

HOMILETICS

by

Bernard J. LeFrois, S.V.D.

I. BIBLICAL NOTES FOR AUGUST

FEAST OF THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD (August 6, 1978)

First Reading: Daniel 7: 9-10.13-14
Second Reading: Second Peter 1: 16-19
Gospel Reading: Matthew 17:1-9

First Reading: A scene of judgment is described by the Seer in apocalyptic language: God enthroned amid the heavenly court to judge men's deeds (the open book). The throne is a symbol of royalty with its functions and powers, but especially its judiciary powers. God is given the mark of eternity, while white garments signify the absolute holiness and impartiality of the judge. Fire in this setting is a symbol of divine justice as in Pss, 50:3; 97:3. It is not said who occupies the thrones. The image of the "son of man" is ambivalent, fluctuating between an individual (the messianic King) and the People of God who he represents (vv. 18.22). His is universal dominion which will last forever. This contrasts with the partial and temporal dominions of the four beasts (vv. 15-22) with which this judgment-scene opens.

Gospel Reading: See biblical notes for Second Sunday of Lent in Bol. Ecl., Feb.-Mar. 1978, p. 186; and Jan.-Feb. 1977, p. 99f; and Jan. 1976, p. 87.

Second Reading: Though turbulent times may weaken the belief in the Lord's glorious return, the apostolic witness stands firm. They already had a glimpse of Christ's glory on the mountain of the transfiguration. Truly, there he was clothed in majesty, and proclaimed by none other than the Father himself as the beloved Son of God, to be revealed in this own time. Besides, there is the prophetic message concerning the triumph of the Lord which is completely reliable, for all prophecy is made only when men are moved by the divine Spirit (v. 21). The reference can be to

O.T. prophecies, such as Dan. 7:14,27; Zech. 9:10, but also to those of the N.T. such as mentioned in 1 Thess. 3:13 and 2 Thess. 1:10. Not only will Christ's triumph be an objective event, but also subjectively fully participated in, with Christ filling each one with delight as the bright Morning Star (Rev. 22:16) which is the harbinger of the Great Day.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

(August 13th, 1978)

First Reading: First Kings 19: 9a.11-13a

Second Reading: Romans 9: 1-5

Gospel Reading: Matthew 14: 22-33

First Reading: Fleeing from the wrath of the wicked queen Jezabel, Elijah the prophet came to Mt. Horeb (Sinai) to renew the covenant of Israel with Yahweh, which had been made by Moses, the servant of God, on this same mountain. All this life Elijah had been a spectacular prophet, defending the true worship of Yahweh with mighty deeds, punishing at times his enemies with fire from heaven. Now he learns that God intends to bring back Israel to himself by the inner persuasion of the Spirit through more practical means such as preaching the word of God. The gentle whisper of the breeze symbolizes the inner workings of the Spirit (see Job, 4:12).

Gospel Reading: Apart from the historical value of this scene, it is presented by the evangelist with strong symbolical overtones. Peter stands out in prominence. The boat with the apostles is the Church buffeted by storms on all sides and hardly able to make any progress. When the night is far spent (between three and six A.M.) Jesus comes to their aid in a miraculous appearance which frightens them because he is not recognized, until they hear his authoritative word: It is I! Peter's courage and faith evokes a positive response from Jesus who imparts to him powers that no other apostle shares (the primacy). Yet the fury of the storm weakens his faith and he too cries out to be saved. With Christ in their midst, the storm abates and the boat reaches its destined goal (the eternal shores). All in Peter's boat acknowledge that Jesus is Lord.

Second Reading: From the heights of exultation in the preceding part, Paul descends to the very depths of poignant grief at the thought of his Jewish brothers not accepting Christ as their Messiah. In these few verses he presents the problem which he will develop in the following chapters.

How could Israel, chosen by God as his special people, with her manifold and unique privileges, reject her long-awaited Messiah, who sprung from her very bosom? Has the Lord rejected his People? Paul would willingly forego his highest ambition in life for their sake, if it were feasible. (The Greek verb is not the potential optative: "I wish to", but the imperfect: "I could wish to", which denotes what is only in thought but not an act of the will.)

"Adoption of sons" in the O.T. was collective (Hos. 11:1). Christ brought the full sharing of sonship to each member (Rom. 8:15f). The "glory" was God's manifestation of his special presence at Sinai, and in the tabernacle (Ex. 40:32) and in the Temple (1 Kgs. 8:11). The "Law" was Israel's great boast, as was the specially prescribed worship of the true God in the Temple. In the last verse Paul reaches a climax. The natural grammatical construction makes the last words a profession of faith in Christ's divinity (like Phil 2:11): Christ, who is God, he blessed forever (King James, JB, RSV Cath. ed.). Other translations opt for an unusual grammatical break, and refer the last words not to Christ but to God in general: Blessed forever be God (RSV non Cath. ed.; NAB, Good News for Modern Man).

