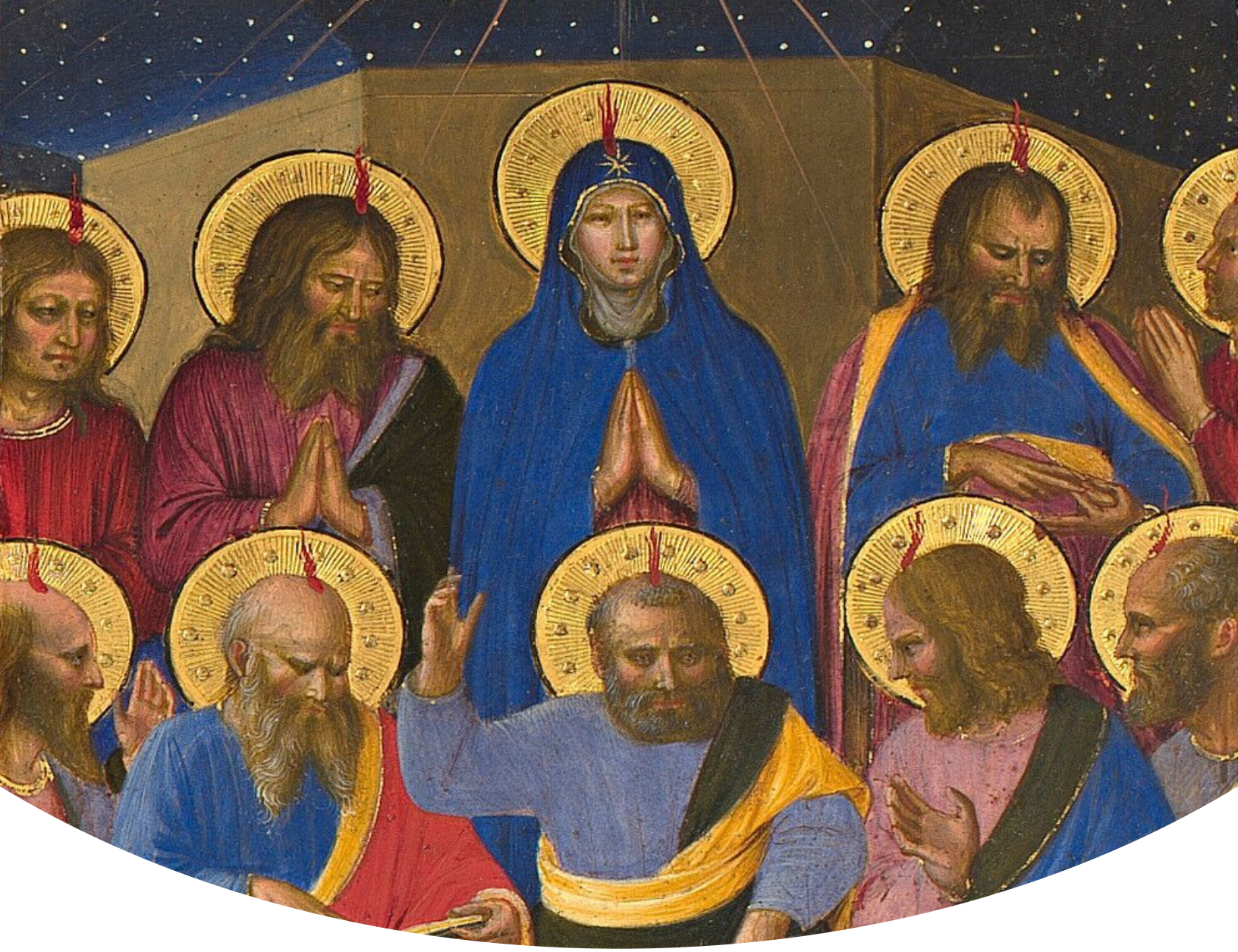

# That Blessed Upper Room

## 2025 Pastoral Letter

His Eminence Frank Cardinal Leo
Metropolitan Archbishop of Toronto

QUODCUMQUE DIXERIT FACITE

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# Introduction

Brothers and Sisters in the Lord.

*May Jesus and Mary be in your hearts.*

I am reaching out to you with this *Pastoral Letter* to share some faith-filled and spiritual reflections in an effort to contribute to the growth of the Christian spirit among us and help strengthen the faith, joy and devotion throughout the Archdiocese of Toronto. Last year, I penned a first Pastoral Letter reflecting on the theme of the **Kingdom of God present and active in our midst**. This year, I would like to reflect together on the place and significance of **The Upper Room** in our lives, our families and in our communities of faith since it is primarily associated with major and pivotal events in the life of Jesus and of the early Church.

For those who have been blessed with the opportunity to visit the Holy Land, one of the major holy sites is the Upper Room on Mount Zion in the Holy City of Jerusalem. It is literally the upstairs room in a two-story building. Tradition holds that it is located directly above the Tomb of King David and close to the Abbey of the Dormition of Our Lady. It is called *Cenacle* because the Last Supper, in Latin *Coena*, took place there. Though it has served many different uses over the centuries, for believers and pilgrims it remains a focal point. It conveys such depth and meaning as to what it means to live in Christ that it can become an inspiring aid for our day.

