

THE APOSTLES CREED

I believe in God,
the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended into hell;
on the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty;
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.

OUR LONGING FOR GOD



All human beings long for God. The desires of plants and animals are all biologically based. But within ourselves, we discover a longing for something *more*. We long for something more than food and pleasure and possessions, and even more than power, accomplishment, honor, popularity, and good human relationships. We long for something above and beyond *all* of these things. This longing for something *more* is a sign that we are made “in the image and likeness of God” (see Genesis 1:26-27). Because God made us in a special way *like* Himself, we are inherently related to God in our very being and have an inherent tendency toward God. This longing for *more*, then, is a really longing for *God*.

Signs that we desire something *more*:

- ***Nothing in this world satisfies us.*** Even when all our earthly desires are satisfied, we still want more, and it is never enough.
- ***Our desire for happiness:*** In everything we do, we desire to be happy and fulfilled. With experience, however, we discover that nothing finite satisfies us. Our deepest longing is for something infinite. Since only God is infinite, only He can fulfill this infinite desire of our hearts. It is for this reason that we can assert that all people long for God, whether they realize it or not. St. Augustine once said, “O Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”
- ***We wonder.*** We want to know. We long for knowledge, answers, meaning, insight, and truth. Ultimately, we want to know who we are, why we are here, where we come from, where are we headed after death, where happiness is found, how we should live, and if there is some sort of escape from sin, suffering, and death. All this propels us to look to God for the truth, love, goodness, peace, and salvation we desire.
- ***Our rational abilities and personal nature:*** We have self-reflexive awareness (the ability to be aware of our own awareness), rationality, conscience, free will, and a personal and relational nature. Having all of these abilities, along with the ability to think about God and the potential to be in relationship with Him, is a sign that we are meant to know and love Him.

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

“As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?”

—Psalm 42:1-2

“For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.” —Psalm 62:1

“O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where no water is.” —Psalm 63:1

“For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”

—Jeremiah 2:13

“What do you seek?” —John 1:38

John 4:1-42 (*the woman at the well*)

“I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger; and he who believes in me shall never thirst.” —John 6:35

Jesus said to the Twelve, “Will you also go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” —John 6:67-69

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *What strikes you about these passages from the Bible?*
2. *In the Gospel of Mark, some of the disciples of Jesus come to Jesus and say, “Everyone is searching for you” (Mark 1:37). They mean that everyone in the area was looking for Jesus because of His miracles and teachings. But how is this true on a deeper level, that everyone is searching for Christ, whether they realize it or not? What are people looking for? And how is it that what they are looking for is fulfilled in Christ?*
3. *What are some examples of people today searching God in the wrong places?*
4. *How do you experience longing for God in your own life?*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Ecclesiastes 1-3 / ***Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC):*** numbers 1-30

OTHER RELIGIONS: MAN'S QUEST FOR GOD



Human beings are inherently religious. Until modern times, every civilization has been deeply religious. The religions of the world are testimony that human beings are in search for meaning in life, for answers to the riddle of existence, and to find that *something more* we all long for.

Are all religions equal?

While there is some common agreement among the world's religions, the religions of the world often propose different answers to life's questions. While there tends to be general agreement on broad moral principals and ideals, there is great variance on more specific moral issues, the nature of the ultimate reality, what happens after death, what we primarily need to be saved from, how God has or has not revealed Himself, and what He desires. Many traditional religions are polytheistic (they believe in many gods). Some, like Hinduism and Buddhism, believe in reincarnation. Some believe that the material world is inherently bad. Some believe the ultimate reality is not personal. The more one studies the world's great religions, the more one sees that there are some very fundamental differences, and that they cannot all be true or right about everything. The differences are too fundamental and contradictory for all religions to be equally true.

How do Catholics view other religions?

Catholics believe all that is true and good, wherever it is found. We therefore affirm everything that is good and true in other religions. We cannot endorse anything that is not good or true, however. It is important to understand other religions accurately. It is always important to respect other believers as well. It is fitting to look for how God is at work in them. None of this should mitigate our devotion to our own Christian faith, however.

Is it arrogant to think that one's own religion is right and others are wrong?

One can be arrogant and be wrong. One can be arrogant and be right. It is best to be humble and right. It is not necessarily arrogant to believe that something is true, and to communicate this with conviction to others, for example that the law of gravity is true. If this is the case with scientific or historical facts, it is also the case with religious belief. One should make sure one is right. To be right, though, is not necessarily to be arrogant.

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

“But Ruth said, ‘Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.’” —Ruth 1:16

1 Kings 10:1-10 (*about the Queen of Sheba*)

“And Elijah came near to all the people, and said, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him.”

—1 Kings 18:21

“In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious.” —Isaiah 11:10

Matthew 2:1-12 (*about the Magi seeking the one to be born king of the Jews*)

Acts 17:22-31 (*Paul preaching to the Athenians in the Areopagus*)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Why do you think that Ruth, the Queen of Sheba, and the Magi are searching for a religion outside of their own, and come to Israel seeking God?*

2. *How is Elijah’s challenge relevant today?*

3. *How does Paul try to convince the Athenians of the true God and of Christ?*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Psalm 139 / ***Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC):*** numbers 31-49

DOES GOD EXIST?



People disagree on the existence and nature of the ultimate reality. But what is actually the case? Does God exist or not? Is God personal or not? Are there many gods or only one God? And can we ever really know the truth?

There are two ways to know God exists: through *Faith* and through *Reason*. We know God exists through *faith*, because God has revealed Himself to the world and given His Holy Spirit to assure our hearts of the truth of what He has revealed. We know God exists through *reason*, because everything created points to Him. So, we can come to know that God exists even apart from faith. St. John Paul II once said that faith and reason are like the two wings of a bird by which we ascend to the heights of truth.

Why do many people today doubt or deny God's existence?

There are psychological and moral reasons that people deny or doubt God's existence. Many people were never taught about the one true God. Many have misunderstandings about God. They then reject God based on these misunderstandings. Many reject God because they project upon Him the faults and shortcomings of their parents or other human beings. Their rejection of God is often a psychological attempt to assert their own value and independence. Some reject God, because they think the idea of God threatens or diminishes human responsibility, autonomy, or freedom. Some would rather not believe in God's existence, because they would then be accountable to someone else and would have to change their behavior and lifestyle. While these are many real reasons people doubt or deny God's existence—and these need to be understood and taken seriously—none of these are serious intellectual arguments against God's existence.

All intellectual objections to God's existence boil down to two. The first objection concerns evil and suffering. The argument is that an all-good God would not permit evil in a universe He created, or at least not as much evil as there is. The second objection concerns the apparent self-sufficiency of the universe. The argument here is that, because the world explains itself, it doesn't need God to explain it. Accordingly, God is like a fifth wheel (unnecessary).

How do we know God exists through reason, despite these objections?

In short, God can permit evil in this world for a greater good. Plus, this world's evils are only temporary. Second, the universe only *apparently* explains itself. Ultimately it doesn't explain itself, and modern science, more than ever before, attests to this. Science is also limited to speak only about the physical causes within the universe.

Since no individual thing in the universe explains itself, but must be explained by something outside of itself, the whole universe also cannot explain itself, but must be explained by a cause outside of itself, sufficient to bring it into being. Again, modern science would echo the fact that everything in the universe is dependent. Ultimately, the existence, dynamism, goodness, and order of the universe must depend on a being whose existence is not dependent at all. This being must also be supremely intelligent (to create such a universe), and the ultimate source of goodness found in the universe. This being we call God.

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

“Then Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” —Exodus 3:13-14

“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” —Psalm 14:1

Wisdom 13:1-9 (*From the greatness and beauty of created things
comes a corresponding perception of their Creator*)

“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world His invisible nature, namely, His eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.” —Romans 1:19-23

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *What tells you that God exists?*
2. *Why do people doubt God's existence?*
3. *How might you help others to know that God exists?*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Sirach 42:15-43:33 / ***Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC):*** numbers 198-231

GOD'S NATURE



What can we know about God?

Both faith and reason tell us about God. What can we learn about God through reason? Just as an artist's works tell us something about the artist, so every created reality reflects the Creator in some way. Since God is the source of the existence, goodness, life, and order in the universe, He must possess these things in a preeminent way. God must, therefore, be the fullness of being and existence, perfect goodness, infinite life, and infinitely wise and intelligent. He must also have all the perfections of created things in a supreme way but without their limitations. Therefore, God cannot be a physical thing subject to change and limited to space and time. We therefore say that God is *perfect* (He has no imperfections or limitations), *infinite* (there is no limit to Who God is), *spiritual and incorporeal* (He is Spirit, not a body), *one* (there is only one God), *personal* (He is Someone we can relate to, not an impersonal force), *omniscient* (He knows all things), *omnibeneficent* (He is all good), *omnipotent* (He can do all things), *omnipresent* (He is present in all things), *transcendent* (He is beyond all things), *intimate* (He is infinitely close to everything), *infinitely happy* (He is infinite bliss), *immortal* (He is not subject to death), *unchangeable* (He doesn't change like we do), and so forth. Our faith, as revealed in the Bible, echoes and affirms all these "attributes" of God. Scripture reveals something even deeper about God: that He is a Trinity of Persons, that His deepest mystery is love, and that He is infinitely merciful and wants to forgive us.

What are some common misunderstandings of God?

Some people have a primitive idea of God, such as thinking that He is an old man with a beard, or some invisible light or cloud. Many atheists and agnostics do not believe in God because they misunderstand the nature of God and often caricature our belief in God. Some people have a very imperfect view of God, in the sense that they think He is an overly harsh dictator who is ever ready to punish, or an absent and uncaring father who doesn't care about what we do. Some wrongly identify God with the totality of all that exists, or some part of it, like the spiritual part, or the good part. This view is called *pantheism*.

If all our thoughts and words fall infinitely short of the mystery of God, how can we talk about God at all?

Our words and thoughts are signs of God. Signs point to something else, something greater than their own reality. Yes, all our thoughts and words fall infinitely short of the reality of God. Yet, they express what God is in a limited, but helpful way. It is also important to note that the Bible speaks of God in two ways: *metaphorically* and *literally*. Metaphorically, God is at times described as light, or as a shepherd, or as walking, or as getting angry, or as stretching out His arm. It is important to interpret metaphors as metaphors, and not literally. At other times, the Bible speaks more literally. Both ways of speaking are important and reveal important things to us about God, but it is important to distinguish and not confuse them. Finally, God has given us various titles we can use to refer to Him, all of which emphasize something different about Him. In the Old Testament, God reveals His proper name as YHWH, which in Hebrew means, “I AM WHO AM.” Jews do not pronounce this name out of reverence for God. God is also called “Adonai,” (my Lord), and Elohim (God), and many other such titles. In the New Testament, the name of Jesus, significantly, means “God saves.”

How do we know that God is personal, and not an impersonal force?

Some people think that God is an impersonal force or reality, since being personal is seen as a limitation to them. Certainly, God is not personal in our limited way. Yet, He must be personal, since He must possess the fullness of all created perfections in an infinitely greater way than we possess them. One of the perfections that we human beings have is the ability to know and love on a rational level. If God cannot know and love rationally, then we have a perfection He doesn’t have, which would mean that God is not perfect. God must know and love, and for this reason we must affirm that God is personal. Indeed, God knows and loves—like us—but in an infinitely more perfect and preeminent way.

What does the Bible tell us about the attributes of God?

Read carefully through the following collection of categorized quotes and references in order to see how and where God’s many attributes are taught in Scripture. Note that this is a representation, and not an exhaustive list.

THE FULLNESS OF BEING (Spirit, One, Living, Outside of Space and Time, Most Holy)

“I AM WHO AM.” —Exodus 3:14

“God is spirit.” —John 4:24

“The LORD our God is one LORD.” —Deuteronomy 6:4

“I am the LORD and there is no other.” —Isaiah 45:5

“Living God” (see Dt 5:26; Jos 3:10; 1 Sam 17:26, 36; 2 Kgs 19:4; Est 13:16; Ps 42:2; 84:2; Is 37:4; Jer 10:10; Dan 6:20, 26; 14:5-6, 24-25; Hos 1:10; Mt 16:16; 26:63; Acts 14:15; Rom 9:26; 2 Cor 3:3; 6:16; 1 Th 1:19; 3:15; 4:10; Heb 3:12; 9:14; 12:22; Rev 7:2)

“Blessed be God who lives forever.” —Tobit 13:1

“They pass away; but you are the same, and your years have no end.” —Psalm 102:27

“Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” —James 1:17

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory”

—Isaiah 6:3; see also Revelation 4:8

INFINITE (Unending, Inexhaustible, Transcendent, Immortal)

“Though we speak much, we cannot reach the end, and the sum of our words is, ‘He is the all.’ ... when you praise the Lord, praise Him as much as you can; for He will surpass even that. When you exalt him, put forth all your strength, and do not grow weary, for you cannot praise Him enough.”

—Sirach 43:27 & 30

God “alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light.” —1 Timothy 6:16

PERFECT (Without Limitations and Imperfections; Nothing Unattractive)

“You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” —Matthew 5:48

ALL-KNOWING (Truth and Wisdom)

“For the Most High knows all that may be known.” —Sirach 42:18

“There is one who is wise, greatly to be feared, sitting upon His throne” —Sirach 1:8

“O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!” —Romans 11:33

ALL-GOOD (Loving, Good, Just, Merciful, and Forgiving)

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy and faithfulness, keeping merciful love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.” —Exodus 34:6-7

“The LORD is good to all, and His compassion is over all that He has made.” —Psalm 145:9

“Righteous are you, O Lord; all your deeds are just and all your ways are mercy and truth, and you render true and righteous judgment forever.” —Tobit 3:2

“God is love.” —1 John 4:16

ALL-BEAUTIFUL (Light, Majesty, Splendor, Glory)

“If through delight in the beauty of these things men assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them... For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.”

—Wisdom 13:3 & 5

See also Psalm 27:4 and 96:6

ALL-POWERFUL (Almighty; Can Do All things)

“For with God nothing will be impossible.” —Luke 1:37

See also Gen 18:14, Jud 16:13, Jer 32:17 & 27, Wis 13:4, Sir 39:18, Mt 19:26

ALL-PRESENT (Is Present; Upholds All Things)

“Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, ‘Let the darkness cover me, even the darkness is not dark to you, the night is bright as the day; for darkness is as light with you.’” —Psalm 139:7-12

PERFECT & INFINITE HAPPINESS

“You show me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy, in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.” —Psalm 16:11

“His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.’” —Matthew 25:21

How can God have all these attributes if He is not divided into parts but is perfectly one?

In God, all attributes are one. We speak of them separately only because we experience these qualities as separate in creation. Thinking of a prism is a helpful way of understanding this truth. God is like the white light that shines through the prism. We might not see that light directly, but we do see that light refracted into the many colors of the color spectrum shining through the prism. So, even as it is necessary to affirm each of the many attributes of God, and to sometimes speak of them separately, it is important always to remember that in God all these attributes are one. God's perfection is His truth is His love is Himself, etc.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you think of God? Have you ever had any misunderstandings of God?

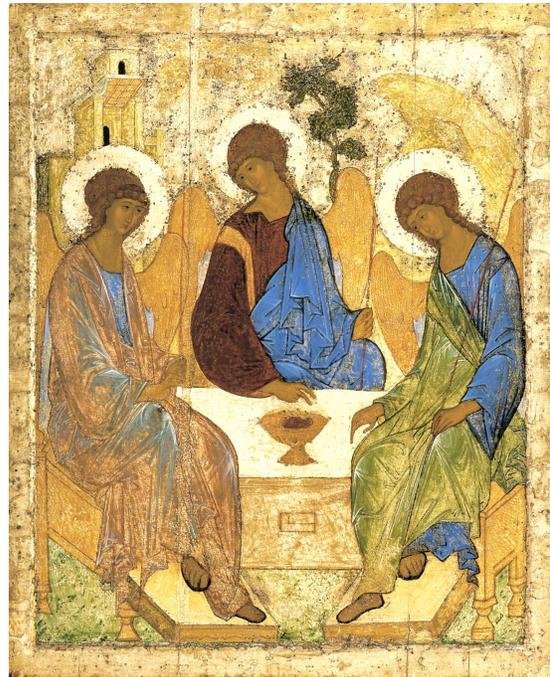
2. How can we better understand and fall in love with the mystery of God?

3. How can we help others better understand and love God?

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: John 14-16, Genesis 18 / *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC):* 232-278

THE HOLY TRINITY



Through reason and the Old Testament we can know that God is one, the source of all that is, personal, and infinitely perfect. We only come to know that God is in one sense Three, however, through the coming of Christ, and through the gift of faith that assures us of this beautiful and sublime truth about God.

What is the Trinity?

The Trinity is the mystery of God, the mystery that God is a divine Communion of Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God possesses one divine *nature*, and yet in the one divine nature of God there are three *persons*. There is an inner dynamism in God, in which we say that the Son proceeds (comes forth / *is begotten*) eternally from the Father, while the Holy Spirit proceeds (*is spirated*, or “breathed forth”) eternally from the Father and the Son both, as from one principle. *What* the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is, is the same (the one divine nature). *Who* the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is, is distinct (three divine *Persons*). So, the Father is not the Son, nor the Holy Spirit. The Son is not the Father, nor the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not the Father, nor the Son. Yet, the Father is fully God, the Son is fully God, and the Holy Spirit is fully God, since they all fully share (or possess) the same divine nature. The Persons of the Trinity are therefore *coequal* and *coeternal*. However, there are not three “Gods,” but only one God. The *Nature* is one, the *Persons* are three. Even though the Trinity is a mystery beyond our mind’s grasp, it is important that we understand these basic truths about God.

Why do we believe that God is Triune?

We believe in God as Trinity because of Jesus Christ. The New Testament reveals that Christ is the eternal Son of God, fully one with the Father. And yet, Christ is also distinct from the Father, since He prays to Him and relates to Him as distinct from Himself. Jesus also taught us about the Holy Spirit, Who is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. Here again, the Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son, and yet is still divine and fully one with Them.

If the Trinity is God, why wasn't this revealed earlier, in the Old Testament?

We find intimations (hints) of the mystery of the Trinity in the Old Testament. For example, the Old Testament refers to both the word, or wisdom, of God, and the spirit of God. The word and spirit of God are depicted as being distinct from God in one sense, and yet in another sense they belong to, and are “part of,” God. However, these remain only hints. It was important that the people of God would first come to understand the oneness of God before coming to understand a deeper dimension to the mystery of God. When Christ comes, He reveals the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to us in an explicit way. It is only through His coming that we are prepared to understand God's inner mystery as the Trinity.

How can God be not only one, but three?

Within creation, we find many things that are both three and one, and are thus reflections of the Trinity. In fire, we have the reality of fire, and then the light and heat that comes forth from the fire. Water, and many other substances, can also exist in three different forms, depending on temperature: a liquid, a solid, or a gas. Some plants, like the three-leaf clover, are one plant with three leaves. All of these things are analogies. They resemble the Trinity in some way. And yet they also fall infinitely short of the mystery of the Trinity, and are thus more dissimilar than similar to the Trinity in the end. The Persons of the Trinity should not be understood to be three parts of God, since God has no parts. The Three Persons should also not be understood to be three different masks of God, since then God would not really be three but only appear to be three. Analogies can be helpful, but they all “limp.”

Perhaps the most helpful analogy is found within our own soul. Each of us has the ability to know and love, and we are able to know and love ourselves. We can call these abilities to know and love ourselves “self-reflexive knowledge” and “self-reflexive love.” As said before, since *we* know ourselves, *God* must know Himself, but in an infinitely more perfect way. *We* don't know ourselves perfectly however. Our inner “self image” falls far short of who we fully are. It is not ourselves, but only an idea about ourselves. It is like looking into a mirror, where the image in the mirror looks like us, but is not actually us. Since God knows Himself perfectly, however, the *knowing* with which He knows Himself is perfect. It is a perfect image of Himself within Himself. It is no less than Himself, and doesn't fall short of Who He fully is. It is this perfect self-image of God within God that we call the eternal “Word” or “Son” of God. Further, God not only knows Himself perfectly. He loves Himself perfectly. One can say that the Father and Son love each other so perfectly in eternity that their love is no less than a third divine Person, the Holy Spirit. So, the Son comes forth from the Father in virtue of God knowing Himself perfectly. And the Holy Spirit comes forth from the Father and Son in virtue of God loving Himself perfectly.

Another beautiful image of the Trinity is the family. In the book of Genesis, Eve is depicted as coming forth from the side of Adam. She is equal to Adam, and yet distinct. Adam and Eve, in their married love, then give themselves to each other, with a result that a distinct person (a child) comes forth from both of them. It is important not to project the limitations and humanness of this analogy into the mystery of God. But it is significant that the family reflects

the Trinity in a very beautiful way. It is worth contemplating that our families were created to resemble the Trinity, and that our families are called to express and reflect the eternal love of the Trinity in their own way.

Lastly, St. John in the New Testament tells us, “God is love” (1 John 4:16). But in the phenomenon of love there must be three elements: a lover, a beloved, and the love between them. Indeed, God is a divine and eternal Communion of Love, the Father loving His beloved Son in the eternal and personal love of the Holy Spirit.

While we will never fully be able to comprehend the mystery of God as Trinity, these analogies help us to understand how God can be, and is, both One and Triune.

What is the significance of God being Trinity?

It is the Trinity that created us. It is the Trinity that saves us. It is the Trinity that comes to dwell within us and make us holy. We are also destined to share in the inner life and love of the Trinity forever. The Trinity is at the heart of all that we believe, live, and strive for.

How do we pray to the Trinity?

Typically, we Catholics pray to the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit, especially in the Mass. We can also pray to the Trinity as one. We can and should address each member of the Trinity often, as well. It is always understood that we are always praying to the whole Trinity even if we might focus on One Person at any given time. The Persons of the Trinity are never separate or divided. We Catholics celebrate the mystery of the Trinity in a special way on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity every year, one week after the Solemnity of Pentecost.

Where do we see the Trinity taught in Scripture?

Kindly read through the following collection of categorized quotes and references:

GOD IS TRINITY: 3 PERSONS IN ONE GOD

See Matthew 28:19; John 14:16-17; 3:34; 15:26; Acts 1:6-8; Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 6:11; 12:3-6; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 2:18; 4:4-6; 1 Pt 1:2; 1 John 5:6-7; Jude 20-1; Revelation 1:9-10

THE PERSONS ARE DISTINCT

“The Word was with God.” —John 1:1

“There is...one Spirit..., one Lord..., one God and Father of us all.” —Ephesians 4:4-6

EACH PERSON IS EQUAL IN DIVINITY

The Father is God. “Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me.” —John 11:41

The Son is God. “the Word was God” —John 1:1; see also Mark 2:7; John 8:58; 10:33,

20:28. Jesus “called God his Father, making himself equal with God.” —John 5:18

The Holy Spirit is God.

“For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God...”

No one understands the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.”

—1 Corinthians 2:10-11

... the Father almighty...

THE NATURE OF GOD IS ONE (There are not 3 Gods but 1)

“He is one, and there is no other besides he.” —Mark 12:33

“I and the Father are one.” —John 10:30

THE TRINITY HINTED AT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

God’s Word (or Wisdom)

God’s Spirit

Passages: Genesis 1 & 18; Psalms 57:3; 61:7; 138:2; Wisdom 7

TRINITARIAN THEOPHANIES (Manifestations of God)

The Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38), Baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:16-17), Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8)

Old Testament Theophanies: Burning Bush, Mount Sinai, Consecration of the Temple

THE INDWELLING TRINITY

“If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” —John 14:23

“And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.” —John 14:16-17

See also 1 Corinthians 3:16 & 6:19

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *What does Rublev’s Icon of the Trinity tell us about the Trinity?*
2. *How might you grow in your appreciation of the Trinity in your life?*
3. *How can our families and communities more greatly resemble the inner love of the Trinity?*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Genesis 1-3 / ***CCC:*** 279-324

CREATION



Why did God create the universe?

The philosopher Leibniz once asked, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” It is a deep and fundamental question all of us have asked in our own way: Why are we here? Why do we exist? Why does anything exist at all?

God could not have created the universe because of some inner need, or for His own benefit, because He would not then be perfect, which means He would not be God. But God must have created the universe for *some* reason, since every action is for an end, and creation is an action. Further, the end of any action is some good that is aimed for. With much thought and prayer, one can eventually come to realize that there is only one possible reason God could have created the universe: for the good of creation itself. However, only rational creatures, such as ourselves, could actually appreciate any good God had in mind. One could reason that God must have created the universe in some way for *our* good, for *us*.

Apart from faith, however, this is as much as we could guess. Through Christ, we come to learn that God created all things out of nothing, only so that we, who did not before exist, might one day come to share in the infinite life and love of the Trinity forever. In other words, God created the universe out of an act of generosity. He created the world in order to share: He, Who did not need anything, willed that other beings might come to enjoy what He enjoys in eternity: His own infinite love and joy.

This, then, is the whole reason we exist: that one day we might share eternal life with God. There can be nothing greater than this. God could not give us any greater good.

Creation is also the foundation and backdrop for everything that will later unfold in the drama of salvation, in God’s plan for us that will culminate in Christ. In Christ, God joins Himself permanently to the created world. He weds Himself to humankind. The Gospel of John tells us that the “Word” through whom God created the universe has finally become “flesh” (John 1:1-3, 14). Likewise, St. Paul tells us that Christ is “the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. . .” (Colossians 1:15-16).