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

(August 20, 1978)

First Reading: Isaiah 56: 1-7
Second Reading: Romans 11: 13-15, 29-32
Gospel Reading: Matthew 15: 21-28

First Reading: The third part of the book of Isaiah (called Trito-Isaiah) opens on a universal tone: salvation is not only for Israel but for all peoples, provided they prepare themselves (v. 1) and carry out the commandments of the Lord (v. 6). Emphasis is here on man's cooperation, though the saving action is God's (v. 7).

God's dwelling-place is called by the superb epithet of "a house of prayer for all peoples". Here the prophet envisages the new and universal People of God, devoted to the Lord, not merely by external ritual, but by deep communion with God in prayer and immolation. Jesus quotes this verse in Mt. 21:13, but the true Temple of the new People of God is the Person of Christ himself (Jn. 2:21) through whom all true worship is given to God.

Gospel Reading: A pagan woman (one not of the race of the chosen People) comes to Jesus for help in need, professing faith in him as Messiah and in his power to heal. But her faith is sorely tried.

There are three apparent refusals, the last of which seems final with its casting her in the role of a house-dog, in comparison with the children of the household to whom the food belongs. Rising to the occasion, she enters cleverly into the picture, and so humbly renews her request that Jesus himself breaks out in praise of her great faith, and grants her request.

The scene is presented by the Early Church with evident symbolic significance. If the Gentile world comes to Jesus with undaunted faith, accepting him as Messiah and Savior, he will also accomplish his salvific work in them. That faith may be sorely tested by the very attitude of those of the House of Israel (the Jews), but in the end it will win out entirely. Jesus, the Food of the children (Israel) will be granted to the pagans also, for their faith often surpasses those of Israel (Mt. 8:10).

Second Reading: Let not the Christian converts from paganism despise Israel. Israel still remains very dear to God. After all, Paul is of the race of Israel. Their rejection of Christ paved the way for the conversion of the Gentile world. All the more will their acceptance of Christ in its own time mean new life both for Israel as a race (the pruned olive tree) and for the entire Gentile church which was engrafted on the olive tree (v. 18). God has not rejected the offspring of the patriarchs. When they return to him in humble submission and only then, will his mercy triumph. Salvation comes to all men only through the mercy of God.

TWENTY FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

(August 27, 1978)

First Reading: Isaiah 22: 19-23
Second Reading: Romans 11: 33-36
Gospel Reading: Matthew 16: 13-20

First Reading: Eliakim is to be installed as chief steward or major-domo over the entire house of the king, instead of Shebna who abused his rights. Although first in authority after the king, Eliakim is not to be domineering, but like a father to all. The key was a sign of one's authority. It was large, and hung over the shoulder for all to see. Admission or refusal of admission to the royal throne was in the power of the chief steward. The peg seems to symbolize security and stability, for it was used to firmly hold down the tent-dwelling. The similarity to today's gospel-message is evident.

Gospel Reading: This passage is called the promise of the primacy of jurisdiction conferred on Peter. Jesus had asked all the apostles, but Peter as spokesman and representative spoke up in answer. In Mk. 8:29 and Lk. 9:20, there is only a confession of Christ as Messiah, and these are parallel texts. Even at the end of this passage (Mt. 16:20) Jesus refers to himself only as Messiah. But the wording of Peter's confession goes beyond messiahship, for it is also a profession of faith in Christ's divine sonship, this special relation to the Father. But a profession of faith in Christ's divinity of such clarity before the resurrection would hardly seem tenable. More likely, Matthew synthesizes by telescoping two events in one: Peter's confession of Christ as Messiah at Caesarea Philippi, and the profession of faith in Christ as Son of God after the resurrection. He does this because this section of his gospel is proposing this fundamental tenet of the Early Church.

The promise to Peter is in all the manuscripts of Matthew's gospel. There is no scientific justification for denying its authenticity. In these words, Jesus in turn promises Peter the primacy of jurisdiction over all the Church (which is conferred in Jn. 21:15-17) Several words in this passage deserve special attention:

1) "**Kepha**" "the rock" in Aramaic (petra in Greek) is used twice, but if it is used as a proper name in the first instance it must have a masculine ending (petros). What the Lord said was: You are the rock and upon this rock I will build my Church. Peter's function is to be the rock foundation-stone of unity, the image of stability. God is the rock of Israel (Deu. 32: 4-15; Ps. 18:3). Abraham is the rock from which God made Israel his people (Is. 51:1). He is the rock on which God built the world (Midrash Tanchuma to Num. 23:9). Hence, Jesus builds on Peter the new edifice of the People of God.

2) **Church** (Greek: ekklesia from ek-kaleo, to call out, to assemble). The word occurs 115 times in the N.T. but in all four gospels only twice, in this passage and in Mt. 18:17. In the epistles it is the common designation for the Christian community, (qahal in the O.T.). It is not certain whether Jesus used this precise word, or that it is a clarification of the mind of Jesus by the Early Church in the terminology then prevalent. It matters little. What is certain is that Jesus intended to form his disciples into the new People of God. They understood this and transmitted this fact to the primitive community as is evident from the Acts of the Apostles. What Jesus brought into existence was aptly expressed by the word "ekklesia" or church.

3) **My:** the community of the Messiah, the new People of God built on Peter the rock. There is only one Church built by Christ on

Peter. Iglesia ni Cristo claims Jesus meant the title by which they go, but nowhere in the Scriptures do we find the title.