The Upper Room was a real physical dwelling/meeting place in Jerusalem at the time of Christ — but much, much more. It constituted an array of grace-filled events, an anointed sign of God's redeeming love, new

beginnings in Christ, a series of turning moments in the life of the worshiping Christian community, and the unfolding of God's saving and loving dream for us. With my brief elucidations found in these pages, I wish to underscore a number of key and foundational building blocks of the Christian life and provide all the faithful — clergy, consecrated and laity — with insights which will hopefully benefit their walk of faith. Living life as an authentic disciple of Christ entails the embodiment of certain "non-negotiable" aspects which I will expound upon in this reflection. My intention is to offer an aid for growing in holiness of life, in Christlikeness — and to offer some tasty and nourishing manna for our common journey to the Kingdom, our Promised Land.

Hence, I believe it to be of great relevance and significance for us all to take time this year, the Jubilee Holy Year, to ponder with Mother Mary, the following **nine dimensions** of our Catholic Christian life as they emerge from the testimony of Sacred Scripture. My idea was to flesh these dimensions out stemming from a theological, spiritual and pastoral consideration. There are a number of ways with which one may utilize this resource. Some might consider meditating on these reflections as a sort of Novena, one per day. Others might choose to dedicate a day a week or a day a month to focus on these points. As each of the aspects of Christian living are delineated, this can be done either individually or in community. Perhaps you can bring these reflections to your prayer space at home; or consider these questions during a time of eucharistic adoration in your parish church or a perpetual adoration chapel. You might consider jotting down in a prayer journal any inspirations that emerge from your heart as you spend time with the Lord letting yourself be guided by these reflections. An accompanying resource might be a Bible or the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. As you read through the nine facets, you might consider researching one or other of the authors or works that are cited; for example, the saints, mystics and spiritual writers. Some of the reflections would also be helpful when meditating upon the mysteries of the life of Jesus and Mary with the holy Rosary. Another idea is to use the deliberations and questions to look into our hearts and ascertain how we are incarnating them in our daily walk of faith, followed by bringing them up in spiritual direction or in the sacrament of penance and reconciliation.

As per the format, these nine themes are subdivided into three sections: One, a reflection for learning and drawing personal connections with your lived experience; Two, the anecdotal illustration serves as an example of a witness or a story that typifies an intuition found in the first part; Three, a more active analysis whereby we ask ourselves an array of questions — as many as you feel you want to answer — which came to mind while pondering the dimension in question. What I always find helpful is looking at the references in the endnotes and going deeper by reading further from the original text. I am most excited about these considerations becoming a fulcrum for further reflection, prayer and for getting closer to the Lord. There are graces that await us as we engage in this prayerful and reflective process. Likewise, this resource can be the object of a parish sharing group or an informal gathering of friends. The reflections can be used as inspiration for summer reading or for Advent or Lenten activities or for a personal retreat. You can, for instance, take one question per day and let it accompany you or set some quiet time per week, a short 15 minutes, to read a paragraph and ask yourself a question that is proposed. Studied and reflected upon individually or in community, whether in families, parishes, schools and religious houses, I pray that this small contribution will help readers and faithful come to a more profound sense of faith, a more mature relationship with the Lord, and to a transforming experience of grace. In whatever way one chooses to use these ruminations, they are offered to the faithful of the Church of Toronto and beyond. Let's unpack these nine characteristics of the Cenacle together.

# 1

# The Institution of the EUCHARIST[1]

It was on that fate-filled Thursday evening, at supper in the Upper Room,[2] when our Divine Lord Jesus shared the Passover meal with his apostles and in that moment instituted the Sacrifice of the Most holy Eucharist. As Catholics we benefit from the sacraments Christ left us, and at every celebration of Mass we are called to spiritually unite with that one original Sacrifice of Jesus. Those unforgettable historical events (Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ) occurred long ago and yet they are made present to us through the intervention and power of the Holy Spirit — in sacramental ways. When we celebrate holy Mass, we are gaining access to eternity, it is a foretaste of Heaven, a spiritual fraternity with the angels and the saints worshipping the one Triune God. The Sacrificial Banquet re-presents the offering of Christ to our Father in Heaven and he takes us up with him and presents us to the Father Almighty. It is always Jesus who renews the Good Friday self-giving, selfless, loving sacrifice of his life for us, but now in the time of the Church, it is accomplished through the sacred ministry of the ordained priests. At its root, it is the same Christ, the same sacrifice, the same offering, the same victim, the same love, the same eternal high Priest effecting the same sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, reconciliation, peace, forgiveness, and redemption. The difference is in the how — the manner in which it is offered. We are never more united to God than when we attend holy Mass. We are never closer to Heaven, than when we participate in the Eucharist. We are never more united with Jesus and among ourselves than when we worship the Lord in our Eucharistic community. We are never more loving than when we celebrate the Sacrament of love.

Let us consider a moment we have all witnessed at airports — two persons who love each other deeply yet are forced to part ways. They want to stay together forever, yet one must leave for the good of the other, to seek employment, to further their education, to care for those in need, to follow their divine calling. They often leave a little something to be remembered by: a symbolic gesture as a parting gift, a picture, a thoughtful reminder. However, Jesus, returning back to the Heavenly Father, did not give us a mere symbol, but rather himself in the Eucharist. When we participate in the holy Eucharist, we are made new, we are encouraged and filled with God himself; we are strengthened in our faith, we are enlightened in our souls; our hearts are healed and our will fortified. We receive the Bread of Life so that we can continue our journey towards Eternal Life while living even now on earth the Abundant Life. This is the dream — this is God's dream for us.