Why did God create many things?

Every created thing reflects God in its own way. But if God only created one type of thing, or only a few things, we would get a much more limited idea of God. Because there are many beautiful things that God created, we get a better idea of God's infinite beauty and grandeur through them. In a similar way, we get a much better idea of who an artist is if we see many of his masterpieces versus only one or a few.

It is also important to note that God did not create only physical things that we can see and touch. He created *spiritual beings* (angels), *material beings* (the visible universe and its life forms), and certain beings which are *both spiritual and material* (humans).

How are faith and science compatible, since they seem to give us two conflicting views about the origins of the universe and humankind?

The beginning of the Bible contains two creation accounts. They are both different, and neither of them claims to be an eyewitness or scientific account of the origins of the universe and humankind. This doesn't make these accounts untrue, however. While scientific accounts tell us about the physical and technical "mechanics" regarding the origins of the universe and humankind, the Bible reveals much deeper truths to us: that God created the world out of nothing, that God is different than—and infinitely transcends—the world, that God cares for us and guides our lives, that the world is good and ordered, that human beings have a special dignity in virtue of being made in the image and likeness of God, that we are called to respect creation and be good and creative stewards of it, that we have fallen away from God through sin, but that God has a plan to save us.

Faith and reason cannot contradict each other. Therefore, whatever the legitimate findings of science tell us about the universe and its origins must harmonize with what God has revealed. Science reveals *how* God did things and the processes through which things came to be in their present form. The Bible and our faith tell us the deeper meaning of creation and God's plan for us.

Interestingly, the present theory about the origins of the universe, popularly called *The Big Bang Theory*, was first proposed by a physicist who was a Catholic priest, Fr. Georges Lemaître. This theory is very much in harmony with what Catholic belief professes about creation. Both tell us that there is a beginning to the universe. Furthermore, the Catholic Church has never condemned the *Theory of Evolution*, and many modern popes have publicly acknowledged it. The Church teaches that there is no problem with Catholics affirming the theory of evolution as long as they affirm that God must have created the soul of humans whenever they first properly existed, and in some reasonable way uphold the doctrines of *Original Justice*, *Original Sin*, and the *unity of humankind*, which modern science confirms.

In summary form, then, what are the basic teachings of the Church on Creation?

- God freely created all things.
- The whole Trinity creates.
- God made us for Himself, so that one day we might share in His life and love forever.
- God did not use pre-existent material to create the universe, but created all things *ex nihilo* (out of nothing).
- The universe did not always exist but was created at the beginning of time.
- God is distinct from the universe and all created things, and infinitely transcends them. We cannot identify God with the whole universe or anything in it (*pantheism*).
- God constantly sustains all things and guides history through His *Providence*.
- Everything that God created is *good*. Evil is a privation, not something in itself.
- All created things reflect the goodness and beauty of God.
- God created *material* beings (the visible universe and all life forms), *spiritual* beings (angels), and beings that are both *spiritual and material* (humans).
- Human beings have a special dignity with *intrinsic worth* since they are made in the image and likeness of God.
- The goodness of creation is the basis for the natural law, justice, morality and the good stewardship of the universe, of living things, and of the environment.
- Faith and reason cannot contradict each other. Therefore, all legitimate findings of science must harmonize with what God has revealed. It is permitted for Catholics to affirm the *Big Bang Theory* and the *Theory of Evolution*, so long as Catholics uphold all essential truths of the faith concerning the origins of the universe and humankind. If God prepared the human body through evolution, He had to directly create the soul when humans first began to exist.
- Creation is the foundation and the backdrop of God's saving plan for us.
- Christ is the center of creation and the culmination of human history.

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. . . And God saw everything that he made, and behold, it was very good.” —Genesis 1:1, 31

“The heavens are telling the glory of God.” —Psalm 19:1

“Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of His laws.” —2 Maccabees 7:23

“I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. Thus also mankind comes into being.” —2 Maccabees 7:28

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” —John 1:1-5, 14

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all men life and breath and everything.” —Acts 17:24-25

“God gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

—Romans 4:17

“He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.” —Colossians 1:15-16

“In these last days He has spoken to us by a Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the ages.” —Hebrews 1:2

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Why did God create the universe?*
2. *What do created things tell us about God?*
3. *How can faith and science be seen in harmony?*
4. *What are the moral implications to the goodness of creation?*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Revelation 5 & 7 / *CCC:* 325-354

ANGELS AND DEMONS



God created not only the visible, material universe. He also created a multitude of spiritual beings we call *Angels*. Angels are pure spirits. They do not have bodies. They are totally inaccessible to us through our senses. Although they sometimes make themselves known to human beings through physical manifestations, this is only a way of communicating to us and is not their actual nature.

Angels are personal beings that are highly intelligent. They know things intuitively which we know through the process of learning.

Angels were all created in grace, a grace that was moving them toward *Heaven*. However, God left them free to say 'yes' to this grace, or to resist it. We learn in Scripture and from Jesus that many angels resisted God's grace. They were very aware of what they were doing and the consequences of their decision. We call them *Demons*. *Satan*, which means "adversary," was the chief rebellious angel. Most of the angels, it seems, were faithful to God and entered *Heaven* immediately, while the demons chose to be eternally separated from God in a state we call *Hell*. The Scriptures reveal that it was because of pride, envy, and wanting to be like God that the demons rejected God (Genesis 3:5; Wisdom 2:24).

Since God made everything interrelated, He willed that the angels would have some interaction with us and some influence in our affairs. Angels are therefore aware of us. They care and pray for us. They guide and protect us. However, God also allows the demons to influence us. The *ordinary* work of angels and demons is hidden and common. In a way we are often not aware of, angels are always trying to help us to be faithful to God and to do good, while the demons are subtly trying to tempt us into sin. Demons tempt us, because this is their way of trying to get back at God. They want us to echo and join in their rebellion. Demons are not behind every temptation, however.

The *extraordinary* (out-of-the-ordinary) work of angels and demons is much rarer, and consists in visible and sensorial manifestations to us, when there is a kind of apparition of an angel or demon, or when they make their presence known to us in a more open and evident manner.

How do we know angels really exist?

We know that angels and demons really exist for the following reasons:

- Jesus explicitly speaks about them many times.
- Church teaching affirms their existence.
- Angels appear throughout the whole of Scripture.
- Many people have experienced manifestations of angels or demons throughout history.
- It is fitting that God created not only material beings and beings that are both spiritual and material (us), but also beings which are purely spiritual, namely angels.

Are there different types of angels?

Although there are not different “species” of angels like there are among animals and plants, Scripture does talk about different categories of angels, such as *Seraphim* (Is 6:2, 6) or *Cherubim* (Genesis 3:24). We are even given the names of three particular angels in Scripture: *Michael* (Daniel 12:1), *Gabriel* (Daniel 9:21), and *Raphael* (Tobit 3:17). Michael’s name means, “Who is like God?” Gabriel means “the Might of God,” and *Raphael* means the “Healing of God.” In the church calendar of feasts, which we call the *Liturgical Calendar*, we celebrate the Feast of the Archangels on September 29th.

Jesus also speaks about children having angels that always see the face of God (Matthew 18:10). This is the basis of our understanding of *Guardian Angels*. The Church teaches that human beings all have a guardian angel assigned to them by God who seeks to guide them to eternal life. We celebrate the feast of the Guardian Angels on October 2nd.

Where do angels appear in the Bible?

In the Old Testament, an angel guards the way to paradise (Gen 3:24). Angels guide and intervene in the lives of the patriarchs (Gen 16:7-14; 19:1-29; 21:17-18; 22:11-19; 24:7; 28:12; 31:11; 32:1-2; 48:16; Hos 12:4), Moses (Ex 3:2; Acts 7:30, 35, 38), Balaam (Num 22:22, 35), Joshua (5:13-15), and the judges (Judg 2:1, 4; 5:23; 6:11-12, 20-22; 13:3-21), kings (2 Sam 24:16; 2 Kings 19:35; 1 Chron 21:12; 2 Chron 32:21; Is 37:36), and prophets of Israel (1 Kings 19:5, 7; 2 Kings 1:3, 15; Is 6:2-1; Bar 6:7; Ezek 40:3; Dan 3:25, 28, 37; 6:22; 13:55, 59; 14:34; Zech 1:9, 11-14, 19; 2:3; 3:1-3, 5-6; 4:4-5, 10; 5:5, 10; 6:4-5; 12:8). An angel guides the people of Israel through the desert to the Promised Land (Ex 14:19; 23:20-23; 32:34; 33:2; Num 20:16; Is 63:9). The manna which the people of Israel ate on their way through the desert is described as the “bread of angels” (Ps 78:25; Wis 16:20). Angels are also mentioned in the Psalms (34:7; 35:5-6; 91:11; 103:20; 148:2), in Job (Job 4:18; 33:23), in Tobit (5:4, 17; 5:22-6:1, 4-5, 7; 11:14; 12:15, 22) and in 1 Maccabees (11:6; 15:22-23).

In the New Testament, angels surround the events in Christ's early life (Lk 1:11-19, 26-38; 2:9-15, 32; Mt 1:20, 24; 2:13, 19). Jesus refers to angels several times in His public ministry (Mt 13:27, 39, 41, 49; 16:27; 18:10; 22:30; 24:31, 36; 25:31; 26:53; Mk 8:38; 12:25; 13:32; Lk 9:26; 12:8-9; 15:10; 16:22; Jn 1:51), and angels serve Him after His temptations in the desert (Mt 4:11; Mk 1:13) and in the Garden of Gethsemane (Lk 22:43). Angels remove the stone placed over His tomb (Mt 28:2) and announce the good news of His resurrection to the women at the tomb (Mt 28:2-7; Mk 16:5-7; Lk 24:4-7, 23; Jn 20:12-13).

Angels play a major role in the Acts of the Apostles (5:19; 6:15; 8:26; 10:3-8; 22; 11:13-14; 12:7-11, 15, 21-23; 23:8, 9; 27:23-24). They are also mentioned many times in the New Testament epistles (Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 4:9; 6:3; 11:10; 13:1; 2 Cor 11:14; 12:7; Gal 1:8; 3:19; 4:14; Col 2:18; 2 Th 1:7; 5:21; Heb 1:4-7, 13; 2:2, 5, 7, 9, 16; 12:22; 13:2; Jas; 1 Pet 1:12; 3:22; 2 Pet 2:4, 11; Jude 6) and appear abundantly in the book of Revelation (1:1, 20; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 5, 7, 7, 14; 5:2, 11; 7:1-2, 11; 8:2-13; 9:1, 11, 13-15; 10:1, 5, 7-10; 11:1, 15; 12:7-9; 14:6, 8-10, 15-19; 15:1, 1, 6-8; 16:1, 3-5, 8, 10, 12, 17; 17:1, 7; 18:1, 21; 19:17; 20:1; 21:9, 12, 17; 22:6, 8, 16).

How should we relate to the angels?

We should be aware of the presence of angels, even though we can't see them. Since they form part of the Church, we should see them as spiritual allies and friends. We can and should ask for their prayers and assistance, as we do with each other and the saints.

As mentioned, each year the Church gives us two feasts of angels (*Archangels* and *Guardian Angels*) in order to honor the angels and remind us of their presence and activity. The angels are mentioned in the prayers of every Mass. There are also many popular prayers to angels. The most popular prayers are the *St. Michael Prayer* and the *Guardian Angel Prayer*.

It is easy to not fully appreciate angels. It is also possible to have an imbalanced devotion to angels or fear of demons, in a way that distracts us from God. True devotion to the angels—guided by the Church's faith—will draw us closer to God, not farther away.

Does the Church still perform exorcisms?

Yes. The Church has been entrusted with the mission of Christ, part of which involves deliverance from evil spirits. Because demons are real and do influence people, the Church calls upon the power of Christ in helping people to overcome evil spirits. Evil spirits influence most people only through temptation. For some people, evil spirits have a particular influence, involving possession or harassment. For this reason, every diocese is supposed to designate a priest as the local exorcist. The Church is very careful to make sure a person's case is diabolical rather than just psychological in nature before performing an exorcism.

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

“Behold, I send an angel before you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place which I have prepared. Give heed to him and listen to his voice, do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression; for my name is in him.” —Exodus 23:20-21

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.” —Matthew 18:10

“Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”
—Luke 15:10

“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.” —John 1:51

The devil “was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” —John 8:44

“And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.” —2 Cor 11:14

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” —Hebrews 13:2

“Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’” —Revelation 5:11-12

“And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’ And he said to me, ‘These words are true words of God.’ Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, ‘You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God.’”
—Revelation 19:9-10

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

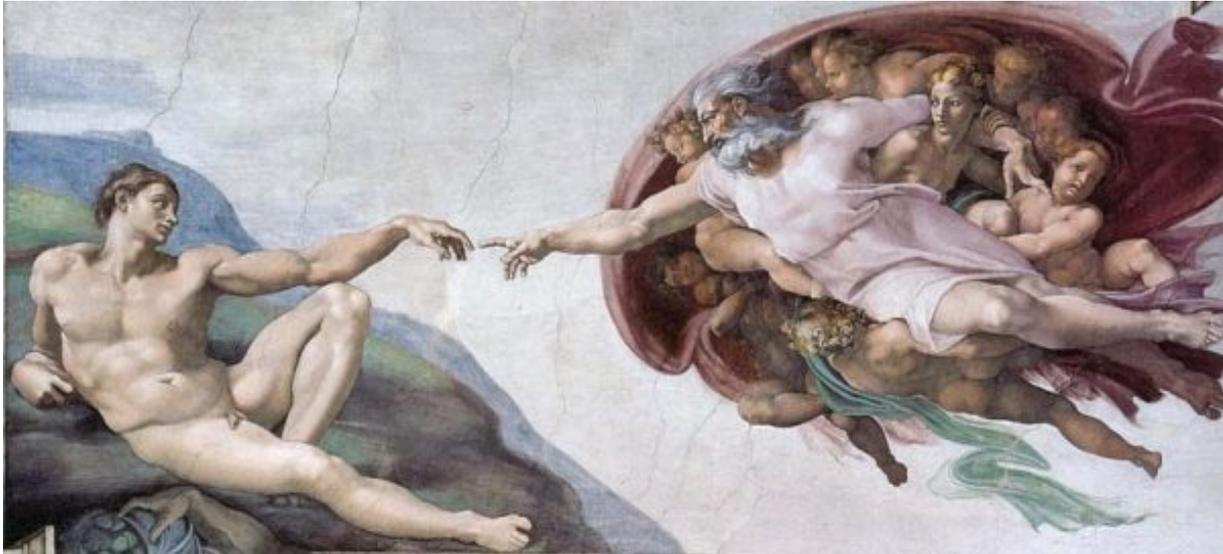
1. *How do angels fit into God’s plan for us?*
2. *How does devotion to the angels fit into the Christian life?*
3. *In what ways can we strive to be like the angels?*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Psalm 139 / ***CCC:*** 355-384

HUMAN BEINGS

OUR IDENTITY, DIGNITY, AND DESTINY



In addition to creating *spiritual beings* (angels) and the *visible, material world* (which includes both living and non-living things), God created a being that is *both spiritual and material*, the *human being*. Like animals, we live, grow, eat, heal, reproduce, move, feel with our emotions, interact with the world through our senses, relate to other creatures, and socialize with our kind. We also have a spiritual soul, however, which enables us to rise above the level of animal existence. This spiritual soul enables us to think, to desire intellectual things, to have free will, to enter into personal relationships, to know and do what is right or wrong, and to come to know God. In a beautiful and mysterious way, the human being sums up in himself the whole material universe, and he bridges the visible and invisible dimensions of creation as well. Unlike the angels, we are formed and grow through time. We are beings that live in the drama of history under God's providence for us.

God created the universe in a special way for those beings who are able to know and love Him through grace, namely humans and angels. God created us in love, so that we might come to know and love Him in this life, and thereby come one day to share in His infinite joy forever. Every other part of creation is ordered to, and is at the service of, human beings and God's plan for them.

Each human being is unique and precious to God. At the same time, we are all alike and form a family. All human beings have a common origin. We all come from God. We also all have common human descendants, and therefore are all related. We all have the same human nature and dignity. Christ died and rose for us all. We are all called into the same Church. And we are all meant to share eternal life together, with God.

What does it mean to be made “in the image and likeness of God”?

Everything that exists resembles the mystery of God in some way. For this reason, we say that everything that exists is a *vestigium* (a “vestige,” literally a footprint). The human being resembles God in a special way, however. Over and above being a *vestigium*, the human being is made *ad imaginem Dei*, to the image of God. Since we are persons endowed with a spiritual soul, we are able to know and love on a rational level, and enter into personal relationships, like God. Being made “in the image and likeness of God,” as said before, means that we have an inherent orientation to God in the core of our being, and have the capacity to know and love Him through grace.

Besides *being made* in the image and likeness of God, we can also image God in a deeper way. Traditionally, we can speak about three different levels of imaging God. The first is called the *Image of Representation*. This is the image of God stamped in our human nature and is referred to in Genesis 1:26-31. Everyone, whether good or evil, has this image. The second level of imaging God is called the *Image of Conformity*, and is expressed in Ephesians 4:24. This is when someone is in a state of grace and actually loves God (and others in His love). These persons image God in a deeper way through actively loving God in their heart and actions, through Christ. Only persons in a state of grace (friendship with God) bear this image. Lastly, those in heaven image God in what we call the *Image of Likeness*, which is expressed biblically in 1 John 3:1-2. There is no part in these souls that doesn't reflect God, since they are totally perfected in love. This is the highest and most perfect way of imaging God. Christ is the Eternal Image of God within God. When we grow in grace and are more and more transformed into Christ spiritually, we more and more image God through Christ, until we image God perfectly in the eternal love of heaven. Thus, we all image God through our *nature* (representation). God progressively calls us to image Him further in Christ, through *grace* (conformity). This is supposed to lead us to imaging God perfectly one day in *glory* (likeness).

Why are human beings said to have a special dignity?

All created things are good and have value. However, because human beings are made in the image and likeness of God and are endowed with a spiritual soul, we have a unique dignity that animals don't have. God made us with a dignity and destiny worth creating a universe for. Christ also found us worth becoming man and dying for. Such is the value of human life! Every human being is worth more than the entire visible universe. Every human being is worth the shedding of the blood of the Son of God.

Because human beings have an intrinsic dignity, we are called to appreciate, reverence, and uphold the dignity of every human person and in every stage of life, from beginning to end. Because human beings have such dignity, it is always gravely evil to kill or wrong innocent human life at any stage.

What does the Catholic Church teach us about human nature?

The human being is a composite of body and soul. While one's parents cooperate with God in bringing about our bodies at conception, God directly creates our souls. The ability to create the spiritual soul is beyond the ability of every material and spiritual being and is therefore something only God can do. It is truly awesome to consider that God directly creates the soul of each person at the moment each one of us begins to exist, at the moment of conception.

A soul is a spirit that animates a body. This is in contrast to angels, whose spirits are not oriented to any body. Since the soul animates the human body, the body shares in the image and likeness of God. The human person is not two things (body and soul) stuck together. Rather, the human being is a unified being consisting of a body animated by a soul, or a soul animating a body. Death is therefore unnatural for us, since it constitutes the separation of body and soul. We will later learn that the whole person is destined to share in the glory of heaven, body and soul, not the soul alone. The soul is unique, in that it is not only spiritual, but also immortal (because it is essentially spiritual). It cannot dissolve and disintegrate as something material does. So, at death, while the body disintegrates, the soul endures. It is only by God's grace that one day our body will be reconstituted and reunited with the soul.

What are the powers of our soul?

In addition to having the general capacities of other animals (to sense, to reproduce, to heal, to move, to feel emotionally, etc.), the human being has the unique powers of *intellect* and *will*. The *intellect* or *mind* gives us the ability to know rationally. The *will* enables us to choose and love rationally. Together, they make free-will and acting personally possible.

Why did God make human beings male and female?

God made human beings male and female. Men and women are equal, equal but different, different but complementary. This "sexual dimension" of human nature is the basis for marriage and the family. Man and woman are inherently ordered to one another, not just for a moment, but for a lifetime. In the lifetime commitment to each other which we call marriage, spouses are meant to love and mutually enrich each other, and their love is meant to overflow to the begetting, raising, and formation of children. This loving and life-giving community of marriage and family, as we have seen, is reflective of the Trinity. Indeed, God made many human beings, so that in community we might learn to live out in our own way the inner loving Communion of the Trinity. In a special way, spouses are meant to reflect this loving inner Communion of the Trinity in their marriage and family life.

Although Jesus is male, and although God has revealed Himself in a special way as Father of the Eternal Son, and our Father, God in Himself is not male or female. Rather He possesses the perfections of both men and women in His infinite mystery. He also transcends the distinction of the sexes. Why God has revealed Himself mainly as Father versus Mother, and why God became man versus woman in Jesus is a mystery theologians seek to understand. It cannot be said that God is sexist, that women have any less dignity than men, or that God does not possess all the perfections of women in Himself on this account.

What is “Original Justice,” or “Original Holiness”?

The Bible reveals that God created the first human beings in *grace*, which is a special share in God’s life. This was a totally gratuitous gift above and beyond man’s nature. It is a sign that God called human beings to something *more*, to something above and beyond simply human existence, and to something more than this world has to offer. This original grace involved perfect harmony with God, with one another, and within themselves, in addition to being immune from death. This grace was a stepping stone meant to lead us to heaven, symbolized by the tree of life in the account of Genesis. As we will see, our first parents sinned, however. Instead of going forward toward heaven, they went backward. In so doing, they ruptured the harmony in which they were created. The original state of grace which God created the first human beings in is what we call “original justice” or “original holiness.”

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

Genesis 1:26-31 (*human beings made in the image and likeness of God and as stewards*)

Psalm 8 (*the wonder of our dignity*)

“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” —Matthew 10:28

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows.” —Matthew 10:29-31

“For you formed my inward parts, you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am wondrously made.” —Psalm 139:13-14

“You shall not kill.” —Exodus 20:13

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *What is unique about human beings, and why did God create us?*
2. *How can we become more aware of, and better respect and cherish, the dignity of every human being in every stage in life?*
3. *Why did God create human beings as male and female?*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Genesis 2-4 / ***CCC:*** 385-421

THE FALL FROM GRACE



What is “the Fall”?

The Fall refers to the event, recounted in Genesis 3, when our first parents fell from a state of holiness, grace, and friendship with God to a state of sin, suffering, and death, at the prompting of Satan. God originally placed our first parents in a state of grace, so that through this grace they might say ‘yes’ to Him and advance toward heaven. In sinning, however, they went backward and turned their faces away from God.

What were the immediate consequences of the Fall?

The sin of our first parents ruptured the harmony that God had originally created us in. Before the fall, human beings are in harmony with God, with each other, with creation, and within themselves. They are also immune from death. After the fall, they find themselves alienated from God. They try to hide from Him (Gen 3:8-10). They become estranged from one another. Adam and Eve fail to take responsibility for their sin and blame each other for his/her own faults (Gen 3:12-13). Their relationship will now be marked by conflict and domination (Gen 3:16). They also become alienated within themselves. They find themselves naked and ashamed (Gen 3:7, 10). Finally, they find themselves at odds with the world. They depart from the state of harmony they were created in, and now go forth into a world of toil, disappointment, suffering, and death (Gen 3:17-24).

Their sin has a ripple affect as well. Their family will be affected. One son will kill another (Gen 4:8). Society will be affected. People will continually think evil in their hearts (Gen 6:5) and become ambitious and controlling (Gen 11:1-9). Their sin becomes like mold that spreads everywhere and affects everything for the worse.

How does the Fall affect us?

Because of the sin of our first parents, instead of being conceived and born in grace, which would have been the case had they not sinned, we are born into the aftermath of their sin, which state we call *Original Sin*. *Original Sin* can refer both to the original fall and to the state we are born into because of their fall. In this state of original sin, we are subject to suffering and death. We are conceived and born without the gift of grace. And not everything is in harmony within us. Our intellect is clouded. We often don't understand clearly and easily get misled. We also easily tend to justify ourselves when we do wrong. Our will is weak. Often enough, we find ourselves unable to do the good we want to do. Our emotions are often not in line with reason. Our actions often flow from a wounded heart. The way we think of God is also affected. We see Him as a tyrant who doesn't have our true good in mind, or as someone who doesn't love us. We call the combination of these fallen tendencies *concupiscence*. In short, it is our tendency to sin and selfishness.

Is there hope for us after the Fall?

For their own good, and for ours, God allows us to suffer the consequences of our sins and the sins of others, including those of our first parents. However, God did not abandon humanity. In the Genesis account, God speaks to Adam and Eve, helping them to learn from their sin (Gen 3:8-13). He makes clothes for them (Gen 3:21). He also promises that one day a descendent of our first parents would arise and "crush" the head of the serpent, that is, defeat the reign of the devil over humanity (Gen 3:15), saving humankind from the condition of sin, suffering, and death. Jesus Christ is this promised descendent.