4) **Gates of the underworld (Hades, Sheol):** can be taken in two ways:

a) Gates as portals like jaws that swing wide open for all who are swallowed up by death: thus, jaws of death. But death had no power over Jesus, so they will have no power those who are one with Christ.

b) Gates as part for the whole (synecdoche), symbolizing the hostile powers of evil. The hostile underworld has trapped man by the death of sin, in order to enchain him in eternal death. But in the battle here portrayed, victory is on the side of the kingdom Jesus founded.

5) **Prevail:** such a translation puts the Church on the defensive. The Greek (katischyō) rather means "to hold out". This puts the Church on the offensive She fights to win. In the end-battle the powers of the under-world have no prospect of success.

6) **I will give you the keys:** The master of the house possesses the keys (Is. 22:22; Rev. 1: 18 and 3:7f). He gives them to his authorized steward (like in today's first reading). To Peter Christ gives the authority of spiritual leadership in his kingdom. The following metaphors clarify what that power is:

7) **Bind and loose:** nowhere found in biblical usage but frequent in rabbinical vocabulary. I can refer to either doctrinal matters: to bind is to forbid something, to loose is to permit it to be held; or it refers to disciplinary matters: to bind is to condemn, exclude someone, to loose is to absolve, allow one to enter. Thus Peter is given a comprehensive mandate with regard to the means of salvation. This is strictly a divine charge. **He receives juridical authority which is exercised on earth and is valid in heaven.**

Conclusion: By using the term "assembly" side by side with that of "kingdom of heaven" Jesus shows that this community of the end-times is to have its beginnings here on earth in the form of an organized society whose leader Jesus now appoints (JB).

Second Reading: Paul concludes his discussion of the problem of the divine election and the blindness of Israel with an outburst of admiration for God's infinite wisdom and mercy, which disposed to have both Jews and Gentiles to be of mutual assistance in reaching the eternal goal of mankind's salvation. He quotes Job and Isaiah to show how independent the infinite God is in all his undertakings. He is the Creator, the source and the goal of all creation. All glory belongs to him.

BIBLICAL NOTES FOR SEPTEMBER

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

(September 3rd, 1978)

First Reading: Jeremiah 20: 7-9**Second Reading:** Romans 12: 1-2**Gospel Reading:** Matthew 16: 21-27

First Reading: Jeremiah is greatly weighed down by the demands of his prophetic role. The Lord had outlined his work in glowing terms (1: 7-9), but the faithful carrying out of his office brought him untold contradiction and grief. In a bold metaphor he complains that the Lord deceived him, and in an inner crisis of soul, he is almost determined to relinquish his role. But then the inner searing of prophetic duty was even more unbearable. He hurled the crisis.

Gospel Reading: After the disciples had openly professed through Peter, their spokesman, that Jesus was truly the Messiah of Israel (16:16), Jesus disclosed to them something totally unexpected: yes, he was their Messiah, but a suffering Messiah (in line with Is. 53). Because of pre-conceived notions, Peter remonstrated strongly but is at once sharply rebuked by the Lord. There is an intended contrast by the evangelist: Peter the Rock has become the stumbling block, an obstacle in the path of Jesus to reach his goal. He is ordered out of the way or perhaps to get behind and follow. He is dubbed "satan" which means adversary, because he is imitating the great Adversary who tempted Jesus to act contrary to the divine plan (Mt. 4:1-6).

Some sayings of Jesus on true discipleship are now strung together. The requisites are 1) not to prefer oneself nor one's whims and ideas to Jesus, even though following him means laying down one's life. 2) willingly embracing the "cross", that is, one's share of sufferings and trials as a member of Christ and 3) following his manner of life and teaching. You do not do things by halves for Christ. If you enjoy all that this life offers, you lose it, for it ends in death. But if you give up everything that is opposed to Christ, and even your life for his sake, you will possess real life forever, and that Life is Christ. A final saying ushers in the glorious Parousia where each one will receive his due.

Second Reading: Paul urges this readers to consecrate their whole being ("body" means the entire person as visibly manifested) to

God's service, like a continuous liturgical act of sacrificial worship. It is "reasonable" (spiritual) worship, befitting a man, in contrast with the unreasonable worship of pagan cults. Far from conforming to worldly standards, they are to conform to the divine model. Then they will be carrying out God's will perfectly and be transformed into his likeness.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

(September 10th, 1978)

(Readings and biblical notes as in *Bol. Ecl.*, July 1975, pp. 486f)

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

(September 17th, 1978)

First Reading: Sirach 27: 33 (30) to 28:9

Second Reading: Romans 14: 7-9

Gospel Reading: Matthew 18: 21-35

First Reading: Wise advice for covenanted People. It can almost be put in a nutshell: Do unto others as you would have the Lord do unto you. The similarity with the fifth petition of the Our Father is evident. Finally, how can a man overcome anger? By remembering 1) the certainty of death 2) the commandments of the Lord 3) the covenant made with the Most High.

