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life***’ [Jn 3:16].”²⁴

In that Scripture verse familiar even to those outside the Faith—namely, John 3:16—Pope John Paul II looked forward to the Jubilee focusing on the message of Divine Mercy, and perhaps privately, at the beginning of his pontificate even then hoped for the possibility of canonizing Sister Faustina during that Jubilee Year.

²² Ibid., 259.

²³ St. John Paul II, Homily for the Canonization of Sr. M. Faustina Kowalska [20 Apr 2000], 2, ¶3.

²⁴ St. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* [4 Mar 1979], I. 1.

In the days when He walked this earth, Jesus declared John the Baptist to be Elijah.²⁵ Likewise, Jesus spoke to Sister Mary Faustina as “Secretary of My most profound mystery”: this mystery being the Divine Mercy of His Sacred Heart.²⁶ As John the Baptist was the voice of the divine Word, so St. Faustina was the secretary of this Word made Flesh, pierced for our salvation.

Certainly like St. John the Baptist, St. Faustina grew smaller as her ten years as a consecrated religious unfolded. Even immediately after her call to religious life by the Lord Jesus, she experienced suffering in pursuing fidelity to what He asked of her. During her search throughout Warsaw for a convent to enter, she was told at one of them—no doubt by an extern—that they didn’t accept maids. Throughout her decade as a consecrated religious, Sister Faustina worked simply as a cook, gardener and porter when not serving the Lord as His secretary. During her final years she was consumed by the agonies produced by tuberculosis. But none of the sufferings of her life diverted her attention and zeal from the Lord’s calling.

As a consecrated religious, Sister Faustina experienced many extraordinary gifts, such as visions, hidden stigmata, bilocation, and the reading of human souls. But such gifts, which in theology are called *gratiae gratis datae*, are always given for the sake of others rather than for oneself,²⁷ and are not as excellent as sanctifying grace.²⁸ Although Sister Faustina had only a fourth-grade education, her words were in accord with the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas when she wrote in her diary: “Neither graces, nor revelations, not raptures, not gifts granted to a soul make it perfect, but rather the intimate union of the soul with God. These gifts are merely ornaments of the soul, but constitute neither its essence nor its perfection.”²⁹

Sister Mary Faustina Kowalska became a saint because of the sanctifying grace that God bestowed and with which she co-operated. She became a saint because of “the intimate union of [her] soul with God.” Nonetheless, this sanctifying grace disposed her to accept the particular vocation to be God’s voice as the secretary of His Divine Mercy. Each of us as a Christian is called in one manner or another to serve Him and His People in a role of prophecy. But in each of our lives, also, those gratuitous graces that God may give us for the sake of others can only stand if they’re rooted in the sanctifying grace that establishes “the intimate union of the soul with God.” The profile in mercy of next Sunday’s saint will help us explore this “intimate union” more closely.

²⁵ Cf. **Matthew 11:11-15**.

²⁶ St. M. Faustina Kowalska, *Diary*, 1693.

²⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 111, 1, *respondeo: gratia gratis data* “is bestowed on a man, not to justify him, but rather that he may cooperate in the justification of another”. This “gratuitous grace” “is bestowed on a man beyond the capability of nature, and beyond the merit of the” recipient. By contrast, by “sanctifying grace”—*gratia gratum faciens*—man is justified, and immediately united to God.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, I-II, 111, 5.

²⁹ St. M. Faustina Kowalska, *Diary*, 1107.

from *Redemptor Hominis*, Encyclical of Pope St. John Paul II (4 March 1979)

I. INHERITANCE

1. At the close of the second Millennium

THE REDEEMER OF MAN, Jesus Christ, is the center of the universe and of history. To him go my thoughts and my heart in this solemn moment of the world that the Church and the whole family of present-day humanity are now living. In fact, this time, in which God in his hidden design has entrusted to me, after my beloved Predecessor John Paul I, the universal service connected with the Chair of Saint Peter in Rome, is already very close to the year 2000. At this moment it is difficult to say what mark that year will leave on the face of human history or what it will bring to each people, nation, country and continent, in spite of the efforts already being made to foresee some events. For the Church, the People of God spread, although unevenly, to the most distant limits of the earth, it will be the year of a great Jubilee. We are already approaching that date, which, without prejudice to all the corrections imposed by chronological exactitude, will recall and reawaken in us in a special way our awareness of the key truth of faith which Saint John expressed at the beginning of his Gospel: *“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us”*¹, and elsewhere: *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”*².