St. Thomas Aquinas, who beautifully referred to the Eucharist as the "Sacrament of Love," succinctly encapsulates the Eucharistic mystery in his prayer, the *O Sacrum Convivium:* "O Sacred Banquet in which Christ is received; the Memory of his Passion is renewed, the mind is filled with

grace and a pledge of future glory is given to us." There are three moments here: first, we look back and we remember what Jesus said and did for us especially the day before he was to be betrayed, while at supper and entered willingly and out of love for us, into his Passion; second, the present moment, our *mind* (the *mens*) also meaning our spirit, soul or heart, is filled up with God's love and presence — grace; and third, we are catapulted forward in an eschatological dimension as a glimpse of everlasting life is offered to us. This all takes place when we go to Mass! It is a sacred family meal, it is the new and eternal covenant, it is a true communion with the Lord and it nurtures communion among ourselves as sisters and brothers. It is not a symbol; it is not a mere reminder; it is Jesus himself — the Real Presence. As the *Catechism* teaches: "In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained."[3]

## ANECDOTAL ILLUSTRATION

There is a moving and compelling story about that outstanding and loyal son of the Church, the Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen. During the 1911 Chinese Republican revolution, in response to the Boxer Rebellion, anti-Catholic supporters apprehended a Catholic parish. They confined the pastor to house arrest, and from his rectory window, he witnessed the desecration of the church. He also knew that there had been thirty-two consecrated hosts in the tabernacle. At the same time a devout eleven-year-old girl was praying at the back of the church. She returned to the church that night and made her holy hour devotion and then consumed one of the sacred hosts, bending down to receive Jesus on her tongue. She did that every night, consuming one consecrated host. On the last night, the thirty-second night, regrettably a guard woke up and saw her there. After she received Christ lovingly, the ruthless guard chased her down and beat her to death with his rifle. After becoming aware of this martyrdom, Archbishop Sheen, while still a seminarian, was so inspired by her self-sacrifice that he made a promise/vow to pray a holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament each day for the rest of his life. And he did. This was an extraordinary witnessing of the Real Presence in his life which was the Archbishop's guiding light and unfailing inspiration for his decades' long ministry where he reached out to countless persons sharing with them the gift of the Catholic faith.

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

How am I and how is my family and community appreciating the awesomeness of the sacrament of the Eucharist? How do I see the Sunday Eucharist celebration impacting my daily life, work, study and relationships? How eager am I to experience the weekly encounter with Christ at Mass in the worshipping parish community? How can I enter more deeply into communion with Christ and with others, becoming more eucharistic in what I say and do? Do I realize in my heart of hearts that Sunday is God's Day and that the Lord is waiting for me to celebrate our faith and friendship with him in and through the Eucharist in community? Is the celebration of the Mass really the "source and summit"[4] — and the "centre" — of my life of faith, my life of prayer, my personal life, my relationships, my walk with the Lord, and my vocation? Will I participate in this year's Corpus Christi Mass and procession?

# 2

## The Gift of the PRIESTHOOD[5]

We must always begin with Christ who was very generous and giving that sacred night in the Cenacle. He is first and foremost our Eternal High Priest. However, because he loved us so, he had decided to share his one and unique Priesthood with his ecclesial family, the Church. This happened the night he was betrayed. The priesthood is indeed a gift Christ left the Church on the eve of his Passion while at that table. As his Priestly People[6], since the community of believers is priestly, we already partake in his Priesthood by virtue of our baptism. We refer to this as the common or baptismal priesthood of all the faithful in Christ. Moreover, the baptized exercise this priesthood according to their individual calling in life, participating in and thus embodying the very mission of Christ as priest, prophet and king. This constitutes the unfolding and flourishing of the grace received at the moment of our baptism, especially in the exercise and witnessing of the virtues of faith, hope and love.

Subsequently, and from among the baptized disciples, Jesus chooses men to follow him in a special way to become his representatives, ministers and instruments of grace. He gives to them a new and second share in his Priesthood — the ministerial or hierarchal priesthood of the ordained. Holy Orders is one of the sacraments "at the service of communion"[7] and points to the fact that not only are bishops and priests servants of God, they are also at the service of the baptismal priesthood in the new covenant established in Christ. Power and authority are meant for the service of others: *sacerdos propter alios*, in Latin. The priesthood is for others, to build up the Body of Christ and not for personal gain or self-aggrandizement. Priests act "in the person of Christ the head of the Church" (*in persona Christi Capitis*) and they lead and build up the Church as shepherds, teachers and spiritual fathers intent on fostering communion by the exercise of this sacred authority. The ministerial priesthood is given sacred power in order to serve and not to be served, as Christ modeled for us. Jesus taught, healed, led, built people up, challenged, went the extra mile, served with his entire life. Bishops and priests are a gift given for the glory of God and to spread his Kingdom, to grow the Body of Christ on earth by serving and furthering the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all the faithful. The Bishop understands his priests as co-workers, sons, brothers and friends — it is truly a sacramental bond that unites them; they are his first and closest collaborators in the exercise of the sacred, apostolic ministry handed down by Christ through the centuries in the Catholic Church.