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

- Genesis 3-4 (*The Fall & Cain's struggle with sin*)
- Romans 5:12-21 (*Christ is the New Adam, reversing Adam's sin and restoring us to God*)
- Romans 7:13-25 (*the inner struggle of failing to do the good we want to do*)
- 1 Corinthians 15:21-22 (*Death came through Adam, Resurrection comes through Christ*)

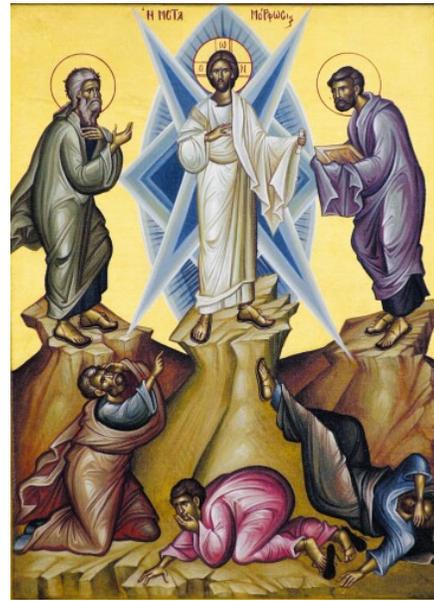
REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1. Where do you see the effects of Original Sin in our world?***
- 2. Why is it hard for us to do good, even when we want to?***
- 3. How can we overcome these tendencies to sin?***

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Exodus 3 & John 1:1-18 / ***CCC:*** 74-100

DIVINE REVELATION



What is “Divine Revelation”?

As Catholics, we believe not only that God exists and has created the universe, but that He has *revealed* Himself to the world as well. *Divine Revelation*, then, refers to God revealing Himself to the world, to God making known His mystery to us, to His self-disclosure to us in history for our salvation. And, just as when we come to know someone, there is an initial encounter, and then we come to know him or her better with time, so God has progressively revealed Himself through time, until He revealed Himself fully to us in Christ.

So, in contrast to *atheists*, we affirm God’s existence. In contrast to *agnostics*, we claim that we can know that God exists. In contrast to *deists*, who believe God exists but never revealed Himself to the world, we believe that God actually did make Himself known to the world, as Jews and Muslims also believe. God has both spoken to, and acted in, the world. Unlike Jews and Muslims, however, we believe that God not only revealed Himself to the world. He has even *given Himself* to the world. He has gone so far as to become one of us in Jesus Christ. He has become man. Jesus Christ is above all, therefore, *the revelation of God*.

Further, just as we communicate with others through both words and actions, so God has revealed Himself to us through *words* (spoken through messengers) and *actions* (His saving and miraculous deeds). In the most powerful way, God reveals Himself to us through the words and actions of Jesus.

What is the “Deposit of Faith”?

The *Deposit of Faith* refers to the fullness of what God has revealed to us, and in a special way through Christ. There is a certain *wholeness* or *fullness* to what God has revealed and which is passed down to us. The *deposit of faith*, then, refers to this whole.

What is “Sacred Tradition”?

“Tradition” literally means something handed down. *Sacred Tradition*, then, is simply *Divine Revelation passed down to us*. Jesus has provided a channel through which all that He has revealed

... *Creator of heaven and earth...*

(the *deposit of faith*) is passed down intact to every generation. *Sacred Scripture*, or the *Bible*, is sacred tradition insofar as it has been written and preserved. Since not all that Christ revealed has been written down in the first century by the apostles and their associates, however, *Sacred Tradition* can also refer to *Divine Revelation insofar as it has not been written in Sacred Scripture but has been passed down through word of mouth*. *Apostolic tradition* refers in particular to what has been passed down to us through the apostles, from Christ.

How do we know what God has revealed, and what He has not revealed?

Christ gave the Holy Spirit to the Church in order to guide her through the ages into all truth (John 16:13). In this way, He gave the Church the role of recognizing and clarifying what God has revealed, and of clarifying how it is applied to various issues that arise in each age. This gift of the Holy Spirit to guard and clarify divine revelation belongs to the Church, therefore. Since Christ established a Church through His apostles, gave the apostles authority to teach in His name, and gave the Holy Spirit to the apostles and their successors in a special way toward this end, the Church, through her shepherds, is the divinely appointed guardian of God's revelation. Christ gave the apostles, and Peter in particular, authority to teach and shepherd in His name. This gift (or *charism*) and authority is passed down to the successors of Peter and the apostles, which are the Pope and bishops of the Catholic Church. We refer to this *teaching office of the Church* as the *Magisterium of the Church*. In sum, the *deposit of faith* (all that Christ has revealed in *Sacred Scripture* and *Sacred Tradition*) is passed down in the Church, and is safeguarded and clarified by the *Magisterium* (teaching office) of the Church, the successors of Peter and the apostles in their roles as official preservers and teachers of the faith.

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

“No one has ever seen God; the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.” —John 1:18

Hebrews 1:1-4 (*God has spoken to us in many ways, in these last days through His Son*)

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.” —John 16:13

“. . . the Church, which is the pillar and bulwark of truth.” —1 Tim 3:15

“So, then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.” —2 Thessalonians 2:15

“Contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” —Jude 3

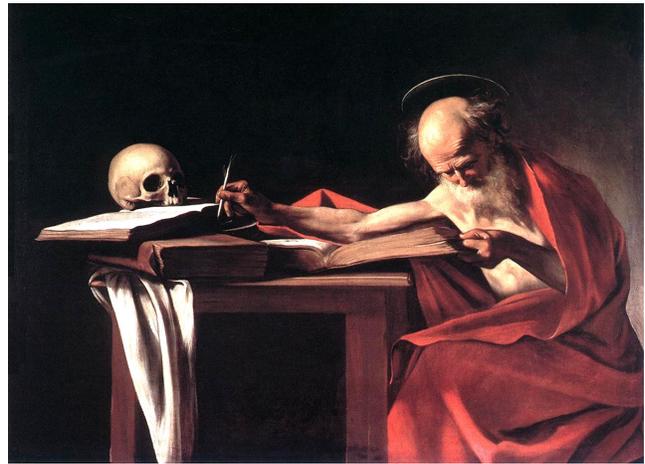
REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *What is Divine Revelation?*
2. *What is contained in Divine Revelation?*
3. *How is it passed down to us?*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Luke 24 / *CCC:* 101-141

THE BIBLE



What is the Bible?

The *Bible* is God's revelation insofar as it has been written down. The *Bible*, or *Sacred Scripture*, is a collection of 73 books (originally individual scrolls) which were written by many different human authors during a span of over 1000 years, and which the Church considers authoritative, inspired by God, and formative for Christian belief and life. This official collection of books, recognized by the Church and read in her official worship (*liturgy*), is what we call the *Canon of Scripture*.

What are the main parts, or divisions, of Scripture?

The two main divisions in Sacred Scripture are the *Old Testament* (everything before Christ and leading up to Him) and the *New Testament* (the books that flow out of the experience of Christ's first coming). The Old Testament contains 46 books, the New Testament 27 books.

What are the books of the Old Testament?

The books which the Catholic Church recognizes as part of the Old Testament are: *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees*.

What are the different parts of the Old Testament?

There are different ways to divide the Old Testament. Perhaps the easiest way to divide the Old Testament is into historical, prophetic, and wisdom books. Among the historical books, the first five books are of special significance and are called the *Torah* or *Pentateuch*.

The *historical books*, which present the narrative of God's people through a theological lens are:

- *Genesis* (Adam & Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob/Israel, Joseph)
- *Exodus* (slavery in Egypt, deliverance, flight into the wilderness, Mount Sinai)
- *Leviticus* (worship and laws are legislated and implemented at Mount Sinai)
- *Numbers* (the journey from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land)

- *Deuteronomy* (Moses exhorts the people of Israel before they enter the Promised Land)
- *Joshua* (Israel enters and settles in the Promised Land)
- *Judges* (wavering between fidelity and falling away under various judges)
- *Ruth* (a story about a female convert and David's great grandmother)
- *1 Samuel & 1 Chronicles* (Samuel, Saul, David)
- *2 Samuel & 1 Chronicles* (David's reign in Jerusalem over all Israel)
- *1 Kings & 2 Chronicles* (King Solomon to King Ahab, Elijah the prophet)
- *2 Kings & 2 Chronicles* (Elisha the prophet, King Ahaziah to the Babylonian Exile)
- *Ezra & Nehemiah* (Return from exile, rebuilding of the nation and temple)
- *1 & 2 Maccabees* (reclaiming Israel from foreign threats, fidelity to God, martyrs)

The *prophetic books* which record God's messages to His people during times of political and religious turmoil or restoration are:

- *Isaiah*
- *Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch*
- *Ezekiel*
- *Daniel*
- Twelve Minor Prophets (*Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*)

The *wisdom books* are:

- *Job* (suffering & loss, questioning, innocence asserted & debated, God's intervention, restoration)
- *Psalms* (150 prayers)
- *Proverbs* (sayings and reflections)
- *Ecclesiastes* (a philosopher king questions the purpose of life)
- *Song of Songs* (love song between a king and queen)
- *Wisdom* (reflections on God, Israel, and the idolatry of the nations)
- *Sirach* (collections of the sayings of Jesus Ben Sira)

How can we understand the whole Old Testament in a simple way?

Jesus recognizes the kind of threefold division of the Old Testament outlined above when he mentions "the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms" (Lk 24:44). However, most of the time Jesus and the New Testament writers summarize the Old Testament in terms of "the law and the prophets" (Mt 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; Lk 16:16; Jn 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Rom 3:21). In a similar way, the whole Old Testament can be divided into two parts revolving around two mountains, Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. Mount Sinai is where the people of Israel encounter God, receive his "law" (*torah*), enter into a covenant with Him, and receive from Him a way to worship Him. The second part of the Old Testament revolves around

Mount Zion in Jerusalem, where God's Temple is established, where David and his descendants rule God's people as kings, and which is the central place of concern for the prophets.

The Old Testament can also be seen in terms of building covenants, which are agreements involving a relationship and mutual commitment between God and His people. Thus, the following covenants are progressively established:

- Covenant with Adam and Eve ("One Holy Couple")
- Covenant with Noah and his sons and their wives ("One Holy Family")
- Covenant with Abraham and his kinsmen ("One Holy Tribe")
- Covenant with Moses and the people of Israel ("One Holy Nation")
- Covenant with David and Israel, and certain nations aligned with Israel ("One Holy Kingdom")

Despite sins and failures along the way, all this would lead up to the "new" (Jer 31:31; Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24) and "eternal" (Heb 9:15; 13:20) covenant which Jesus would establish, and which would embrace all peoples through the universal church He would establish ("One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church").

What are the books of the New Testament?

The New Testament books, which were written at different times between 50 and 100 AD, are: *Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, Revelation.*

What are the different parts of the New Testament?

The New Testament can be divided into the following parts:

- The Gospels, or accounts of Jesus' Life (*Matthew, Mark, Luke, John*)
- An account of the early Church from the Ascension of Jesus until Paul arrives in Rome (*Acts of the Apostles*)
- Letters from various Christian leaders to different Christian communities or individuals
 - Paul's Letters (*Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*)
 - *The Letter to the Hebrews*
 - The "Catholic" Epistles (*James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude*)
- The Apocalypse (*Revelation*)

One can also group the New Testament books into the different authors associated with the different books. Besides individual books authored by, or associated with, various early apostles or disciples, there are four authors thought to be the source of more than one book:

- Luke (*Luke & Acts*)
- John (*John, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Revelation*)
- Paul (see above for the list of “Pauline” books)
- Peter (*1 Peter, 2 Peter*)

Why are there four different Gospels?

The Gospels are accounts of the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus written by different authors from different perspectives and to different communities. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the *Synoptic Gospels*, since they are similar (“synoptic” means to “see together”). Whereas the Gospel of John is different in many ways. With all four Gospels, we have a much richer perspective of Jesus than if we were limited to only one Gospel. Each Gospel is very powerful in its own right and gives us unique insights into Jesus.

How can the different letters of St. Paul be grouped?

In our New Testament, we have a collection of letters that St. Paul wrote to various communities and individuals during his missionary journeys in the Mediterranean world. Four letters are to individuals (*1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*). Three of these are instructions to co-workers of Paul and leaders of Christian communities (Timothy and Titus), and so are called the “pastoral epistles.” The other (*Philemon*) is a letter of appeal to a slave owner to free his slave. The rest of Paul’s letters are to communities. *Romans* is a unique letter which Paul wrote to a church (in Rome) he was traveling to and had not founded or visited. Paul’s other letters are to churches he founded or had a formative influence on. Some of these churches were in Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey (*Galatia, Ephesus, Colossae*). Some were in Greece (*Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi*). Some of Paul’s letters are called the “captivity epistles,” since Paul wrote them from prison (*Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, 2 Timothy*). We can also understand St. Paul’s letters in terms of the possible order in which they were written, namely *1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, Titus, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy*.

Why is the Catholic Bible different from the Protestant Bible?

The New Testament is the same for all Christian communities. However, there is disagreement about the books of the Old Testament. The Catholic Church has seven more books in its Old Testament canon than the Protestant communities have, as well as some parts in Daniel and Esther. The Catholic canon is essentially the same as was recognized in the early Church councils of Hippo and Carthage (393-414AD), and later most solemnly recognized and defined at the Council of Trent in the 1500’s. The Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, challenged the officially accepted list of Old and New Testament books in the 1500’s for three reasons. First, certain biblical books contained doctrines which Martin Luther rejected. Second, original Hebrew texts (or, rather, copies of original texts) were not at the time

available for these seven books. Third, Martin Luther thought that the Christian Old Testament should be identical to the canon of Hebrew Scriptures which the Jews had currently recognized and used. The problem with Luther's reasons are that, first, it is not legitimate to reject books of the Bible when they do not accord with one's personal theology. Second, the canonical requirement that an Old Testament book be written in Hebrew is arbitrary. In addition, in the twentieth century, ancient Hebrew texts were discovered for some parts of these seven books. Third, Jewish tradition was not in full agreement about the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures until after the first century, and the canon agreed upon presently in Jewish communities was officially recognized by Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. After the coming of Jesus, however, it is the Church that now has the authority to determine what belongs to Sacred Scripture, not any community which would not recognize Jesus. Lastly, while none of these seven books are explicitly quoted in the New Testament, there are several instances of passages implicitly referred to. There are many books in the Protestant Old Testament which are not quoted in the New Testament either. Such is not a basis from excluding them from the Old Testament.

Are there "missing books" of the Bible, or can the Bible be added to?

There were many circulated writings in the early Church which the Church was aware of but ultimately chose not to include in the canon of the Bible, either because a particular writing had problematic aspects to it (like the so-called "Gospels" of "Thomas"), or because the writing was felt to be too late or not connected closely enough with an early apostle or disciple of Jesus. So, the Church was very deliberate about which books were included or excluded from Scripture. Also, God's revelation comes to a fullness with the coming of Christ. Therefore, the Church has decided that divine revelation is considered "closed" after the last books of the New Testament were written, or with the death of the last apostle. From that point, all that God has revealed is complete and will be handed on to each generation. We can always understand God's revelation in deeper ways. But God will not officially or publicly reveal anything new about Himself or His plan for us until the end of time. Thus, there are no "missing books of the Bible," and the Bible cannot be added to.

Who wrote the books of the Bible?

At the deepest level, God is the author of the Bible. We therefore speak of the Bible as *inspired*. This does not mean that the books of the Bible were *dictated by God*, or that the human authors of Scripture were purely passive in the exercise of writing each book. Rather, God employed the human authors in their full humanness and with their strengths and limitations in knowledge and literary skill. Regarding the human authors of Scripture, most books of the Bible do not tell us who wrote them, and some books were written "in the name" of a certain author, but were understood not to be literally from that author, for example, the Book of Ecclesiastes, which we know was not written by Solomon. Many books have traditional authors associated with them. The Church allows reasonable scholarly debate about the possible authors of the biblical books, while respecting tradition. In the end, who the human authors actually were does not affect the *inspiration* of the Bible.

How should we read and interpret the Bible?

We see the Scriptures as the word of God. Therefore, we should reverence the Bible and look to the Scriptures for spiritual inspiration. It is important to understand and interpret the Bible correctly, however. It is important always to let the Church guide our understanding and interpretation of the Bible. The following approaches to Scripture should be avoided:

- The tendency to treat the Bible as a mere collection of human documents (secular approach)
- The tendency to insist upon taking all texts at face-value scientifically and historically, and the preoccupation in trying to harmonize all detailed discrepancies (fundamentalist approach)
- The tendency to take passages out of context and to use them for some agenda
- The tendency to make oneself the ultimate arbitrator of the meaning of the Bible, or to pit passages of Scripture against the Church

In contrast, we should read the Bible in light of Christ, Who is the one Word spoken in the many words of Scripture. We should read it with faith and reason, as well as with the guidance of the Church. We should read the Bible in continuity with the tradition of the Church, which includes many insights from the liturgy, teachings, and the Fathers of the Church. We should consider the text and context very carefully, and view each passage in terms of the whole of Scripture. To this end, studying our faith and the books of the Bible in light of our faith is invaluable. We should also read the Scriptures prayerfully, looking for what God is saying to us through the Scriptures. With some difficult passages, especially in the Old Testament, it can be helpful to remember that God progressively revealed Himself, and that God used and even allowed human limitations and imperfect understandings of God to come through at times. In the end, God has willed to use the Scriptures as a privileged instrument to speak to us, to inspire us, to enlighten us, to form us, to make us holy, and to lead us to eternal life. That should be the focus in our prayerful reading of the Bible.

How is the Bible used at Mass?

For Sundays, there are always three readings at Mass, the *First Reading*, the *Second Reading*, and the *Gospel*. There is also a psalm recited or sung between the first and second reading. The *First Reading* is usually from the Old Testament and is usually paired with the Gospel, although sometimes it is from the Acts of the Apostles. The *Second Reading* is always from a New Testament letter. The *Gospel* is always from Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.

For Sundays, there is a three-year cycle of readings, called Years A, B, and C. Year A is devoted to Matthew, Year B to Mark, and Year C to Luke. The Gospel of John is often read during the Lent and Easter seasons, and at other special times of the year.

For daily Mass during the week, there is a two-year cycle for the First Reading, called Years 1 and 2, while the Gospel is the same for both years. With regard to the Old Testament, Year 1 is mainly devoted to the first part of the Old Testament, to the “Law,” whereas Year 2 is mainly devoted to the second part of the Old Testament, to the “Prophets.” New Testament readings are also interspersed within these two years.

How do we highlight the Gospel at Mass?

The Gospels are at the heart of the Bible since they constitute the only four accounts of the life of Jesus we accept as canonical. For this reason, there are certain things we do for the Gospel at Mass that we don't do for any other readings:

- We stand, whereas we sit for the other readings.
- There is a procession, which can involve incense and candles.
- Only an ordained priest or deacon can read the Gospel at Mass and give the homily. If a deacon is present, it is his proper role to read the Gospel.
- If a deacon is present, he receives a blessing from the priest before processing to read the Gospel. If no deacon is present, the priest prays a special prayer in quiet while bowing to the altar before reading the Gospel.
- The *Alleluia* ("Praise the LORD" in Hebrew) is sung, with a Scriptural verse in between the *Alleluia* refrain.
- The deacon or priest says, "The Lord be with you" before reading the Gospel. He then traces the cross on the text of the Gospel with his thumb.
- After the priest or deacons says "A reading from the holy Gospel according to (*Mathew, Mark, Luke, or John*)," the people respond, "Glory to you, O Lord," while tracing the cross on their forehead, lips, and heart. Sometimes the Gospel is incensed at this point.
- There is a special *Book of the Gospels* that can be used which contains all the Gospel passages read at Mass for the three-year Sunday cycle and special feast days.
- The Gospel is kissed afterward, while the priest quietly says, "Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be wiped away."
- At the end of the Gospel reading, we respond, "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ," whereas we only say, "Thanks be to God" after the other readings.

How should I go about reading the Bible on my own?

It is a good spiritual practice to read a little of the Bible every day. It is generally advisable to start with the New Testament, especially with the Gospels, and slowly to make your way through the whole New and Old Testaments. It is also advisable to obtain good commentaries or guides to help you understand and rightly interpret the Scriptures.

There is a traditional method of prayerfully reading the Bible called *Lectio Divina* (“divine reading”). This method, either alone or in a group, involves reading a select passage slowly and prayerfully, taking some time to meditate on it, reflecting on how God is speaking to you through the passage, speaking to God from your heart in light of the passage, and ending with quiet prayer in the presence of God, allowing the passage to sit with you and to form you. (See the separate handout with more details about the method of *Lectio Divina*.)

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.” —Romans 15:4

“Attend to the public reading of scripture.” —1 Timothy 4:13

“From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” —2 Timothy 3:15-16

“First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” —2 Peter 1:20-21

“The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” —John 6:63

“Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart.” —Jeremiah 15:16

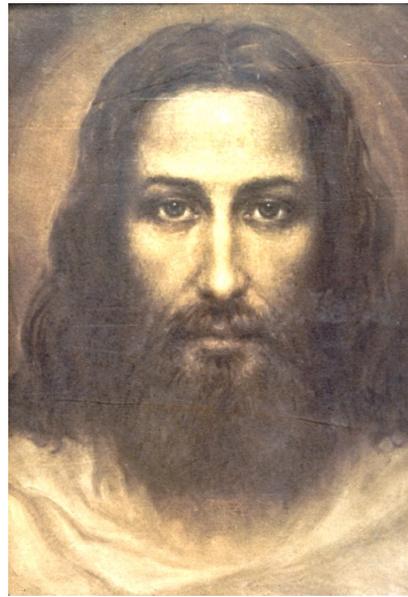
REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *What are some new things you learned about the Bible here?*
2. *How should we as Catholics read and interpret the Bible?*
3. *How might you find greater inspiration from the Bible, both at Mass and in your daily life?*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: John 1:1-18 / *CCC:* 422-483

JESUS CHRIST



Who is Jesus Christ?

Historically speaking, and from an outsider's perspective, Jesus Christ is a Jewish man who lived from perhaps 4 B.C. to 30 A.D. in the nation of Israel, which at the time was under the control of the Roman Empire. Jesus was born in Bethlehem (which is a few miles south of Jerusalem) and raised in Nazareth (which is in the region of Galilee, a northern region in Israel). He was of the tribe of Judah and the lineage of King David. His mother and father were named Mary and Joseph. Jesus lived an ordinary life, working as a carpenter or laborer until about thirty years old. At that point, he began going about Galilee, preaching, teaching, healing, and gathering and forming disciples. About three years later, he made his way south to Jerusalem, where he would be put to death on the charges of sedition and blasphemy (the charge was that he led people to believe that he was the king of the Jews and the Son of God).

We Christians profess this Jesus, in fact, to be:

- The eternal Son of God who became man
- The long-awaited Messiah of the Jewish people
- The desire and hope of all peoples
- The Savior of the world, who, according to the plan of God, suffered and died for the sins of the world, but whom God victoriously raised from the dead three days later, so that one day we might rise from the dead and have eternal life through Him
- Our Lord

Where in the Gospels is Jesus referred to as the Son of God?

The Gospel of Mark calls itself “the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The Angel Gabriel reveals to Mary that the One born of her will be called the “Son of the Most High” and “Son of God” (Lk 1:32, 35). The voice of God at the Baptism and Transfiguration reveals Jesus as “my beloved Son” (Mk 1:11; 9:7). John the Baptist calls Jesus the “Son of God” (Jn 1:34). Jesus refers to Himself as “the Son” of the “Father” in His public ministry (Mk 12:6-8; Mt 11:27; 12:32; 22:2; 24:36; 28:19; Jn 5:19-27; 8:36; 10:36; 17:1). Demons recognize Jesus as the “Son of God” (Mk 3:11; 5:7; Mt 4:3, 6; Lk 4:3, 9, 4:41; 8:28). The disciples occasionally realize and profess Jesus as the Son of God (Mt 14:33; 16:16; Jn 1:49; 11:27). The Gospel of John calls Jesus “the only Son from the Father” (Jn 1:14). Jesus is condemned to death by the Jewish leaders on the charge of blasphemy, specifically for claiming to be the Son of God (Mk 14:64; Jn 19:7), which title Jesus acknowledges when directly asked (Mk 14:61-62; Mt 26:64; Lk 22:70). Jesus is ridiculed for this claim (Mt 27:40, 43). At the Cross, a Roman centurion strikingly acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God when Jesus has just died (Mk 15:39). When risen, Jesus refers to Himself as the Son within the Trinity (Mt 28:19).

Most often, however, Jesus refers to Himself as the “Son of Man.” In the Old Testament, God calls Ezekiel “Son of Man” (Ezk 2:8; 3:1; 3:4, etc.). In that context the title means someone who comes from human beings and is mortal. Daniel however has an astounding vision of a figure called the “Son of Man,” who comes “from the clouds of heaven,” and to whom God, the “Ancient of Days,” gives an “everlasting dominion” that would never pass away or be destroyed (Dan 7:13-14). This figure is given divine-like dominion over all people, and yet is human and mortal as well. In calling Himself the “Son of Man,” Jesus identifies Himself with this divine-human figure who would die and yet would be given an “everlasting dominion,” implying resurrection and eternal exaltation.

What does it mean that Jesus is the Son of God?