Gospel Reading: Forgiving our brothers in Christ is not to be measured the number of offenses. There is no limit. That is the symbolism of the already full number seven and it is strongly corroborated by seven multiplied by ten (JB) or the square of seven multiplied by ten (NAB). The parable well illustrates the point: It can be given in three steps:

a. **Called to account:** An oriental king and absolute monarch desires to settle accounts with the officials of his realm. One was brought in that had spent a fabulous amount lavishly and was in extremely great debt, living far beyond his means and borrowing from the royal revenues. Since he was simply unable to pay the debt, the king, as was custom of the time, ordered him to be sold with his entire family into slavery. Falling down the official begs for mercy and promises to pay all (which is clearly impossible), if given the opportunity. With royal magnanimity and generosity the king grants him his freedom, pardons the offense and remits the entire debt. Every reason for him to rejoice and be grateful!

b. **Forgiven but not forgiving:** At heart, the servant is ignoble and base. Hardly out of the king's presence, he meets a fellow-servant of the king who owes him a trifling sum, and with physical violence demands immediate payment of the debt. A plea for mercy in the same terms he had obtained mercy from the king goes utterly unheeded. He has the man jailed.

c. **Condemnation:** Indignant fellow-servants report the matter to the king. Greatly incensed, he recalls the official, publicly rebukes him severely, and condemns him for his mean and unmerciful treatment of his servant. This time he is delivered to the torturers for good. (Note that his condemnation is not for the previous crime but for his action toward his fellow-servant who is also the servant of the king).

d. **The lesson:** This is given in the last verse. Unless we forgive our fellowmen their offenses, God will not forgive ours. There is no mention of any limit of number of offenses. God's infinite mercy will always forgive us provided we always forgive our fellowmen. There is no proportion at all between the two. Our Lord put this very lesson into the fifth petition of the Our Father.

Second Reading: This short passage is set between an exhortation to judge one's fellowmen with charity and understanding, for each and every Christian belongs entirely to the Lord, and is endeavoring to serve him alone. To him belongs universal dominion, won by his death and resurrection. Thus he is Lord of both the living and the dead. If we serve others, it is for his sake.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (September 24th, 1978)

(Readings and biblical notes as in Bol. Ecl., July 1975, pp. 489f)

II. HOMILIES FOR AUGUST

CHRIST, THE GLORY OF THE ELECT

August 6, 1978: Feast of the Lord's Transfiguration

What the apostles see on the mountain of the transfiguration is not only a glimpse of Christ's own glory, but also a glimpse of the glory of the elect, who are called to share the very glory of the Master. For that is what he promises them later on in the high

priestly prayer: "I have given them the glory you gave me, that they may be one, as we are one" (Jn. 17.22). His face became dazzling like the sun in brightness, and this is what he claims for his faithful followers in the parable of the darnel-weeds: "The virtuous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Mt. 13-43). They will be radiant with glory as Jesus is here on the mountain. The Beloved disciple who was there and witnessed it, will tell us in his first letter: "When he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he really is" (1 Jn. 3:3). Today's opening prayer brings this out: "God our Father, in the transfigured glory of Christ your Son, you show us the splendor of your beloved sons and daughters..."

How shall we put on the light of Christ and radiate that light to others? How can sinful man, so prone to deeds of darkness, radiate the shining on the face of Christ? Only if we ourselves became children of light. That is the message of Paul to the Ephesians: "You were darkness once, but now you are light in-the-Lord; be like children of light, for the effects of the light are seen in complete goodness, and right living and truth" (Eph. 5:9). By sincerely following Christ, we open our minds to that light, so that we can be transformed from the darkness of sin and ignorance into the light of holiness and truth, and thus radiate the goodness and warmth of light to others. In the same vein Paul tells the Corinthians: "God who said: 'Let there be a light shining out of darkness' has shone in our minds to radiate the light of the knowledge of God's glory, shining in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

But again we must ask: what are the means offered us to become like Christ the light that is all goodness and holiness? No other than the voice of the heavenly Father himself in today's gospel tells us the means; it is all in one word: Listen to my Beloved Son. He is my sole delight. He is the full revelation of my mind. He is the Way and the Truth for all men. Only by listening to the words of wisdom pouring from his lips, and putting those words into practice, will you become like him, a child of light, radiating goodness and mercy and love in all directions. Listen to him as he unfolds his message in the Gospel, in the parables and in the longer instructions, such as the sermon on the mount. Listen to him in the pithy sayings he gives to his disciples, in the keen answers he responds to his adversaries, listen to him in the farewell discourses at the last supper. Read the message of the Good News he brought to earth, and ponder over it, study it, put it into practice. If the People of God of the Old Covenant took the words of God and fastened them on their foreheads, and on their wrists, placing them as reminders on their doorposts and their gates (Dt.

6:8), how much more should the People of God of the everlasting covenant place in their hearts the words of the glorious Son of God whom the Father has given us as Teacher, Model and Guide, Saviour and Redeemer?

