



Asian Journal of Religious Studies

“The Lord is truly among us.”

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Asian Journal for Religious Studies

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Editorial

Pope Francis Mercy-Drenched Geopolitical Vision

In October 2017 Fr Antonio Spadaro, a close friend of Pope Francis, delivered a lecture at the University of Notre Dame titled “The Diplomacy and Geopolitics of Mercy: The World of Pope Francis.” We tend to think of mercy as a personal quality, and it is, but Spadaro sees it as a theme that also runs through the pope’s vision of politics and society.

“For Francis, mercy is not an abstract concept. It is the action of God within the life of this world: in societies, in human groups, in families and individuals,” he said. “God not only acts through the lives of individual people, but through the historical processes of peoples and nations. Even the most complex and intricate ones.”

Spadaro recalls Francis going to the war-torn Central African Republic to open the Holy Door for the Jubilee Year of Mercy at the cathedral in Bangui, before opening the Holy Door at St. Peter’s in Rome. This is why Francis made clear to the diplomatic corps, again in his talk of 2016, that the “opening of the Holy Door of Bangui Cathedral was meant as a sign of encouragement to look ahead, to set out anew and resume dialogue.”

Here then is a great image of mercy: the door. The sign of the “Holy Door” has a clear political meaning for Pope Francis. This opening was made symbolically more effective through the presence of thousands and thousands of Holy Doors around the world, writes Michael Sean Winters in *National Catholic Reporter*.

What, then, does mercy as a political category mean? Summing it up in a sentence we could say: never consider anyone or anything as definitively “lost” in relations between nations, peoples and states. This is the heart of the political significance of mercy. No

one, absolutely no one, is beyond the reach of God's mercy, even you know who.

After citing some recent interventions by the Holy See in the diplomatic sphere, such as working for peace in Colombia and better relations with Cuba and China, Spadaro elaborates: "As these and other cases show, the pope's position consists not in saying who is right and who is wrong, for at the root of all conflict is a fight for power or regional dominance, or what the pope calls a 'vain pretext.' There is no need to take sides for moral reasons. The pope rejects the mixing of politics, morals and religion that leads to the use of a language that divides reality between the absolute good and the absolute evil, between an axis of evil and an axis of good, between goodies and baddies. For Francis, the history of the world is not a Hollywood film, in which 'our boys' come to save us from 'those people.' He knows there are always different interests at stake, and that different sides act out of standpoints that are usually morally ambiguous."

Spadaro then discusses how the vision of Francis is the exact opposite of that espoused by fundamentalists of all stripes, "the jihadists and the neo-crusaders."

It is against this "abusive version" of religious experience that Francis is "carrying forward a systematic counternarrative to the narrative of fear." Spadaro adds that the pope's vision is, ultimately, the only one available to the sincere Christian: "The love typical of the Christian is not only love for the 'neighbor,' but also love for the 'enemy.' When we look at those doing evil through the eyes of pietas, then what triumphs is something that is humanly inexplicable — and perhaps also 'scandalous.' It is the intimate force of the Gospel of Christ: love of our enemies. This is the triumph of mercy."

Kuruvilla Pandikattu SJ
The Editor

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***Sabbath* in the Hebrew Bible**

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The word *Sabbath* comes from a Hebrew word *šabbat* meaning *rest*. The observation and remembrance of Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:8 “remember the *Sabbath* day, to keep it holy”: the fourth in the original Jewish the Eastern Orthodox, and most Protestant traditions, the third in Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions). It is believed that the *Sabbath* day is commemorated as God’s day of rest after he finished the Creation (Gen 2:2-3). However, its emphasis is on the covenant between God and His people and the consequent relationship exists between them (cf. Exod 31:12-13,16; Isa 56:1-8; Jer 17:19-27). The following is an attempt to trace the various aspects of *Sabbath* in the Hebrew Bible.

Exod 16:21-30 records for the first time the occurrence of the term the “*Sabbath*” in the Hebrew Bible.¹ Indeed, even though the *Sabbath* theme is essentially present in the creation framework of Gen 2:1-3, only the term “the seventh day” (3x) is attested there.² Exod 16:21-30 mentions three important features of the *Sabbath* day: 1. *Sabbath* is a “resting day” for the Israelites (v23,30); 2. *Sabbath* is “holy to the Lord” (v23); 3. *Sabbath* is a “divine gift” to the people (v29). While the first element is the most emphasized one in Exod 16, the second and the third aspects bring out the divine nature of the term.

Besides 16:21-30 the book of Exodus deals five more times with the *Sabbath* theme (cf. 20:8-11; 23:12; 31:12-17; 34:21; 35:1-3). The *Sabbath* observance forms the third of the Decalogue (cf. Exod 20:8-11). In comparison with Exod 16:21-30, the element of “the *Sabbath* is holy to the Lord” (cf. 16:23) is found emphasized and extended in 20:10-11, where holiness of the *Sabbath* is understood as the Lord blessed it and made it holy (cf. 20:11). Similarly the element of “resting” (cf. 16:23.25.29.30) is realized and even made stricter by the command that no work may be done by any human and animal on that day (cf. 20:10).³ The Israelites have the duty to keep holy the *Sabbath* day (cf. 20:8). The reason for the demand of “resting/no working” is further substantiated by the fact that the Lord himself rested when he finished the Creation (cf. 20:11; Gen 2:2-3).⁴ Thus, Exod 20:8-11 also places the *Sabbath* day in the framework of creation, an element which brings Exod 16 close to Gen 2:1-3.⁵ However, the third commandment found in Deut 5:12-15, besides the elements similar to those in Exod 20: 8-11, sets the reason for the *Sabbath* observance in the context of the Lord’s liberation of the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt (cf. v15). In this perspective, the aspect of “resting/no working” of the *Sabbath* brings to light God’s direct liberative intervention for his people, and highlights the dignity of “freedom”/ “liberation” among those who keep the *Sabbath*.⁶

Exod 23:12 strengthens the two elements already found in Exod 20:8-11: the six-day and seventh - day context (cf. Exod 20:9-10), and the command to rest for the benefits of human being and animals (cf Exod 20:10). In Exod 23:12 the animals are specified as “your ox and your ass” and the servants as “son(s) of your maidservant(s)”. Therefore, according to the divine command, the well-being of the beasts

of burden, servants and aliens must also be taken consideration of on the *Sabbath* day.⁷

Exod 31:12-17 attests the *Sabbath* theme in the context of the Lord's command to set up the "Tent of Meeting" for his dwelling among the people (cf. Exod 24:12-31:18). The elements like "cessation of creation", "holiness to the Lord" "resting/no working" are repeated in this text. However, the Israelites are further commanded to keep the *Sabbath* cautiously since it is considered as the eternal sign and eternal covenant between the Lord and the Israelites (cf. v13,16-17).⁸ *Sabbath* observance is an eternal institution among the Israelites one of the factors that assures the Lord's presence among them and his sanctification of them (v12.16).⁹ Those who desecrate the *Sabbath* day by working on it will be put to death (cf. v14-15).¹⁰

The death penalty inflicted on those who work on the *Sabbath* (Exod 31:14-15) is further stressed and concretized in Exod 35:1-3 in addition to the elements already known so far such as the holiness of the *Sabbath*, and the framework of "working on six days and resting on the seventh day (cf. v1-2). In Exod 34:21, the Israelites have already been commanded to rest on the seventh day even during the seasons of plowing and harvesting. A strict prohibition against working is further stressed in Exod 35:3 by the fact that the Israelites are not allowed even to light a fire in any of their dwellings on this holy day. Num 15:32-36 later records a case of the death penalty being applied to a man gathering sticks, a concrete illustration of the heavy punishment inflicted for the violation of the *Sabbath* commandment.

In short, Exod 31:12-17 brings out the fullest theological treatment of the *Sabbath*. Six points are consecutively found in this text: a) *Sabbath* is holy to the people (v14);

b) breaking the *Sabbath* is a serious crime: death (v14-15); c) *Sabbath*, a day of total rest is holy to the Lord (v15); d) resting is obligatory on this day (v16); e) *Sabbath* is the perpetual covenant between the Lord and his people (v16-17). f) on the seventh day, the Lord rested from work and was refreshed (v17).