Occasionally in the Old Testament, humans or angels are called “sons of God.” However, in the case of angels, this simply indicates that the angels originate from God and are godlike. When referring to humans, it means that such human beings have been “adopted” by God in a special way, and/or that their authority derives from God. In no case are they thought to be eternal with God or to be part of God. When Jesus is referred to as the Son of God, however, He is not simply *a* son of God, or adopted, or possessive of divinely derived power. It means that He is *the eternal Son of God*. He is “part” of God. He belongs to God. He comes from God, but from within God. He preexists His human life on earth. He is not created, but He is part of the uncreated mystery of God. When learning about God as Trinity, we learned that all three persons are coequal and coeternal. So, the Son is fully God, since He shares or “possesses” the one divine nature shared or “possessed” by each Person of the Trinity. And yet, the Son, like each Person of the Trinity, is distinct from the other Persons. Since the Son of God has become man in Jesus, then, God has become man.

How do we know that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, and therefore fully God?

The following things indicate that Jesus is more than merely human, and that He is in fact God:

- Jesus and John the Baptist refer to the preexistence of Jesus, that Jesus existed before becoming human (Jn 1:1, 15; 8:58; 17:5, 24).
- Jesus forgives sins. Yet only God can forgive sins (Mk 2:1-12).
- Jesus speaks with divine prerogatives in teaching and clarifying God's law originally given to Moses by God (Mt 5:21-48; 7:28-29).
- The Pharisees interpret the claim to be the Son of God as blasphemy (Mk 14:61-64).
- The Gospel of John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . all things were created through him. . . and the Word was made flesh" (Jn 1:1-14).
- Jesus is called "the only Son from the Father" (Jn 1:18).
- The Gospel of John mentions that Jesus made Himself equal to God (Jn 5:18).
- Jesus is referred to as "the Bridegroom" of the Church. This is a divine claim, given that in the Old Testament God is referred to as the Bridegroom of His people (Mk 2:19-20; Mt 25:1-10; Jn 3:29; 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17).
- St. Paul says that in Christ "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:19).
- Jesus applies the divine name ("I AM") to Himself (Jn 6:20, 35, 41, 48, 51, 8:12, 58; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6, 15:1, 5; Rev 22:13).
- It was prophesied that God would become man (Is 7:14; 9:6; Ezek 34:11-16; Mic 5:2; Mal 3:1).
- The world is said to be created and is sustained through the Son of God (Jn 1:3; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2-3).
- Jesus is said to be superior to the angels (Heb 1:4-14).
- Jesus' miracles imply an internal source of divine power versus drawing such power from a source external to Himself (Mk 4:41; 6:2; Lk 7:16).
- Jesus is called Lord, clearly understood in some contexts to be a divine title (Mt 7:21-22; 22:43-45; Mk 16:19-20; Lk 1:43; 2:11; 6:46; 24:34; Jn 11:27; 13:13-14; 20:28; 21:7, 17; Acts 7:59-60; Rom 1:4, 10:9; 1 Cor 8:6; 12:3; 2 Cor 4:5; Phil 2:11).
- Jesus calls Himself "Lord of the Sabbath" (Mk 2:28).
- Thomas calls Jesus, "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28).
- Jesus claims to be greater than Abraham (Jn 8:58), Moses (Mk 9:4; Jn 1:17; 5:46), David (Mt 12:37), Solomon (Mt 12:42), Jonah (Mt 12:41), and the Temple (Mt 12:6).
- Jesus is without sin (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 1:18-19; 2:22; 1 Jn 3:5; Is 53:9).
- Jesus is given authority to judge the living and the dead (Mt 25:31-46; 28:18; Jn 5:27; Acts 10:42; 2 Tim 4:1).

Other things that point to the divinity of Christ are scientifically verifiable miracles that happen in our day and age, the stability of the Church in spite of great challenges through the ages, the credibility of the apostles, the coherence and consistency of Church teaching, and the holiness of saints in every age. In the end, however, while all these things point to the truth that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, and therefore fully God with the Father and the Holy Spirit, it is only by the Holy Spirit engendering faith in our hearts that we can have fully sufficient assurance that Jesus is God Who has become man.

A last thing to consider here is that Jesus cannot simply be a good man or prophet, since no authentic prophet would lead people to think he is God if he is not in fact God. There are only three possibilities for who Jesus is then: in the popular language of an argument made by C. S. Lewis, Jesus is either a “liar,” a “lunatic,” or “Lord.” Either Jesus knows full well that He is making a claim that is not true, meaning He is a liar. Or He is delusional, meaning that he thinks he is the eternal Son of God, but this is only because of some mental illness or psychosis. Or He is telling the truth and is actually Who He claims to be, the eternal Son of God. The Gospels portray Jesus as a figure who is neither a “liar” nor a “lunatic,” but rather One who truly is “Lord.”

How did God become man?

When we say that God became man in Jesus, we are not saying that God changed into a man. God is inherently unchangeable. Nor do we mean that the Father or the Holy Spirit became man. Nor do we mean that Jesus was eternally human and just came to earth to manifest His humanity to us. Nor do we mean that there was an existing man out there whom God adopted in order to call him His Son, or that God infused such a man with the divine nature. Instead, we mean that the Son of God, Who is fully God, *united to Himself* a human nature at a certain chosen point in history, without changing Who He was. Prior to this point, the Son of God possessed only the divine nature. After this point, a human nature, which did not exist before, is created and immediately united to the divine nature in the divine Person of the Son of God, through a virginal conception within Mary’s womb. So, two things are joined together, the human and the divine, from this moment. The human nature is created, limited, and changeable. The divine nature is uncreated, unlimited, and unchangeable. So, Jesus is one divine Person with two natures, human and divine. The two natures remain what they are without mixture or confusion, and yet they are united to the divine Person of the Son of God in such a way that they can fully be said to be His. This mystery of God becoming man is called the *Incarnation*, which denotes the event of God coming “in the flesh.”

Why did God become man?

Not only is it possible for God to become man in this way. He actually did become man in this way. God truly loved us to the extent of becoming one of us. Why? There are many reasons. First, the Son of God became man in order to save us from sin, suffering, death, and every other form of evil. The angel Gabriel told Joseph to name the child born of Mary, his wife, "Jesus," explaining that He would "save His people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). Second, to reveal God to us. Jesus is the image of the invisible God, as St. Paul tells us (Col 1:15). Jesus reveals God to us in and through our human nature. In Jesus, we can see the face of the invisible God. We can touch the intangible God. We can hear the God Who is beyond words. We can speak and relate to God in human form. Third, the Son of God became man in order to give us a visible example of the way God wants us to live (Jn 13:15). Fourth, so that God could live in solidarity with us (Heb 2:14-18). Fifth, to assist and increase our faith (Jn 20:28). Sixth, to give us hope of attaining eternal life, through the Resurrection of Christ (1 Cor 15:20). And seventh, so that, having seen how much God loves us, we might be moved to love Him in return (Jn 15:13; 1 Jn 4:10).

How does Jesus fulfill the Old Testament?

Jesus is "the one who is to come" (Lk 7:20), or the "Messiah," which means "the Anointed One" in Hebrew, translated as "Christ" in Greek (Jn 1:41). The term, "Christ," then, summarizes this dimension of Jesus, that He is the fulfillment of the Jews.

Specifically, we can see Christ as fulfilling the prophecies, figures, sacred objects, and feasts of the Old Testament.

So, first, Christ fulfills the *prophecies* of the Old Testament. Putting the prophecies together, we discover that it is prophesied that God would become man (Is 7:14; 9:6; Ezek 34:11-16; Mic 5:2; Mal 3:1), that He would be of the tribe of Judah (Gen 49:10) and of David's lineage (Is 9:7; Jer 23:5; 30:9; 33:15; Ezk 34:23-24; 37:25; Amos 9:11; Zech 13:1), that He would be born of a virgin (Is 7:14) in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2), that He would be a light to those sitting in darkness in Galilee (Is 9:1-7). He would open the eyes of the blind (Is 29:18; Is 42:7), and make the lame walk, the deaf hear, and the mute speak (Is 35:5). He would preach good news (Is 52:7) and teach in parables (Ps 78:2). He would be betrayed with silver (Gen 20:16; Zech 11:12). He would be scourged (Is 50:6; 53:5; Jer 20:2). Those who put Him to death would divide His clothing and tear holes in His hands (Ps 22:16, 18). He would be pierced (Zech 12:10; 13:1), but that not a bone of His body would be broken (Ex 12:46; Num 9:12; Ps 34:20). He would rise from the dead on the third day (Hos 6:2; Jonah 1:17; Ezek 37:1-14). He would pour out the Holy Spirit on all humankind (Joel 2:28). Through Him, the Gentiles would come to know the true God (Is 49:6). He would come one day to judge the living and the dead (Is 25:6-9; 66:22; Dan 12:1-4; Joel 3; Mal 4:1).

Second, Christ also fulfills the *figures* of the Old Testament. He is a New Adam through whose obedience He has come to reconcile us with God and one another (Gen 3; Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21-22). Like Isaac, Christ is the “only son” who carries the wood of his sacrifice up a mountain (Gen 22). Like Joseph, he is betrayed by His own people (Gen 37:12-36), sold for silver (Gen 37:28), and condemned with two criminals, one who is saved, the other who is not (Gen 40-41). Like Melchizedek, Christ is a king and priest who presents a sacrifice of bread and wine—except that Jesus transforms the bread and wine into His Body and Blood (Gen 14:17-24; Heb 7). Like Moses, Christ has unparalleled intimacy with God and reveals God’s law on a mountain (Ex 33:11; 34:29-35). Like Aaron, Jesus is the High Priest of His people, in the case of Christ offering the acceptable sacrifice of Himself (Ex 28-29; 39; Lev 8-9; 16; Heb 9). Like Joshua, Christ is a Savior Who leads His people into the Promised Land (Num 27:12-23; Dt 3:28; 31:23; Josh 3). Like David, Christ unifies His people and shepherds them in righteousness and mercy (1 Sam 13:14; 2 Sam 5:1-5; Jer 3:15; Acts 13:22). Like Elijah and Elisha, Jesus miraculously multiplies bread (1 Kgs 17:8-16; 2 Kgs 4:1-7, 42-44) and raises the dead (1 Kgs 17:17-24; 2 Kgs 4:18-37). Just as Jonah spent three days in the belly of a whale but then was delivered (Jon 1:17-2:10), Christ spends three days in the heart of the earth (in death) before He is raised from the dead (Mt 12:40). Like Jeremiah, Jesus is falsely accused, arrested, and flogged (Jer 37:11-38:6). Like Ezekiel, Christ is both a priest and a prophet (Ezk 1:3).

Third, Christ fulfills and embodies in Himself the *sacred objects and animals* of the Old Testament. Thus, Christ is the new and definitive Temple, the dwelling place of God on earth (Jn 2:18-22). Just as Aaron’s staff came to life and blossomed after being dead (Num 17), so Christ comes to life in Resurrection after death. Jesus is described as the Lion of Judah (Gen 49:19; Rev 5:5). He is also the Lamb of sacrifice Who takes away the sins of the world (Jn 1:29; Is 53:7). He is also like the bronze serpent which Moses held up to the people after they were attacked by snakes, so that whoever had been bitten but looked up at the bronze serpent would be healed (Jn 3:14-15; Num 21:9). Similarly, Jesus in His suffering became sin, so to speak (He took on the suffering consequences of our sins), though He knew no sin, so that we could look to Him for salvation (2 Cor 5:21).

Fourth, Jesus fulfills and completes within Himself the *Jewish feasts* of the Old Testament. Thus, He is the new Passover Lamb by which we pass from death to life (Jn 1:29, 36; 1 Cor 5:7; 1 Pt 1:19; Rev 5:6, 12). He transforms the Jewish Feast of Pentecost by sending the Holy Spirit upon the Church on that day (Acts 2). On the Feast of Booths, Jesus, the dwelling of God, speaks of Himself as the light of the world, and says that from His side rivers of living water will flow (John 7:37-39; 8:12). On the Feast of Dedication, or Hanukah, Jesus speaks of Himself as “consecrated” to God (Jn 10:36), like the Temple, which was re-consecrated to God by the Maccabees at the origin of this feast (2 Macc 10:1-8). He also says that He and the Father are one, on this very nationalistic feast which strongly affirmed that God is one (Jn 10:30). Jesus fulfills all the different dimensions of the various Jewish feast days and is Himself the new place of worship for all humanity, since He is the new Temple, wherein all the Jewish Feasts are centered. In these four ways then, Jesus completes and perfects the plans and work of God in the Old Testament. St. Paul says, “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor 1:20).

How is Jesus also the desire of the nations and the fulfillment of all people?

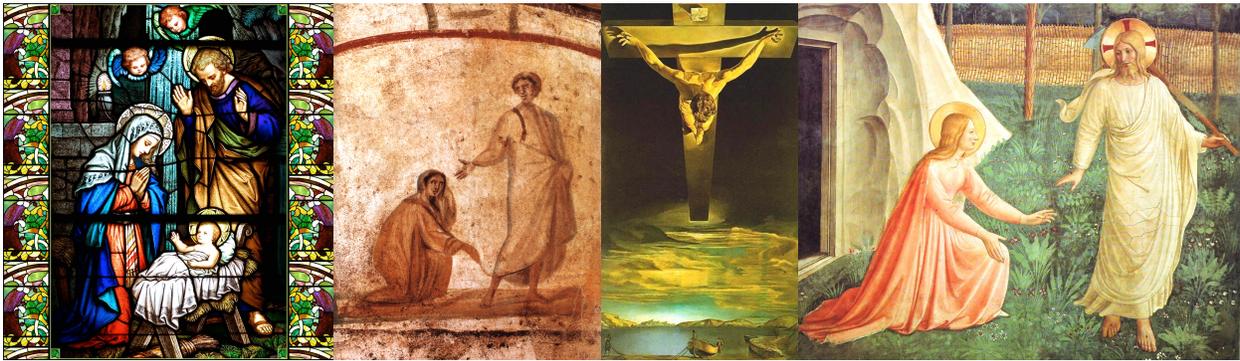
God created human beings so that they might one day come to share in His life and love forever. Humanity fell away from God, however. Choosing the Jewish people was a stepping-stone in God's plan to recover all humanity for Himself. There are various foreshadowings of this fuller plan in the Old Testament. God tells Abraham that one day all the families of the earth will be blessed through his faith (Gen 12:3). Gentiles in Jewish territory were encouraged to become part of God's people and live according to God's ways (Ex 20:10; 23:12; Num 15:14-15; Dt 5:14). The psalms foresee a day in which all the peoples of the earth will praise God (Ps 22:27-28; 86:9; 108:3; 1 Chr 16:24). The prophets foretell this as well (Is 2:1-4; 60:3; Hos 2:23; Amos 9:12; Zech 14:16). They also reveal to us that the coming Messiah will be a light to the nations (Is 49:6; Dan 7:13-14; Mic 5:4).

Christ will fulfill all these prophecies. Magi from the East, likely Persian astrologers, seek to do Him homage at His birth (Mt 2:2-12). Jesus goes at various times to foreign, pagan territory to teach and heal (Mk 5:1-20; 7:24-8:10, 8:27; Mt 2:13-23). Jesus also goes into Samaritan regions and reveals God's plan for the Samaritans (Lk 9:52; 10:25-37; 17:11-19; Jn 4:1-42; Acts 1:8; 8:1-25; 9:31). Jesus heals a Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7:24-30), as well as a Roman centurion's son, or servant (Mt 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10). Greeks come to see Jesus in Jerusalem (Jn 12:20-22). And although He instructs His apostles to only go to the lost Sheep of Israel when He sends them out preaching and healing in Galilee (Mt 10:5-6), Jesus will send His apostles out to the ends of the earth when risen from the dead (Mk 16:15; Lk 24:47), in order to make disciples of all nations, teaching them all that He commanded, and baptizing them into the life of the Trinity (Mt 28:16-20).

Jesus is indeed the fulfillment of all peoples, since He is the fulfillment of the human heart. At the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, some disciples tell Jesus, "Everyone is looking for you" (Mk 1:37). They mean literally that all the people in the area are seeking Him because of His teachings and miracles. But this is true on a deeper level, that everyone is looking for Christ in the depths of their hearts, whether they realize it or not.

The "I am" statements especially capture this. At various times, Jesus says, "I am Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 22:8), "I am the bread of life" (Jn 6:35), "I am the light of the world" (Jn 8:12), "I am the door" (Jn 10:9), "I am the good shepherd" (Jn 10:11), "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11:25), "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6), "I am the true vine" (Jn 15:1), "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev 22:13), and "I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star" (Rev 22:16). In all these statements, Jesus is telling us, "I am the One you are looking for." St. John Paul II once said, "Jesus Christ is the answer to the question that is the human person."

... and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord...



What is the outline of Jesus' life?

Jesus' life can be divided into five parts: His early life, His hidden life, His public ministry, His suffering and death, and His risen and exalted life.

Jesus' infancy and early life are only recounted in two places: in the first two chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In the *Liturgy* (the official worship of the Church), we read through these chapters every year in the seasons of Advent and Christmas, when we celebrate the Incarnation. These chapters tell us about the conception and birth of John the Baptist six months before Christ (Lk 1:5-38, 57-80), the *Annunciation*—when the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she would be the mother of the Son of God (Lk 1:26-38), the *Visitation*—when Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth and sings praise to God (Lk 1:39-56), the *Nativity of Jesus*—His birth celebrated by angels and shepherds in Bethlehem (Lk 2:1-20), the *circumcision of Jesus*—eight days after His birth (Lk 2:21), the *Presentation*—when Jesus is presented in the Temple forty days after His birth (Lk 2:22-39), the *Epiphany*—the visit of the Magi (Mt 2:1-12), the flight into Egypt (Mt 2:13-23), the slaughter of innocent children in Bethlehem by Herod the Great (Mt 2:16-18), the return to Nazareth (Mt 2:22-23), and the *Finding in the Temple*—when Jesus was found teaching in the Temple at the age of twelve (Lk 2:41-52).

The *hidden life of Jesus* is the period between the infancy of Christ and when He begins His public ministry at about thirty years old (Lk 3:23). We know practically nothing about this period. Besides the *Finding in the Temple* when Jesus was twelve, we are only told that Jesus is an obedient child (Lk 2:52), and that He works as a carpenter in Nazareth in His young adult years (Mk 6:3), having learned from Joseph, His foster father (Mt 13:55). Still, it is very meaningful to realize that Jesus lived in solidarity with us through faithful family life and quiet daily work.

The *public ministry of Jesus* is divided into two parts and is about three years in length. The first part begins when Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist (Mk 1:9-11) at the approximate age of thirty (Lk 3:23). After His Baptism, Jesus spends forty days in the desert praying, fasting, and conquering the temptations of the devil (Mk 1:12-13; Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13). After this, Jesus returns to Nazareth and Galilee where He begins manifesting the *kingdom of God* by preaching, teaching, healing, praying, and gathering and forming disciples (Mk 1:14-8:26; Mt 4:12-16:12; Lk 4:14-9:17). This first part is approximately 2-3 years in length.

The second part of the Jesus' public ministry consists in His last journey south to Jerusalem, where He will suffer, die, and rise (Mk 8:27-13:37; Mt 16:13-25:46; Lk 9:18-21:37). Jesus' parables and teachings change tone during this journey. They are now oriented toward His Death, Resurrection, and Second Coming. Jesus formally predicts His Passion and Resurrection three times (Mk 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). After the first time, He manifests Himself in transfigured glory to Peter, James, and John on a high mountain (Mk 9:2-10; Mt 17:1-8; Lk 9:28-36)—what we call the *Transfiguration*, which we celebrate as a Feast every August 6th.

The stage begins to be set for the *Passion of Christ* when Jesus enters Jerusalem (Mk 11:1-11), which triumphant entrance we celebrate on the Sunday which begins Holy Week, popularly called *Palm Sunday*. In this week, Jesus gives His discourse on the last things to his disciples as they marvel at the Temple (Mk 13; Mt 24). On Thursday evening, Jesus celebrates a last intimate meal with His disciples before His death, which meal we call the *Last Supper* (Mk 14:12-16). At this Supper, Jesus humbly washes the feet of His disciples (Jn 13), prepares them for His eventual departure from earth by speaking to them about the Holy Spirit whom He with the Father will send upon them (Jn 14-17), and gives them the gift of the Eucharist, His Body and Blood to eat and drink in the form of bread and wine (1 Cor 11:23-26; Mk 14:22-25; Mt 26:26-29; Lk 22:14-23). After this Jesus takes His disciples to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane, which is at the base of the Mount of Olives, the mountain that faces Jerusalem to the East (Mk 14:26-42). It is there that Judas, a disciple who betrayed Jesus, brings soldiers to have Jesus arrested (Mk 14:43-52). From there, Jesus is brought to the palace of the high priest, where He is tried and found guilty—in their minds—of blasphemy (Mk 14:53-72). In the morning, Jesus is brought to Pilate, the Roman governor of Palestine, so that the Jewish leaders may prevail upon him to have Jesus crucified (Mk 15:1-5; Jn 18:28-32). Under pressure, Pilate decides to have Jesus scourged and mocked, in order to appease the crowd and Jewish leaders (Jn 18:28-19:11). They will accept nothing less than crucifixion, however, and Pilate gives into their pressure to have Jesus crucified (Jn 19:12-16). Jesus is then made to carry His cross to a place called Golgotha (Jn 19:17), a rock quarry right outside of the city walls of Jerusalem (Mk 15:22; Jn 19:20). It is there that Jesus is crucified. Mary, His mother, and some of the women stand at the foot of the Cross while most of Jesus' disciples watch from a distance (Jn 19:25-27; Mk 15:40-41; Mt 27:55-56). Jesus is taken down and buried in a new tomb nearby in the evening (Mk 15:42-47; Mt 27:57-66; Lk 23:50-56; Jn 19:38-42). All this happens on Friday.

Three days later, on Sunday, Jesus *rises from the dead*. Various disciples find the tomb mysteriously empty (Mk 16:1-18; Mt 28:1-8; Lk 24:1-12; Jn 20:1-10). Then Jesus appears to various disciples as bodily risen (Mk 16:9-20; Mt 28:9-20; Lk 24:13-53; Jn 20:11-21:19). He will appear to them over a forty day period (Acts 1:3), mostly in and around Jerusalem, but also in the north, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (Jn 21; Mt 28:16). On the fortieth day, they are back in Jerusalem, and Jesus leads them to the top of the Mount of Olives. He instructs them to preach the Gospel to all nations, but first to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit would come upon them (Lk 24:49; Acts 1:8). He then ascends to heaven in their midst (Mk 16:19-20; Acts 1:10-11). For ten days, the disciples then dedicate themselves to prayer in the upper room in Jerusalem where they celebrated the Last Supper and where Jesus appeared to them (Acts

1:12-14). On the tenth day, on the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, the disciples experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them. There is a loud noise in the house, and a strong wind. They are all filled with the Holy Spirit, and tongues of fire appear over the top of each of them. They then go forth to preach and begin the mission that Jesus gave them: to preach the Gospel and make disciples to the ends of the earth (Acts 2).

What are the main themes of Jesus' public ministry?

Above all, Jesus reveals the kingdom of God to us, and God as our Father.

First, Jesus manifests the *kingdom of God* to us through three main activities in His public ministry: His teaching, His miracles, and His gathering and forming disciples. The kingdom of God is not something that can be defined in words, but it has to do with our participation in God and His ways. In His preaching, Jesus teaches us about the kingdom of God. Since it cannot be defined, Jesus gives us *parables*, which are comparisons. He compares the kingdom of God to things within our experience. Further, since there are many different dimensions to the kingdom of God, Jesus tells many parables, so that we might have a better understanding of what the kingdom of God is, and all the different dimensions to it.

Jesus also manifests the kingdom of God to us through His *miracles*. Miracles are something that only God can do. They are therefore a manifestation of God's presence and power in the world. But the miracles of Jesus are not performed to impress. They are rather expressions of love, mercy, and the awe-inspiring power of God. They are also always in the context of faith: they reinforce, reward, and/or engender faith. If one looks at the miracles of Jesus as a whole, one will see that Jesus heals all kinds of people: Jews and Gentiles, young and old, male and female, rich and poor. Jesus also heals every part of the body: eyes, ears, tongues, hands, legs, skin, and internal organs and tissues. This shows that He has come to heal the whole person, and every person, ultimately in the age to come, however. The external healings are also signs of the deeper, interior healing from sin that He has come to bring. Jesus also raises the dead, thus showing that He has power over death and is its Conqueror. Likewise, Jesus casts out demons, showing that He has come to overcome the power of the Evil One. Lastly, Jesus shows power over nature. From this we perceive the power of the Creator in Him.

Finally, Jesus manifests the kingdom of God by *gathering and forming disciples*. We will explore this dimension to the kingdom more fully in the section on the Church.

Another major theme in the public ministry of Jesus is the *revelation of God as Father*. Jesus is the eternal Son of God Who—now that He has become man—reveals His eternal love of the Father in and through His humanity. He calls God “Abba,” or “Father.” He also invites us to come to know God as Father in and through Him, so that we might be sons and daughters of God the Father in the Son, in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit. He loves telling us about the Father. Jesus also embodies and communicates the Father's infinite mercy toward sinners and the outcasts. As Good Shepherd, He seeks out the lost sheep, to bring us back to the Father.

How does Jesus save us?

Because of the Fall, we human beings are subject to the evils of sin, suffering, and death. We also find ourselves in a situation in which we are unable of ourselves to make sufficient restitution for our sins, never mind the sins of the whole human race. Sin is a weight too heavy for any mere human to bear. We are also unable to save ourselves from death or give ourselves eternal life with God.