We also are in a certain way in a season of a new Advent, a season of expectation: *“In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...”*³, by the Son, his Word, who became man and was born of the Virgin Mary. This act of redemption marked the high point of the history of man within God’s loving plan. God entered the history of humanity and, as a man, became an actor in that history, one of the thousands of millions of human beings but at the same time Unique! Through the Incarnation God gave human life the dimension that he intended man to have from his first beginning; he has granted that dimension definitively-in the way that is peculiar to him alone, in keeping with his eternal love and mercy, with the full freedom of God-and he has granted it also with the bounty that enables us, in considering the original sin and the whole history of the sins of humanity, and in considering the errors of the human intellect, will and heart, to repeat with amazement the words of the Sacred Liturgy: *“O happy fault... which gained us so great a Redeemer!”*⁴

II. THE MYSTERY OF THE REDEMPTION

7. Within the Mystery of Christ

While the ways on which the Council of this century has set the Church going, ways indicated by the late Pope Paul VI in his first Encyclical, will continue to be for a long time the ways that all of us must follow, we can at the same time rightly ask at this new stage: How, in what manner should we continue? What should we do, in order that this new advent of the Church connected with the approaching end of the second millennium may bring us closer to him whom Sacred Scripture calls *“Everlasting Father”*, *Pater futuri sæculi*?²¹ This is the fundamental question that the new Pope must put to himself on accepting in a spirit of obedience in faith the call corresponding to the command that Christ gave Peter several times: *“Feed my lambs”*²², meaning: Be the shepherd of my sheepfold, and again: *“And when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren”*²³.

To this question, dear Brothers, sons and daughters, a fundamental and essential response must be given. Our response must be: Our spirit is set in one direction, the only direction for our intellect, will and heart is-towards Christ our Redeemer, towards Christ, the Redeemer of man. We wish to look towards him-because there is salvation in no one else but him, the Son of God repeating what Peter said: *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”*²⁴.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent [C]

Luke 1:39-45

December 20, 2015

“Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice....”

EACH ADVENT, HOLY MOTHER CHURCH SETS BEFORE US TWO SAINTS FOR OUR REFLECTION, FOR US TO PRAY TO, AND FOR US TO EMULATE. Certainly there are other saints who also figure into the Gospel passages that we hear during Advent. Certainly there are other saints who can help us prepare for the birth of Christ. But the two saints whom the Church sets squarely before us during Advent are the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saint John the Baptist.

Holy Mother Church divides her liturgical season of Advent into two parts. Roughly speaking, the first part focuses on St. John the Baptist as the precursor of the Lord who is to come. John is the voice of the One who is God’s own Word.

In the latter part of Advent, from December 17 onwards, the Church focuses our attention on the Blessed Virgin Mary as the bearer of the Lord who has come, but who still is hidden in her virginal womb. In the late days of Advent, Jesus is with us within Mary. But He is still to appear at His birth: the first of the great messianic epiphanies. As you know, in the Eastern Churches and the Eastern rites of the Catholic Church, January 6th is celebrated with much greater fervor than December 25th. The entire season of Christmas is celebrated as a series of epiphanies of the Christ within the world of fallen man, of which the Nativity is only the first epiphany.

The Gospel passage, then, on this final Sunday of Advent is an anticipation of the Epiphany of December 25th. Although the Christ Child is not seen—is not *“manifested in the flesh”*,³⁰ to use the phrase of St. Paul in his first letter to Timothy—the Gospel narrative today centers on the Person of the unborn Jesus, and the encounter that He brings about. **REFLECT MORE CLOSELY, THEN, ON THIS ENCOUNTER OF THE VISITATION, AND SPECIFICALLY ON THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AS THEOTOKOS, TO PREPARE US FOR THE PROFILE IN MERCY OF SAINT TERESA OF JESUS.**

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THE JOYFUL MYSTERY OF THE VISITATION IS AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN FOUR PERSONS: TWO MOTHERS AND THEIR UNBORN CHILDREN. There are many ways in which we might look at this scene as a diptych, with each of the two panels presenting a mother and unborn son. In looking at these two panels together, we see both similarities and contrasts. For example, the elderly Elizabeth and her son John the Baptist represent the Old Covenant, while the youthful Mary and her son Jesus represent the New. Mary conceived as a virgin, while Elizabeth conceived naturally. And so on.