In addition to the above-mentioned cases, the theme of the *Sabbath* is also treated considerably in Lev 23:1-3; Num 28:9-10; Amos 8:4-6; Jer 17:19-27; Ezek 46:1-5; Isa 56:1-7; 58:13-14; 66:23; Neh 13:15-22. In general, these texts deal mainly with two main aspects of the Sabbath: the “worship” and the “resting”. In the liturgical year of the Israelites *Sabbath* is considered one of the feast days of the Lord,¹¹ on which Israelites are to gather as a sacred assembly to worship God wherever they live (Lev 23:3). Num 28:9-10 mentions the sacrifices for the Sabbath day, which are double the amount of the daily offering.¹² Later, in the context of the new temple and the new cult (Ezek 40:1-48:35),¹³ Ezek 46:1-5 also deals with the matter of the sacrifices on this holy day as offered by the prince, which requires a different quantity: six unblemished lambs, and an unblemished ram, together with a cereal offering of an ephah for the ram, and a cereal offering of as much as he is able to give for the lambs, and a hint of oil for each ephah. The worship dimension of the *Sabbath* is also discussed in Isa 66:23, which in turn does not deal with the sacrifices as in Lev 23:3; Num 28:9-10; Ezek 46:1-5, but with the universal perspective of the worshippers. Isaiah announces the perspective of the New Zion, in which all humankind shall come to worship before the Lord from one new moon to another and from one Sabbath to another.

The “resting” aspect of the *Sabbath* day is re-emphasized in Amos 8:4-6; Jer 17:19-27. The prophet Amos strongly

accuses the greedy people of their hypocrisy in keeping the new moon and the *Sabbath* day. They keep the *Sabbath* for form's sake, considering it as a burden for them. They wish the *Sabbath* to be gone quickly so that they can continue their unjust business. In his turn, the prophet Jeremiah strongly urges the Israelites (kings and the inhabitants of Jerusalem) to observe the sanctity of the *Sabbath*. The Israelites are ordered by the Lord not to carry forth a burden out of their houses and bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem on this holy day, nor to do any work, but to keep the *Sabbath* holy (Jer 17:21-22.25.27). What is new in Jeremiah's treatment of the *Sabbath* theme is his announcement about the correlation between the destiny of Israel and the observance of the *Sabbath*. If the Israelites obey the Lord's command, the leaders and the people will live in peace (Jer 17:24-26). If they do not listen to him, Jerusalem will be totally devoured by fire (Jer 17:27).

The positive results which spring from the faithful observance of the *Sabbath* also echo in the Book of Isaiah. In his message about the new temple and the new leadership (Isa 56:1-66:24),¹⁴ Isaiah announces that those who keep the *Sabbath* free from profanation and themselves from evildoings shall be blessed (cf. Isa 56:2). Even the eunuchs shall be given an everlasting imperishable name better than sons and daughters if they observe the *Sabbath*, do what pleases the Lord and hold fast to his covenant (cf. Isa 56:4-5). In general, Isaiah announces that all who keep the *Sabbath* free from profanation and hold fast to his covenant shall be brought to the holy mountain; they shall be joyful and their sacrifices shall be accepted by the Lord (cf. Isa 56:6-7).¹⁵ Those who refrain from breaking the *Sabbath* observing it with delight, honoring it by not following their own ways and interests shall have delight in the Lord, who in turn shall nourish them (cf. Isa 58:13-14).

A similar message of keeping the *Sabbath* free from profanation is also found in Neh 13:15-22. Nehemiah realizes that the *Sabbath* rule is not observed among his people or among the aliens in Jerusalem. Treading winepresses, bringing in sacks of grain, loading donkeys of all kinds of burdens (grain, wine, grapes, figs. etc.), business activities all take place on the *Sabbath* day (cf. v15-16) certainly violate the third commandment which forbids the Israelites, their servants, their beasts of burden, and the aliens among them from doing any work on this holy day (cf. Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14). These activities profane the Sabbath (Neh 13:17-18). Nehemiah sternly warns the people and takes necessary steps to make sure that calamity will not occur to Jerusalem once again (Neh 13:17-22). In this sense, Nehemiah shares a similar view with Jeremiah and Isaiah about the bond between the *Sabbath* observance and the destiny of Israel. Nehemiah stresses, however, more the negative consequences resulting from Israel's failure of observing the *Sabbath* observance in the past as a serious warning for his contemporaries (Neh 13:17-18).

In short, in the Hebrew Bible the concept of the *Sabbath* is multifaceted, and it covers the following aspects:

1. The *Sabbath* belongs to the Lord (cf. Exod 16:23.26; 20:10; 31:15; Lev 23:3; Deut 5:13);
2. It is holy to the Lord (cf. Gen 2:3; Exod 16:23; 20:11; 31:15; 35:2; Isa 58:13) as well as to the Israelites (Exod 31:14; Lev 23:3);
3. The Israelites must keep it holy (cf. Exod 20:8; 31:14; Deut 5:12; Jer 17.22.24.27; Isa 56:2.6; 58:13; Neh 13:22) mainly by "resting/no working" on this day (cf. Exod 16:23.25.29.30; 20:10; 31:15; 35:2; Deut 5:14; Lev 23:3; Amos 8:5; Jer 17:21-22.25.27; Neh 13:15-16)¹⁶;

4. They are to follow the temporal framework of working six days and resting on the seventh day (cf. Exod 16:26; 20:9-10; 31:15; 35:2; Lev 23:3; Deut 5:13-14) following the Lord's example as manifested in his creation framework (cf. Gen 2:1-3; Exod 20:11; 31:17);
5. The Israelites are also to keep *Sabbath* holy with their worshipping activities (cf. Lev 23:3; Num 28:9-10; Ezek 46:2-5; Isa 66:23);
6. Those who break the *Sabbath* day will be put to death (cf. Exod 31:14.15; 35:2; Num 15:35.36);
7. When the Israelites keep it faithfully, honoring it as the divine gift for them (cf. Exod 16:29), treasuring it as the sign of the Lord's liberation of them from Egypt (cf. Deut 5:15) and as the eternal sign/covenant between the Lord and them (cf. Exod 31:13.16.17), they will live in peace and happiness (cf. Jer 17:25-26; Isa 56:2.5.7; 58:14); otherwise they will fall into destruction as they did previously (cf. Neh 13:17-17).

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Notes

- 1 According to SARNA, *Exploring*, 147, “the biblical Sabbath has no known analogy in the ancient world. In fact, the very concept of a seven-day week is unique to Israel”.
- 2 SARNA, *Exploring*, 145-146, makes the following observation on Gen 2:1-3: “This passage contains no mention of the Sabbath as a fixed, weekly institution. It refers only to the seventh day of the Creation, to the divine cessation from creativity, and to the blessing and sanctification of that day. But the term “Sabbath” is not to be found, cognate verbal form”.
- 3 According to TIMMER, *Creation* 46, “Exodus 20: 10: the prohibition of any Work by anyone on that day shows a development over the command’s nascent formulation in Exodus 16, where only the gathering of food was prohibited”.
- 4 ALBCK, “Commandments”, 271, notes: “since man is taught to follow in God’s ways to cleave to him by imitating him, so man too should work for six days and rest on the seventh day”.
- 5 Cf. KROCHMALNIK, *Schriftauslegung*, 132; SARNA, *Exploring*, 146; TIMMER, *Creation*, 46
- 6 SARNA, *Exploring*, 148, notes: By proscribing work and human creativity on that day and by enjoining the inviolability of nature one day a week, the Torah delimits human autonomy while it restores to nature its pristine freedom, At the same time, human freedom is immeasurably enhanced, human equality is strengthened and the cause of social justice is promoted by legislating, with divine sanction, the inalienable right of every human being, irrespective of social class, to a day of complete rest every seven days”. ALBCK *Commandments*, 271, also comments on the aspect of resting: “In that way he can imitate the sovereignty and freedom of God who also “rested” from his work on the seventh day,

and there is no power which can force him to work". MARKL, Dekalog, 216, sees this as a case of *imitatio dei*.