On the one hand, it is fitting that human beings make restitution for sin, since it is we human beings who sinned. On the other hand, we are unable to make sufficient restitution. In His great wisdom, God decided to save us and solve all these problems perfectly through the Incarnation. Since Jesus is fully human, He can make restitution as a man. Since He is God, His restitution is more than sufficient for the sins of the whole human race. He also has the power in Himself to save us from suffering and death, and to give us eternal life.

Salvation also has two elements to it: on the one hand we are saved *from* sin, suffering, and death. On the other hand, we are saved *for* holiness leading to eternal life. It is especially in His Passion and Death that Christ saves us *from* the evils of sin, suffering, and death. It is especially in His Resurrection that Christ gives us new life, so that we might be holy and attain eternal life (Rom 4:25).

Since Jesus is fully God and fully man, all His actions are *human* actions performed by a Divine Person. This makes each of His actions infinitely powerful and salvific, and therefore infinitely meritorious. So, everything Jesus does is saving for us.

At the same time, Jesus saves us especially through His Passion. It was unnecessary for God to become man to save us, but, as we have seen, it was the perfect plan of God. Further, having become man, it was unnecessary for Jesus to suffer so much, since each of His actions is more than sufficient to redeem the human race. Why then did He choose to suffer so much? The answer is simple: God wanted to show the extent of His love toward us. He could have gone no further. God has shown the fullest expression of love for us in laying down His life for us. In this tremendous love, the Son of God offers to the Father something so much more valuable than the sins of all humankind were offensive to God. In other words, the love that Jesus shows infinitely outweighs the sins of all humankind, and therefore was *superabundantly meritorious* for our salvation.

Even after Jesus has died and risen, we still struggle on this earth. God has willed to save us through the struggle of this life, so that we might learn to love Him through the struggle and so become more perfect and purer in our love for Him and others. Therefore, we experience many effects of His salvation now on this earth. At the same time, there are many effects of His salvation—such as freedom from suffering and death—that we will only experience after this life, when we will rise with Christ and experience His exalted life fully and eternally.

... and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord...

Where is Jesus now?

Jesus ascended into heaven forty days after His Resurrection. The Creed says that He now “sits at the right hand of the Father,” which means that Jesus is forever exalted in His humanity in heaven with the Father and in the glory of the Holy Spirit (Mt 22:44; 26:64; Mk 16:19; Acts 2:33; 5:31; 7:55-56; Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet 3:22). He ever intercedes for us before the Father (Heb 7:23-25). He is also ever present to us in our souls (Jn 14:23; 2 Cor 13:5; Eph 3:17), in the Sacraments—especially in the Eucharist (1 Cor 10:1), in the Church (Mt 1:23; 18:20; 28:20), and in the needy we serve (Mt 25:40).

What kind of relationship should we have with Jesus?

There is only one adequate response to God: trust and surrender. Since Jesus is God, we call Him “our Lord.” He invites us to trust in Him, and surrender to Him. He invites us to follow Him. He invites us to have—and grow in—a deep, intimate, loving, and joyful relationship with Him in the midst of our brothers and sisters in the Church. He wants us to come to know God in and through Him. He is also “our Savior.” He ever makes Himself accessible to us as an infinite source of forgiveness and healing. He also ever calls us forward, to be holy and grow in love of God and neighbor. He wants us to abide in Him, even as He lives within us and abides in our hearts. We are also called to conformity with His life, sufferings, and triumph over sin and death, so that we might live, think, act, speak, suffer, die, and rise in Him. Through surrendering and committing our lives to Him in faith, through coming to know Him more deeply through daily prayer, and through being conformed more and more to His image in the way we live, Jesus is leading us step by step to eternal life, where He now reigns eternally with the Father.

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” —Gal 2:20

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” —Eph 5:1-2

Philippians 2:1-11 (*Christ humbled Himself for us, and was therefore exalted*)

Colossians 1:9-20 (*the preeminence of Christ*)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1. What struck you about this overview of Christ?***
- 2. What dimension to Jesus would you like to learn more about?***
- 3. How can we deepen our relationship with Christ?***

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Romans 8 / ***CCC:*** 687-747

THE HOLY SPIRIT



Although the mystery of God as Holy Trinity was not yet explicitly known in the Old Testament, there are many intimations of the Trinity that we find therein. From the very first chapter of Genesis the Spirit of God is mentioned and becomes a theme throughout the whole Old Testament. Indeed, the Spirit of God permeates everything. With the New Testament, we learn that the Spirit of God is neither something created nor an impersonal force nor simply another name for God. Instead, we learn that the Holy Spirit is part of the very mystery of God. He is the Third Person of the Trinity, fully personal, and coequal and coeternal with the Father and the Son, yet distinct from them. Through the whole of the Scriptures we learn of the special role that the Holy Spirit plays in the plan of God for us.

The Spirit of God is referred to, or symbolized, in the following passages in the Old Testament:

Gen 1:2, (6:3), 41:38, Ex 31:3, (35:21), 35:31, Num 11:17, 11:25-29, (14:24), 24:2, 27:18, Deut 34:9, Jdg 3:10, 6:34, 11:29, 13:25, 14:6, 14:19, 15:14, 1 Sam 10:6, 10:10, 11:6, 16:13-14, 19:20-23, 2 Sam 23:2, 1 Kgs 18:12, 22:24, 2 Kgs (2:9 & 15), 2:16, (5:26), 1 Chr 12:18, 2 Chr 15:1, 18:23, 20:14, 24:20, (Ezra 1:5), Neh 9:20, 9:30; Job 27:3, 32:8, 33:4, Ps 51:11, 104:30, 139:7, 143:10, Is 4:4, 11:2, 28:6, 30:1, 31:3, 32:15, 34:16, 40:13, 42:1, 44:3, 48:16, 59:21, 61:1, 63:10-11, 63:14, Ezk 1:12, 20-21, 2:2, 3:12, 14, 3:24, 8:3, 10:17, 11:1, 5, 19, 24, 18:13, 36:26-7, 37:1, 14, 39:29, 43:5, Dan 4:8-9, 18, 5:11-12, 14, 6:3, (13:45), Joel 2:28-9, Mic 2:7, 3:8, (Hag 1:14), 2:5; Zech 4:6, 6:8, 7:12, 12:10

Note: The verses in parentheses indicate passages where the word spirit is used but which imply the activity of God's Spirit more indirectly.

And the following images are seen as symbols of the Holy Spirit in Scripture:

Dove: Gen 8:8-12; Song of Songs 2:12; 5:2; 6:9; Mt 3:16; Mk 1:10; Lk 3:22; Jn 1:32
Cloud: Ex 13:21; 14:20; 16:10; 19:9; 24:15-8; 33:9-11; 34:5; 40:34-8; Lev 16:2; Mt 17:5
Fire: Ex 3:2; 13:21-2; 19:18; Lev 6:13; Deut 4:24; 36; Mt 3:11; Lk 3:16; 12:49; Acts 2:3
Water: Jn 3:5; 3:34; 4:14; 7:37-39; 19:34; 1 Jn 5:8 Rev 7:17; 21:6; 22:1,17; Is 55:1; Num 20:11; 1 Cor 10:4; Ez 47:1
Anointing: Lk 4:18; Acts 4:26-7; 10:38; Heb 1:9; 1 Jn 2:27; Is 61:1; Dan 9:25-6
Finger: Ex 8:19; 31:18; Deut 9:10; Lk 11:20; 2 Cor 3:3

How is the Holy Spirit present in the life of Jesus?

It was prophesied in the Old Testament that the Messiah (the “Anointed One”) would be anointed by the Spirit of God (Is 11:1-2; 42: 1; 61:1), and that He would be both a Spirit-Bearer and a Giver of the Spirit, so that through Him God’s Spirit would be poured out on all humankind (Joel 2:28-29).

In the Gospels, we see that the Spirit of God is present from the very beginning of Jesus’ earthly life, and that every part of His life is marked by the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Holy Spirit brings about the virginal conception of Jesus in Mary’s womb (Lk 1:35; Mt 1:18), fills Elizabeth when Mary visits her (Lk 1:41), prophesies through Zechariah (Lk 1:67), reveals to Simeon that He would see the Messiah before death (Lk 2:26), and inspires the same Simeon to go to the Temple to find this Child (Lk 2:27). John the Baptist later says that, while he baptizes with water, the Coming One will baptize “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Mt 3:11).

In the public ministry of Jesus, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in His baptism, to empower Him for the mission of salvation (Mk 1:10). After this, the Holy Spirit drives Jesus out to the desert for a period of prayer and fasting (Mk 1:12). Then Jesus returns to Galilee “in the power of the Spirit” (Lk 4:14). Jesus teaches Nicodemus that one must be born of water and the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God (Jn 3:5-8). Jesus describes the Spirit as “rivers of living water” that would come forth from His Heart once He is exalted (Jn 7:39). Jesus rejoices and prays “in the Holy Spirit” (Lk 10:21). The words He speaks are “Spirit and life,” and He says that, “It is the Spirit that gives life” (Jn 6:63). When Jesus sends His apostles out to preach and heal, He assures them that the Holy Spirit would speak through them (Mt 10:20). He warns His disciples about blaspheming against the Holy Spirit (Mt 12:31-32). Jesus encourages us to pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit (Lk 11:13), since “it is not by measure that he (God) gives the Spirit” (Jn 3:34).

At the Last Supper, Jesus tells His disciples about the “Spirit of truth” who dwells in them and will be with them after He departs (Jn 14:17). He says that, “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (Jn 14:26). This Holy Spirit will also bear witness to Christ (Jn 15:26), guide the Church into all truth, and declare the things that are to come (Jn 16:13). When risen, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit upon His apostles, giving them the power to forgive sins in His name (Jn 20:22). He then instructs His apostles to baptize all future disciples “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). He instructs His disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem, until they are clothed with power from on high, before going forth (Lk 24:49; Acts 1:5, 8). Lastly, the cloud which takes Jesus up in His Ascension (Acts 1:9), and which was also present when He was earlier transfigured (Lk 9:34), is a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

How is the Holy Spirit present in the Church?

In the New Testament, just as the Holy Spirit descends upon Mary to bring about the Incarnation of Jesus, and just as the Holy Spirit later descends upon Jesus in His Baptism to empower Him in His mission of salvation, the Holy Spirit also descends on the Church in the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles in order to:

- fill the Church as the new Temple of God (Eph 2:22)
- empower and guide the Church's mission—which is an extension and continuation of the mission of Christ (Acts 2:17-18)
- witness to Jesus with the apostles (Jn 15:26-27; Acts 1:8; 5:32; 15:28)
- establish the apostles and future leaders of the Church (Acts 20:38)
- sanctify the members of the Church through the Sacraments (Mt 28:18; Jn 1:33; 3:5; 4:13; Acts 1:5; 2:38; 10:47; 11:16; 1 Cor 12:13)
- help the members of the Church to worship (Jn 4:23-24) and pray (Rom 8:26-27)
- form and build them up through the Scriptures (Acts 1:16; 4:25; 28:25; 2 Pet 1:21)
- distribute spiritual gifts to all the members of the Church for the building up of the whole Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:1-13)
- sanctify the members of the Church with the Gifts of the Holy Spirit (Is 11:1-2), so that they may bear the fruits of the Spirit in their lives (Gal 5:22-23)
- be the seal and pledge of our eternal inheritance (Eph 1:13-14).

From the Scriptures, then, we can witness the close relationship the Holy Spirit has with the Church, which relationship Jesus Himself establishes. Any attempt to pit the Holy Spirit against the Church, then, is completely foreign and antithetical to the Scriptures and to Christ, and should therefore be avoided. The book of Revelation, speaking of the Church as the Bride of Christ, says, "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come'" (Rev 22:17).

What are all the passages where the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the New Testament?

You are encouraged sometime to visit and pray over the following passages in the New Testament, in order to better appreciate the presence, gift, and activity of the Holy Spirit in your life, and in the life of the Church:

Mt 1:18,20; 3:11,16; 4:1; 10:20; 12:18, 28, 31-2; 22:43; 28:19; Mk 1:8, 10, 12; 3:29; 12:36; 13:11; Lk 1:15; 35, 41, 67, 80; 2:25-7; 3:16,22; 4:1, 14, 18, Jn 1:32-3; 3:5-6, 8, 34; 4:23-4; 6:63; 7:39; 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13; 20:22; Acts 1:2, 5, 8, 16; 2:4, 17-18, 33, 38; 4:8, 25, 31; 5:3, 9, 32; 6:3, 5, 10; 7:51, 55; 8:15, 17-19, 29, 39; 9:17,31; 10:19, 38, 44-47; 11:12, 15-16, 24, 28; 13:2, 4, 9, 52; 15:8, 28; 16:6-7; 19:2, 6, 21; 20:22-3, 28; 21:4,11; 28:25; Rom 1:4 ; 5:5; 7:6; 8:2, 4-6, 9, 11, 13-16, 23, 26-27; 9:1; 12:11; 14:17; 15:13, 16, 19, 30; 1 Cor 2:4, 10-14; 3:16; 6:11, 17, 19; 7:40; 12:3-4, 7-13; 14:2, 12; 2 Cor 1:22; 3:3, 6, 8, 17, 18; 5:5; 6:6; 13:14; Gal 3:2-5, 14; 4:6, 29; 5:5, 16-18, 22, 25; 6:8; Eph 1:13, 17; 2:18, 22; 3:5,16; 4:3-4,30; 5:18; 6:17-18; Phil 1:19; 27; 2:1; 3:3; Col 1:8; 1 Thes 1:5-6; 4:8; 5:19; 2 Thes 2:13; 3:16; 1 Tim 4:1; 2 Tim 1:7; 1:14; (4:22); Titus 3:5; Heb 2:4; 3:7; 6:4; 9:8, 14; 10:15, 29; 1 Pet 1:2, 11-12; 3:18; 4:6; 4:14; 2 Pet 1:21; 1 Jn 3:24; 4:2, 6, 13; 5:7-8; Jude 1:19-20; Rev 1:10; 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 4:2; 14:13; 17:3; 19:10; 21:10; 22:17

How should we have a devotion to the Holy Spirit?

Jesus calls us to live a spiritual life, that is, a life animated by the Holy Spirit, the “soul of the Church.” We are therefore called to have a deep and intimate devotion to the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit Who dwells in our souls through grace, sanctifies us, guides us through prayer, inspires us with insights, speaks to us through the various people and events in our lives, forms us through the Scriptures and the Teachings of the Church, communicates God’s healing and forgiveness to us, transforms bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, showers us with spiritual gifts, helps us build up the communion of the Church, and moves us to bear fruit in a holy and charitable life lived for God and for others. It is recommended that we call upon the blessing and guidance of the Holy Spirit before we go about our day and before undertaking any significant actions.

We celebrate the presence, gift, and activity of the Holy Spirit each year on the *Solemnity of Pentecost*, fifty days after Easter, when the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles and the early Church (Acts 2). On this day, the Church wears red as a symbol of the fire of the Holy Spirit. The nine days in between the Ascension and Pentecost are a special time to pray for the Holy Spirit in our lives, since that is when the apostles and early disciples, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, devoted themselves to prayer as they awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). We call these nine days a *novena*. Inspired by this first *novena*, various devotions have arisen in the history of the Church involving nine days of prayer. There are various novenas to the Holy Spirit, to Jesus, to Mary, and to various angels and saints. In each case, some particular favor is sought of God, often times either through invoking a Person of the Trinity directly, or through the intercession of a saint. There are also many traditional prayers to the Holy Spirit we are encouraged to say. Every Christian should speak often to the Holy Spirit more informally too.

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.” —Lk 11:13

“For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. . . No one understands the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.” —1 Cor 2:10-11

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law.” —Gal 5:22-23

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Who is the Holy Spirit?*
2. *What role does the Holy Spirit have in God’s plan for our salvation?*
3. *How might our life be more animated by the Holy Spirit?*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Mt 16:13-19; 1 Cor 12 / ***CCC:*** 811-945

THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH



The Church is the communion of Christ's faithful. God laid the foundations for the Church in the Old Testament. Yet, it was not a fully established reality until the coming of Christ. The mystery of the Church is an essential part of Christ's mission, since it is the Father's will to draw all humanity to Himself through Christ. Therefore, the Church is not something man-made. Rather, the Church finds its origins and reason for being in Christ Himself. Just as Adam and Eve sinned and thereby brought about division between them and God, and between human beings, so Jesus came to reconcile us with God and one another. Drawing all people back into unity with the Father through Himself, then, is at the heart of Christ's mission of salvation and is what the Church is all about. This is why St. Irenaeus even says that God created the world for the sake of the Church.

Where does Jesus teach about the Church?

Jesus speaks specifically about the "church" (ἐκκλησία in Greek) in two passages in the Gospels (Mt 16:13-19; 18:15-20). The sense of the word is "assembly." The Old Testament background is the assembly of Israel which entered into covenant with God at Mount Sinai. So, when Jesus speaks of a "church," he is speaking of a new-covenant people centered in Him. Jesus says that He personally will build His Church on the "rock" of Peter. He also gives the Church, and Peter in a particular way, the authority to bind and loose, so that what Peter and the Apostles bind and loose on earth will be considered bound or loosed in heaven. Lastly, Jesus says that the gates of death will never prevail against His Church.

Although Jesus only uses the specific word "church" a few times in two passages, the word is abundantly used later on in the New Testament. Jesus speaks mostly about the Church using other language. When Jesus speaks about the social aspects to the kingdom of God, or when He refers to the city set on a hill (Mt 5:14), the vine (Jn 15:1-11), the flock (Lk 12:32; Jn 10:1-18),

and the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16; 21:33-44), or when He speaks of Himself as “the Bridegroom” of His people (Mk 2:19-20; Mt 25:1; Jn 3:29; Rev 21:9), He is teaching us about the mystery of the Church. Later in the New Testament, the Church will be referred to explicitly as the Body of Christ (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 10:16; 12:12-31; Eph 3:6; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:23, 30; Col 1:18, 24; 3:15), the Bride of Christ (Jn 3:29; 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:21-33; Rev 19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17), and the New Jerusalem (Gal 4:25-26; Heb 12:22; Rev 3:12; 21:2, 10).

Did Jesus give any structure to His Church?

When we examine the Gospels, we see Jesus clearly setting up a kind of structure for His new-covenant people. He not only gathers disciples. After spending a whole night in prayer, Jesus personally chooses twelve apostles to be closely associated with Him (Lk 6:12-16). The number twelve is significant, because there were twelve tribes in Israel (that had territory). The “twelve tribes of Israel” is a way of speaking about the whole people of Israel, and the leaders of the twelve tribes represented the twelve tribes to Moses (Num 1:44). When Jesus chooses twelve apostles to form, give authority to, and send out to preach and heal in His name, He is clearly laying the foundations for a New Israel, a new people of God that will include the whole world. In fact, Jesus specifically tells His apostles that they will “sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Mt 19:28). Later on in the New Testament, St. Paul will speak of the apostles as forming the foundation of the Temple of the Church (Eph 2:20), and the book of Revelation tells us that the “names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” are written on the foundations of the Temple in the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev 21:14).

Among the twelve apostles, three are particularly close to Jesus: Peter, James, and John. They alone witness the raising of Jairus’ daughter (Mk 5:37; Lk 8:51) and the Transfiguration (Mt 17:1-2; Mk 9:2; Lk 9:28), and are closest to Jesus when He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:37; Mk 14:33). Among these three, Peter holds a special place. Jesus chooses Peter to be the leader of the early Church and, as we will see, sets up a kind of “office” of leading the whole Church, initially filled by Peter, and afterwards by someone who will take Peter’s place when Peter dies.

While the Church should not be thought of as reduced to its structure, or only as an “institution,” there is an essential structure to the Church as Christ established it. An analogy with the human body can be helpful. The body should not be reduced to the skeleton. However, the skeleton is essential to it. Imagine what would happen to a body without a skeleton! A good skeleton is at service to the whole body, and enables the body to function and thrive.

Where in the Gospels and the New Testament do we see this special role of Peter?

Peter's name from birth is Simon. When Jesus first calls him, Jesus renames him "Peter," which means "rock" (Jn 1:42). It is not until later—in Matthew 16—that Jesus explains *why* He renamed Simon "Peter." In Matthew 16, Peter, inspired by God (Mt 16:17), professes Jesus to be the Messiah and Son of God (Mt 16:16). In other words, Peter declares Jesus' identity. Jesus will in turn use the occasion to declare Peter's identity: "And I tell you, you are Rock (Peter), and upon this Rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades (death) will not prevail against it. I will give you (singular) the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you (singular) bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you (singular) loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:18-19).

Consider also the following points that demonstrate Peter's role as leader of the Church:

- **Peter's name in its different forms is mentioned around 200 times in the New Testament.** The next most frequent name of an apostle mentioned is John (about 50 times).
- **Peter's name is always first with every listing of the apostles, even as the order of the other apostles varies.** See Mt 10:2, Mk 3:16-19, Lk 6:14-16, Jn 21:2, Acts 1:13.
- **Peter alone is renamed by Christ.** See Mt 16:18 and Jn 1:42. His original name is Simon. Jesus calls him "Rock" (*Kepha* in Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke, and *Petros* in Greek). There is no biblical record of anyone before Peter being named "rock." Abraham is metaphorically called a rock at one point (Is 51:1-2), as is God Himself in many places (Ps 18:31; 42:9; 78:35, etc.). However, "Rock" never became a name for Abraham or God. When Jesus calls James and John "sons of thunder," this is only a nickname (Mk 3:17).
- **Peter alone is given "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" by Christ.** See Mt 16:19.
- **Jesus gives Peter the unique role of strengthening his brothers (Lk 22:32) and feeding Christ's flock when Christ is gone (Jn 21:15-17).**
- **Peter is the spokesman for the apostles in the Gospels (Mt 14:28-32, 17:24-27, Mk 10:23-28) and for the Church in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:13-26, 2:41, 3:6-7, 5:1-11, 8:18-23, 10:46-48, 15:7-11).**
- **Jesus teaches the crowds from Simon Peter's boat (Lk 5:3), a symbol of the Church.**
- **Peter is mentioned as a preeminent witness of the Resurrection (Mk 16:7, 1 Cor 15:5).**
- **Although Paul corrects Peter (Gal 2:11-14), Paul also defers to Peter's authority (Gal 2:2).**
- **That Peter will have a successor after his death is clearly implied in Jesus' words and in the Scriptures.** In the Old Testament, in the dynastic court of David,

there were various important roles. David—or a descendent of his—was king. This was the most important role, of course. But there was another important role, that of the Steward of the Kingdom and Keeper of the Keys to the King’s palace. This figure was second only to the king. It was understood that when the King was away, the royal steward was in charge. And, there was always someone to fill this important position. When one steward died or was removed, another was appointed. We are given insight into this role in Isaiah 22. There, God says that He will remove the current steward, Shebna, from his “office” (Is 22:19), and that Eliakim will replace him. Eliakim will inherit the “robe,” the “belt,” and the “authority” of Shebna. The Lord also says that Eliakim will be a “father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (Is 22:21). Eliakim will also be given “the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open” (Is 22:22). All this forms the background for Matthew 16. Jesus is the New David, Who is also a King, the King of Kings. In Matthew 16, He is clearly appointing Peter to be the “Steward” of His Kingdom, and the “Keeper of the Keys.” This means that Peter is second only to Jesus in authority. And, it is to be understood that when Jesus is away (when He ascends into heaven, that is), Peter is in charge. What Peter says goes. It is also to be understood that Jesus is setting up an office here, so that when Peter dies, someone would be appointed to take his place, just as in the dynastic court of David. Jesus also says that death shall not overcome the Church built upon Peter (Mt 16:18). The Church obviously outlives Peter. Lastly, after the death of Judas, the apostles pick Matthias as a successor (Acts 1:12-26). If Judas’ place had to be filled with a successor, how much more Peter’s place.

Why is the “pope” an essential part of Christ’s Church?

The *Pope* is the successor of Peter, on whom Jesus built His Church. It is therefore necessary to be in union with Peter, or his successor (the *Pope*), in order to be fully in union with Christ. Since Peter died in Rome, the bishop of Rome is the successor of Peter, whom we traditionally call “Pope” (father), or “Holy Father” (a title of respect), or “Vicar of Christ.” This is why St. Ignatius of Antioch in around the year 110 A.D. says that the church in Rome presides over the whole Church in love, and why St. Irenaeus in 180 A.D. says that every church must be in union with the Church of Rome. While all Christians should be in full union with the pope as Peter’s successor, as Christ intended, unfortunately, because of tragedies in history, there are many divisions of Christians who have broken away from the Catholic Church, who do not acknowledge the pope, and who are not in union with him. Only within the Catholic Church will one find the successor of Peter, the pope. From the present pope back to Peter, we can trace back one successor of Peter after another, going all the way back to Christ in an unbroken chain. In fact, it is St. Irenaeus who gives us the first list of the names of successors of Peter around the year 180 A.D.

In setting up the “Office of Peter,” Jesus was providing a way for the Church to be unified in truth and love from age to age. It was to prevent confusion and division. It was so that, as time went on, there would be a clear way to keep united and know with clarity what Christ taught and how it applies to the different situations that arise in each age.