Without denying the importance of these similarities and contrasts, we also need to reflect on this scene as being asymmetrical. Everything is directed towards Jesus in a linear manner: from Elizabeth, to John, to Mary, to Jesus. A similar asymmetry is seen in the Gospel passages that recount John the Baptist’s ministry. John and Jesus as adults mirror each other in some ways, but there are also sharp contrasts, and these contrasts are understood finally because John is pointing towards Jesus. John is preparing the way for Jesus. John is the voice of Jesus the divine Word.

However, while Jesus is the focus of today’s Gospel passage, He is never referred to by name. He is spoken of in two ways, both times by Elizabeth, in consecutive sentences. St. Luke the Evangelist writes that *“Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?’”* What is the evangelist highlighting here?

CONSIDER THAT IN THESE TWO SENTENCES, THE EVANGELIST PAINTS AN IMAGE OF ELIZABETH THAT REFLECTS HER RELATIONSHIP WITH MARY, EVEN AS THAT RELATIONSHIP

³⁰ 1 Timothy 3:16.

POINTS TOWARDS JESUS. In this, Elizabeth symbolizes each of us who search for God. The evangelist tells us that “*Elizabeth [is] filled with the Holy Spirit*”. This statement echoes Gabriel’s salutation to Mary at the Annunciation, when he addresses her by proclaiming: “*Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!*” But the evangelist, having described Elizabeth as being “*filled with the Holy Spirit*”, immediately tells us that she “*cried out in a loud voice*”, echoing the role of her son John as the voice of the divine Word: as if Elizabeth is the voice for the unborn voice of the unborn Messiah.

“*Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice*”. What did she cry in this “*loud voice*”? She makes a declaration, and then asks a question. First, she cries out to the *Theotokos*, “*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*” Elizabeth unites Mary and Jesus in describing both of them as “*blessed*”, and unites them in calling Jesus “*the fruit of your womb*”, speaking of Jesus here in regard to His humanity. But then Elizabeth asks, “*how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?*” Elizabeth again unites Mary and Jesus in the phrase “*the mother of my Lord*”: she speaks of Jesus here in regard to His divinity, and in this becomes the first person to call Mary the Mother of God. **IT’S IMPORTANT HERE TO NOTE THAT AS ELIZABETH DIRECTS OUR ATTENTION TO MARY AS THE FIRST AND BEST DISCIPLE OF JESUS, SO MARY SYMBOLIZES ALL THAT SAINT TERESA TEACHES IN HER LIFE AND DOCTRINE ABOUT UNION WITH GOD IN PRAYER.**

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IN 1970, POPE PAUL VI NAMED ST. TERESA ONE OF THE FIRST TWO WOMEN DOCTORS OF THE CHURCH. St. Teresa’s doctrine was strongly influenced by the life and ministry of her fellow reformer, St. John of the Cross. But conversely, one could speak of the influence of Teresa upon John. There are few examples of two Doctors of the Church who not only lived at the same time, but whose lives profoundly influenced each other. The few examples that exist, however, are striking: St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory Nazianzen; St. Ambrose and St. Augustine; St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross. There are many works that one can explore in order to gain insight into how the lives and doctrines of John and Teresa complemented each other. In the field of English-language works of the 20th century, the two greatest authors on this topic are Professor E. Allison Peers and Fr. Thomas Dubay.³¹ Nonetheless, without wanting to minimize the debt that St. Teresa owed to St. John of the Cross, let’s focus more closely on the life and doctrine of St. Teresa herself.

Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada was—according to her own autobiography—just under twelve years old when her mother died. Teresa notes there: “When I began to understand my loss, I went in my affliction to an image of our Lady, and with many tears implored her to be my mother. I did this in my simplicity, and I believe that it was of service to me; for I have by experience found the royal Virgin [to] help me whenever I recommended myself to her; and at last she has brought me back to herself.”³² Here Teresa seems to foreshadow the development of her own spiritual life, and her doctrine on the spiritual life, as an imitation of Our Lady.

HOWEVER, AFTER ENTERING A CARMELITE CONVENT AT THE AGE OF TWENTY, THE NEXT TWENTY YEARS OF TERESA’S LIFE WERE FILLED WITH MANY TYPES OF PHYSICAL ILLNESS AND SPIRITUAL MEDIOCRITY. Consider first her moral and spiritual failures. In Chapter VIII of her autobiography, Teresa writes regarding her sinfulness that:

“It is not without reason that I have dwelt so long on this portion of my life. I see clearly that it will give no one pleasure to see anything so base; and certainly I wish those who may read this to have me in abhorrence, as a soul so obstinate and so ungrateful to Him Who did so much for me. ... I passed nearly twenty years on this stormy sea, falling and rising, but rising to no good purpose, seeing that I went and fell again. My life was one of perfection; but it was so mean, that I scarcely made any account whatever of venial sins; and though of mortal sins I was afraid, I was not so afraid of them as I ought to have been, because I did not avoid the perilous occasions

³¹ See, for example, *Handbook to the Life and Times of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross* by E. Allison Peers (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1954), and *Fire Within* by Fr. Thomas Dubay, S.M. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).

³² St. Teresa of Jesus, *The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus*, in Volume One of *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1987), Chapter I, 7.

of them. I may say that it was the most painful life that can be imagined, because I had no sweetness in God, and no pleasure in the world.”³³

This passage from Teresa’s autobiography captures much of what makes her one of the most compelling of the Doctors of the Church: she is brutally and candidly honest about herself and her failures, but is so with a warmth that comes from appreciating God’s mercy towards her. Her honesty and warmth make her imminently sympathetic, much like Saint Augustine of Hippo.

In addition to the moral and spiritual weaknesses which she focuses upon in much of the first part of her autobiography, she also recounts there her many physical weaknesses and illnesses. To give a few examples: she suffered a “serious illness” in her teens that forced her to leave her boarding school.³⁴ After only three years in the convent, she had to leave the dwelling of the convent to recuperate.³⁵ At the age of 24, on the Solemnity of the Assumption, she suffered an attack of catalepsy,³⁶ which left her helpless for “more than eight months”.³⁷ The attack was so severe, in fact, that for “about four days” she was thought to be at death’s door: a grave was dug for her, and the Friars of her Order began “funeral solemnities”.³⁸ She suffered paralysis persistently for a further year, and then intermittently for twelve more years.³⁹ All of this is quite a catalog of physical suffering and infirmities, and someone not striving for holiness might have looked upon those maladies as a waste of her life. But Teresa’s striving for holiness included every suffering that she experienced.

One of the abiding fruits of this time of great illness was a personal devotion to Saint Joseph, who holds a close relationship with the Person of Divine Mercy. In her autobiography St. Teresa speaks in five paragraphs of this devotion, and commends it to others.⁴⁰ She explains that to “other Saints, our Lord seems to have given grace to succour men in some special necessity; but to this glorious Saint, I know by experience, to help us in all: and our Lord would have us understand that as He was Himself subject to him upon earth—for St. Joseph having the title of father, and being His guardian, could command Him—so now in heaven He performs all his petitions.”⁴¹

Throughout the chapters of her autobiography where she recounts her many illnesses, Teresa recognizes the Hand of the Lord Himself amidst her moral and spiritual sickness. She states:

“The reason, then, of my telling this at so great a length is that ... the mercy of God and my ingratitude, on the one hand, may become known; and, on the other, that men may understand how great is the good which God works in a soul when He gives it a disposition to pray in earnest, though it may not be so well prepared as it ought to be. If that soul perseveres in spite of sins, temptations, and relapses, brought about in a thousand ways by Satan, our Lord will bring [the soul] at last—I am certain of it—to the harbour of salvation...”⁴²