As cooperators of the bishop, promising and offering love and obedience to him, and forming a sacramental and personal brotherhood of presbyters, ordained priests are at the service of the People of God, shepherding Christ's flock by governing, teaching, sanctifying, all for the glory of God. Stemming from the episcopacy, priests receive a special share in Christ's priesthood and are configured to the saving Lord, receiving a special seal (an indelible spiritual character) on their soul. Consecrated to preach the Gospel in season and out of season, they are to shepherd the flock, celebrate liturgies, exercise pastoral care, seek the lost, make Christ present and nourish the Christian People with the sacraments. Bishops and priests are ultimately intent on cultivating a life of holiness for themselves and for the People to whom they are sent to continue Christ's own mission. Bishops have the fulness of the sacrament of holy orders and priests have a share in that grace, though in a limited way.

## ANECDOTAL ILLUSTRATION

While on a pilgrimage to the Eternal City with her family, Thérèse Martin — who came to be known as St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face — began to understand her divine calling: to be consecrated to God and to be a spiritual mother for priests. In her autobiography she describes that after meeting many holy priests in Italy, she understood their weaknesses and frailty in spite of the sublime dignity: "If holy priests...show in their conduct their extreme need for prayers, what is to be said of those who are tepid?" (A 157). In a letter to her sister Céline, she offered great and zealous encouragement writing: "Let us live for souls, let us be apostles, let us save especially the souls of priests...Let us pray, let us suffer for them, and, on the last day, Jesus will be grateful." (LT 94). A very touching episode at the end of her earthly life further illustrates the magnanimity and depth of her soul. Though already extremely ill, she nonetheless heeded the nurse's advice to walk 15 minutes each day in the convent garden. She did it even if it did not really help her health situation all that much. On one occasion, a fellow Carmelite nun accompanying her noticed how painful it was for Sister Thérèse to walk. She advised her caringly: "You would do better to rest, this walking can do you no good under such conditions. You are exhausting yourself." But the Little Flower responded: "Well, I am walking for a missionary. I believe that over there, far away, one of them is perhaps exhausted in his apostolic endeavours, and, to lessen his fatigue, I offer mine to God."

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

We read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "The faithful exercise their baptismal priesthood through their participation each according to his own vocation, in Christ's mission as priest, prophet and king."[8] Are we conscious that while we go about our daily duties, responsibilities, chores and activities, we are called to unite this work, all work, to Jesus? When we rejoice, we have the graced opportunity to unite that joy to Jesus; when we experience suffering, we unite that suffering to Jesus; and when we worship at Mass we unite ourselves to the self-offering of Jesus himself. How real is this calling in my life? Do I ever consider myself as called to participate in the priesthood of Christ? How often do I think of my baptism and the common priesthood of all the faithful? Does it influence my faith journey? Do I see and live my life, work and vocation as service? How does the universal call to holiness inspire and guide my daily decisions, thoughts, words and deeds? Do we pray for our ordained priests especially those who struggle? How do I collaborate with the parish priests in the archdiocese for an even greater outpouring of grace and for a stronger witnessing to the beauty and saving truth of the Gospel? Do I encourage and respect our priests as true icons of Christ and spiritual fathers? Do I fast and pray daily for an increase in vocations to the ordained/ministerial priesthood? Do I encourage the young men of our families and communities to consider the possibility of a calling to the priesthood? As a young man, have I ever given true and generous thought, prayer and discernment to this persona and ecclesial vocation?

# 3

## The Example and Commandment to Live in HUMBLE SERVICE

In the Upper Room, on the night before he was to offer up his life for us, Christ "got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him."[9] Every year in the celebration of the Easter Triduum, we repeat this profound gesture at the Mass of the Last Supper. Giving himself to the very end for the world's salvation, "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end,"[10] Jesus likewise left us the example of his boundless charity and humility. Ever since, foot-washing has come to represent something very important for the followers of Christ. The rite is often referred to as part of the *mandatum* (commandment), from Jesus' words during the meal, which we read in John 13:14; in Latin: *Mandátum novum do vobis dicit Dóminus, ut diligátis ínvicem, sicut diléxi vos* — "I give you a new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you." This is why Holy Thursday is also known as "Maundy Thursday," the word *maundy* coming from the Latin word *mandatum*. And these are the words spoken by our Lord to his apostles at the Last Supper, after he completed the washing of the feet.

As a disciple of the Lord Jesus, it is imperative that we take stock of this outstanding example of brotherly love, of humble, loving service for Jesus, with Jesus and in Jesus. The historical and cultural context of the time, ancient Palestine, relates that only slaves washed another's feet. It was truly an extremely unpleasant and humiliating task since, as people wore sandals or went barefoot, they walked along dusty and grimy roads shared by herdsmen and their animals. We can imagine the extreme dirt and filth of the unpaved byways. By willingly washing his apostles' feet, God Incarnate lowered himself to the status of a slave and asks us to do the same out of love and honour for him, and as a witness that we belong to him. For Christ, love takes on a very concrete and even crude physicality; for him, love is not a fuzzy feeling we get from time to time; it is not a philosophical ideal. For the Son of God, it is a tangible even earthy expression of the gift of self — this self-giving is real, graphic and costly.

We can appreciate how humble the Lord of lords and King of kings was in accomplishing such an act of servility, but also with what great and unconditional charity he showed us the way to serve. He left us the example: a challenging call to humble service mandated by virtue of our baptism and life in him. For us it means to lay down our lives in service to others and even more, to see our very life in terms of service and nothing else. What Christ is saying in this gesture

is that we need to love in and through our service to our sisters and brothers and not in any other way. Love and service go hand in hand in Jesus' understanding and in that of the Church as well. We twin the action with the virtue, humble service and Christian charity; loving the Lord by serving others. One cannot exist without the other.