- 7 MARSHALL, Israel, 159, holds that this regulation may "demonstrate a humanitarian purpose" and may "reflect efforts to preserve the longevity of valuable labour resources: livestock, slaves, and resident aliens". The humanitarian concern is also stressed by TIMMER, Creation. 46.
- 8 Cf. MARKL, Exodus, 316-319. According to LAFFEY, Pentateuch, 149, "Sabbath observance was to continue perpetually from one generation to another, just as God's covenant would last through the generations".
- 9 LAFFEY, Pentateuch, 148, notes on Exod 31:12-13: "The Sabbath is identified as a sign of God's covenant relationship; the people are to keep the Sabbath to recognize God as the one who makes them holy".
- 10 LAFFEY, Pentateuch, 148, notes on Exod 31:14-15: "Such severe punishments express the gravity of the offense, which is rejection of the covenant relationship with God. [...] There is no greater punishment, illustrating that this violation is of the greatest magnitude".
- 11 Lev 23:1-44 lists the feast days of the Lord: the *Sabbath* (v3); the Passover and Unleavened Bread (v4-14); the Pentecost (v15-21); the New Year' Day (v23-25); the Day of Atonement (v26-32); the Feast of Booths (v33-36.39-43).
- 12 The daily offerings: two unblemished yearling lambs as the established holocausts, offering one lamb in the morning and the other during the evening twilight, each with a cereal offering of one tenth of an ephah of fine flour Mixed with a fourth of a hint of oil of crushed olives. The accompanying drink offering will be a fourth of a hint for each lamb (cf. Num 28:4-5.7).
- 13 Cf. BOADT, Ezekiel, 309.
- 14 Cf. STUHLMUELLER, Isaiah, 332.
- 15 Although the prophet does not clearly specify the significance of "keeping the *Sabbath* free from profanation", the analysis of the texts up to this point suggests that he is speaking of the "resting/no working" dimension (cf. also Neh 13:15-22). The worship dimension of the *Sabbath* observance may also be intended in the prophet's announcement.
- 16 The spirit of "resting/no working" is further applied to the sabbatical year (cf. Exod 23:10- 11; Lev 25:1-7; Deut 15:1-11). Even the ground must be allowed to rest every seventh year (cf. Lev 25:1-7, esp. v2.4.5), that is, as. WENHAM, Leviticus, 317, remarks, "to be left untilled and thus to return at least partially to its state prior to human cultivation".

Mary, Full of Grace: Dogmas, Devotions and Implications

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The title ‘full of grace’ was the starting point of defining Marian dogmas and other titles attributed to Mary. The Marian Dogmas are given to us by the Church to help us better understand our relationship with our Creator. It is important to remember that these teachings about Mary’s Immaculate Conception, her Perpetual Virginity, her Divine Motherhood, and her Assumption, must always be interpreted within the context of the more fundamental teachings of the Church about God.

2.1 Marian Dogmas

When discussing the dogma of Immaculate Conception, an implicit reference may be found in the angel’s greeting to Mary. The angel Gabriel said, “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you” (Lk 1,28). Mary must have been in a state of sanctifying grace from the first moment of her existence in order to be called full of grace. In *Ineffabilis Deus*, the bull in which Pope Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, “full of grace” read in the Tradition, as the surest foundation in favour of the dogma itself. This Marian dogma does not say the angelic greeting is a proof for proclaiming it. The dogma clearly says that

Mary was preserved from sin ‘in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, our Saviour’. This is just what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception holds: “that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin.” The biblical understanding of grace is that it takes away sin (Eph 1,6-7). Mary had been fully graced means that she was in a state of perfect sanctity by divine grace for her divine and virginal maternity.

The second part of the angelic salutation, ‘the Lord is with you’ is a formula found many times in the Old Testament. Often this formula is used in the issuance of a command that is difficult to accomplish if left to oneself (Ex 3,12; Josh 1,9; Judges 6,12).¹ Why the vocation to maternity is a difficult mission here? Mary has to conceive and bring forth virginally the Son of the Most High.² For this it is indispensable that the Lord is with her.

By reciting daily *Hail Mary*, we may not think of the profound significance of the new name with which Mary is greeted by angel Gabriel. It is important to note that no one in salvation history has ever been addressed with this unique title. With this unique name, God prepares Mary for her unique role and mission any woman ever embraced in history viz., to be the mother of His Son in the plan of salvation. The Dogma of Mary’s Divine Motherhood was officially proclaimed by the Church at the Council of Ephesus in 431. In this doctrine, she is called “Mother of God” which is a translation of the Greek term Theotokos, which literally means “God-Bearer.” The title, *full of grace* is apt for the woman who is destined to become the Mother of God. “‘The fullness of grace’ indicates all the supernatu-

ral munificence from which Mary benefits by being chosen and destined to be the Mother of Christ” (The Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 9). *Lumen Gentium* appropriately recalls this when it affirms: “The Virgin of Nazareth is hailed by the heralding angel, by divine command, as ‘full of grace’” (LG, n. 56). God granted her the perfect and lasting grace for her vocation as the Mother of God.

The very wording of the dogma of Assumption has in it the other Marian dogmas.³ The dogma states that Mary is assumed, body and soul, into heavenly glory. Grace means a participation in the nature and life of God. Here in Mary we can see the divine perspective on what human life is destined to be. Surely Mary is our sure sign and hope in a grace-filled life.

2.2 Marian Devotions

The purpose of all Marian devotions is to help us love God more. Therefore, we are encouraged to ask Mary to pray for us as we continue our spiritual journey through this life in hope that we too will remain open to God’s grace and be more conformed to His will.

We have to avoid extremes in our veneration of Mary. In the words of Jacob Parappally, “The images of Mary that have emerged in the last twenty centuries oscillate between extremes. On the one extreme we find an apotheosis of Mary, making her a goddess with divine attributes challenging the traditionally communicated male image of God who supports patriarchal and hierarchal systems with their pervasive and dehumanising elements which would not let women to unfold themselves as humans...On the other extreme there is another image of Mary, who was just an instrument of God so that God could enter into history as a

human. It could have been anybody else. Mary happened to be that medium. Nothing more and nothing less!”⁴ Mary is not a mother Goddess.⁵ She is the mother of God as clearly stated by the council of Ephesus in 431. She is not equal to Jesus. The tendency to make her equal to Jesus and praise her more loving and compassionate than God is clearly an aberration of true Marian devotions. Fathers of the Church and the ecclesiastical tradition were very careful in avoiding this kind of exaggerated and disproportionate devotion to Mary. She has to be given the right place in our devotion as the one who is uniquely called by God as ‘full of grace’. Mary, full of grace, is an icon of belonging to God alone and participating in divine life which is a gratuitous gift from God and to which all humans are called to.

Neither an exaggerated devotion to Mary nor the rejection of the due honour to Mary as Mother of God, full of grace and pre-eminent member of the Church⁶ can be accepted. Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus* (1974) gives the following guidelines for a proper and balanced Marian devotion⁷ with the title “Four Guidelines for Devotion to the Blessed Virgin: Biblical, Liturgical, Ecumenical and Anthropological”: a) Devotion to Mary must be rooted in the Scripture and reflect the basic Christian message. b) It should not replace the liturgy but must be harmonized with it. c) It must be ecumenically sensitive in the sense that it should avoid extreme and disproportionate devotions. d) The negative images of Mary (her passive role and submissiveness) are not to be focused too much but her positive and inspiring images must be highlighted.

The image of Mary, full of grace is the source of all other NT images of Mary. This image made her the Mother of God in God’s plan, the most perfect disciple of Jesus, an active co-worker in the mission of Jesus, the pre-eminent

member and model for the Church. She, being full of grace, symbolizes the life and destiny of every human person who is disposed and open to God's grace.

3. Theological and Anthropological Implications

Mary, Mother of God and our celestial mother, who experienced the plenitude of grace, is a model for us to experience and respond to God's grace in our day today life in many ways:

- **Become a gift for others:** Mary is grace-filled not due to any merit in her but by the gratuitousness of God. Likewise, who we are and what we possess are gifts freely given by God, our loving Father. Like Mary we are called to share the gifts with others.
- **Enable the grace.** Mary's reception of grace was not passive. She responded to the grace of God with her *Fiat* (Lk 1,38) and cooperated actively in the unfolding of divine plan with complete dedication. We have to imitate Mary in her active cooperation to the divine plan and mission of Jesus in conformity to the will of God.
- **By the grace of God I am what I am:** In Mary, full of grace, God has given humanity a model of what it means to be human in the eyes of God. St. Paul rightly affirms, "By the grace of God I am what I am" (2 Cor 12,9). Mary's story is a story of grace and faith as narrated in the episode of annunciation (Lk 1,26-38). Her story begins with the word *grace*, with the divine greeting 'full of grace'. This does not of course downplay the outstanding personal value of the Blessed Virgin. Rather, Luke wishes to present Mary as the pure fruit of God's goodwill. We are pure fruits of God's graciousness. For every human being there is grace, the free

election of God from the beginning of one's existence. Grace is the first principle of human existence itself. Luke clearly says that everything in Mary derives from God's grace. God's free and gratuitous choice and gift makes Mary what she is. Mary is 'full of grace' not because of her merit or human claims but because of God's benevolence and sovereign grace.