Deep within us the Spirit we received in baptism is enlightening us as we ponder Christ's message, and pray over his words. What is that message which runs throughout all his exhortations and counsels? It is a message of love. The Son of God became our brother to show us how to live not as enemies who hate each other, nor as strangers who ignore one another, but as brothers who love one another, help one another toward the goal that lies ahead. The Savior wants that all men love one another, not merely in fine sounding words and in multiple conferences and conventions, but in down-to-earth, actual deeds which alone prove the sincerity of our words. As St. John says: "Let us love one another in deed and truth, and not merely talk about it" (1 Jn. 3:18). Jesus proved his love for us both by dying for us and by instituting a perpetual memorial of his dying love in the Eucharist. It is the Eucharist that will strengthen us to love each other, for it is the sign and the bond of love, to draw all men more and more into the oneness of his Body-Person. Then the prayer today after communion will be fulfilled, which addresses the Father in these words: "You revealed the true radiance of Christ in the glory of his transfiguration. May the food we receive from heaven change us into his image".

To be transformed into the very image of Christ in glory! What a destiny! What a future for the believing Christian. This is the work of love's transformation. Let us set to work anew to obtain that glorious goal!

THE ABIDING PRESENCE

August 13, 1978: Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Human Situation: Children and grown-ups enjoy bathing at the sea-shore, quite unmindful of any dangers that may lie hidden in the waters. There is an ever-present awareness of the life-guard stationed at his place, in whom they put implicit trust. They know he is ready to help them in any need, and it is this presence of the life-guard that lends a sense of security to even the youngest among them.

The Good News: He had commended them to get into the boat and row back to the other side of Lake Genesareth. Then he had gone up the mountain to pray by himself, leaving them alone. They had

obeyed, although they were reluctant to go without his presence among them. Yet they only thought he was leaving them alone. In reality, he was very much with them, for he was praying very much just for them, his chosen ones, since he had great plans for them. It was for their best that he withdrew his visible presence for a while. They had to learn to trust him even when he seemed to go away and leave them by themselves. They had to experience the need of him, and of his all-assuring presence.

We do not always sense the presence of the Lord in our lives, especially when he seems to leave us to our own resources. But he is always with us, for that is what he promised. When God seems far away, he is right in our midst, right in the depth of our hearts, right there in the Tabernacle, waiting for us to call upon him in our need. Then indeed we prove to him that we have faith in him, for faith is something spiritual and is not felt necessarily by the senses and the feelings.

The disciples obeyed the Lord and now it was already late in the night and darkness had enveloped them. There was not even any moonlight, for the sky was overcast and a strong wind was blowing. The sea showed signs of getting rough and it was against their better judgment to have risked this crossing under such circumstances. But Jesus had bidden them to do so and so they kept on. For a long time they rowed, all efforts being put forth to reach the goal of the other shore. But the rowing became increasingly difficult, and with strong head-winds they hardly made any progress. They were strong fishermen, used to rowing, but in these conditions they could do next to nothing, that is, by themselves alone. If ever they felt the need of Jesus, it was now. It is the same when the trials of life nigh engulf us and we seem to be make no headway at all in solving our many problems, that we need to turn with all the more trust and confidence to our Savior. Now is the time for earnest prayer that the all-powerful Lord come to our aid. Now is the time to prove our faith with which we are blessed as Christians.

When the night was far spent and their energies were almost at a breaking point, Jesus came to his disciples, but in a manner they least expected. They did not even recognize him walking on the waves, but were frightened at what they thought was a ghost. Out there alone on a rough sea, with Jesus seemingly far away on the mountain, it was only natural that they were filled with fear. But then they heard his well-known assuring word: "Courage! It is I!" Do not be afraid!" They could not believe their ears and were still filled with wonder, when Peter challenged: Lord, if it is you,

bid me to come to you on the water. Jesus said but a word: Come! And Peter shared that extraordinary power of Jesus walking on the water, which none of the other apostles shared!

But does he forget that it is not on his own power that he walks the waves? Does he keep in mind that Jesus is his goal and in him alone can be too find safety and salvation? It is faith that is needed, great faith, Peter. But the waves are high, and forgetting rather to keep his eyes on Christ, Peter is frightened by the turbulent waves. He begins to sink, only to cry out to the Lord to save him. Even Peter, prince of the apostles, must depend in all things on the one and only Savior of mankind. Even Peter must constantly exercise great faith, for the storms that beset the boat are many and great.

Jesus chided the chosen apostle gently: Why did he doubt? Why such little faith when I have shown you so often my saving power in dire need? And they entered the boat and found themselves shortly at the shore. The lesson is obvious: Jesus never deserts his own, but he tries their faith, for they must learn to do without the sensational and the extraordinary, and be strong in living faith, that he is ever present, ever at our side, ever Emmanuel: God-with-us, to lead us on over the waves and storms to the final goal of eternity.

Our response: It is good to have at hand the little ejaculation to say at given occasions: "Sacred Heart of Jesus I trust in you." Life is often full of dark days, and stormy nights. Faith is the bulwark that has kept the saints serene even in the greatest trials of life, for they professed continually their faith in his name: "I am he! Take courage."