We might consider this to be St. Teresa’s spiritual biography summarized in just two sentences. Likewise, it might serve as a blueprint for the spiritual direction that she gave to others through her words and actions, and specifically in her reform of the Carmel. It’s a simple, two-fold blueprint. There are simply, Teresa tells us, “the mercy of God and my ingratitude”. God’s divine mercy, and my human sins. The two meet in the Person of the Divine Mercy, who through His divine and human natures brings God’s grace and our sins into one. The human sinner need merely to persevere in opening one’s heart, mind and soul. **LISTEN AGAIN TO TERESA’S WORDS AND IMAGINE THAT**

³³ *Ibid.*, Chapter VIII, 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Chapter III, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter IV, 6-8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Chapter V, 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Chapter VI, 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Chapter V, 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Chapter VII, 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Chapter VI, 9-13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Chapter VI, 9.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Chapter VIII, 5.

SHE'S SPEAKING OF YOUR SOUL IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION: "how great is the good which God works in a soul when He gives it a disposition to pray in earnest, though it may not be so well prepared as it ought to be. If that soul perseveres in spite of sins, temptations, and relapses, brought about in a thousand ways by Satan, our Lord will bring [the soul] at last—I am certain of it—to the harbour of salvation...."

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St. Teresa's doctrine about the spiritual life is found in the latter parts of her autobiography, in her book titled *The Way of Perfection*, and in her masterpiece, *The Interior Castle*. It's not possible in a brief period of time to summarize her teachings on difficulties in the first stages of prayer, and on the spiritual development that leads finally to contemplation. Nonetheless, consider the union that she describes in the four chapters of "the seventh dwelling places", which is the conclusion of *The Interior Castle*. **WE ARE MOVING HERE OUTSIDE OF TERESA'S "PROFILE IN MERCY" AND INTO THE UNION THAT MERCY EXISTS FOR THE SAKE OF.** In doing so, we're not only concluding today's consideration of Saint Teresa of Jesus, but also the Advent series of spiritual conferences by reminding ourselves of where all our own efforts and perseverance in the spiritual life are meant to lead us.

St. Teresa speaks throughout *The Interior Castle* about different ways in which God brings about union between Himself and the Christian soul: for example, the "Prayer of Union",⁴³ and spiritual "espousal" (also called spiritual "betrothal").⁴⁴ **BUT ONLY IN DISCUSSING THE SEVENTH DWELLING PLACES DOES ST. TERESA DISCUSS WHAT SHE CALLS "SPIRITUAL MARRIAGE" AS THE CULMINATION OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE ON EARTH.** Most of her discourse about spiritual marriage occurs in the first and second of these four chapters of the seventh dwelling places, with a single mention of spiritual marriage in the fourth chapter, which is the final chapter of the entire work of *The Interior Castle*.

As we consider St. Teresa's doctrine about spiritual marriage, remember today's Gospel passage. Consider that linear dynamic of the four persons in this scene, where Elizabeth draws our attention through John to Mary, and through Mary, to Jesus. Without exploring here all the parallels that we might trace between, on the one hand, St. Teresa's doctrine on ascending forms of union in prayer, and on the other hand, the dynamic of these four persons in today's Gospel passage, focus on the union between Mary and Jesus.

The "spiritual marriage" of the Christian soul with God in advanced prayer echoes the union of Mary and Jesus. St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Commentary on John* notes that in "the mystical sense, marriage signifies the union of Christ with his Church.... And this marriage was begun in the womb of the Virgin, when God the Father united a human nature to His Son in a unity of person."⁴⁵ And in that same paragraph, St. Thomas quotes *Revelation 19:9*, which the priest proclaims at Holy Mass just moments before Holy Communion, with the exception of one word. *Revelation 19:9* reads: "**Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb.**" Why is it that the word "marriage" is left out of the text that the priest proclaims before the reception of the Eucharist? In any case, St. Thomas notes the connection between marriage and the Incarnation, which echoes in the union to which the Christian is called in prayer.