- **Like Mary, Church is our grace-filled mother.** Mary is identified with daughter Zion, with the people of God. Everything said about the *ecclesia* in the Bible is true of her, and vice versa. The Church learns concretely what she is and is meant to be by looking at Mary like a mirror. As from Mary, full of grace, Jesus was born; from grace-filled parents graceful children are born. A right attitude towards church and family life. The more we become a fitting habitation for God, daughter Zion, the more we are the Church, a grace-filled mother.
- **Mary full of grace is model of personal holiness.** Living a grace filled life means to experience the unmerited divine assistance of God so that we can live a life free from sin. This is the reason why St. Paul in his letters mentions several times that the discovery of grace implies conversion (Rom 6,1-2,15; Rom 2,4; 2 Cor 6,1). A real participation in the nature and life of God requires from our part an active response to God's grace, a holy life. In S. Jayard's words, "When we realize that God wanted Mary to be totally sinless to bring forth Jesus into the world, we must remind ourselves that the same God like us also to be equally sinless, as we receive the same Jesus in the Eucharist."⁸
- **Devotion and imitation of Mary.** She is the model whom God gave to the humanity revealing his uncon-

ditional love for us and inviting us to participate in His own life. She is challenging and inspiring us to respond to this divine call as she did with free will and openness. This inspiring God-given image of Mary from the NT should challenge us positively from appealing to images of Mary which may satisfy only our emotional needs. The Church invites us to imitate Our Lady's virtues, so that, after her example and through her intercession, we may persevere in the grace of God.

- **Acknowledge that all is grace.** In the modern industrial and technological society we witness a culture which tends to eliminate the idea of God's grace from human life. To acknowledge that all is grace will increase our respect for human life and God's entire creation. We will stand for the dignity of life and protection of creation. It is the absence of grace-filled lives that promote sterilization, promiscuity and abortion, the rejection of the beautiful vocation of marriage and motherhood, violence against children and women in our contemporary society.
- **Gratitude must follow God's grace.** St. Paul rightly teaches us that we have to thank God for His grace: "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus..." (1 Cor 1,4). This is a fundamental religious attitude to acknowledge before God that we are dependent on God, for our being and having and to accept its gratuity. Mary, full of grace is our model in doing so in her famous *Magnificat* (Lk 1,46-55). She attributed to God's grace the great things that God was doing in her and took no merit for herself. Mary represents all humanity

in her attitude of total surrender, acceptance and gratitude before God's graciousness.

- **Rejoice!** God's grace was the source of joy which Mary expressed in her *Magnificat*. By participating in the divine life we cannot but be joyful.
- **Foster relationships.** Grace is a relational term. God's grace is essentially his unconditional love and relationship with us. If we are in the state of grace all our human relationships (family and marriage relationships, the relationship between students and teachers, the relationship among persons who lead a community life, our relationship with other religions etc.) will become mutually enriching and fruitful. This will foster our interconnectedness and rootedness in the divine.
- **Live gracefully.** We are invited to learn from Mary the lessons that mark a grace-filled life. Mary is presented in the Gospels as a model for faith (Lk 1,45), service (Lk 1,56; Jn 2,1-11), humility (Lk 1,48), obedience to God's will (Lk 1,38), and prayer life Lk 1,46-55; 2,51).
Conclusion

Mary, *full of grace* from biblical, philological and theological perspectives can mean the following: a) Mary is processed and inserted by God into the unique state of grace to fulfil the promises to David. b) The messianic joy that was announced by the prophets to the people of Israel - the daughter of Zion - is now focused on one person, Mary *full of grace*, who in a way represents the desires and hopes of Israel. She is not addressed as a single individual but as the representative of God's people. c) God-given names are significant in Bible. *Full of grace* is a God-given singular status that Mary has in the salvation history. Mary is fash-

ioned by grace and is the recipient of grace to the point that she can be called full of grace. d) From a philological point of view the perfect passive participle would mean having been graced with a nuance of fullness. e) In relation to the noun *charis* in (Lk 1,30) the title indicates both the divine act and the intention of the divine act (i.e., to be the Mother of God) for which Mary has been graced. f) From a theological point of view grace is a relational term. So full of grace would mean that Mary lives her life freely and openly in total relation to God.

‘Full of grace’ is the matchless divine greeting directly addressed to Mary that encloses in itself like a seed the whole life and mission of Mary and indirectly addressed to the Church who mirrors mother Mary in discovering God’s grace. The truest identity of both Mary and the Church is in grace. As Mary needed to ponder over the meaning of this address the church also needs to reflect on and live out its identity as ‘full of grace’. Church’s reflection on Mary led to different Marian dogmas and devotions which could be understood and lived in relation to God, following the teachings of the Church. Both Mary and Church are living manifestations of God’s grace. So, it is a mistake to insist more on Mary’s grace than God’s grace. God is the giver of grace and Mary is the receiver of grace. So like St. Paul, each one of us can say ‘By the grace of God I am what I am’ (1Cor 15,10).

Notes

- 1 Cf. IGNACE DE LA POTTERIE, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, B. BUBY (Trans.), New York 1992, 21.
- 2 The Dogma of the Perpetual Virginity of Mary was defined at the Lateran Council in 649: Mary conceived our Lord “without any detriment to her virginity, which remained inviolate even after his birth.”

- 3 In 1950 Pope Pius XII issued the dogma on Mary's Assumption: "The Immaculate Mother of God, Mary Ever-Virgin, after her life on earth, was assumed, body and soul, into heavenly glory." Mary's Assumption has been described as "a singular participation in her Son's Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians" (CCC No. 966).
- 4 J. PARAPPALLY, "Marian Images and Devotions through the Ages (A Historical-Contextual Survey)", in *Mary in Our Search for Fullness of Life*, R.K. SAMY (ed.), Bangalore 2006, P.37.
- 5 CCC No. 971: "The Church's devotion to the Blessed Virgin is intrinsic to Christian worship. The Church rightly honors 'the Blessed Virgin with special devotion. From the most ancient time the Blessed Virgin has been honored with the title 'Mother of God,' to whose special protection the faithful fly in all their dangers and needs. This very special devotion [hyperdulia]. . . differs essentially from the adoration which is given to the Incarnate Word and equally to the Father and the Holy Spirit and greatly fosters this adoration."
- 6 Mary is "hailed as a pre-eminent and altogether singular member of the Church" (LG 53) because of the gifts of grace which adorn her and because of the place she occupies in the mystical Body.
- 7 PAUL VI, *Marialis Cultus*, Nos. 29-39.
- 8 S. JAYARD, *Mary for Modern Times*, Pune 2014.

[This article is the continuation from last issue of AJRS. So the discrepancy in numbering!]

The Apostolate of Being

Noel Dias

Sri Lanka

When we think of the apostolate we think of action, of going and of doing. But the first, the last and perhaps the most effective apostolate we will ever do is the APOSTOLATE OF BEING, OF BEING ME, OF BEING HAPPY TO BE ME.¹

I had absolutely nothing to do with my existence, I did not choose to be. I did not choose to be me. How could I choose when I wasn't? My parents didn't choose me either. They may have wanted a child but they did not know who I would be. But God knew exactly who I would be. And God wanted me, "You have not chosen me; I have chosen you". God chose me out of an infinite number of possible beings. The only logical conclusion from these facts of life is that the will of God for me, my mission, my apostolate is

TO BE ME, TO BE HAPPY TO BE ME.

BEING ME means first of all to accept the gift of existence, to accept life from the womb to the tomb. This is not easy as we grow old.