PERSISTENCE REWARDED

August 20th, 1978: Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Human Situation: For centuries man tried to fly engine-less man-powered contraptions with but little success. There were many failures and crack-ups. Then in 1977, a 24-year-old young man managed to get his bicycle-pedalled "dragon-fly" off the ground and "flew" it for over a mile in a circle 8 around two poles, winning the \$87,000 prize for anyone who would accomplish the distance set by the authorities. He had failed often, but he never gave up. His persistence won the prize.

The Good News: Today's gospel is a story of dogged persistence, but it also reveals a deep insight into the Heart of the Savior. A mother had a little daughter whom she loved dearly, but for days the little

one had been writhing with a strange ailment, and every available medicine had been to no avail. Beside herself with grief, the mother was helpless to do anything more. Then she heard that the Wonder-worker from Nazareth was in the vicinity at the border of her country. He was being hailed as the long-awaited Son of David. He had healed many, fed thousands in the wilderness, cast out demons, and was kindness itself to all. Courage came back to the mother's heart. Though she was a pagan, she approached him with deep faith and humility, convinced that he could heal her daughter. "Son of David, have pity on me" she cried. "My daughter is sorely troubled by a demon."

There is a sudden strange silence. All look at the master, expecting a sign from him. But Jesus says not even one word. They pass on. They leave her prostrate on the ground. Her prayer was not heard. Her little child would not be cured. But the mother is determined. Again she runs after the Master. Again she shouts and continues to shout her one request: "Have pity on my little one who writhes in pain at home." Then apostles intervene. But not in her favor. Her continued clamor embarrasses them and they beg the Master to send her away. This time Jesus speaks. But what does he say? "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel". That sounds final. She was a pagan. The Son of David is Israel's Messiah. His mission was not for the pagans. The conclusion was evident.

This second blow is still harder to bear, since it sounds so final. The mother is crushed. She was unheard, unanswered. A woman with less determination would have given up then and there. Yet there is nothing too hard for a mother's heart, when it concerns one of her own. With a last supreme effort, she manages to buoy up her faith and hope to the utmost, and coming before Jesus she falls at his feet, with the one word: "Lord, help me". Surely the kind Heart of the Wonder-worker will not refuse this last persistent plea. He speaks. But what he says was totally unexpected, almost unbelievable. "It is not fair to take the bread that belongs to the children and cast it to the house-dogs." The disciples gasp. The air is tense. Everyone could grasp the insinuation. Israel was the chosen children, the pagans were the house-dogs. The bread of God's favors belonged to the children. Why throw it to the house-dogs!

But the good woman stood that final test. Cleverly she entered into the picture given by the Master, and rose to the occasion. She was humble enough to accept the insinuation, but she has a ready answer: "Oh, yes, Lord! The little dogs do feed on the crumbs and the scraps that fall from their Master's table!" At that, even the

Master could not repress his great admiration. "O woman, great is your faith!" You have won out, you have stood the test. Go home now, your little one is cured!" See how the Heart of Christ acts. All along he had intended to grant the request of this mother who was not asking something for herself but for her child. He tested her and saw the stuff she were made of, and he has given her praise that was given to few others. Her prayer did not go unheard. It was her persistence that won the day. And her example will give courage and faith to thousands who hear of her courage and her faith.

Our Response: Each year we hear this Gospel read to us. Each year we are spurred on to new courage and strength to turn to the Blessed Savior in our needs, and to persist despite initial delays or seeming refusal on the part of God. But perseverance and persistence will bring from his lips the same praise: Great is your faith. Go, you have won the day. But he can only call our faith great if it has been tested in the crucible like the pagan mother in today's gospel.

YOU ARE THE ROCK

August 27th, 1978: Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Because of the theological importance of this gospel, it seems advisable to offer the audience a word-for-word explanation of its multiple content, as is given in the biblical notes for today.

HOMILIES FOR SEPTEMBER

THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS

September 3rd, 1978: Twenty-Second Sunday

The Human Situation: In early Christian centuries, pagan Rome ridiculed a crucified Savior by painting a caricature of him in the form of a donkey crucified to a cross. But the cross triumphed, and paganism collapsed. Today the cross of Christ stands high on hundreds of church steeples in the holy city of Rome. The pagan temples are mere monuments of antiquity. The "folly of the cross" has become the wisdom of the Christian world.

The Good News: That the Messiah, their long-awaited Deliverer and Savior would be a suffering Savior was farthest from the minds of those who had followed Jesus. They had been under the dominion of foreign powers for so many years, they had often been weighed down by corruption in government circles, as well as by exorbitant taxes and unjust treatment of the ordinary man of the street, that they longed for the great king who would restore Israel to her glory, as the prophets had foretold, and the psalmist had sung in the Temple liturgy. And now, just after all the apostles had agreed through Peter their spokesman, that Jesus was that promised Deliverer, that long-awaited king of Israel, all their hopes had apparently been dashed to the ground, by the revelation Jesus had just made, that he would suffer great torments at the hands of the leaders in Israel and be put to death. They hardly heard the last part of his prophecy that he would be raised on the third day, at any rate, it made little impression on them, for it was unheard of that anyone should return from the realm of the dead.