In addition, we see in Christ's prophetic and sublime teaching, the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian life and lifestyle which is fundamentally that of self-sacrificing/oblative love since it was the distinguishing characteristic of Christ himself. The world will come to know that we are his disciples by

## ANECDOTAL ILLUSTRATION

Mother Teresa (St. Teresa of Calcutta) spent her entire life in this humble service to the poorest of the poor. Coupled with an intense prayer life and contemplative spirituality, she and her Missionaries of Charity also spent hours on end tending to the sick, the poor, the outcast, the rejected, the dying. She would say that each morning, at the celebration of holy Mass, Jesus came to her and to her sisters in communion; then, for the rest of the day, she would go to care for Jesus present in the needy, the helpless, the forgotten. This was a life organized and spent through the lens of service embodying Christ's own words: "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."[11]

Consider how the priest, during the celebration of the Most Sacred Mysteries, touches the sacred Host reverently, attentively, lovingly, delicately, carefully, devoutly. In those same ways we are to reach out and touch the bodies and spirits of the poor, the needy and the sick, in humble service and honouring the memory of the Lord Jesus. The Eucharist we celebrate and the Eucharistic Body of Christ we receive, propels us to loving, active and humble service to the Mystical Body of Christ and to the world.

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

Do I see my life in terms of service? What emotion does feet-washing stir up inside of me? Can I name some instances where I can symbolically wash someone's feet as Christ did? Is there a sick person I can visit? Is there a young person I can encourage? Is there a food bank to which I can contribute? Do I know of a perpetual adoration chapel I can visit and where I can pray for the many needs of our wounded humanity? Can I reach out to a fallen-away Catholic and invite him/her back? Is there a homeless person I can feed? Are there elderly persons I can visit and care for? Can I name the needs, poverties, addictions, vices, struggles, and challenges in my neighborhood and community? Is there a pro-life group I can join? Is there a volunteer program or ministry in my parish which I can join?[12] Is there a person suffering from mental illness or loneliness to whom I can reach out and for whom I can make a difference? Who can benefit from my time, my treasure and talents? Who needs to be forgiven? How am I using my gifts for others and for Jesus? How am I a gift for others? Am I too proud to lower myself in humble service? How much of my day or week is dedicated to service for others?

# 4

## The RESURRECTION — Christ Appears as the Risen One[13]

The single most important event in human history, which has forever changed the course of life, is the Resurrection of Christ. Considered the "crowning truth of our faith in Christ."[14] It concerns and involves all of us in "the building of a new era"[15] from that Easter day onward. The Gospels relate that the Risen Christ appeared to his disciples in the Upper Room.[16] It must have been quite the experience since they witnessed him being crucified and put to death three days prior. Christ comes to bring the gift of peace to his own; he assures them that it is truly him; he gives to them the Holy Spirit; he puts to rest their fears; he heals the wound of their disbelief; he shares a meal with them; he strengthens their faith. Easter is truly a revolution in that all of humanity and the cosmos, my life and yours, has forever been altered because of it. Christ's Resurrection has changed all things; we now have access to the Father and our lives are renewed. Things are really different now. Our former comprehension of greatness and authority now has a deeper, fuller, new meaning; the human quest for glory, praise and recognition is now purified and given a new understanding; power is seen as service; forgiveness supersedes vengeance; fear has given way to faith/trust; compassion is the response to misery; mercy complements justice; peace and serenity replace our anxieties; healing has come to infirmity; death itself has been overcome; enemies are loved and forgiven; selfishness is exchanged for selflessness; hope has taken the place of despair; God's love has taken up its rightful place and been restored as the one thing necessary.

There is a depth which we can never fully comprehend this side of heaven with respect to the newness of life which Christ brings to us in and through his Resurrection. It was there in the Cenacle that appearing to them, his friends and followers, Christ manifested the new life of the risen, one that we are called to embrace in the here and now of our daily living and by doing so prepare ourselves for the life eternal that awaits us. The Resurrection of Christ is also the pledge of a new life very much in our reach and willed by God for us. Even today, we can experience the power of the resurrection for the risen Christ says to us, "Because I live, you shall live also."[17] This is the heart of the Easter faith. This is why this unique and central celebration fills us with renewed hope and encouragement in this world oftentimes marked with brokenness, pain, sorrows, and tears; this is why we truly hold that life is worth living because it has been redeemed, we have been bought back, we have now access to Christ's new life, to the Power of the Resurrection today and each day of our earthly life until we enter definitely into the Kingdom of the eternal Resurrection. Importantly, the beauty of it is that we encounter the Risen Christ each day in the Church, the community of believers, in the Words of the Holy Scriptures, in the Sacraments and in service to those in need. By engaging with our faith in this way, and experiencing now the closeness of the Lord in our lives, we already live lives of Resurrection People.

Moreover, with the grace of the Holy Spirit we have hope that we do not lie buried in the tomb of our sins, vices, addictions, despair, discouragement or doubts. Rather, we are daily renewed, to daily live lives marked by joy and peace, justice and love, and in all things and at all times lives that strive to be pleasing to the Lord.