BEING ME also means to accept my human condition,

To accept that I am dependent on a higher being,

To accept that, on account of original sin, I do not have the gift of integrity;

I do not have perfect control over all of my faculties

What control I have is gained only with a lot of discipline.
And discipline is what I need most

And want least.

I have a free will which is my greatest dignity

And my greatest responsibility.

I must assume responsibility for my personal actions.

I must accept that I am a singer;

I have been a sinner in the past'

I may be a sinner in the future.

BEING ME means to accept my particular uniqueness.

There is not now'

There never has been,

There will never be another me.

Since I AM ONE OF A KIND

I am not inferior or superior to anyone

I give God a praise, honour, love and service

That no none else can give

Therefore, I AM INDISPENSABLE.

It is very important to have this positive self-image

Because the most vicious disease of normal people

Is a negative self-image, an inferiority complex.

It is not easy to BE ME:

External forces are always at work:

The fashion, the ideas repeated: Papers, TV, Radio,

The milieu in which I live.

Internal forces at work:

Envy, jealousy, the desire to be popular, to be like
others

I am a social being and I live together in society which affects me in so many ways.

(This does not mean that I do what I like whatever may be the effect on other people with the excuse that I must be ME)

I AM HAPPY TO BE ME

Because I am a tabernacle of the Blessed Trinity who dwells within me.

“In Him I live and move and have my being”

I am really WE,

And WE is mostly God, Father-Son-Holy Spirit

I AM HAPPY TO BE ME

Because this is the greatest prescription ever given for physical, mental and Spiritual happiness.

I AM HAPPY TO BE ME

Because this is the best way that I can express my gratitude to God for the gift of Myself.

I AM HAPPY TO BE ME

Because, outside the Sacrifice of the Mass, which has an infinite value, the greatest honour and praise I can give to God is

TO BE HAPPY, TO BE HAPPY TO BE ME

“God loves a cheerful giver”.

There is only ONE LOVE, the LOVE OF GOD

We can only receive or transmit God’s love.

We simply accept this love of God poured into our hearts

By the Holy Spirit who is given to us.

We let this love permeate our being,
Radiate from us
And overflow to others

The love of God working in us

Can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine
or do.

Whether I live a long life or a short one,

Whether I am sickly or healthy,

Rich or poor,

Learned or uneducated,

Whether I accomplish much or little,

Is not what matters.

What is important is

That I make the love of God visible in me,

So that others may

Believe, hope, love and be happy to be themselves.

I AM HAPPY TO BE ME

Because this is the greatest weapon I have in the
apostolate.

The first and most effective apostolate I can always
exercise is the

APOSTOLATE OF BEING ME, OF BEING HAP
PY TO BE ME.

Everyone is seeking happiness;

Remember:

What you are shouts so loud that I cannot hear what you

are saying

Don't tell me what Jesus can do for me;

Show me what Jesus has done for you.

If you want me to believe in your Redeemer,

Look a little more redeemed.

When people meet a person who is genuinely happy,

They want to know what makes them happy.

And when they discover that it is Jesus,

They want to follow Jesus.

Lord, it is good to BE ME

I am happy to BE ME

I accept myself

I love myself

I celebrate myself

Because in so doing

I am accepting

Loving

Affirming

Celebrating

YOU.

1. This is a reflection given to me by the Veteran Jesuit priest, Fr. Perniola. He was my confessor and lived up to 102 years. He is an Italian, who studied the local languages and Pali. He taught at Aquinas University, Colombo, and moulded many people's spiritual journey. This is a tribute to him!

Responding Truthfully and Gently: A Tribute to Prof Noel Sheth SJ

Errol D'Lima SJ

St Xavier's School, Mumbai

Noel Sheth (31-10-1943 - 7-7-2017) journeyed through life with purpose. His Jesuit identity always before him, he applied himself meticulously to every task given him with the hope that it would benefit others. The eldest of four brothers, he lost his father when he and his siblings were still young. He felt responsible for the family. His mother hailed from Kandivali in Mumbai and with faith and fortitude looked after her sons and provided for their education through her earnings.

It was in St. Xavier's High School, Dhobitalao that Noel completed his schooling and then decided to join the Jesuits of the Bombay Province; he did so on June 20, 1960. His flair for languages showed in his knowledge of Gujarati—his father was a baptized Gujarati—Marathi, Hindi and English. After philosophy, Noel was asked to prepare himself in Sanskrit and Indian Culture to be part of the staff of St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. He performed brilliantly in his M.A. in Sanskrit from Pune University and was offered a full scholarship to Harvard to complete his doctorate in Sanskrit. At Harvard, he impressed both staff and students with his extraordinary competence in Sanskrit and on occasion was invited by the professor to teach his

confreres. Back in India, the wider needs of the Jesuit Assistancy decided his superiors into assigning him to Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth (JDV), Pontifical Institute of Philosophy and Religion, Pune. He resided in the Papal Seminary and functioned as dean of the Inchoate Department of Indian Studies and Social Sciences in the Faculty of Philosophy. Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism and Sikhism were the subjects he taught. His name is included in the *Who's Who of Sanskrit Scholars of India*.

Noel had the capacity to put together an immense amount of detail so that the knowledge of subjects he taught was almost exhaustive. His effort to excel in all he attempted also meant that he had high expectations of his students. Not only was his learning appreciated in JDV but also at the national and international levels. He was called to participate in and preside at international meetings and seminars. Throughout his teaching career, he came across not only as a scholar but also a simple and amiable person. With a mind for detailed planning as well as sensitivity for the views of others, he served terms as rector of the Papal Seminary (1991-94) and later of JDV (1999-2005). He helped bring technical modernization to the JDV campus and was presented the Dr. Sam Higginbottom award for the best principal (president) in India, 2004-2005 by the All India Association for Christian Higher Education.

His identity as a Jesuit priest characterized his commitment to the Church and the Society of Jesus. Ordained on March 23, 1974 Noel cherished the priesthood and the ministry that it implied. Because of his deep knowledge of Oriental Religions, he could appreciate the contribution of other faiths in understanding the world of religion and be pluralist while preserving his Christian identity. At the time of his death, Noel was a member of the International Sec-

retariat for Ecumenism and advisor to Fr. General in Inter-religious matters.

Noel had noteworthy qualities of both, head and heart. Gentlemanly in his actions and very humane in his dealings with others, he could listen, assess and respond truthfully, yet gently, to what was said to him. He walked tall yet made everyone feel that they mattered to him. He set great store on being impartial in his dealings with his associates, staff and students. It was easy to recognize the kindness that emanated from him. He enjoyed meeting companions and shared in the fun and food of such gatherings. When he returned from an overseas engagement, he brought something not only for his own community but also for others. For health reasons, Noel was careful about his diet and took few chances. Noel's friends are grateful to God for having him in their midst for 57 years; we feel his loss acutely.

It was my privilege to chat with Noel on the very day (June 26, 2017) he was to fly to Bogota, Columbia where he completed his life's journey in this world. We offer our condolences to his two surviving brothers and his many friends both in India and abroad. May God grant Noel eternal rest and may perpetual light shine on him.

Homily Notes

Nov 1, 2017: All Saints Day

Rev 7:2-4,9-14; 1 Jn 3:1-3; Mt 5:1-12a

Being Saints for Today

G.K. Chesterton once said that the greatest tragedy in the world is that of a Christian not becoming a saint. The whole understanding of the term saint is beginning to take a new meaning in the post-modern context: a saint is a person who is too holy to be imitable; a saint is a person whose feet are a foot above the ground and who secludes himself from the society. In fact, very few Christians strive to be saints today. What is then the significance of the All Saints Day for us?

In today's first reading from the book of Revelation, we see the vision of St. John, where he sees 1, 44,000. This number should not be taken in the literal sense, but as an indicative of the inclusiveness of the Kingdom of God and the bitter truth that though God wills that everyone to be saved, those who reject it would not be saved. John is pointing this at the Roman Emperor and the Romans who were persecuting the then Christians. In the second reading, we come to know from the First letter of St. John, what love the Father has showered upon us by letting us be called his children. We aim to be like Jesus and become like Him in his glory. Whoever treasures this hope will purify himself or herself. It is this hope that is the fuel of our faith.