Elsewhere in his writings, though, St. Thomas wrestles with a problem that arises from considering the Incarnation as a type of marriage. After all, marriage by definition is between two persons exchanging consent. But in the Incarnation that took place at the Annunciation, the divine Person of the Son has united to Him not a human person, but a human nature. That may seem like a technicality that doesn't blur much the reasons for considering the Incarnation as a type of marriage. But St. Thomas is a very careful thinker: he knows that ideas have consequences, for good and ill. So Saint Thomas proposes the Incarnation as a type of marriage based upon two persons exchanging

⁴³ St. Teresa first speaks in *The Interior Castle* of the "Prayer of Union" in Chapter II of the Fifth Dwelling Places.

⁴⁴ She first speaks in *The Interior Castle* of "spiritual espousal" (in some translations, "spiritual betrothal") in Chapter IV of the Fifth Dwelling Places.

⁴⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1980), Chapter Two, Lecture 1, page 150.

consent: namely, the divine Person of the Son, and the human person of Mary. In his *Commentary on the Sentences*, St. Thomas writes: “In Christ’s conception a certain marriage was sealed through the indivisible conjoining of the divine and human natures. But requisite for a marriage is consent, which is both requested and brought back through the words of messengers. Therefore it was proper that God, through His angel, should seek out the consent of the Virgin, from whom He would assume human nature.”⁴⁶

MINDFUL THAT THE “SPIRITUAL MARRIAGE” THAT ST. TERESA SPEAKS OF IN THE INTERIOR CASTLE IS NOT A GENERAL METAPHOR FOR ALL TYPES OF UNION WITH GOD, BUT RATHER A VERY SPECIFIC EXPERIENCE WITHIN ADVANCED PRAYER, CONSIDER WHAT SHE SAYS ABOUT “SPIRITUAL MARRIAGE” IN THE SEVENTH DWELLING PLACES. In the first chapter, she notes that when “our Lord is pleased to have pity on this soul that He has already taken spiritually as His Spouse because of what it suffers and has suffered through its desires, He brings it, before the spiritual marriage is consummated, into His dwelling place which is this seventh. For just as in Heaven so in the soul His Majesty must have a room where He dwells alone.”⁴⁷

In the second chapter of the Seventh Dwelling Places, St. Teresa speaks at greater length about “spiritual marriage”. She explains first that “this great favor does not come to its perfect fullness as long as we live [on earth]; for if we were to withdraw from God, this remarkable blessing would be lost.”⁴⁸ Regardless, in the union of the spiritual marriage:

“The Lord appears in this center of the soul, not in an imaginative vision but in an intellectual one, although more delicate than those mentioned, as He appeared to the apostles without entering through the door when He said to them ‘*pax vobis.*’ What God communicates here to the soul in an instant is a secret so great and a favor so sublime—and the delight the soul experiences so extreme—that I don’t know what to compare it to. I can say only that the Lord wishes to reveal for that moment, in a more sublime manner than through any spiritual vision or taste, the glory of Heaven”.⁴⁹

However, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, St. Teresa does not conclude her masterpiece *The Interior Castle* with a description of spiritual marriage as a foretaste of Heaven. She doesn’t end on a high note, or in the way that a Beethoven symphony ends with a rousing and triumphant explosion of chords. **INSTEAD, SHE CONCLUDES IN THE FINAL CHAPTER OF THE INTERIOR CASTLE BY RETURNING TO EARTH FROM HEAVEN, A MOVE THAT IS SO REFLECTIVE OF HER PRACTICAL, DOWN TO EARTH PERSONALITY:**

“It will be good, Sisters, to tell you the reason the Lord grants so many favors in this world. ... I want to tell you again here lest someone think that the reason is solely for the sake of giving delight to these souls; that thought would be a serious error. His Majesty couldn’t grant us a greater favor than to give us a life that would be an imitation of the life His beloved Son lived. Thus... these favors are meant to fortify our weakness... that we may be able to imitate Him in His great sufferings.

We have always seen that those who were closest to Christ our Lord were those with the greatest trials. ... look at what His glorious Mother suffered....”⁵⁰

Instead of concern for oneself and one’s comfort, Teresa explains the outcome of the Christian on earth entering union with God: “All [the soul’s] concern is taken up with how to please [the Lord] more and how or where it will show Him the love it bears Him. This is the reason for prayer, my

⁴⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, Book III, Distinction 3, Question 3, Article 1, 1, 2.