Lastly, in addition to the pope being the successor of Peter, the bishops of the Catholic Church are successors to the Apostles. Each bishop of the Catholic Church has a chain of “ordination” that is traced back, and derives its power from, the apostles, and therefore from Christ Himself. This is what we call *Apostolic Succession*. The early Church saw this connection to the Apostles as an absolutely essential element of the true Church.

Why does the Church teach that the Pope is infallible?

The role of the pope as Peter’s successor is to shepherd the whole flock in the name of Christ and to guard and clarify the truths of the faith. The pope cannot and does not make up doctrine. Neither do we believe that Popes have any special “direct line” to heaven. Neither are Popes impeccable. In the history of the Church, some popes have been great saints. Some have been great sinners. And we have had everything in between. But, none of this has affected the doctrine of the Church. What *Papal Infallibility* means is simply that, because of the promise of Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit will prevent the pope from speaking any error under certain conditions: First, the pope must be speaking of something that falls under “Divine Revelation,” or a matter of “Faith and Morals.” Second, the pope must speak consciously and freely, not under any coercion. Third, he must invoke the authority of Peter given him by Christ. That is, not everything that the pope says is necessarily or automatically correct. But when the pope speaks with the authority of Peter, or *ex cathedra* (“from the Chair”), the Holy Spirit will assure the truth of Revelation that he is clarifying, and prevent any error from being communicated. Most times in history, popes have only authoritatively confirmed things already clarified by Church councils or teaching. Rarely, they will authoritatively teach something without a Church council. All these conditions simply clarify what Jesus said, when He said to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” When we look at the history of the Catholic Church, we see remarkable clarity, consistency, and coherence in Church teaching, which one will find nowhere else. Indeed, just as Jesus once taught the crowds on the Sea of Galilee from the bark of Peter, so Jesus continues to guide and teach His flock from the “Bark of Peter,” the Catholic Church.

Does Christ want all His followers to be one in His Church?

Yes. At the Last Supper, Jesus prayed that His followers would always be “one, as you Father are in me, and I in you” (Jn 17:20-23). And, every image of the Church found in the New Testament (Christ’s Body, His Bride, His Flock, the Temple, etc.) is inherently one. Jesus only has one Body. He only has one Bride. While there were many synagogues in ancient Palestine, there was only one Temple. In John 10, Jesus says, “There shall be one flock, one shepherd” (Jn 10:16). It is clear that Jesus wants us all to be one in the Church He established.

Why are Christians divided?

Christians were in fact unified in one Church, which called itself “Catholic” and was in union with the pope, for hundreds of years, with a few exceptions. In the 400’s, a group of Christians stemming from Alexandria, and a different group stemming from Antioch, broke from the unity of the Church. Today, these churches are collectively known as the Oriental Orthodox. In 1054, there was a tragic division between the churches in Rome and in Constantinople, which eventually led to a major division between the Church in the West, which remained united with Rome, and the churches in the East, which broke unity with Rome. We call the collection of these various Eastern national churches the “Eastern Orthodox.” With time, some groups within these Churches would reunite with Rome, thereby becoming fully Catholic, while retaining their Eastern traditions. Starting in the 1500’s in the West, individuals and groups began breaking away from the Catholic Church. This is known as the Protestant Reformation. It was headed by such figures as Martin Luther in Germany, Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, John Calvin in Geneva, and King Henry VIII in England. Tragically, the Protestant Reformation has given rise to continuing divisions, resulting in over 30,000 different Protestant denominations today, including those which call themselves “non-denominational” or “interdenominational.” The chief Protestant divisions with their approximate starting dates are the Lutherans (1519), Anglicans / Episcopalians (1534/1789), Mennonites (1536), Presbyterians (1560), Congregationalists (1560), Baptists (1609), Methodists (1744), Seventh Day Adventists (1863), and Pentecostals (1901). Eventually, other sects arose which cannot, properly speaking, be called Christian, since they do not profess the divinity of Christ or the Trinity, such as the Mormons (1830), Jehovah Witnesses (1870), and Christian Scientists (1879), and other radical sects and cults.

As Catholics, we view other Christians as “separated brethren.” On the one hand, we have many things in common and acknowledge a common baptism and faith in Christ. On the other hand, we see all these other groups as incomplete, as having lost the fullness that is preserved in the Catholic Church because of Christ. We recognize that many founders and followers of these different denominations were or are well-intentioned. We should respect them, relate charitably toward them, cultivate good relationships with them, understand their beliefs accurately, work through dialogue towards greater understanding and unity, and occasionally pray and do charitable works together. We also acknowledge that Catholics are often partly at fault for the divisions that have happened or continue. We call the general, praiseworthy effort back towards Christian unity *Ecumenism*, or the *Ecumenical Movement*. It is important for us Catholics to be “ecumenical,” that is, to cultivate a good relationship with our separated brothers and sisters in Christ in the terms stated above, and to work toward greater understanding and unity. However, it is also important for us to remain firmly rooted in the fullness of our faith, and to try to draw those who are open to reunion with the Catholic Church. Being “Catholic” should not be thought of as one “option” among others of being Christian, nor as something added on top of being Christian. Rather, it should be thought of as the *fullness of Christianity*. This fullness is important, since Jesus instructed His apostles to teach “all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:20), not just part of it.

What does the word “Catholic” mean, and isn’t the “Catholic Church” just another denomination like the others?

A “denomination” is something that “denominates,” or comes from, a larger whole, but which is a division away from it. But the Catholic Church is not from a larger whole, since it is the larger whole. It also does not have any human founder at its origin, but Jesus Himself who founded His Church on Peter, the Rock. It is the fullness of the ancient Church which Jesus established. Further, one should not be fooled by the names “nondenominational” or “interdenominational.” These are still denominations within the Protestant family of Christians. So, the only Church which is not a denomination is the Catholic Church.

The word “Catholic” (καθολικός in Greek) means “universal.” It is an adjective describing the whole Church. In the New Testament, the word “church” was used in two different ways. The first way was applied to local churches, such as the “church” at Corinth or Philippi. The second way was when Jesus or New Testament writers speak of the whole Church, or the worldwide Church (all the local churches). In order to clarify when the whole church was meant, the early Christians used the adjective “catholic.” The first time the word appears in writing is in the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch in 110 A.D. In short, then, the early Church called the whole body of believers the “Catholic Church.”

Is the Catholic Church necessary for salvation?

Since the Church is the one Body of Christ, it is the “ark of salvation.” Jesus saves us through His Body, the Church. He calls us all into unity with Himself and one another in His Church. For this reason, if a person was to see clearly, through grace, that the Catholic Church is the Church of Christ, and if he or she was still to reject it or to refuse to enter it with such clear knowledge, such a person would be rejecting the call of Jesus and the salvation Jesus is calling him to through the Church.

At the same time, it is God’s desire that “all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). Because of this desire, we must say that in some way God gives the possibility of salvation to each human person. If a person is saved, it can only be through Christ. A person could be saved even through a kind of implicit and unconscious faith. If a person’s ignorance of Gospel is *invincible* (not easily and reasonably overcome), it is excusable. If, on the other hand, one’s ignorance is *vincible* (easy and expected to overcome), it is not excusable. God will save those who cooperated with the grace and truth given to them, despite the limitations of their circumstances. God will not reject those who, through no fault of their own, never accepted or entered His Church, but did their best to cooperate with His grace in the circumstances of their lives. In the end, God is the judge of hearts. Ours is the duty to attract and invite people to the fullness of what Christ wants for people in His Church. It is not ours to pronounce God’s judgment on people. We leave that to God. Our focus should be on cooperating with God’s grace and doing what we know is right through grace.

What are the Four Marks of the Church?

The four traditional “marks” or “characteristics” of the Church are the following:

1. **One.** We have already seen how the Church is inherently one.
2. **Holy.** The Church is holy, since the source of her holiness is the Holy Spirit, Who has been given to the Church by Christ, and Who is ever present as the source of holiness in the Church, producing saints in every age through His grace. Insofar as the members of the Church are not holy, it is because of human failure to cooperate with the grace of the Holy Spirit within the Church.
3. **Catholic.** The Church is “Catholic,” meaning for everyone. It is the Body of Christ’s faithful that all are called into.
4. **Apostolic.** The Church is apostolic, both in the sense that it is “sent out” to continue the mission of Christ (the word “apostle” means one who is sent), and in the sense that it is built on the foundation of the apostles.

What about the problems and scandals in the Church?

Tragically, there have always been problems and scandals in the Church, and scandals are a terrible source of counter-witness to Christ. We should be deeply saddened by scandals, problems, and imperfections, certainly present also among the shepherds of the Church. We should not be surprised by these things, however. Even among the twelve apostles there is Judas, who betrayed Jesus. There is “Judas in every age,” so to speak. The other apostles certainly had their failings as well. Indeed, in every age of the Church, there are great saints and great sinners, and everything in between. In acknowledging the problems and scandals in the Church, we should also acknowledge the saints, and the many good things that the Holy Spirit is doing through many of the faithful throughout the world. And, a religion should not be judged according to those who fail to live its teachings. It should instead be judged by those who do live its teachings.

In this world, the Church is more a hospital for sinners needing mercy and conversion than a museum of saints. How should we respond to failures within the Church when we hear of them? We should remember our own struggles and failings. We should pray for conversion and healing for all. And, instead of being discouraged, we should seek to grow all the more in the living out of our faith. We don’t help the matter when we fail to live our faith because others have failed to live their faith. We would only be increasing the numbers of those who fall away and don’t live up to their faith. It does not follow that because others have failed, we should stop praying, going to Mass, serving, and actively participating in the communion of the Church. Neither should we break away and join another religion, or some denomination. Rather, we should feel compelled to play our part in the constant reform of the Church. We should be part of the solution, and not contribute to the problem. Finally, we should remember that Christ so loved the Church that He died for her (Eph 5:25). Should we love the Church any less? Despite her imperfections, Christ still died for her (Eph 5:25) and promised to be with her until the end of the world (Mt 16:18). Following His example, and knowing that it is His will, we should commit ourselves just as much to the Catholic Church, since it is and will always be the fullness of His Church.

Charisms and Vocations in the Church

All the followers of Christ and members of His Church are called to be holy. And, through our baptism, we are equipped with all the spiritual gifts we need to be holy. We are also called to be holy, not just for ourselves, but to live out holiness in the midst of our brothers and sisters in the communion of the Church. For this reason, flowing out of our baptismal grace and the universal call to be holy, all are given unique spiritual gifts for the building up of the Body of Christ, called *charisms*. These are often built upon our natural gifts and talents. Sometimes they are extraordinary. All Christ's faithful are called to *discern* their charisms, and to recognize their gifts and talents, so that they may contribute them to the good of the whole Church. The Church flourishes when everyone is striving for holiness and to build up the Church through their own love, service, and charisms.

In addition to the primary vocation to be holy, and the unique charisms of Christ's faithful, all have a kind of "secondary" vocation, which is a specific way of living out holiness, involving a state of life to which they feel called. The three main *Vocations* in the Church are the *Laity*, the *Ordained*, and the *Consecrated*. Each involves a life-commitment. *Lay People*, usually called to marriage, are called to be holy in the midst of the world, and to order temporal affairs to the kingdom of God. The *Ordained* are called to shepherd God's people in the name of Christ. The *Consecrated* are those who consecrate themselves to God in place of marriage to an earthly spouse, who take vows or promises of chastity, poverty, and obedience, and who often live in a community with a particular mission. All vocations are called to *communio*, that is, a deep communion among themselves and with the rest of the Church. All are also called to *missio*, that is, to some kind of mission for the good of the Church and the world. There are three aspects to the *missionary* dimension of every vocation: the *Priestly*, the *Prophetic*, and the *Kingly*. This is what we call the threefold *Munera Christi* (offices of Christ). God worked through three principal figures in the Old Testament to form His people: Priests, Prophets, and Kings. God forgave, blessed, and sanctified the people through priests. He exhorted and taught them through the prophets. He governed and served them through the kings. Christ fulfills all three roles. He is a priest, prophet, and king. He also gives us a share in this threefold mission. At our baptism, we are anointed as priest, prophet, and king in Christ. According to our own state of life, we are called to help others be holy (*priestly*), to evangelize and form others in our faith through word and example (*prophetic*), and to serve them through the *Spiritual* and *Corporal Works of Mercy*, which we will learn about later (*kingly*).

Does the Church only exist on earth? Is the Church only a temporary reality?

It is important to realize that the Church includes not only Christ's faithful on earth. The Church presently exists in three states. Christ's faithful still on earth are called the *Church in Pilgrimage*, or the *Church Militant* (since it still struggles against sin). Christ's faithful in heaven are called the *Church Glorified*, or the *Church Triumphant*. Christ's faithful who have died but are still being purified in preparation for heaven are called the *Church in Purification*, or the *Church Suffering*. As we will learn about in the next section, we live in communion with Christ's faithful on earth, in heaven, and in purgatory. Eventually, at the end of time, there will only be one state that the Church exists in: the *Church Glorified*, or the Church in heaven.

How can we live out the mystery of the Church in our own way?

We are called to have a kind of “spirituality of the Church.” This involves avoiding a “just me and Jesus” mentality. In being called into relationship with Jesus, we are called into relationship with all others who follow Christ in the Body of His Church. We are called to have *solidarity* with the members of the Church around the world, so that we “rejoice with those who rejoice, (and) weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). We are called to love the Church, and devote our life to her, according to our own state in life. It is important for us to be one in mind and heart, which involves believing in all official teachings of the Church, since it is Christ Himself who preserves His Revelation and teaches us through the “bark of Peter.” This also means loving our brothers and sisters in Christ, living in union with them, being patient with them, forgiving them, praying for them, and bearing the burdens of others, just as others often bear our burdens. It also means respecting, and cooperating with, the pastors of the Church. We are also called to be enriched through the gifts of others, and in turn to enrich others through our own love, charisms, and service, for the upbuilding of the whole Body of Christ (Eph 4:1-16). Finally, like the people of Israel, we are on pilgrimage together toward the Promised Land of Heaven. It is there that the plan of God for us, His people, will finally be complete. We will be perfectly one with God and one another, in love and eternal joy. It is good to keep this in mind when we relate to our brothers and sisters in the Church.

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

1 Cor 12 (The Church is One Body with Many Members)

“So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” —Eph 2:19-22

Eph 4:1-16 (The one Lord showers gifts on His faithful for the building up of the Church)

Eph 5:21-33 (Christ loved and laid down His life for His Bride, the Church)

“... the Church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.” —1 Tim 3:15

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. ***What is distinctive about the Catholic Church compared to other Christian communities?***
2. ***How should Catholics relate to other Christians?***
3. ***How can we better live out a “spirituality of the Church”?***

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Hebrews 12 / ***CCC:*** 946-962

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS



What is the “Communion of the Saints”?

The *Communion of the Saints* refers to the union of all the faithful in Christ, and the sharing of spiritual goods between them. The union between Christians through grace is actually deeper than the union of family members through blood, and God has willed that we would all be enriched through each other. Further, because the Church, as we have said, exists presently in three states (the Church on earth, in heaven, and in purgatory), we have communion with the faithful in all three states. This is because all those who are united with Christ are united with one another in and through Christ, whether they are here on earth, or in heaven, or in purgatory.

With the faithful on earth, we share the same faith and are called to build each other up in this faith (Rom 1:12). We likewise walk together in pilgrimage toward our heavenly homeland. In this way, we share the same hope (Eph 4:4). We also share in the same Sacraments (1 Cor 12:13; 10:17). As said before, we all have different *charisms* that we are called to put at the service of one another (1 Cor 12:7). We are also called to put our material and temporal goods at the service of one another and the Church (Acts 4:32). Lastly, we have communion in the same charity, which is the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, Who has been given to us (Rom 5:5; Eph 4:16; 1 Cor 8:1).

We share this same bond of love with the faithful who have gone before us but who are presently being purified for heaven in a state we call *Purgatory*. We are called to be mindful of them and to pray for them. We will further explore Purgatory when we discuss “Life Everlasting” in the Creed, and the “Last Things.”

Those who have gone before us and are now in heaven are our older brothers and sisters in Christ. They pray for us and cheer us on in the struggle of our earthly pilgrimage. We can and should ask them to pray for us. They are also examples to us in the way they lived on earth.

Who are the “Saints”?

The saints, broadly speaking, are all those made holy by Christ in Baptism and who are in a *State of Grace*. The New Testament refers to saints in this broad sense in the following passages: Mt 27:25; Acts 9:13, 32, 41; 26:10; Rom 1:7; 8:27; 12:13; 15:25-26, 31; 16:2, 15; 1 Cor 6:1-2; 14:33; 16:1, 15; 2 Cor 1:1; 8:4; 9:1, 12; 13:13; Eph 1:1, 15, 18; 2:19; 3:18; 4:12; 5:3; Eph 6:18; Phil 1:1; 4:21-22; Col 1:2, 4, 12, 26; 1 Thes 3:13; 2 Thes 1:10; 1 Tim 5:10; Philemon 5, 7; Heb 6:10; 13:24; Jude 3; Rev 5:8; 8:3-4; 11:18; 13:7, 10; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20 24; 19:8; 20:9; 22:21.

More narrowly, those in heaven are called *Saints*, since they have been totally perfected in holiness and God’s love. In certain passages the New Testament refers to these saints in heaven (Rev 18:20, 24; 19:8).

In a yet narrower way, the Church recognizes particular individuals of different times and places as saints, insofar as they have been exemplary models of following Christ. The Church has examined their lives and declared them to be models of holiness. They are publicly held up as an example for all the faithful, and are celebrated in the *Liturgy* (the official worship of the Church). For hundreds of years now, the Church has had a process whereby a person of reputed holiness, after he or she dies, is examined and eventually publicly acknowledged as a saint. There are steps in this process. The present day process has four steps. In the first step, such a person is called a *Servant of God*. In the second step, the person is declared *Venerable*. In the third step, which is called *Beatification*, he or she is declared *Blessed*. In the fourth and final step, which is called *Canonization*, he or she is officially recognized as a *Saint* and is given that title before their name. Unless an individual is a *martyr* (one killed for Christ), a separate documented miracle through the person’s intercession is required for steps three and four, as a kind of “proof” that the person is in heaven. When persons are beatified, they can be officially venerated at the local level of the dioceses or the religious communities in which they lived. It is not until persons are canonized that they can be venerated universally throughout the Church.

Do Catholics worship saints?

No. We honor the saints with a special honor, but we do not worship them. We worship God alone. To worship anyone or anything other than God is the sin of *Idolatry*. In Catholic tradition, there are certain helpful Greek terms which distinguish between worship and different kinds of honor. *Latria* is worship properly speaking, or adoration. This is the honor due God alone. *Dulia* is not worship but describes the special honor we have for the saints. *Hyperdulia* is a special honor given to the Blessed Virgin Mary above the other saints. To honor a human person is not a sin. In fact, in the Ten Commandments, God commands us to “honor” our father and mother (Mk 10:19). Jesus also speaks about a certain honor due to a prophet (Mk 6:4). Jesus also says that He personally will “honor” those who serve Him (Jn 12:26). St. Paul says we should honor each other (Rom 12:10), and that certain missionaries deserve special honor (Phil 2:29). St. Peter exhorts believers even to honor the emperor (1 Pt 2:17). If it is fitting to honor all these, it is certainly fitting to honor those who have followed Jesus in an exemplary way through the ages, the saints.

Do Catholics “pray to” saints?

Catholics do not pray to the saints as though they were God. Rather, we ask the saints to pray for us, just as we ask other Christians on earth to pray for us. St. James tells us, “The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects” (Jas 5:16). Likewise, St. Paul exhorts Christians to pray for one another (or “make intercession for them”), not because asking others to pray for us detracts from Christ, but because Christ likes to work through others and has chosen to make our prayers for each other efficacious (Eph 6:18; Col 1:3, 9; 4:3; 1 Thes 5:25; 2 Thes 1:11; 3:1; 1 Tim 2:1; Heb 13:18; Jas 5:16; 1 Jn 5:16). If certain Christians have gone before us and their souls are glorified with God in heaven, they certainly do not cease praying for those of us still on earth. The Bible at times depicts holy people who have gone before us as interceding for us (2 Macc 15:14; Rev 5:8; 8:3). Indeed, when they die, they are not cut off from us and from the Church. Instead, they are made more perfect members of Christ and the Church. They are aware of us. They still care for us. They pray for us. Because of this, from the Church’s beginnings, Christians have asked the angels, and the martyrs and other saints, to pray for them.

Catholics often use the language of “praying to” a saint. They do not mean “praying to” the saint in the same way as “praying to” God. Unfortunately, this language can make it seem that this is the case to Christians from Protestant traditions. The root of the word “pray” means to “beg” or “ask.” For example, “I pray thee, lord,” in ancient English can be translated as “I beg you, sir” in modern English. With this understanding, it is not wrong for Catholics to use the language of “praying to” a saint in itself, as long as it is perfectly clear to all that this is different than “praying to” God. However, it is best to use different language around our separated brothers and sisters in Christ, so as to avoid confusion and misunderstanding.

It is sometimes objected that it is wrong to ask the saints to pray for us, since this involves calling on the dead, which is condemned in the Old Testament (Dt 18:10-11). However, the saints are not dead. While their souls are presently separated from their bodies (except in the case of Mary), they are alive with God in heaven. In fact, they can be said to be more alive than we are. And, there is no danger of the saints in heaven misleading us. They will always point us to Christ, and help us to grow in relationship with Him. Further, the closer we grow to Christ, the closer we grow to His family, including the saints in heaven.

Why does the Catholic Church venerate images of Jesus, Mary, and the Saints?

Images help us. Photographs help us to remember family members and friends. Statues and images help us to remember Jesus, Mary, and the angels and saints. Images are vehicles for us, therefore. We do not so much venerate the image as the person the image represents. The Old Testament forbade images of God, since it was important for the Israelites to know that nothing created is God or can adequately represent God.

However, not all images were forbidden in the Old Testament. In some cases, God directly commanded that images be made, as in the case of the *Cherubim statues* on top the *Ark of the*

Covenant (Ex 25:18-22), or the *Bronze Serpent* that God instructed Moses to mount on a pole for the healing of the people bitten by living serpents (Num 21:9). The *Cherubim Statues* represented angels and helped the people acknowledge Him Who is greater than the angels (Gen 3:24; Ex 25:18-22; 37:7-9; Num 7:89; 1 Sam 4:4; 6:2; 1 Kgs 6:23-36, etc.). The Bronze Serpent would serve as an image of Christ (Jn 3:14-15). Further, when God became man in Christ, *God became a visible image*. St. Paul calls Christ the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). In contrast to the phenomenon of idolatry, where someone is drawn away from God through images, through the Incarnation, people are now drawn to God through the Image of Christ, and by extension, through those visible images that represent Him and His servants. It is also fitting that those with artistic skill would glorify God through their art. If they were limited to non-religious images only, they wouldn’t be able to glorify God directly through their art.

Why do Catholics venerate the Relics of Saints?

The *Relics* of the martyrs and other saints are considered precious, both because our bodies will rise again in Christ, and because they were part of a holy person. And, just as God can and does work powerfully through the prayers of the saints, He can and does work miracles and answer prayers through the relics of the saints as well. We see this in the Bible. A Syro-Phoenician woman is cured simply by touching the hem of Jesus’ garment (Mk 7:24-30). A man is brought back to life through his body touching the prophet Elisha’s bones (2 Kgs 13:21). Many sick were cured, not only “by the hands of Paul,” but also through handkerchiefs or aprons that were touched to his body and afterward touched to the sick (Acts 19:11-12). God even used Peter’s shadow to heal people (Acts 5:15). A relic also helps us feel close to a saint, just as does a keepsake from a family member who has passed.

Tradition has categorized relics into three classes. *First Class Relics* are part of the body of the saint, such as a bone. *Second Class Relics* are something that belonged to the saint, such as a rosary or a piece of clothing. *Third Class Relics* are designated items touched to first class relics, such as a little cloth that has been touched to the bones of a saint.

There is an ancient practice of placing relics of saints in church altars, underneath where the presiding priest kisses the altar and where the Eucharist is celebrated. This signifies that the Eucharist is celebrated in union with the saints in heaven. Other relics are placed in *Reliquaries*, which are protected cases or holders for relics that allow the faithful to see and venerate them. Often the church where the main relics of a saint are is designated as a *Shrine*, and sometimes a *Basilica*. Often, many of the faithful will go on *pilgrimage* there to ask God for a special favor through the intercession of that particular saint. It is customary for the faithful to kiss relics as a means of veneration. In the end, relics are a *means* for us growing in our relationship with Christ and His saints, and occasionally instruments through which God works miracles. A Christian spirit must suffuse all religious practices surrounding relics. Any superstitious approach is antithetical to the faith.

How do Catholics celebrate the Saints throughout the year?

Each saint is assigned a day in the year to be his or her “feast day.” For example, the feast of St. Mary Magdalene is on July 22nd. The feast of St. Dominic is on August 8th. The feast days of the saints are spaced out throughout the year.

Some saints are only celebrated in a local region of the Church where the saint lived. St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, for example, is only venerated in the United States, since she was a saint here in America. Many other countries have their own localized saints not celebrated by the larger Church as well.

Other saints are celebrated universally throughout the Church, since the Church has judged them to have a more universal significance. For example, the saints of the New Testament—such as Mary, Joseph, the Apostles and early Disciples—are celebrated universally. Early martyrs also tend to be celebrated universally. When we learn about the *Liturgical Year*, we will learn about how Christ and the mysteries of His life, as well as various feasts of Mary and other saints, are celebrated throughout the year and with different rankings of feasts.