The core of the entire Christian message according to many theologians is concisely expressed in the Beatitudes. The beatitudes are a challenge to the real disciples of Jesus. Like Jesus said, in Mt 7: 20, we know people by their fruits. The beatitudes are the fruits of the Christian life. It is through these, that one derives the Christian identity in his or her life. Today, we do not lead a life of seclusion but we are to be contemplatives in ac-

tion. We must have the mind of Christ in our every action. How can we, who are Christians, fail to be saints? How can we give witness to our faith in our context? How can we be saints of the modern times? Discernment in the spirit is the key.

-Bhanu Yeshwanth

Nov 2, 2017: All Souls Day

Wis 3:1-9; Romans 5:5-11; John 6:37-40

Being People of Hope

Some people tend to think that life ends with death but we Christians believe that our real life begins with death because through death we make a passage from earthly life to heavenly life with God. The church places this feast as the following of All Saints Day to show that all our departed ones are too the saints who are undeclared and they intercede for us to God. Praying for the dead is an ancient practice which we see in the holy tradition of the Catholic Church. All souls day is not a day to mourn and cry for our departed ones but the day to be grateful that after their long awaited journey of earthly life, they now can experience the salvation of God, which God promised his people as we see it in first reading. The Lord promises through the prophet Isaiah that the dead shall live, their corpses shall rise and the dwellers in the dust shall awake and sing for joy (Is 26:19). However the future life which is promised is different from the life in this world. It will be a new life in a new world where the sense of loss and grief will exist no longer.

Through this day the church gifts us with the opportunity to remember the departed, to thank God for the life that they lived with us on earth and for the eternal life that they enjoy now in heaven with God. Every Christian must be happy to enter into this new life without fear because this is the purpose for which we are living. We should not have any fear of death because we have already died with Christ in our baptism and we wait to be raised by the Risen Lord.

In the gospel Jesus clearly makes a mention that all who come to him placing their trust purely on him, their burdens will be tak-

en away. Jesus is the only resting place for all of us and the only way in and through which we can be united with our heavenly Father. God unveiled the mystery of human life through Jesus Christ and his resurrection. His resurrection is the foundation for our belief of life after death. That's why St. Paul says if Christ has not risen from the dead all his preaching would make no sense.

As we celebrate all souls day let's remind ourselves that we are a people of hope, a hope that Christ will lighten our burdens, a hope that one day we may join with our near and dear ones who have put on the name of God on their foreheads, who have joined with choirs of heaven singing and praising God always. May God help us to live our life full here on earth before we attain the life everlasting! Amen. **-John Rakesh**

Nov 5, 2017: XXXI Sunday of the Year

Mal 1:14b- 2:2b, 8-10; 1 Thes 2:7b-9,13; Matthew 23:1-12

“Be Humble as Your Heavenly Father Is”

The readings of today invite us to focus on humility. Humility is one of the aspects of human living but due to our limitations, we restrict ourselves to show humility in action. Today people want to live a luxuries life; they do anything and everything to attain pleasure at any cast. But today's readings ask us to accept others with humility, because God humbled Himself when He created us in His image and likeness.

The first reading is taken from the prophet Malachi. God instructs and sends Malachi to the people of Israel the chosen one to tell them that they have broken the covenant of the lord by their immoral life that turned their blessings into mourn. And he asks them to come back to the lord who created them. In the gospel Jesus teaches us to be careful about Pharisees and scribes. Because they teach the law but they do not follow it. Rather, their aims are to hold high positions and ranks in the society, and want to be called rabbi. But Jesus tells us there is one god for all and one teacher to be called that is Jesus himself. Therefore humble yourself to turn back to the lord. As St. Paul in the second read-

ing of today says that we are happy that we humbled ourselves as children in order to proclaim the gospel of Jesus. In the same way Paul also asks us to be humble in our mission of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus amidst diversity and sufferings.

Dear friends, Jesus as our model has taught us to be humble. In order to save the entire world He humbled and surrendered Himself fully in the hands of His Father. We also should have the attitude of humility in our daily mission to proclaim the gospel of Jesus. As pastors of the future church let us prepare ourselves to accept the reality with humility and lead the people in God's way with humility. **-R. Prabu**

Nov 12, 2017: XXXII Sunday of the Year

Wis 6:12-16; 1 Thes 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Keep Awake!

The main lesson that Jesus gives us today is to be alert. We must keep the flame of faith alive in our heart. This flame is lit with the oil of charity and prayer; charity performed through and for the love of God. It was a great honour for the bridesmaids to be chosen to members of the bridal party, but not all the members were ready when the Bridegroom came. Their lamps were going out of oil.

The Bible often uses the symbol of a Bride and Bridegroom to symbolize the love between God and His people; between Christ and his Church. As a Bride becomes one flesh with her Bridegroom, so Christ, the Divine Bridegroom becomes one with his Church. He sacrifices himself for her, even to the point of offering his life for her. All the members of the Church form part of that Mystical Body. In this Gospel the Church is also symbolized by the whole bridal party. We are reminded of what Christ says in another Gospel passage that many are called, but few are chosen. (cf. Mt 22:14)

The Gospel reminds us that we not saved automatically simply by being members of the Church. Unless we are striving for holiness we can't hope to enter the Kingdom of God. In his document *Dominus Iesus*, written when he was the Prefect for the

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Pope Benedict XVI teaches us the following: With the coming of the Saviour Jesus Christ, God has willed that the Church founded by him be the instrument for the salvation of all humanity (cf. Acts 17:30-31).

This truth of faith does not lessen the sincere respect which the Church has for the religions of the world, but at the same time, it rules out, in a radical way, that mentality of indifferentism “characterized by a religious relativism which leads to the belief that ‘one religion is as good as another’”. If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation. However, “all the children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word, and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be more severely judged”.

One understands then that, following the Lord's command (cf. Mt 28:19-20) and as a requirement of her love for all people, the Church “proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life...(Jn 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life”.

We must keep the flame of faith alive in our hearts through prayer, reception of the sacraments and works of charity, especially towards those who are least among us, so that when Christ calls us, and we never know when that time will be, we'll be ready to enter his Eternal Kingdom to take part in the Great Wedding Feast.

-Sunny Thomas

Nov 19, 2017: XXXIII Sunday of the Year

Prov 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31; 1 Thes 5:1-6, Matthew 25:14-30

Come and Join in Your Master's Joy

The readings of today illustrate how the children of God must be faithful to Him. The first reading portrays that the woman who

is wise and is blessed by God. The second reading states that those who are baptized in the name of Christ are sons of light and sons of the day. Their life should be a life of light to others. The gospel reading that is “The Parable of Talents” tells us how we should be faithful to God. In this connection, the gospel mentions three attitudes required of the servants of the master.

The word ‘talent’ in Bible refers to a huge amount of money, but in our context we can understand a talent in terms of a gift or ability with which a person is endowed. For example, we can say that a person has a great talent for music or a person has a great talent for dance. The servants in the parable are none other than you and me and the master is God our Father. Thus we are all servants of God and we all have been endowed with talents in varying degrees. All these talents are God given gifts. As we find in the parable, some are given more talents and some are given less talents. But all that is asked of us is that we should make use of the talents for others.

At the end of our life, we will be asked these questions: “How did you use the gifts I gave you”? So we need to utilize our gifts fruitfully. Each time we misuse or don’t use our gifts we say no to God and life. Faithfulness consists in responding to God’s call and making ourselves worthy of God’s call by living the Good News. So, it is very important for us to spend some time in reflecting on what our unique ‘talents’ or gifts or abilities are and then to ask how and then how we should use our talents.

-Suresh S.

Nov 26, 2017: Christ the King

Ezek: 34:11-12, 15-17; 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28; Mt 25:31-46

May Your Kingdom Come

Today, we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. Jesus Christ is the King of kings. The gospel of today’s liturgy contains the parable of the last judgment. It tells us, how the Lord would separate the just people from the unjust people. In the first reading of today, we see that God is the Shepherd of all. He says “I myself will care for my sheep and watch over them.” It shows that

Israel's God is God of defender of justice and upholder of the weak. Thus He will shepherd His flock with justice. The second reading of today's liturgy of the word also speaks of Jesus' kingdom. "Then comes the end when Jesus hands over the kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet." The Lord has been exalted through His resurrection therefore He will continue His work by destroying the hostile powers of Satan. Jesus will reign forever because He is the King of all universe.