The apparition of the Risen Christ in the Upper Room ushered in a season of a new life. By his death on the cross, Jesus has rescued us from sin and everlasting death, and by his resurrection, a path for new life has been set forth before us. Just as the stone from Christ's tomb was rolled away and he stepped out gloriously alive, he offers us that same opportunity every day to rise to a new, better, holier and more joyful life. If we are able to acknowledge our many different tombs and what is keeping us buried, we will emerge to a lifestyle which will fill us with deep meaning. If, in faith, we bring those instances of death and burial to the Risen One asking for some share in his own Resurrection power, then a new and full life waits us, not only in eternity, but here and now, today and every day.

What the Risen Lord offers us is a season of living the abundant life, a life of meaning and of purpose, of goodness and truth, of beauty, virtue, love and joy, of holiness and of service. All of this is ours for the taking. It is up to each of us to accept this gift. Through the Resurrection of Jesus, we have been freed from the shackles of sin — the empty tomb is for us a call to live life to the full by living it for his glory and his purpose. Fruit of a profound reflection on the meaning of the Resurrection, the great saint and doctor of the Church, John Chrysostom, in a well-known Easter sermon, preached the following: "O death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? Christ is risen and you are abolished. Christ is risen and the demons are cast down. Christ is risen and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen and life is freed. Christ is risen and the tomb is emptied of the dead: for Christ, being risen from the dead, has become the Leader and Reviver of those who had fallen asleep. To Him be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen."

## ANECDOTAL ILLUSTRATION

Let us take for example the experience of receiving the gift of a wonderful, unique, and expensive work of art. It is a marvelous painting from a Renaissance master which we intend to display and keep. In our home we look intently around the many rooms, dwelling spaces, different areas; we consider the ambiance, the different settings, the lighting. Nothing works; nothing is good enough, suitable enough to showcase the magnificent art piece of great value and beauty. So, we decide to change things around: we demolish some walls, rearrange, make space and reconfigure the entire site so as to build around the priceless, gorgeous and inestimable masterpiece. This is what the Resurrection is for us. We do not fit it into our lives, squeeze its reality and power in the smallness of our daily activities or pepper its might willy-nilly throughout our comings and goings. We build our life around the Resurrection. We reconfigure ourselves because of it; we re-dimension our relationships, our careers, our dreams, and our hopes in light of it: it is central, it is a gift, it is a living reality. It is our saving reality — it is Christ alive in us.[18]

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

In my life, how real is the Resurrection and its power? Have I entered fully and consciously into the new life of Christ? Can I name a difference that Christ's Resurrection makes in my life and daily decisions? What are those tombs and boulders that keep me from living the new life of the Resurrection here and now? Do I benefit from the weekly celebration of Christ's Resurrection by participating in Sunday Mass? How are things different in my life because I am in Christ and live for him? Do I know someone who is buried in sin and pain that needs the power of the Resurrection to pull them out? Is Christ's Shalom-Peace my daily blessing to others? When was the last time I witnessed to the Resurrection and shared with someone what it means to be alive in the Lord and to follow the Risen Christ Jesus? Does my family honour the Resurrection of Christ in the Upper Room of my domestic church? Am I living the abundant life of Jesus Christ? If not, then, why not?

# 5

## The Arrival of the HOLY SPIRIT at Pentecost[26]

Human history is full of significant moments that we'd like to have seen firsthand. One such watershed moment was the original Pentecost Sunday.[19] There, in the holy city of Jerusalem in the Upper Room, was the Mother of the Church herself, Mary of Nazareth. Along with the apostles and disciples she was praying and waiting for the gift Jesus promised. Suddenly, unexpectedly, and powerfully, the Holy Spirit descended upon them bearing gifts. Since then, the world has never been the same. The Holy Spirit came to seal the new law and new covenant that Jesus came to establish and fulfill.

The Christian Pentecost event we read in the Book of Acts has interesting antecedents and parallels with other more ancient Pentecostal feasts. The first being the celebration that involved offering to God the first fruits of the spring grain harvest in a special sacrifice in the Temple. For Christians, we understand that the Holy Spirit himself is the first fruit of the harvest that has been yielded by Christ's life, death and resurrection, no longer in the old, but the new and eternal Covenant. The complete and everlasting harvest, however, will be experienced in eternity though the first fruits are real and fill us with

joy and peace in the Spirit already here on earth as his disciples. Then, the second ancient Jewish feast of Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, was when Jews were invited to go to on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This was to commemorate their birth as God's Chosen People, in the covenant Law which was given to them on Mount Sinai, via Moses, fifty days after the Exodus when God gave them the guiding Law after they escaped from Egypt.[20]

The Pentecost event in the Book of Acts of the Apostles, which took place fifty days after Easter Sunday. The Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples with a strong, powerful wind, and in the form of tongues of fire. This powerful moment is considered the birthday of the Church, or better yet, her public manifestation since "the Church was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the cross."[21] Let us reflect on who the Holy Spirit is as a Divine Person and how he is working in our lives. He is first and foremost God's gift,[22] and since God is love, his first gift is love in the Person of the Holy Spirit poured lavishly into our hearts. That love is so powerful that it heals us of our spiritual woundedness by forgiving our sins. That's the first effect of the love we receive. The second effect is that we are given, even now in our earthly dwelling, a pledge, a promise, a forestate, a "first fruit" of the eternal life we will one day inherit in heaven. Finally, by receiving the Holy Spirit, we ourselves are able to bear much fruit, called the fruit of the Spirit.[23]