On one day of the year we solemnly honor and celebrate all the saints in heaven, both known and unknown. This is what we call the Solemnity of All Saints on November 1st.

Is every Christian called to be a saint?

Yes. God calls us all to be saints, since God calls us all to be holy. St. Peter says, “As He Who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:15-16). The same call is expressed in different language when Jesus says, “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). This perfection means to be both “complete” and “fully developed,” like a fully mature and flourishing plant, versus a mechanical concept of perfection, like “dotting all of one’s ‘i’s” and “crossing all of one’s ‘t’s.” It is also the perfection of love of God and neighbor. An overly self-focused idea of perfection is also completely excluded from what Jesus means. Further, this call to perfection certainly does not involve having a kind of “holier-than-thou” attitude or only having the external appearance of holiness. These are caricatures of holiness, but not real holiness. True holiness and perfection involves being humble and real, even as it involves being “fully developed,” and “flourishing” in all areas of one’s life. Another way of thinking about this is that Jesus does not want us to be incomplete, inconsistent, or hypocritical, but rather to be fully healed and transformed by His grace and love. Lastly, one should not think that holiness is boring, or that it deprives us of our identity, happiness, freedom, and/or creativity. This is a total misunderstanding of holiness. The saints show us that to be holy means to be fully yourself, to be your “true self,” to be joyful, to be fully free, and to be creative. It involves God, through the grace of Christ, making you the “best version of yourself.” Above all, it is Christ shining in and through you.

We should neither be discouraged by our weaknesses, nor surprised that we do not become saints overnight. Becoming holy is a life-long process. We are called to be patient with ourselves and with others. At the same time, we are called to be open to God's call and help in making us holy, and ever encourage others to strive for holiness, even as we struggle and strive for it ourselves. The holier we are, the closer we will be to God and others, and the more integrated we will be within. The holier we are, the happier we will be. It is a temptation to be complacent, to give up, or to settle for anything less than what God has in mind for us. Becoming holy is difficult, yes, but Christ is the One who calls us to be holy, and helps us to be holy. Keep in mind that God often allows us to experience our weaknesses, in order that we may grow in humility, come to appreciate His mercy more fully, and rely on His grace more completely. Becoming holy is God's work, and yet it also takes a lot of work on our part, since God wills to work through us. Becoming holy requires great self-awareness and honest self-examination. It involves a kind of battle against our weaknesses. It involves God purifying us from all selfish tendencies, and transforming us into pure love. It is a journey, the most difficult and yet the most exciting of all journeys. It is a journey God calls us to ever advance in, following Christ, His Son, toward the perfection of love in eternal life.

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

"The first (commandment) is this, 'Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." —Mk 12:29-31

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification." —1 Thes 4:3

"But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day" (Pr 4:18).

"Finally, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, you do so more and more" (1 Thes 4:1).

"Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." —1 Cor 11:1

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Who are the Saints?*
2. *How do the Saints fit into God's plan, and our spiritual life?*
3. *Why does God call each of us to be holy?*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Lk 1-2 / *CCC:* 487-511 & 964-975

MARY

THE MOTHER OF JESUS



In some Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah, a woman is mentioned, a woman who would be the mother of the Messiah. Thus, Genesis foretold that a future descendent of Eve would crush the head of the serpent that overcame Adam and Eve (Gen 3:15). The Messiah would be the “seed” of a future woman. Isaiah foretells that the coming Messiah, who would be called Emmanuel (“God with us”), would be born of a virgin (Is 7:14). Micah also mentions a woman who, in Bethlehem, would give birth to a future “ruler of Israel,” whose “origin is from of old, from ancient days” (Mic 5:1-3).

In the New Testament, we discover that this chosen woman who would bear the Messiah is Mary of Nazareth (Lk 1:26-27; Gal 4:4). In the period of her betrothal to Joseph, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her that she is “full of grace,” that the Lord is with her, and that she has “found favor with God” (Lk 1:28-30). The angel then announces the mission God has chosen for her. She is to be the mother of the Messiah, Who is the Son of God (Lk 1:31-33). The angel explains that the Holy Spirit will bring about a virginal conception in her womb without the involvement of any man (Lk 1:34-35). The Holy Spirit will do this amazing thing, just as He has caused her older, barren cousin, Elizabeth, to conceive in her old age (Lk 1:36-37). Mary responds in perfect trust and obedience. She says, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38).

Mary is the first one to hear the good news, then, and she is the first one to respond in perfect trust. After this event, which we call the *Annunciation*, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth in what we call the *Visitation* (Lk 1:39-56). After Christ’s *Nativity*, Mary and Joseph will have Jesus circumcised eight days after His birth (Lk 2:21). Forty days after His birth, Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to the Temple in what we call the *Presentation* (Lk 2:22-38). After the visit of the Magi in Bethlehem (which we call the *Epiphany*), Mary and Joseph will flee to Egypt in order to protect their Child (Mt 2:13-23). Years later, when Jesus is twelve years old, Mary and Joseph, after losing track of Jesus, will discover Him teaching in the Temple (Lk 2:41-52). We call this event the *Finding in the Temple*. The Gospel of Luke tells us that “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2:19, 51). Mary is also present at some points

in the public ministry of Jesus (Lk 8:19-21; Jn 2:1-5). Especially noteworthy is Mary's presence at the *Wedding Feast at Cana* (Jn 2:1-5). Mary will stand faithfully below the Cross while her Son is being crucified (Jn 19:25-27). We can assume that Jesus appeared in a special but unmentioned way to His mother after He was raised from the dead. Mary is with the apostles and early disciples at Pentecost (Acts 1:14). Later tradition tells us that Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven at the end of her earthly life. Thus, we see that Mary faithfully fulfills her role to be the Mother of the Savior. She accompanies Him in every aspect of His life. She is the perfect disciple.

The New Testament portrays Mary as a kind of *New Eve*, just as Jesus is presented as a *New Adam* who comes to reconcile the human race with God. This time, however, we discover that the New Eve is the *mother* of the New Adam, and not His spouse, since the spouse of the new Adam will be the Church as a whole. In the Gospel of John, just as Jesus is referred to as "man" (Jn 19:5), Mary is presented as "woman," as Adam and Eve were called "man" and "woman," *ish and ishah* in Hebrew (Gen 2:23). In fact, "Woman" is a special title that Jesus gives to Mary in the Gospel of John. From the beginning of John's Gospel until the wedding feast of Cana, John uses numerous themes from the first chapters of Genesis. For example, John begins His Gospel in the same way that Genesis begins: "In the beginning" (Gen 1:1; Jn 1:1). Along these lines, the *wedding* at Cana is reminiscent of the *wedding* of Adam and Eve. At Cana, it is Jesus and Mary who are the prominent male and female figures. Jesus, as the New Adam, turns water into wine, a symbol of the new creation He has come to bring. He does this through Mary's bidding, through the "woman" (Jn 2:4). Significantly, Jesus calls Mary "Woman," not out of disrespect, but because she is the *New Woman*, that is, the New Eve. Jesus likewise calls Mary "Woman" at the foot of the Cross, and says "Woman, behold your son" (Jn 19:26), referring to the beloved disciple. This scene of the Passion of Jesus is also reminiscent of Garden of Eden. Both in Eden and at the Cross, there is a man, a woman, a garden, a tree, and death. Yet, whereas in Eden, Adam and Eve disobey God through eating from a tree of (apparent) delight, and thus will be subject to death, at Golgotha (where Jesus is crucified), Jesus and Mary are faithful to God unto death, through a tree of suffering, the Cross. Similarly, at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, an angel comes to invite Mary to say yes to God in obedience, in direct contrast to the way that Satan came to seduce Eve to disobey God. It is because of these parallels that St. Irenaeus, around the year 180 A.D., explicitly describes Mary as the New Eve. Finally, in chapter 12 of Revelation, a vision reminiscent of Genesis is described in which "a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (Rev 12:1) gives birth to a son who will rule the nations, evidently, Jesus (Rev 12:5). A dragon, described as the ancient serpent of Genesis (12:9), goes after the child but is unable to harm him (12:5). The dragon next goes after the woman, but she is protected (Rev 12:6, 13-17). The dragon is seen to have no power over Christ or His mother. The dragon then goes after the disciples of Jesus (12:17). This woman, who is described in such exalted terms, is called "the woman," like Eve, but, unlike Eve, she is not swayed in the least bit or touched at all by the serpent-dragon and his power. This figure is also called "woman," as Mary is in John's Gospel.

The New Testament also portrays Mary as a kind of *New Ark of the Covenant*. One can see this clearly by comparing 2 Samuel 6 and Luke 1:39-56:

- Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth in a town of Judah (Lk 1:39), just as David brings the Ark of the Covenant to a town in Judah (2 Sam 6:10).
- Elizabeth says to Mary, “And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Lk 1:43), just as David says, “How can the ark of the LORD come to me?” (2 Sam 6:9).
- At the greeting of Mary, John the Baptist leaps for joy in Elizabeth’s womb (Lk 1:41, 44), just as David leaps and dances before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam 6:16).
- Mary stays with Elizabeth three months (Lk 1:56), just as the Ark of the Covenant stayed for three months in the house of Obededom (2 Sam 6:11).

Luke is clearly portraying Mary as a kind of New Ark of the Covenant. Further, the angel Gabriel says that the Holy Spirit will “overshadow” Mary (Lk 1:35), just as the cloud of God’s glory overshadowed the Tent of Meeting and the Ark of the Covenant at the time of Moses (Ex 40:34; Wisdom 19:7), and later filled the Temple at the time of Solomon (1 Kgs 8:10). Then, in the book of Revelation, John sees a vision of the Ark of the Covenant in Heaven (Rev 11:19), and the next thing he sees is the “woman clothed with the sun” (Rev 12:1). There is clearly a connection. In the Old Testament, the Ark of the Covenant is the place where God was most present on earth, above the seat and the wings of the cherubim (Ex 25: 22; 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; 2 Kgs 19:5; 1 Ch 13:6; Ps 9:7; 22:3; 29:10; 33:14; 61:7; 80:1; 99:1; 102:12; 123:1; Is 37:16; Dan 3:55; Heb 9:5). Thus, Mary becomes the new place where God has come to “tabernacle” on earth (Jn 1:14). Lastly, within the Ark of the Covenant were placed the Ten Commandments, some of the Manna that fell in the desert, and Aaron’s Staff that blossomed (Heb 9:4). These are all symbols of Christ who dwells in Mary’s womb: Jesus is the Word of God, the Bread of Life, and our Great High Priest.

What does the Catholic Church believe about Mary?

In short, we believe the following things about Mary:

- *Predestination*: Because of God’s sheer grace, from all eternity, Mary was chosen to be the mother of the Son of God (Gal 4:4; Rom 8:29-30). God chose her to have a special plan in the redemption of the human race. Just as in the beginning, a man fell through a woman, so God chose to redeem the human race by a New Adam, His Son, but through a woman, as a kind of *New Eve*. Indeed, He did not wish to save the human race without a woman being intimately involved. Mary is this woman.
- *Immaculate Conception*: Because of this special role, God gave Mary the grace to be conceived without original sin and to be without sin throughout her life. Just as Adam and Eve began their existence without sin, so Jesus and Mary would begin their human existence without sin. But, whereas Adam and Eve would fall into sin afterwards, Jesus and Mary would continue in faithfulness and holiness.

- *Perpetual Virginit*y: That Jesus was virginally conceived in the womb of Mary highlights the two natures of Jesus. That is, He receives His humanity from Mary, but He is also eternally begotten of the Father. In other words, Jesus' virginal conception highlights that Jesus is not only human: He is also divine. But, Mary was not just a virgin before Christ's birth. She was also a perpetual virgin, ever consecrated to God in virginity through the whole of her life. For a Catholic response to the common objections against Mary's perpetual virginity, see the separate handout titled "The Perpetual Virginity of Mary."
- *Mother of God*: Mary is the mother of God, because she is the mother of Jesus, Who is God. This is in no way to say that she is God, or greater than God, or that God receives His divinity from her. Rather, Mary is the mother of a Person, Who is the Son of God, Who is both human and divine. Analogously, your mother is a mother of a person who has a body and soul: you! We do not say that your mother is only the mother of a part of you, even though she did not create your soul, since only God can create a human soul. We rather recognize your mother as the mother of the whole of you, even though your soul does not originate from her. Similarly, Mary is the mother of Jesus in the complete reality of His Person, even though she is not the origin of His divine nature. Such a title underscores that Jesus is fully God and man. One will also remember that Elizabeth called Mary "mother of my Lord" (Lk 1:43).
- *Mother of the Redeemer*. When Jesus was presented in the Temple forty days after His birth, the holy man Simeon predicted that Jesus would be rejected by many, and that Mary would share in His suffering one day—that a sword would pierce her soul (Lk 2:35). We see this fulfilled when Mary stands faithfully beneath the Cross of Jesus (Jn 19:25), enduring in her heart what He underwent in His body. In this way, she cooperates as a mother in His work of saving the human race. She is not the Redeemer. Yet, she has a unique role in sharing in His saving work and victory over sin as a woman, mother, and partner.
- *Assumption*: Because the corruption of the body in burial is an effect of original sin, Mary, like Jesus, has been preserved from the corruption and dissolution of the body in burial. Thus, as the earliest traditions of the Church about the end of Mary's life attest, Mary was not buried. Rather, God took ("assumed") her body and soul into heaven at the end of her life. Mary thus experiences now what we will experience at the end of time, namely the reunion of our bodies with our souls. Mary is, thus, the first one to share in the fruits of Christ's Resurrection through her own resurrection / assumption. From this moment on, Mary has been fully glorified in heaven, body and soul.
- *Mother of the Church*: Jesus entrusted His mother to the beloved disciple at the Cross. But this is a symbolic action by which Jesus was saying to all of us, "Behold, your mother!" (Jn 19:27). Indeed, Jesus gave Mary as a spiritual mother to all of us at the Cross. The book of Revelation also implies this, when the children of the woman clothed with the sun ("the rest of her offspring") are described as "those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus" (Rev 12:17). Next, just as the

Holy Spirit comes upon Mary to bring about the Incarnation and human birth of the Son of God in the beginning of the Gospel of Luke (Lk 1:35), so also the Holy Spirit descends upon Mary and the early disciples to bring about the birth of the Church, the “Body of Christ,” in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:14; 2:4). Thus, just as Mary is highlighted as the mother of Jesus in Luke, so she is present as the mother of the Church in Acts. Lastly, if Eve, who sinned, was called “mother of all the living” (Gen 3:20), how much more should Mary, who was faithful, be called “Mother of all”? Jesus has indeed given Mary to the Church to be our spiritual mother. And Mary has fulfilled this role in every age by praying for her children, and by occasionally appearing in person in order to draw back wandering humanity to her Son. Both because she is glorified body and soul in heaven, and is a powerful and special motherly intercessor for us, we also call her *Queen*.

How do we know that Mary was immaculately conceived?

The following things point to Mary’s Immaculate Conception:

- Mary is depicted as the New Eve in the New Testament and in the Fathers of the Church. Being the New Eve, it makes sense that Mary would begin her existence without sin, just as Eve did. In Mary’s case, however, she continued without sin because of the special grace of God towards her.
- The Ark of the Covenant was covered with pure gold (Ex 25:11), a symbol of Mary’s all-holy purity.
- Mary is called “full of grace” by the angel Gabriel (Lk 1:28).
- If John the Baptist was sanctified even from his mother’s womb (Lk 1:15), how much more Mary?
- In the book of Revelation (chapter 12), in John’s vision of the “woman clothed with the sun” and her child, the ancient serpent (Satan) is shown to have no power over the child or His mother. He is not even able to touch them. Satan therefore goes on to try to sway the followers of Jesus, to tempt them to fall away.
- We never see Mary sinning in the Bible.
- The Fathers of the Church, and ancient liturgies, call Mary “all-holy,” and St. Augustine says that we cannot talk about sin and Mary together.
- The Church has confirmed the truth of Mary’s Immaculate Conception with the highest authority when Pope Pius IX solemnly declared and defined it in 1854.
- Visions and miracles attest to the truth of Mary’s Immaculate Conception. For example, Mary appeared to a French girl, Bernadette Soubirous, in 1858, and told St. Bernadette, “I am the Immaculate Conception.” Many spiritual conversions and miraculous cures have come through this apparition.

How do we know that Mary was assumed into Heaven?

The following things attest to the truth of Mary's *Assumption* into heaven:

- The earliest traditions about the end of Mary's life, dating from the 4th century, all speak of her being assumed into heaven, and most speak of Jerusalem being the place where it happened.
- Mary's Assumption was celebrated liturgically as early as the 5th century.
- Although there are ancient claims about having relics of the apostles and early disciples, no one has ever claimed to have the relics (bones) of Mary.
- The woman in Revelation 12 is described in bodily terms. She is "clothed" with the sun, with the moon under her "feet," and on her "head" there is a crown of twelve stars. This is in contrast to the just "souls" crying out to God before the Day of Judgment in Revelation 6:9-11.
- The Ark of the Covenant, which is a symbol of Mary, was made of a hard and durable acacia wood which, when treated properly, would not decay.
- The Ark of the Covenant being brought up into Jerusalem to the place prepared for it by David (1 Ch 15; Ps 132:8), and eventually into the Holy of Holies in the Temple (1 Kgs 8:4-9), is a symbol of the Lord bring Mary, the New Ark of the Covenant, body and soul into heaven at the completion of her earthly life.
- If Enoch and Elijah were "taken up" to heaven at the end of their lives, how much more fitting is it that Mary, the mother of the Son of God, was as well.
- If Mary began her existence, like Eve, without sin, and if she lived a sinless life, since the "wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23), it is fitting that God would glorify Mary's body at the end of her life rather than let it corrupt in burial.
- If Mary is the new Eve, it is fitting that she would be the first to share in the New Adam's victory over death.
- The Catholic Church, through Pope Pius XII in 1950 (*Munificentissimus Deus*), has confirmed with the highest authority that Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven.
- Various visions of saints attest to Mary's Assumption.

What kind of devotion should we have towards Mary?

Mary is human. She is not God. Like all the saints, however, she is holy and prays for us. Yet, she is unique among all the saints, and the Church reveres her as greater than all the angels and saints, since she was immaculately conceived and lived a sinless life, since God chose and graced her to be the New Eve and Mother of the Redeemer, and since Jesus has given her to us to be a spiritual mother. Therefore, we should honor her with a special honor, as Jesus Himself has honored her. As mentioned before, while the term *dulia* designates the special honor due to the saints, the term *hyperdulia* designates a special honor due to the Blessed Virgin Mother.

Just as Jesus works through the prayers of others, especially the saints, He has chosen to work in a special way through the prayers and motherly intercession of Mary, His mother and ours. Therefore, like the other saints, we look to Mary as an example of discipleship and feminine spirituality, and as a powerful intercessor. In a special way, Jesus wants us to look to her as a spiritual mother. She should not be seen as a competitor to Jesus, but rather as someone who brings us closer to Him, since no one was, or is, or ever will be, closer to Jesus than Mary. Further, she will never draw our attention away from Him, but she always points us to Him. In fact, she ever tells us what she once told the servants at the wedding feast of Cana: “Do whatever He (Jesus) tells you” (Jn 2:5).

Mary also has a special relationship to the Trinity. She is the *Daughter of the Father*, the *Mother of the Son*, and is even referred to in Church tradition as the *Spouse of the Holy Spirit*, because of her unique relationship with the Holy Spirit who sanctifies her. She thus models for us the kind of intimate relationship we are called to have with the Persons of the Trinity.

Mary is the Mother of the Church, the Body of Christ, just as she is the Mother of Jesus. Because of this, the whole Church celebrates her spiritual motherhood. Liturgically, we celebrate Mary as *Mother of God* on January 1st, her *Assumption* on August 15th, her *Queenship* on August 22nd, her *Nativity* on September 8th, her *Presentation* in the Temple on November 21st, and her *Immaculate Conception* on December 8th. She is also celebrated in the feast days of the *Annunciation* on March 25th, the *Visitation* on May 31st, and the *Presentation of the Lord* on February 2nd. There are certain *Marian feasts* that are closely associated with a feast of Jesus. For example, on January 1st we celebrate Mary’s role in the birth of her Son with the *Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God*. The feast of the *Immaculate Heart of Mary* follows the *Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus* (after *Corpus Christi*). Likewise, we celebrate *Our Lady of Sorrows* on September 15th, a day after the *Exaltation of the Holy Cross* on September 14th. Finally, there are other optional feast days of Mary, such as the *Most Holy Name of Mary*, or those which celebrate Mary’s apparitions to certain persons throughout the history of the Church, such as *Our Lady of Lourdes* on February 11th, *Our Lady of Fatima* on May 13th, and *Our Lady of Guadalupe* on December 12th.

There are certain traditional and popular prayers invoking Mary that have arisen in the history of the Church, such as Hail Mary Prayer (*Ave Maria*), the Angelus, the Hail Holy Queen (*Salve Regina*), the Rosary, the *Memorare* (an expansion of the earliest known prayer to Mary called the *Sub Tuum*), the Litany of Loreto, and others. Christians are encouraged to incorporate these into their prayer life. See the separate handout with a collection of traditional Marian prayers.

In recent centuries, there is a beautiful tradition of “consecration to Mary.” This involves entrusting yourself entirely to Mary, so that she may entrust you more fully to Christ. It is a way of dedicating yourself to her, or—more accurately—of dedicating yourself more fully to Christ through her. This type of consecration involves preparation, making and renewing the consecration, and seeking to grow in and live out the consecration all the days of one’s life.

Above all, you are encouraged to get to know Mary as your mother; to love her deeply and tenderly; to talk with her often; to ask for her help in knowing, loving, and following Christ; and to ask her to pray for the needs of others. We honor Mary, then, not because she was simply the biological mother of Jesus, but because she heard the word of God and did it (Mk 3:31-35), as Elizabeth said: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1:45). And, in honoring Mary, we are simply echoing Elizabeth, who said to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (Lk 1:42). We also fulfill what Mary herself says in Scripture: "All generations will call me blessed" (Lk 1:48).

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

<i>Annunciation</i>	Luke 1:26-38
<i>Visitation</i>	Luke 1:39-56
<i>Nativity</i>	Luke 2:1-21
<i>Visit of the Magi & Flight into Egypt</i>	Matthew 2
<i>Presentation</i>	Luke 2:22-38
<i>Finding in the Temple</i>	Luke 2:39-52
<i>Wedding Feast of Cana</i>	John 2:1-11
<i>At the Foot of the Cross</i>	John 19:25-27
<i>Pentecost</i>	Acts 2:12-14
<i>The Woman Clothed with the Sun</i>	Revelation 12

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *What is special about Mary?*
2. *What strikes you about Catholic Teaching on Mary?*
3. *How does devotion to Mary fit into Christian discipleship and spirituality?*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Luke 15 / *CCC:* 976-987

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS



We learn from divine revelation and the Scriptures that God’s mercy is part of His character and at the heart of the ministry of Jesus. Pope Benedict XVI has said that divine mercy is God’s love healing the wounds of sin. After our first parents sinned, God manifested His mercy by not abandoning them, and in aiding them and giving them the hope of future salvation (Gen 3:15, 22). God revealed Himself to Moses as “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy and faithfulness, keeping merciful for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty” (Ex 34:6-7). Through Moses, God set up a system of sacrifices through which the people could make “atonement for their sin,” and thereby be forgiven (Lev 4:20, 26, 35; 5:10, 13). The prophet Micah says that the Lord will “have compassion on us” and “cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic 7:19). Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord says that He in no way wants the death of the wicked, but rather that he turn back to Him and live (Ezk 18:24, 32). Psalm 103 says, “For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us” (Ps 103:11-12).

In the New Testament, mercy is at the heart of the mission of Jesus. He is named “Jesus,” because “He will save His people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). From the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus calls people to repentance and gives them the hope of being forgiven (Mk 1:15). Mercy is at the heart of the Beatitudes (Mt 5:7) and many of Jesus’ parables, such as the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son (Lk 15). Jesus makes it clear that He has authority on earth to forgive sins (Mk 2:10), and that He has come to call, not the righteous (since no one is righteous apart from Him), but sinners to repentance (Mk 2:17), and “to save and seek the lost” (Lk 19:10). He also says that every sin can be forgiven, except the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—which is presumed to be hardened unrepentance to the Spirit of mercy (Mt 12:31-32). Jesus manifests His mercy to Matthew the tax collector (Mt 9:9), the sinful woman (Lk 7:1-10), the adulterous woman (Jn 8:3-11), Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10), many prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners (Mt 9:10-11; 11:19; 21:31-32; Lk 5:30; 7:29; 15:1; Lk

18:9-14), and to the disciples in their struggles, weaknesses, and falls (Lk 10:38-42; Jn 20:26-29; 21:15-19). One reason the Eucharist is given is the “forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28). On the Cross, Jesus forgives those who crucified Him (Lk 23:34), and He forgives the repentant thief, assuring him that he will soon join Jesus in Paradise (Lk 23:39-43). On the Cross Jesus also makes expiation for the sins of the world, with the result that His Passion becomes a font of God’s forgiveness for every age (Heb 4:16; 5:9; 9:26). After His Resurrection, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on His apostles, giving them the power to forgive sins in His name (Jn 20:22-23), and He commands that the forgiveness of sins be preached to all nations (Lk 24:47).