The gospel of today tells us clearly, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, and then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people, one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand, and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, come, you that are blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (Mt 25:31-34). Every human being of every period of history will be gathered for the last judgment. All will be judged by their works of love and mercy. We should know that God's judgment does not depend on the number of titles we possess, the amount of knowledge we have, the famous position we have acquired, the wealth we have gained rather God sees the love and mercy we have shown to our neighbors.

Today we have become so indifferent to each other and thus we are not able to experience the love of God in our lives. The works of mercy are actions and practices, which Christians consider as expectations to be fulfilled by believers, and are a means of grace. This grace will aid us in eternal happiness. Jesus possesses the kingdom of heaven. So if we want to inherit life eternal we must see Jesus in others as St. Mother Teresa saw Jesus in the destitute, poor and marginalized. We are invited to see Jesus in others. The kingdom of Jesus is charity hence we will be judged according to the work of charity we do. For Jesus will say to us; "Come you that are blessed of my father, inherit the

kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Mt 25:34-36). In the present context how do we understand this Gospel passages? Today people are hungry not only for food, but also for the Word of God; they are thirsty, not only for water, but also for justice and love: the naked, not only for clothes, but for human dignity; the homeless, not only for a shelter made of bricks, but for a heart that understands and reaches out to them. The Lord will ask each one of us how we have served Him in others. Today let us introspect ourselves how we love Jesus in our neighbors because He says “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). As we celebrate the feast of Christ the King, let us examine ourselves, whom do we give first place in our lives? If Jesus is, in the first place in our lives then we will serve Him in the poor and the needy.

Jesus Christ, my Lord and God, you are King of kings and Lord of lords. I acknowledge you as my King, the sovereign ruler of my mind, heart and will. May your Kingdom come in our hearts, in our homes and in our country! Lord, May your Kingdom come on this earth, as it is in heaven! Amen.

-Augustin Tudu

December 3, 2017: First Sunday of Advent

Is 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7 1 Cor 1:3-9 Mk 13:33-37

Open Your Heart to the Lord

Imagine! You are sleeping. You are dreaming. A big lion is chasing you. You try to run away and you see a tiger coming in front of you. You turn sideways, but every side you turn to, you find a ferocious animal coming after you. How can you escape? The answer is: Wake up.

By waking up one enters a whole new world of reality, different from that of the dream world. What was a huge problem in

the dream state becomes a non-issue in the waking state. Dream state concerns and priorities lose their importance and new concerns and priorities take their place. E.g., you discover that your problem is no longer how to escape from wild beasts but how to beat the morning rush and arrive early for work. We can relate to the change that occurs between a dream consciousness and a wake consciousness. A similar and even more significant change occurs when we move from a state of being spiritually asleep to that of being spiritually awake, when the soul is awake and alert to spiritual reality.

In today's gospel Jesus admonishes and encourages his followers to remain alert in the spirit. He was about to leave them for an uncertain length of time. By their faith and commitment to Jesus, his followers are like people who have roused themselves from spiritual slumber. But the time of his absence would be a time of trial for their faith life when they would be tempted to doze off. He enjoins them to remain awake and watchful so that whenever he comes to them he would find them not sleeping but watching in faith, ready to welcome him.

Today we enter into the season of advent: a time of special preparation for the coming of the Lord. Mark's portrait of the doorman watching out to open for the Lord whenever he suddenly appears is an image of what we are expected to be doing all year long but especially during the season of advent. The doorman keeps awake in order to recognize and welcome the Lord at his coming. Faith, likewise, transforms us into people who are able to recognize the Lord and willing to receive him. Recognition is crucial because the Lord does not always come in easily recognizable ways. At Bethlehem he came in the form of a newborn child and people did not recognize him. In the Parable of the Last Judgment which we heard last Sunday he said he came to people in the form of the most needy and disadvantaged of this world and many did not recognize him. But true people of faith did recognize him and serve him in these people who live in the blind-spot of society. Faith is first a way of seeing, and then a way of living.

The “wicked” who were consigned to hell in the Last Judgment were probably waiting for the final coming of the Lord and failed to recognize him in his day-to-day coming. The shocker in that parable is that Christ comes into our lives in the form of the ordinary people and events of our everyday lives. We need to be awake in faith to recognize and serve Christ in these commonplace and routine encounters since it will do us no good to recognize him on the Last Day if we have not recognized and served him day by day.

Before we conclude, let’s say a word about Jesus’ saying: “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). This saying can be understood literally to mean that Jesus did not know the date of the end of the world. It can also be understood as a strategy meant to discourage the disciples from further inquiry into the matter. In either case the implication for us is the same: Put an end to idle speculations regarding the Last Day. Open your eyes in faith to see God present and active in your life and in your world. Open your heart and your house to the Lord who comes to you daily in the form of the needy man or woman. This is the best way to prepare to welcome the Lord when he comes on the Last Day.

-Munachi Ezeogu, cssp

December 10, 2017: Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah40: 1-5,9-11; 2 Pet 3:8-14; Mk 1: 1-8

Making the Way Straight

In the gospel of today, John the Baptist, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah (40:3) was the voice that was making the way straight for the Lord. He facilitated the coming of Jesus. He was a unique harbinger who paved the way for Christ’s coming by his austere life, preaching and death.

Some 2000 years ago John’s voice was heard in the desert, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and preparing the way of the Lord. He called people for a change of heart.

John the Baptist paved the way for Christ’s coming also by

his death. The purpose of his coming was to point out Christ for others. He was a forerunner. Other prophets only foretold about Christ's coming, but John the Baptist saw Christ's coming. He was a bridge between the Old Testament and New Testament.

By our good behaviour we too can lead others to God like John the Baptist did. We being the leaders of the Church, have to ask ourselves: 'how do we pave the way for God in others' lives?' People look at us, observe us and learn from us. They learn about God from us not only from what we preach and teach them, but also from the way we behave. Our scandalous life might become the reason for the other to remain far from the church. We need to live an exemplary life which leads the other to God.

As John the Baptist fulfilled his mission by paving the way for Christ's coming, so we, too have a mission in our lives: to pave the way for God's coming into our lives and into the lives of others. God has put us here for a purpose. We need to decipher our mission and fulfil it. In its specificity, our mission may vary from individual to individual, but in its goal of facilitating the God's kingdom on this earth, it remains the same.

Advent recalls that Jesus comes again to be reborn in us. We have to be baptised by the 'stronger and greater One', so that we may bear witness to him and mould our lives according to his spirit.

The advent message of this Sunday compels us to orient our life to Christ. The Lord is coming and we have to receive him. We have to remove all the obstacles that hinder us to receive the Lord so that we all will be ready to open the doors of our hearts to Him when he comes and knocks. **-Joel R. Fernandes**

December 17, 2017: Third Sunday of Advent

Is 61: 1- 2a, 10, 11; 1 Thes 5: 16-24; Jn 1: 6-8, 19- 28

Be Prepared to Rejoice

Advent is a period, a special season, a season of genuine waiting for the Word becoming flesh (Jn 1: 14), and God coming to meet the human in the history (Immanuel) (Mt 1: 23).

The coming of this King is marked by good news of deliver-

ance; good news to the oppressed, binding the brokenhearted, liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners and the Lord's favor to all those who wait for him eagerly and faithfully. It is through an attitude of sensitivity and a word of comfort that can change the history of the family, community and society at large. This mission will require faithfulness and commitment that of the bride and the bridegroom where they rejoice in each other and as the earth is faithful to the Lord the Creator in bringing its fruits.

Not despising the words of the prophet, we are called and invited to be rejoicing because we are nearing in encounter the true light which enlighten and deliver everyone. John the Baptist witnessed to this light rejoicing acknowledging himself only as a mere voice crying in the wilderness. Can we be in our own little way become a voice that can change our community that hold fast to what is good and abstain from every form of evil? Every act of kindness moved by love needs conviction that God has loved us first which in turn will lead to peace among all.

Fulton J. Sheen once remarked, "The Christmas gift of peace was the uncoiling of the links of a triple chain that unites a person with God, then with himself, and then with his neighbor." All we need is to reconcile our self with the cosmos.

May the coming King grant us the grace to be peace loving so that each and every one of us can receive him worthily and be a faithful witness. Let us rejoice, always rejoice for He is coming into each and every one of our lives. Amen.