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit together with Christ have accomplished a unique mission in the Church and now we all can share in the communion of the Holy Trinity as a result of this saving work. Specifically, the Holy Spirit "prepares men and goes out to them with his grace, in order to draw them to Christ." Secondly, he "manifests the risen Lord to them, recalls his words to them and opens their minds to the understanding of his Death and Resurrection." Thirdly, he "makes present the mystery of Christ, supremely in the Eucharist, in order to reconcile them, to bring them into communion with God, that they may "bear much fruit.""[24] The Spirit is given to us and accompanies us on our journey of faith in the footsteps of Jesus. He gives us power to participate in the very mission of Christ. As we strive to fulfill that mission through our vocation, he provides for us great courage and strength in times of weakness; he offers supportive guidance

to us in times of doubt; he never ceases to console us when we are saddened and heavily burdened by life's troubles, and he always advocates, pleads our cause, as we pray to the Father through the Son. I often think of that beautiful spiritual saying of Fr. Olier: *se laisser à l'Esprit* — to abandon onself to the Holy Spirit.[25] Each day we do well to ponder this saying and incorporate it in our life.

The Holy Spirit goes by many names: most notably he is God, and the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. He cannot, however, be contained in just a few words or metaphors. Nonetheless, in the Scriptures and Tradition, many helpful intuitions are given to us. He is the love of the Father and the Son, Lord and Giver of life, Spirit of truth, Spirit of the Living God, Spirit of life, Advocate, Paraclete, Comforter, Convictor of sin, God's Seal on his people, Guide, Indweller of believers, Intercessor, Revealer of truth, Teacher, Witness, Soul of the Church, and many more.

There are two ancient hymns to the Holy Spirit which are very rich in theology, poetic in composition and profound in meaning. We would do well to read them over, or sing them, and then ask ourselves how we can grow in intimacy with and be more docile to the Holy Spirit. We did, after all, receive the Holy Spirit at Baptism and then at Confirmation. He came to us with the seven sanctifying gifts as well as many other gifts called *charisms*. They equip us to assume our mission in building the Kingdom, witnessing to the Gospel, living in holiness of life, be pleasing to the Lord and fulfill God's purpose, and glorifying him at all times by what we say and do daily. The first hymn is the 13th C. medieval Sequence *Veni Sancte Spiritus* which we sing on Pentecost Sunday. The second is the *Veni Creator Spiritus*, composed in the 9th C. and attributed to Rabanus Maurus. These two hymns constitute a masterful prayer which we would do well to use in invoking the Holy Spirit to come down to us and in us.

## ANECDOTAL ILLUSTRATION

Think of a symphony orchestra. It's made up of a hundred different musicians and dozens of instruments. The conductor is the visible focus of everyone's attention, both the musicians and the audience. And yet, is the conductor the real source of the music? No, the composer is. In front of every musician is a music stand holding a few pages marked with black dots — the score, the music. No one in the audiences sees the score, but that score is what brings all those minds together, coordinates everyone's efforts, and produces a beautiful, inspiring performance. That's what the Church is like. The Pope is the conductor, guaranteed by God to stay faithful to the musical score. We are all musicians, contributing our own unique talents to the symphony of holiness that resounds throughout the world and history. The Holy Spirit is the living musical score, the one who tells us what notes to play, when to play them, how fast to play them, how loud and soft. He is the silent force behind the power of every saint, every Christian, and the Church as a whole.[27]

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

Who is the Holy Spirit to me and how often to I speak with him? How am I conscious that we receive the Holy Spirit in the seven sacraments,[28] being made a "new creation" in Baptism?[29] Do I consider myself as "living by the Spirit?" Am I able to willfully renounce some creatural vice so I can truly "walk by the Spirit?"[30] Since the Holy Spirit "builds, animates and sanctifies the Church,"[31] do I understand my role in being his instrument of communion, evangelization and of healing in the Church and the world? Do I call upon the Spirit of Jesus every day to renew my faith by invoking a fresh, new outpouring of his gifts upon my life and career, studies and school, ministry, marriage, family, home, work, archdiocese, society and Church, and country? How often do I ask him to rekindle the fire of his love in me, reawaken and reactivate the seven gifts and the other charisms so as to use them generously for the growth and spreading of Christ's Kingdom? He dwells in us and empowers us, speaking to us in prayer and Scripture, inner convictions, gentle nudges and promptings. Am I convinced that fostering a deeper and more meaningful relationship with the Holy Spirit will lead me to a more fulfilling spiritual life marked by joy and consolations? Do invoke his help with faith when I pray or when reading Scripture or in making decisions?

# 6

## The Disciples Gathered in COMMUNION and COMMUNITY[32]

"I Believe in the Holy Catholic Church" is what we profess every Sunday in the Creed, but what is the Church? According to the *Catechism:* "In Christian usage, the word "church" designates the liturgical assembly, but also the local community or the whole universal community of believers. These three meanings are inseparable. "The Church" is the People that God gathers in the whole world. She exists in local communities and is made real as a liturgical, above all a Eucharistic, assembly. She draws her life from the word and the Body of Christ and so herself becomes Christ's Body."[33]

In the Upper Room, we see the beginnings of the Church, gathered as one, united in prayer and worship, empowered by the Holy Spirit, witnessing and mission-driven, sent as a light into the world, as a sacrament. Furthermore, the Church was born in and from the Father's heart, foreshowed from the world's beginning, prepared for in the Old Testament, instituted by Christ, revealed by the Holy Spirit and perfected in glory.[34]