Jesus also commanded us to be merciful like our heavenly Father (Lk 6:36) and made forgiveness toward others the condition of ourselves being forgiven (Mt 6:12-15; 18:21-35).

In the New Testament, we see the early Christians preaching and showing the mercy of Christ to each other and to the world. Indeed, the Church is the extension of Christ and the continuation of His mission of mercy in the world. What Jesus did on earth, He continues to do through His Church. This is why Jesus communicates the power to forgive sins to His apostles, which power is passed down to all bishops and priests in the Church, and which gift is the basis for the *Sacrament of Penance*, also called *Reconciliation* or *Confession*: so that Jesus might continue to communicate His mercy to souls in each age through His Church.

How can we live out a “spirituality of mercy”?

To show mercy, we first need to receive mercy. The more we are able to appreciate how merciful God is to us, the more we will be able to show mercy to others. Part of holiness involves knowing that we constantly depend on, and ever stand in need of, God’s mercy. We are therefore called to have *humility* in acknowledging this, and tremendous *confidence* that God loves us, wants to forgive us, and will forgive any sins we are repentant for.

We are also called to have the *joy* of knowing we are loved and forgiven, and of knowing that God forgives us, not reluctantly, but gladly and lavishly. God can bring good out of any evil we have done, and make us powerful witnesses of His mercy to others. In a particular way, He can use us to help others in the very areas in which we have fallen or struggled. For example, those who have struggled with alcoholism are often best able to help those who are struggling presently with alcohol abuse.

It is also important for us not to despair. If we struggle with something, it is important for us not to give up, but to keep returning to God, asking for His help in overcoming our sins. We might wish that turning away from our sins were as easy as turning off a light switch and walking away. However, we all have particular weaknesses that are hard for us to overcome and that we continually struggle with. On the one hand, we should not be surprised, nor despair. That is what the devil wants us to do, since if he can succeed in getting us to despair, he has won. Through despair, we give up trying, we continually beat ourselves up, we lose motivation, and we become more focused on ourselves than on Christ and His mercy. Before

we sin, God is warning us through our conscience that this or that thought, word, or action is not good for us, while the devil promises the skies. After we sin, however, the devil is the first one to point the accusing figure toward us. Meanwhile God extends His merciful hand to us, to forgive us and help us out. So, we need to have unfailing confidence in God and keep turning back to Him. On the other hand, we should never settle for sin and neglect doing our part in overcoming sin. Recovery and overcoming sin involves a lot of grace and a lot of hard work (cooperation) on our part. It isn't an easy journey. But it is a blessed one, at the end of which we will be stronger. For example, St. Francis de Sales was someone who struggled deeply with anger, but through constantly working on it with God's grace, by the end of his life he made great progress and was known to be one of the gentlest people one could meet. Through struggling with that particular weakness, his weakness, with time, became an area of strength. His example gives us hope, and can motivate us to work hard in overcoming our weaknesses with God's grace.

On the other hand, we should never presume on God's mercy, meaning having the attitude that it is OK to sin since God will forgive us. God's mercy is transformative. It does not leave us where we are, but heals us, so that we have the strength not to sin again. To use God's mercy as an excuse to sin and not strive for holiness is an abuse of God's mercy. This is one type of the sin of *presumption*. In this regard, it is important to distinguish between true mercy and false mercy. False mercy winds up "enabling," minimizing, or even tacitly approving sin. False mercy is not so much mercy as it is thinking that a particular sin is no big deal and that one need not change. For mercy to be authentic, however, it is necessary to acknowledge the sin that can be forgiven. Mercy is great precisely because it forgives sin, and even great sin. If the sin is not a big deal, neither is God's mercy.

Jesus never "enabled" sin. He never approved or minimized people's sins. He rather manifested true mercy toward people open to forgiveness and wanting to change by offering the depths of God's forgiveness, by calling people out of sin, and by giving them a way out of their past sins. True repentance wants out of the sin. If we "justify" our sins through a myriad of excuses, it is a sign that we are not truly repentant, nor fully open to God's mercy. It is a sign that we don't really want to change: we just don't want to feel guilty.

Jesus is a beautiful paradox: at the same time, He offers us the depths of God's mercy and calls us to the heights of God's holiness. This is one way we know He loves us. Someone once said that Jesus loves us right where we are, but too much to let us stay there. Many people fail to be true to both sides of the paradox. People who lean in the conservative direction tend to emphasize God's justice and Jesus' call to holiness. People who lean in the liberal direction tend to emphasize God's mercy, patience, and understanding. But both can wind up minimizing, not fully appreciating, or failing to uphold the other side. Both tend to view Jesus through selective and partial lenses. The truth is that the real Jesus both offers us the depths of God's forgiveness (and there is no limit to that forgiveness) *and* calls us to the heights of holiness (and there is no limit to that either).

... the forgiveness of sins...

In the history of ethical thought, often positions tend toward either *rigorism* or *laxism*. The strength of the rigorists is that they have high ideals and don't accept rationalizations for sin. The weakness is that they often fail to sufficiently appreciate both God's mercy and the extent of human weakness. Conversely, the strength of laxists is that they have an appreciation for God's mercy and human weakness. Their weakness is that they tend to leave people where they are and easily accept rationalizations for sin. When we look at the life and teaching of Jesus, we see that Jesus has the strengths of both positions while avoiding the weaknesses. This is one reason we know that He is the true Son of God and our Savior.

The Church celebrates God's mercy in a particular way each year on the Sunday after Easter, also known as *Divine Mercy Sunday*. On this Sunday, we read the Gospel about the risen Jesus bestowing the Holy Spirit on the apostles for the forgiveness of sins. Activities highlighting God's mercy on this day was inspired in recent times by private revelations of Jesus to St. Faustina Kowalska, a religious sister and mystic who lived from 1905 to 1938.

Since we all fall short in many ways, we should seek God's forgiveness whenever we do fall short, and, at the end of each day, examine our conscience, giving thanks for the day's blessings and asking forgiveness for any sins and shortcomings. It is also important to apologize and make restitution to whomever we have wronged. Lastly, when we consider the faults of others, we should remind ourselves of our own faults and of how much mercy God has shown us. We should not fail to address others about their faults when this is our responsibility, but we should always do so with humility and as God would have us do it.

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

Luke 15 *The Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Prodigal Son*

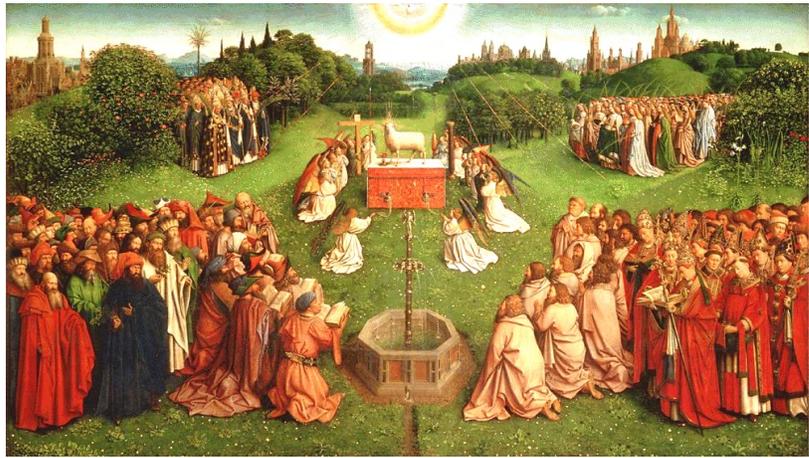
REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *How do we know of God's mercy toward us?*
2. *How is it possible to forgive those who have wronged us?*
3. *How can we better live out a "spirituality of mercy"?*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Mt 24-25 (chapters) / *CCC:* 988-1065

THE LAST THINGS



In this world we find ourselves in a state of mortality. Like all living things, we have a lifespan on this earth. None of us know exactly when, where, or how we will die, but we do know that time is short, and that every moment is closer to our last. We naturally wonder what happens after death: Is there some kind of afterlife? If so, will we be conscious? And, if so, will we be judged according to how we lived our life? Do we go to some better place or state, or perhaps some worse state? Will we be able to relate to others? Will we live forever? Will we be happy, or will we get bored? Will we be united with God? Or do we return to this earth, reincarnated as some other person or living thing? If so, how does this work, and do we keep on returning forever? Or, does everything end in nothingness, so that we only exist for a short time in this world? And, is there any way to know the truth? Or can all we do is guess? Lastly, in light of our true destiny (whatever it is), what is the meaning and purpose of this life?

In divine revelation, God has shed light on these questions. It is there that we learn that death was not a part of God's original plan for us. The book of Wisdom says, "Through the devil's envy death entered the world" (Wis 2:24). In the book of Genesis, we see that our first parents suffered death only as a consequence of their sin (Gen 3:3). The tree of life in paradise is a sign that God was calling them to something greater than the garden. The tree of life is, thus, a symbol of heaven. However, instead of going forward (toward heaven), our first parents sinned and went backwards. Thus, they were banned from the garden, and the tree of life that would bestow immortality was now barred from them (Gen 3:22-24). Being subject to death was one of the consequences of this original sin.

We have seen that God did not abandon humanity after this sin, but He had a plan to draw humanity back to Himself one step at a time, ultimately through redeeming us through Christ, His Son. For much of the Old Testament, however, there is an ongoing lack of clarity about the afterlife. In contrast to other cultures and religions which all seem to have had elaborate views of the afterlife, the Jews did not presume to know what happened after death, and they themselves wondered what happens (Eccl 3:20-21). The term "Sheol" was designated to denote a general place of the dead, where all go, both just and unjust. But there is no great clarity about what this was like and how conscious the souls of the dead would have been.

... the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

Later on in the Old Testament, in Daniel (12:1-3) and 2 Maccabees (7:9, 11, 14, 23, 29), a final resurrection and separation of the just and the wicked is foretold. In the book of Wisdom, we hear of the immortality of the souls of the just (Wis 3:1-9). In other passages, Jeremiah is described as praying for God's people from Sheol (2 Macc 15:15-16), Elijah is predicted to return to earth (Mal 4:5-6), and a day is foretold when God will destroy death forever (Is 25:7-8) and bring lifeless bones to life again (Ezk 37:1-14).

It is only in Christ that our ultimate destiny is fully revealed. In His teachings and parables, Jesus teaches us about a final resurrection from the dead, about a time of judgment in which all human beings will have to give an account to God for their lives, and about eternal life in heaven or hell, either with God or apart from Him. In His "eschatological discourse" during Holy Week (Mt 24), Jesus also predicts the destruction of the Jewish Temple, which would happen in 70 AD, and He teaches His disciples that He will come back again at the end of the world to judge all of humanity and to bring history and this world to a close.

In His Passion, Jesus undergoes our death, bearing upon Himself the sins of the world, thereby making atonement, so that we could be forgiven and eternal life made accessible to us again. Through His Resurrection, Jesus both conquers death and proves that He has power over death. His humanity also enters an eternally exalted state whereby He can be present to us in every age in His risen life and eventually raise us up with Him to share His glory forever.

Why do we have to die?

Our condition of being subject to death is part of the condition of original sin. However, this life was never supposed to be our final destiny. We were made for more than what this life has to offer. This life is by its nature temporary and transitional. We are only passing through. This life is like a hallway. No one likes to sleep or stay in a hallway. Instead, we pass through hallways to get to a bigger room. Similarly, this life can be compared to an engagement ring. It is good as is, but it is leading to a marriage. No one wants to be engaged forever. The engagement is supposed to lead to a permanent union of love. When we discussed why God created the universe, we mentioned that God made us for Himself, that He did not make us for His own benefit ("as though he needed anything" —Acts 17:25), but He created the whole universe out of nothing only so that we—who did not before exist—might one day share in His infinite love and happiness forever. There can be nothing greater than this. In short, God created in order to share, so that not only He, but other beings (ourselves) as well could experience something of the infinite love and joy He has and is in Himself. This is our destiny. This is why we were made. This is what Jesus reveals, and the reason He died and rose for us.

... the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

How and when will we be judged?

The *Final Judgment* is when Christ will come again (Mt 24:30-31, 45-51; 25:29-30, 31-33; Jn 5:25-29; Rev 20:11-15). Since “the Father has given Him (the Son) authority to execute judgment” (Jn 5:27), “before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (Mt 25:32-33). All “the dead, great and small,” will stand before God, and all will be judged “by what they did” (Rev 20:12). For those written in the “book of life,” namely, “those who by patience in well-doing seek glory and honor and immortality,” God “will give eternal life,” while “for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and tribulation” (Rom 2:6-8).

In the end, those who die in a *State of Grace* will be saved, while those who die in a *State of Mortal Sin* and unbelief will be condemned (Mk 16:16). Those who are in a state of grace love God above all things and love others, on at least a basic level, through God’s grace within them. Whereas, those who are in a state of unrepentant mortal sin love themselves above all things, even above God. All those who die in a state of grace will go to heaven. However, if they are not fully perfected in God’s love and grace, they will need to be purified in a state we call *Purgatory* before entering heaven. Those who die in a state of unrepentant mortal sin immediately go to hell for eternity.

Those who die before the final judgment (when Christ comes again) will undergo *Particular Judgment* immediately when they die. Particular judgment means simply that everyone who dies before Christ’s second coming will be judged personally and individually when they die. This judgment is immediate and definitive, so that they do not have to wait around as unconscious souls before the final judgment, awaiting their reward or punishment. When the final judgment comes, their particular judgment is simply confirmed, since these souls will already be in heaven, hell or in purgatory before entering heaven. There are numerous Scriptural passages which affirm the doctrine of particular judgment (Lk 23:43; Acts 7:59; 2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:23; 1 Thes 5:10; Heb 9:27; 12:22-24; Rev 6:9-11; 13:6).

Will our bodies really be raised at the final judgment?

In the Creed we say explicitly that we believe not only in “life everlasting,” but also in “the resurrection of the body.” Indeed, just as Christ was raised from the dead in His real human body, our bodies will also be raised, reconstituted, and eternally reunited with our souls at the final judgment (Dan 12:2-3; 2 Macc 7:9, 11, 23, 29; Jn 11:24; Acts 24:15; 1 Cor 15:35, 42, 44; Phil 3:21; 1 Thes 4:16). God made human beings distinctively as a unity of body and soul. Therefore, it is fitting that our final destiny would involve not just part of us (the soul), but the whole of us, body and soul. The bodies of all will be raised, both those saved and those not saved. If it is asked how God can reconstitute all human bodies, especially those which have been destroyed, we need to remind ourselves that “all things are possible for God” (Gen 18:14; Mt 19:26; Mk 10:27; Lk 1:37; 18:27). The bodies of the saints in heaven will not be bodies subject to need, exhaustion, and corruption, but, as St. Paul says, will be some kind of glorified

... *the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.*

and “spiritual” body (1 Cor 15:40, 44). As far as we know, except for Jesus and Mary, those who die before the final judgment exist only in their souls in heaven, hell, or purgatory. After the final judgment, everyone’s bodies will be eternally reunited with their souls. Finally, Jesus teaches that “in the resurrection” to life, the elect “neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven” (Mt 22:30). This is because, all those in heaven, in a sense, will be “married” to God (Rev 19:9; 21:2).

How and when will Christ come again?

Jesus tells us that no one “except the Father” knows the day or hour of His *Second Coming* (Mt 24:36). However, we do know that He will not come like He did the first time, that is, by being born on this earth in a hidden and humble form. Instead, His second coming will be public, unambiguous, and glorious. He says, “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Behold, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, ‘Behold, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out; if they say, ‘Behold, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man” (Mt 24:23-27).

On the one hand, there will be signs that precede and accompany His coming: Jesus speaks of false prophets, wars, famines, earthquakes, persecutions, the “desolating sacrilege,” widespread wickedness, and a general coldness in the hearts of human beings (Mt 24:3-12). He also says that, “the gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come” (Mt 24:14). After these preceding signs and events, and “immediately after the tribulation of those days,” “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; then will appear the sign of the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and He will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Mt 24:29-31). On the other hand, Jesus will come when people least expect it (Mt 24:36; 50), “like a thief in the night” (Mt 24:43; 1 Thes 5:2). Therefore, we are called to “watch” (Mt 24:42-43; 25:13) and ever be “prepared” and “ready” (Mt 24:44; Lk 12:40; 1 Pet 1:5) for that Day. On the other hand, it is important not to get overly anxious or worried about the end times, as St. Paul insists, since that would distract us from doing God’s will in the present moment, ironically (1 Thes 5:1-11; 2 Thes 6-15). If we are living the way we are called to live, we have nothing to fear. Jesus says, “Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Lk 21:28).

... the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

What is Heaven like, and who goes there?

Although St. Paul says that “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor 2:9-10), Jesus and the Scriptures give us little glimpses of what heaven is like. Jesus speaks of heaven as “eternal life” (Mt 19:29; 25:46; Mk 10:30; Lk 18:30; Jn 3:15-16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24; 6:27, 40, 47, 54; 12:25, 50; 17:2), and as entering “into the joy of your master” (Mt 25:23), where the “blessed of my Father” will “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mt 25:34) and “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43). St. Paul says that the slight momentary affliction of the sufferings of this life are “preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Cor 4:17-18). He says, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood” (1 Cor 13:12). He says that, “we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thes 4:17). St. John says, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure” (1 Jn 3:2-3). Just as Jesus describes heaven as a wedding feast in His parables (Mt 22:1-14; 25:1-13), the book of Revelation, speaks of heaven as a “marriage” and “the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev 19:9; 21:2). It is the “dwelling of God,” where God will “be with them” and “wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:3-4). In the last chapter, we are told, “They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 22:5). Finally, both St. Peter and the book of Revelation speak of a “new heavens and a new earth” (2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1; Is 66:22-23). Somehow the earth itself will be remade, or renewed, and made glorious.

In essence, heaven is being eternally united with God in love and joy, what theological tradition calls the *Beatific Vision*. There will be an abundance of “secondary” joys as well, such as being with all those who have died in Christ. heaven will be as creation was supposed to be, and creation having come to its final completion and destiny, where God will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28).

... the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

Does Hell exist, and who will go there?

Jesus teaches clearly that hell exists, and He forcibly warns people about going there. He speaks of it as *Gehenna* in Aramaic. *Gehenna* was literally a place in the valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, where great sin occurred in the past, such as idolatry and the sacrificing of children (2 Chr 28:3; 33:6), which place was therefore cursed (Jer 7:31; 19:2-6). But Jesus uses the term to refer to the place of the damned (Mt 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mk 9:43, 45, 47; Lk 12:5) and describes it as a place or state of suffering and punishment for sin where both body and soul can be destroyed (Mt 10:28) in unquenchable fire (Mk 9:43). But Jesus does not always use the term *Gehenna* to describe hell. Jesus also speaks of hell as the “outer darkness” and “furnace of fire” where men will “weep and gnash their teeth” (Mt 13:41-42; 22:13), and as the “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” where the damned will “go away to eternal punishment” (Mt 25:41-46). St. Paul speaks of how the damned will “suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might, when He (Christ) comes on that day to be glorified by His saints. . .” (1 Th 1:9).

The Church, faithful to Christ and the Scriptures, therefore teaches that we must believe that hell exists, that it consists essentially in being eternally and definitively separated from God, that only those who die in persistent and unrepentant mortal sin go there, and that no one is predestined for hell, since God wants no one to go there. It is reasonable to believe that those who sinned worse suffer more, while those who sinned less suffer less.

How can a loving God send people to Hell for eternity?

God wants no one in hell. But it exists because of human and angelic freedom. God will not force people to love and obey Him. If people have rejected God and chosen to live without Him in this life, preferring to love themselves above Him, then God gives them what they have chosen: to be without Him forever. Some saints have said that the damned would suffer more in coming closer to God, since they couldn't stand being so close to eternal love and purity. Things can change in this life. People can turn from good to bad and from bad to good. But we are only given until death to choose definitively for or against God and His goodness, truth, and love. We have a lifetime to form the decision we will make, for or against God. God created each one of us only so that we could be with Him forever in love and joy. And He sent His Son to suffer and die so that we could be forgiven, saved from hell, and be with Him forever in heaven. God loves each of us more than we love ourselves, and God more than anyone wants to prevent each person from going to hell. But, He made us free, leaves us free, and respects our freedom. hell is also punishment for great unrepentant evils men have done. These are the reasons hell exists.

... the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

What is Purgatory?

In heaven, everything is perfect. Everyone loves God and others perfectly, and everyone there no longer has any faults. The book of Revelation says that “nothing impure shall enter” the city of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev 22:27). However, those who die in Christ often die with many shortcomings, faults, un-atoned-for sins, and imperfect love. So, the Church teaches that all those who die in a state of grace will go to heaven. However, if they are not totally perfected in love of God and neighbor when they die, they enter a state of purification before entering heaven. We call this state of purification *Purgatory*. Purgatory is only for those who die in Christ, and it is only temporary. No one is in Purgatory forever. And Purgatory will cease to exist at the end of the world when everyone is fully purified. Some will need greater purification, some less. Thus, some will spend a “longer” or “shorter” time in Purgatory accordingly, although time is not the same in this state as it is on earth. This purification is a purification of love: it is God’s love purifying us of every stain of sin and selfishness, and a state in which we experience suffering for the sins we failed to make up for during our lives.

Although the word “Purgatory” is not found in Scripture, its reality is taught. St. Paul says that on the last day, the “work” of everyone who built their lives on the foundation of Christ will be tested. He says that different people build with different materials on the foundation of Christ, and he notes a descending order of quality in materials: “gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw” (1 Cor 3:12). He says that “each man’s work will become manifest”, since “the Day,” meaning Judgment Day, “will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.” He goes on to say, “If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward,” but “if any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” (1 Cor 3:13-15). This is exactly what Purgatory is: the spiritual fire of God’s love purifying us to be with Him forever. Note that someone “will suffer loss” in such a purifying process, and yet the person will still be saved.

God gives us all the grace we need in this life in order to go straight to heaven when we die. However, many of us fall short and will need purification when we die, some more and some less. The teaching of Purgatory is beautiful, since it tells us that God doesn’t leave us imperfect, but will fully purify, perfect, beautify, and glorify us, no matter how imperfect we are, as long as we die in God’s grace. It also assures us that we will be purified of all our faults when in heaven, so that there will no longer be any conflict or tension. Everyone will live in perfect love and harmony.

Some saints who have had visions of Purgatory tell us that souls in Purgatory experience greater joy than they ever experienced on earth, since they are in God’s presence and know they will be saved, and that it is only a matter of time before they enter heaven. At the same time they experience more suffering than they ever experienced on earth, since they come face to face with themselves, without hiding or making excuses, and seeing the full consequences of their sins, and because the purification is deep, getting to the roots.

... *the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.*

The souls in Purgatory are our brothers and sisters in the *Communion of the Saints*. And God has willed that we can help them by our prayers, so that they can be more quickly purified—and their sins made up for—through our prayers (2 Macc 12:39-45). It is a good practice to remember the souls in Purgatory, to pray for them, and to have Masses said for them. All this profits them. We pray for all the dead, in fact, at a funeral Mass, and in the rites that follow. If a soul is already in heaven, God will benefit another soul by our prayers. No prayer is lost. We should note that we cannot benefit those who are in heaven by our prayers, since they are already fully perfected and glorified. Rather, the souls in heaven pray for us and for those in Purgatory. Our prayers, likewise, cannot profit souls in hell, since hell is definitive, and therefore our prayers would not do any good. It only makes sense to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are still on their way to heaven, both on earth and in purgatory.

The Church celebrates All Souls day on November 2. This is a special day to remember, honor, and pray for all the souls in purgatory.

What is the meaning and purpose of life?

Since we were made to be with God forever in heaven, this life is transitional. It is the way to our destination. It is therefore supremely important that we go the right way in life by following Christ, and allow His grace to convert and transform our life in all areas. God made us for Himself. And therefore, the meaning and purpose of this life is to love God in this life, so that we can be forever with Him in the next.

How should we live in light of the “last things”?

It is important that we remember why we are here and where we are going, that time is as nothing compared to eternity, and that the way we live this short life on earth in cooperation with God’s grace will determine where we will be for all eternity. God made us for heaven, and that is where He is leading us, if we follow Him, and keep on turning back to Him when we fall and hurt ourselves. It is easy for us to forget what is important. We get distracted and confused along the way. This is why the Church reflects on the “last things” (*Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, and the Second Coming of Christ*) at the end of every Church year, and why we should keep them ever in mind. We should not live in fear and anxiety. We should have a healthy fear of sin and hell. However, we should have great confidence in God’s love and mercy toward us, and look forward to heaven. Nothing is greater than heaven, and that is what God wants for us.

... the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

“I am a sojourner on earth.” —Psalm 119:19

“For I am your passing guest, a sojourner, like all my fathers.” —Ps 39:12

“But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! But according to His promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you wait for these, be zealous to be found by Him without spot or blemish, and at peace. And count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation.” —2 Pet 3:8-15

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *In summary, what does the Church teach about the “last things?”*
2. *What strikes you when thinking about all this?*
3. *How should we live in light of the “last things?”*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: Hebrews 1-4 (chapters) / ***CCC:*** 1066-1209