-C. Peingam Augustine

Dec 24, 2017: Fourth Sunday of Advent

2 Sm 7:1-5, 8B-12, 14A, 16 Rom 16:25-27 Lk 1:26-38

Being the Mother of Jesus

The nursery school kids were preparing a Christmas play. Little Cynthia did not like the part she was assigned to play. She wanted to change parts with her friend Monica. When the teacher asked her why, she answered, "Because it is easier to be an angel than to be the mother of Christ." The little girl is certainly right.

To be the mother of Christ is no light matter. Yet difficult as it sounds, that is exactly what we are all called to be. In fact, we could say that even though Jesus was born in Bethlehem his real desire is to be born in the hearts of believers, to be re-produced by believers.

Mother of Christ is a title we usually reserve for Mary. But Mary is mother of Christ in two senses. She is mother of Christ in the physical sense that she carried Jesus in her womb and gave birth to him. This is an unrepeatable event and an honour that no other human being could share with her. But she is also mother of Christ in a spiritual sense. In a spiritual sense the role of being mother of Christ is available to all Christians. We all, men, women and children, can and should become mothers of Christ. The idea of Christians called to be mothers of Christ is very common among Christian mystics. The Dominican priest mystic, Meister Eckhart, said that God made the human soul for her to bear the divine Son, and that when this birth happens it gives God greater pleasure than the creation of heaven and earth.

What is this spiritual motherhood of Christ and how does it happen? For the answer we need to go right back to Jesus himself. "While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, 'Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.' But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother'." (Matthew 12:46-50)

This shows that (a) Jesus expects his followers to be not only his brothers and sisters but his mothers as well, and (b) the way to be the mother of Jesus is by doing the will of God. Spiritual motherhood of Christ is attained by saying yes to God, even when God appears to demand from us what is humanly impossible, like asking Mary to be a virgin mother. To become mothers of Christ we need to make the prayer of Mary our own: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your

word” (Luke 1:38).

This prayer of Mary has been known as the world’s greatest prayer. It is the prayer that brought God down from heaven to dwell in the soul and body of a lowly young woman. It is the prayer that brought about the greatest event in human history, God becoming human in Jesus. It is a prayer that changed forever the course of human history some 2000 years ago. This prayer is so very different from what has been called the world’s most common prayer, the prayer in which we try to get God to do our will. The world’s most common prayer says, “My will be done,” whereas the world’s greatest prayer says, “Thy will be done.”

Yes, little Cynthia was right. It is not easy to be the mother of Christ. But in today’s gospel Mary shows us how. It is in hearing God’s word and saying yes to God even when God’s will seems to go against all our plans and hopes for the future. As Christmas draws near, Mary reminds us that the best Christmas, in fact the only true Christmas, is that Christ be born not in the little town of Bethlehem but in the inner sanctuary of our hearts.

-Munachi Ezeogu, cssp

December 25, 2017: Nativity of Our Lord

Isaiah 52: 7-10; Eph 1:1-6; John 1:1-18

Christmas Makes Us Humble

In this Christmas night, the Son, second person of the trinity, our lord and God, the eternal Word became small; small enough to fit into a manger. He became a child, so that the Word could be grasped by man. We call this as Incarnation. One of the truths of incarnation is that God incarnates ‘not as He is’ but as ‘He who can be grasped by man’. So he takes the nature of man leaving the nature of God, which is the greater form of humility. Because by this, He left everything, even His very existence only for us “For a child has been born for us” (Is 9:6). It is really the self-giving love of our lord Jesus, which is not only manifested on the cross but also on the birth in the manger.

In today’s Gospel we encounter the maternal love of Mary, the fidelity of Saint Joseph, and the vigilance of the shep-

herds and their great joy. “She gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in manger” (Lk 2:7). As we know manger is narrow container for feeding animals. It is a small thing simply built on ground. Those who want to see inside of manger, first they have to bend down, because it is very small. Thus the birth in manger tells us that those who want to receive Jesus, first of all have to humble themselves. They have to bend down. They have to recognize that we are creatures of god not the Creator, we are the sinners; can be saved only by Him who is laying in the manger and our pride, jealous, enmity etc. are the great obstacles to bend down and see the one who is in the manger.

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night” (Lk2:8). The shepherds were the first to see this; to receive the news of Jesus’ birth, why? They were the first because they were among the last and the outcast. And they were the first because they were awake, keeping watch in the night, guarding their flocks. Even though they were considered as outcast people, they were sincerely doing the things, what God had assigned to them (They were awake, keeping watch in the night, guarding their flocks). Here I remember the words saint mother Teresa “we are called not to be successful but to be faithful”. Shepherds were always faithful before God. Therefore whatever may be the state of life, (clergy or lay; owner or worker) each one is bound up to do a duty for the building up of kingdom of God which requires the child like simplicity and humility like the shepherds.

I conclude this reflection by the prophecy of Isaiah 9:2 “The people who walked in darkness have seen a greater light” means ‘the people who walked in pride have seen a greater humility (i.e.) birth of God in a manger. **-Pramod**

Dec 31, 2017: The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

I Sir 3:2-6, 12-14 II Col 3:12-21 III Lk 2:22, 39-40

Priority of Family Life

A little boy greets his father as he returns from work with a question: “Daddy, how much do you make an hour?” The father

is surprised and says: "Look, son, not even your mother knows. Don't bother me now, I'm tired." "But Daddy, just tell me please! How much do you make an hour?" the boy insists. The father finally gives up and replies: "Twenty dollars." "Okay, Daddy," the boy continues, "Could you loan me ten dollars?" The father yells at him: "So that was the reason you asked how much I earn, right? Now, go to sleep and don't bother me anymore!" At night the father thinks over what he said and starts feeling guilty. Maybe his son needed to buy something. Finally, he goes to his son's room. "Are you asleep, son?" asks the father. "No, Daddy. Why?" replies the boy. "Here's the money you asked for earlier," the father said. "Thanks, Daddy!" replies the boy and receives the money. The he reaches under his pillow and brings out some more money. "Now I have enough! Now I have twenty dollars!" says the boy to his father, "Daddy, could you sell me one hour of your time?" Today's gospel has a message for this man and for all of us, and the message is that we need to invest more of our time in our family life.

The gospel shows us Jesus at the age of twelve. That was the age that every Jewish boy was expected to make his bar mitzvah and so become a responsible subject of the law. It was a ceremony of legal adulthood. From then on he was required to keep the law and make the annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem like any other Jewish man. One way teenagers celebrate their coming of age is to go out and do those things that the law had hitherto forbidden them to do. You know your boy is growing up when he stops asking where he came from and begins to not tell you where he is going. As we can see, Jesus was no exception. To celebrate his coming of age he attends the Temple Bible class without informing his parents. When his parents catch up with him after two days of searching for him everywhere, all he tells them is, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49). Even holy families do have their occasional tensions and misunderstandings.

The most puzzling part of the story, however, is the way it ends: "Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and

was obedient to them” (v.51). The twelve-year old adult Jesus already knows that his mission is to be in his Father’s house and be about his Father’s business. From the test-run he did in Jerusalem earlier that day, it was clear that he was already capable of doing it very well, because “all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers” (v. 47). The puzzle then is this: If Jesus, already at the age of twelve, was ready to begin his public mission, and was evidently well prepared for it, why would he go down with his parents and spend the next eighteen years in the obscurity of a carpenter’s shed only to begin his public ministry at the age of thirty? Were those eighteen years wasted years? Certainly not! In a way that is hard for us to understand, Jesus’ hidden life in Nazareth was as much a part of his earthly mission as his public life. We are reminded that it was at this time that “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour” (v.52). And when we reflect on the fact that for every one year of his public life Jesus spent ten years in family life, then we shall begin to understand the importance and priority he gave to family life.

We have two lives, a private or family life and a public or professional one. These two lives should be in harmony but very often they are in tension. Whereas Jesus resolved the tension by giving priority to his private life, we, unfortunately, often try to resolve it by giving priority to our professional life, leaving our family life to suffer. Rose Sands writes about the unhappy man who thought the only way he could prove his love for his family was to work hard. “To prove his love for her, he swam the deepest river, crossed the widest desert and climbed the highest mountain. She divorced him. He was never home.” The celebration today of the holy family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus reminds and challenges us to value and invest in our private life with our families before our professional life at the work place, even when our job is as important as saving the world.

-Munachi Ezeogu, cssp