⁴⁷ St. Teresa of Jesus, *The Interior Castle*, in Volume Two of *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1980), VII, 1, 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, VII, 2, 1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, VII, 2, 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, VII, 4, 4-5.

daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works.”⁵¹
Saint Teresa of Jesus continues to stress this point in the final chapter of *The Interior Castle* with passages that speak directly in support of a religious community with a twin charism of prayer and apostolate, active and contemplative life, love of God and love of neighbor. Let me end with these words from St. Teresa:

“This is what I want us to strive for, my Sisters; and let us desire and be occupied in prayer not for the sake of our enjoyment but so as to have this strength to serve. ... Believe me, Martha and Mary must join together in order to show hospitality to the Lord and have Him always present and not host Him badly by failing to give Him something to eat. ... His food is that in every way possible we draw souls that they may be saved and praise Him always.”⁵²

Amen.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, VII, 4, 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, VII, 4, 12.

from *The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus*, Chapter VIII

13. But because I have much to say hereafter of this sweetness, which our Lord gives to those who persevere in prayer, I do not speak of it here; only this will I say: prayer is the door to those great graces which our Lord bestowed upon me. If this door be shut, I do not see how He can bestow them; for even if He entered into a soul to take His delight therein, and to make that soul also delight in Him, there is no way by which He can do so; for His will is, that such a soul should be lonely and pure, with a great desire to receive His graces. If we put many hindrances in the way, and take no pains whatever to remove them, how can He come to us, and how can we have any desire that He should show us His great mercies?

14. I will speak now—for it is very important to understand it—of the assaults which Satan directs against a soul for the purpose of taking it, and of the contrivances and compassion wherewith our Lord labours to convert it to Himself, in order that men may behold His mercy, and the great good it was for me that I did not give up prayer and spiritual reading, and that they may be on their guard against the dangers against which I was not on my guard myself. And, above all, I implore them for the love of our Lord, and for the great love with which He goeth about seeking our conversion to Himself, to beware of the occasions of sin; for once placed therein, we have no ground to rest on—so many enemies then assail us, and our own weakness is such, that we cannot defend ourselves.

15. Oh, that I knew how to describe the captivity of my soul in those days! I understood perfectly that I was in captivity, but I could not understand the nature of it; neither could I entirely believe that those things which my confessors did not make so much of were so wrong as I in my soul felt them to be. One of them—I had gone to him with a scruple—told me that, even if I were raised to high contemplation, those occasions and conversations were not unfitting for me. This was towards the end, when, by the grace of God, I was withdrawing more and more from those great dangers, but not wholly from the occasions of them.

16. When they saw my good desires, and how I occupied myself in prayer, I seemed to them to have done much; but my soul knew that this was not doing what I was bound to do for Him to Whom I owed so much. I am sorry for my poor soul even now, because of its great sufferings, and the little help it had from any one except God, and for the wide door that man opened for it, that it might go forth to its pastimes and pleasures, when they said that these things were lawful.

17. Then there was the torture of sermons, and that not a slight one; for I was very fond of them. If I heard any one preach well and with unction, I felt, without my seeking it, a particular affection for him, neither do I know whence it came. Thus, no sermon ever seemed to me so bad, but that I listened to it with pleasure; though, according to others who heard it, the preaching was not good. If it was a good sermon, it was to me a most special refreshment. To speak of God, or to hear Him spoken of, never wearied me. I am speaking of the time after I gave myself to prayer. At one time I had great comfort in sermons, at another they distressed me, because they made me feel that I was very far from being what I ought to have been.

18. I used to pray to our Lord for help; but, as it now seems to me, I must have committed the fault of not putting my whole trust in His Majesty, and of not thoroughly distrusting myself. I sought for help, took great pains; but it must be that I did not understand how all is of little profit if we do not root out all confidence in ourselves, and place it wholly in God. I wished to live, but I saw clearly that I was not living, but rather wrestling with the shadow of death; there was no one to give me life, and I was not able to take it. He Who could have given it me had good reasons for not coming to my aid, seeing that He had brought me back to Himself so many times, and I as often had left Him.