That their master whom they had just acknowledged as Messiah-King should be handed over to the leaders and be put to death meant in their minds that they were more powerful than he. How could he be Israel's Savior and Messiah! That is why Peter remonstrated so vigorously. He had pinned all his hopes on Jesus and so did the others. Everything until now had looked so promising: the glamor of the crowds hanging on his words, the impact his healings made on those he cured and the bystanders, the amazement they all shared when he drove out demons and calmed the storm at sea, even his fearlessness in standing up against the leaders in Israel and defending the tax-collectors and the poor ones; all this had given them the greatest confidence and hope. And now this prophecy of his impending death! So Peter remonstrated. He tried to dissuade Jesus from following that path that seemed to him to lead to utter failure and ruin. It must not happen to him. It simply could not happen to the Messiah of Israel.

It is not often that anger is attributed to Jesus in the gospels. But this time he is filled with a holy anger. Will even his devoted apostles, and above all Peter, try to dissuade him from the path that he knows clearly to be the will of the Father for the salvation of his fellowmen? It is a real temptation to listen to these close friends of his who loved him dearly, persuading him to take an easier path, and forget the harsh measures which the Father laid out for him. How subtle the temptation! Why must the Messiah king of Israel submit to such atrocities and even die for the people? Is there no alternative? But Jesus resisted at once and vehemently any such suggestion. It was like the subtle temptation of Satan

in the desert at the outset of his public career: Use your miraculous power independently of God's plan, and nourish yourself with bread! Throw yourself down, cause a sensation, and all will be your followers. Swiftly he had responded: Away with you, Satan! This was not the way the Father had planned for him. It was the way of suffering and death as the victim for the sins of men. Now he says those same words to Peter he had said to Satan: Out of my sight, you satan. You are an adversary to me in reaching the goal set for me by my Father. Get behind me and follow me on the path I intend to follow as the Father gave me to follow.

Then Jesus told all his followers, and we are his followers, "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me". This is the doctrine of the cross. This is the scandal of the cross for those who do not understand the message of Jesus. It is not acceptable to anyone who would follow worldly standards or selfish aims. How often those subtle temptations come to each one of us, to throw off the cross that was given to us in the form of an unexpected set-back or sickness, family troubles or financial worries, opposition from unexpected quarters or lack of support from those over us. The words of Jesus are clear: If you want to be my follower, you must take up your cross, but first deny yourself whatever stands in opposition to my ideals, whatever comes between me and you, and the yoke of my cross will not be heavy. All your advancement in business or career will be of no avail if you lose the salvation offered you, which can only be obtained by sharing my cross. Deny your unworthy ambitions, deny your desire for more power and wealth. What will it profit you if you even gain the whole world and ruin yourself in the process, ruin yourself for all eternity! Following me, says the Lord, is no child's play. Your entire eternity depends on it.

Our Response: When standing before Calphas, Jesus thought of his coming glory and it gave him courage (Mt. 26:64). So too the thought of the glorious future promised to those who follow Jesus, once he comes again in the triumph of his Parousia, ought to be our strong stimulus to carry the cross that the good God lays upon us. Legend tells us that Simon of Cyrene was reluctant at first when forced to carry the cross after Jesus, but when he had done so for just a short while, the burden became light, and he gladly carried the cross. He became a follower of Jesus, which can be rightly concluded from St. Mark's mentioning the names of his two sons, who would be well known to his Christian readers Mk. 15:21).

THE POWER OF UNITED PRAYER

(Another homily on today's gospel is found in
Bol. Ecl., July 1975, p. 491)

September 10, 1978: Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Human Situation: By uniting in larger groups, man often obtains what he needs or desires. When hundreds of workers signed a petition demanding better lunch-room and toilet facilities, the company listened and renovated several basement rooms for the purpose. When numberless phone calls and letters deluged a TV channel, demanding the removal of an indecent program, the manager capitulated. Such is the power of united effort. Will it be less when God's children put forth their petitions?

The Good News: The prayer of petition is a powerful means to obtain what we need for ourselves and others in any given situation. Before choosing the twelve apostles, Jesus spent the night in prayer (Lk. 6:12). He taught his followers the excellent prayer, the "Our Father" with its manifold petitions for God's glory and our well-being. Before raising Lazarus to death he prayed to the Father (Jn. 11:44). For Peter especially he prayed that his faith would not fail (Lk. 22:32). And he told his disciples: "Ask and it shall be given to you" (Mt. 7:7). God always hears our prayers, but will only give us what is beneficial to us, for we are his loving children.

Today's gospel speaks of prayer in common. Israel was known for its common prayer. The psalms were sung in groups at home, on journeys and in the temple-liturgies. Jesus here has also community-prayer in mind, though in its smallest form of two or three. He is emphasizing fellowship. His promise is very broad: the prayer will be granted, whatever it is, but he conditions it by demanding that they must agree among themselves, as to what they are praying for. That supposes that they took counsel together and it is not the whim of one private person. No selfish ends of an individual but the need of the community is here in question.

Why is this prayer of a community in Jesus so efficacious? Why? Because Jesus is in its midst. He has formed all those who are baptized in him into one Body-Person, and it is his powerful presence which assures the good will of the Father. It is the Spirit of Jesus crying out in the oneness of the community: "Abba, Father" that draws down the divine blessing. At the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus said to his Father: "I know that you always hear me..." and yet he petitioned for this miracle to happen. That is why he directs

us to pray together with himself in our midst, for the Father always hears his prayer. At the same time he is before the throne of God always making intercession for us (Hebr. 7:25).

The liturgy has well understood this message of Jesus. The presiding officer prays together with all the faithful present, and in their name. All prayers are made through Jesus or in his name. The object of these prayers is always in some way the spread of the kingdom or the well-being of its members, peace on earth, eternal salvation and the glory of God. The community adds the "amen" which is a whole-hearted confirmation: so-be-it! of whatever was the object of the prayer. Thus the "amen" ought to be recited aloud, with full intention and purpose. If we let our individual prayers and intentions be absorbed by these prayers of the community, they will always reach the Heart of God, for in them he hears his own Son praying, and his Spirit crying: Abba, Father!

Our Response: Community prayer is of great value, and we ought to prefer it to our own individual private prayers, though these too are good and laudable. When we pray in the community of Jesus, we pray with an immense number of those who have put on Christ and have the Spirit in their hearts, lifting up their voices in one accord to God the Father of all. Did not Jesus say: "If you, with all your sins, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to anyone who asks!" (Mt. 7:11).

UNLESS YOU FORGIVE . . .

September 17th, 1978: Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time.

(The parable in today's gospel can be developed very graphically with the help of the biblical notes for today, with the lesson in mind as given there).

THE CALL TO FAITH

September 24th, 1978: Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time.

(Another homily on today's gospel can be found in *Bol. Ecl.*, July 1975, p. 494).

The Human Situation: When St. Therese of the child Jesus was but a child, she learned that a notorious criminal named Franzini would be executed at the gallows in a few days. Therese determined

to win the grace of conversion for this man, and make him her first big "convert". She redoubled her prayers and little sacrifices imploring heaven's favor for the conversion of the criminal. Still, when Franzini ascended the steps to the gallows, he refused to take the crucifix offered him by the attending chaplain. But at the last moment, just before he noose was placed around his neck, he seized the crucifix and kissed three times the holy wounds. When she heard the news, Therese was thrilled. It was not merely a eleventh hour conversion but a last minute one.

The Good News: It is the goodness and free will of God to call one to take part in the labors of the kingdom. The call to faith is a free gift of his love. Some are born in good Christian families and grow up in an environment that lends itself to regular Christian living. Others have had an unfortunate upbringing, coming from neo-pagan environment, broken homes, evil surroundings and bad example. Yet once they have received the call of God's love, they belong to his kingdom just as much as those born in more favorable and Christian surroundings. The favor of God rests where it will, and no one can begrudge another's place in the kingdom, no matter at what hour the call was accepted to "work in the vineyard" of the Lord, provided that call was accepted with good will. In our Lord's time, the Jews thought they had a right to be members of the kingdom, because they were descendants of Abraham, but Jesus made this statement: "There will be wailing and grinding of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the prophets safe in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves rejected. People will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and will take their place at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Lk. 13: 28f).

With this in mind, no one should boast of his Catholic parentage or presume upon it. No one may despise others because for a long time they lived a sinful life and only later in life encountered Christ and committed themselves to him. Often such late conversions are all the more fervent, because they realize the blessing which they now possess. And no one has a right to heaven just because he is a baptized Christian. Eternity depends on the grace of God and each one's cooperation with that grace of God. The thief on the cross, the dying Franzini, the death-bed conversion are all the works of God's love. Would the Christian who has remained loyal to Christ all his or her lifetime be envious of the one whom God has enfolded in his love the last moment to save him from an eternity of frustration?

560 BOLETIN ECLESIASTICO DE FILIPINAS

It is Christ who is the master of the vineyard, and he calls many to work in it under various capacities. He calls them from every corner of the globe, from the dense cities with its crime-laden alleys, to the lone desert dwellers or the eskimos in the ice regions of Alaska. All are called to be his brothers and there is no regard for race or color or status in life. He offers them the grand reward of an eternity of happiness with him, if they agree to cooperate with his call and labor according to their abilities in building up God's world, the kingdom of God on earth. For some it will be in the simple duties of home life, for others in professions and crafts, still others in management and employment. Each according to his capacity, working together with Christ to advance the aims of Christ and build up a world, where peace and love dominate in preparation for the Great Day of Christ's Coming. Some receive the invitation early in life, others later, still others at the last hour. It is the boundless goodness of the Heart of the Savior to grant them all the promised reward: "He who is faithful to the end will be saved" (Mk. 13:13).

Our Response: The great and precious treasure of the faith is often not appreciated. Today high school and college students are relinquishing their Catholic faith and becoming Buddhist. Prescinding from the good which Buddha did to people, he is not Christ the Savior. No one can offer eternal salvation to man but Christ the Lord. No one gives the grace of faith but Christ. To relinquish Christ in favor of any other person is to admit that he never really understood Christ nor experienced a genuine encounter with him. What is needed is a thorough renewal in our Christian commitment, a proper understanding of the person and mission of Jesus. And finally, a total dedication to our Lord and our God.