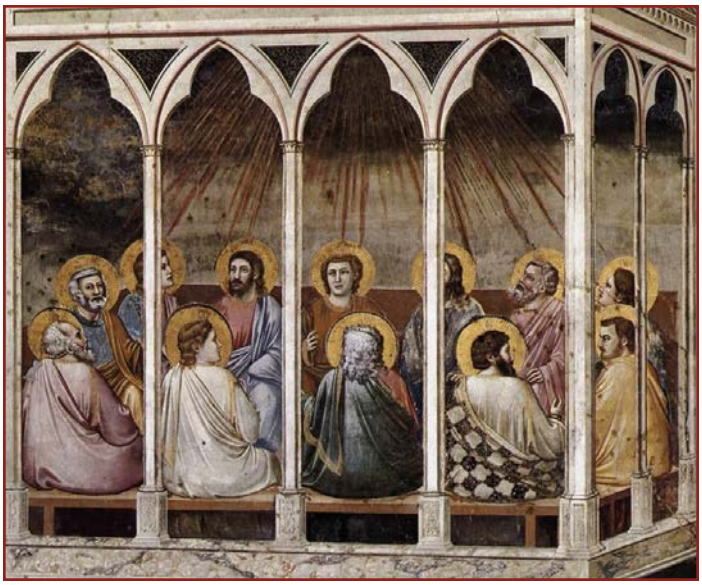
Indeed, as the universal sacrament of salvation, she is the sign and the instrument of the communion of God and humankind, in both her divine and human composition. With visible and invisible attributes, she continues to be that sacred assembly convoked, called together by God himself, as her spouse, in his loving and saving plan. Much has and can be said, about the mystery of the Church; I wish, however, to underscore two aspects: community and communion.

The experience of the Cenacle reminds all believers of the importance of the Church in our lives, in the life of every true and authentic believer and follower of Christ. Christ remains the focal point of the Church's very identity and mission. She lives to point to him and to invite all to enter into his family. If she shines, it is only to draw attention to her spouse, Christ, and to show and manifest his light.[35] The Upper Room event and its spiritual significance highlights an ecclesial unity in community, a gathering place and a gathering spirit for Christ's disciples, thus indicating the importance of fellowship. A community that gathers liturgically, especially on the weekly Easter (Sunday) to remember the Lord Jesus, is living in communion as a family. The community believes, prays, listens, worships, loves, announces, hopes, witnesses, serves, challenges, unites.

We are called to the Church. Communion with Christ, which is willed by the Father and accomplished by the Holy Spirit, is actualized-made present in the Church herself.[36] All persons are called, therefore, to enter into the Church, become part of her life, and to assume their part of the wider mission, according to the vocation given, charisms received[37] and their place in the hierarchical and charismatic community of faith. To be a "Child of God" is indubitably the greatest honour and title we can bear. Importantly, however, to

be a "Child of the Church" comes in second. These two nomenclatures can never be separated as one depends upon the other. As St. Cyprian of Carthage teaches: "He who does not have the Church for a Mother, cannot have God for a Father."[38] Christ wishes to save us and to sanctify us, but he wills to accomplish it through the Church-by means of the Church, his Mystical Body and Spouse. Furthermore, the Church is not so much a building as it is God's faithful and faith-filled family, "members of his household," wrote St. Paul to the Church in Ephesus, "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."[39]

The challenge for us is this: to remain faithful to the Church who speaks on behalf of her Spouse and Lord; to love the Church as a loyal and devoted son/daughter; to respect the Church as the mouthpiece of the Lord's teaching and depository and dispenser of his mysteries and truths; to defend the Church from her enemies, the mistaken and misguided detractors; to let ourselves be guided by the Church who as a mother and teacher nourishes and nurtures the divine life/God's life in us. We need to remain faithful to preserving unity among the members and celebrate the different liturgies, customs, traditions, vocations, charisms, ministries and apostolates, which, each in their own way, manifests something of the mystery, beauty and holiness of Holy Mother Church. Let us take on this responsibility and with grateful hearts build ever more zealously that profound unity/communion which is already present and which is fruit of the Holy Spirit. The world will know to whom we belong, in whom we dwell, in whom "we live, and move and have our being",[40] and we will bear powerful witness to the world, by the genuine love we bear one another.[41] By way of a profound unity among ourselves, this communion of one in heart and mind[42] will in turn build up the community of faith, and we will be pleasing to the Lord, fulfill our mission, accomplish his will, bring to completion his purpose and be a sign to the world that Jesus is Lord and in him we have life in abundance.[43] Jesus himself established his Church and did so for eternity, declaring that despite challenges or troubles facing his beloved Spouse, "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."[44]



The believers in the Upper Room felt a dire need and desire for community, as they were excited about their newfound faith and mission which were made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection. However, since they were also aware that Christ was no longer physically with them, they knew ever so well that they needed each other. Scripture relays: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."[45] Not only did they worship Christ in the Eucharist, they also cared for each other's needs. Being united to Christ forged the first disciples into members of the same family, a sacred household, which gave them a special bond. In the end, we understand that community is truly essential for our spiritual and human growth, but also as to fulfill our calling. The Lord will not fail to develop that sense of community among us as we share our struggles and joys with others and draw near to him together in communion.

## ANECDOTAL ILLUSTRATION

The following story illustrates a creative and congenial manner of fostering a true sense of Christian communion and community.

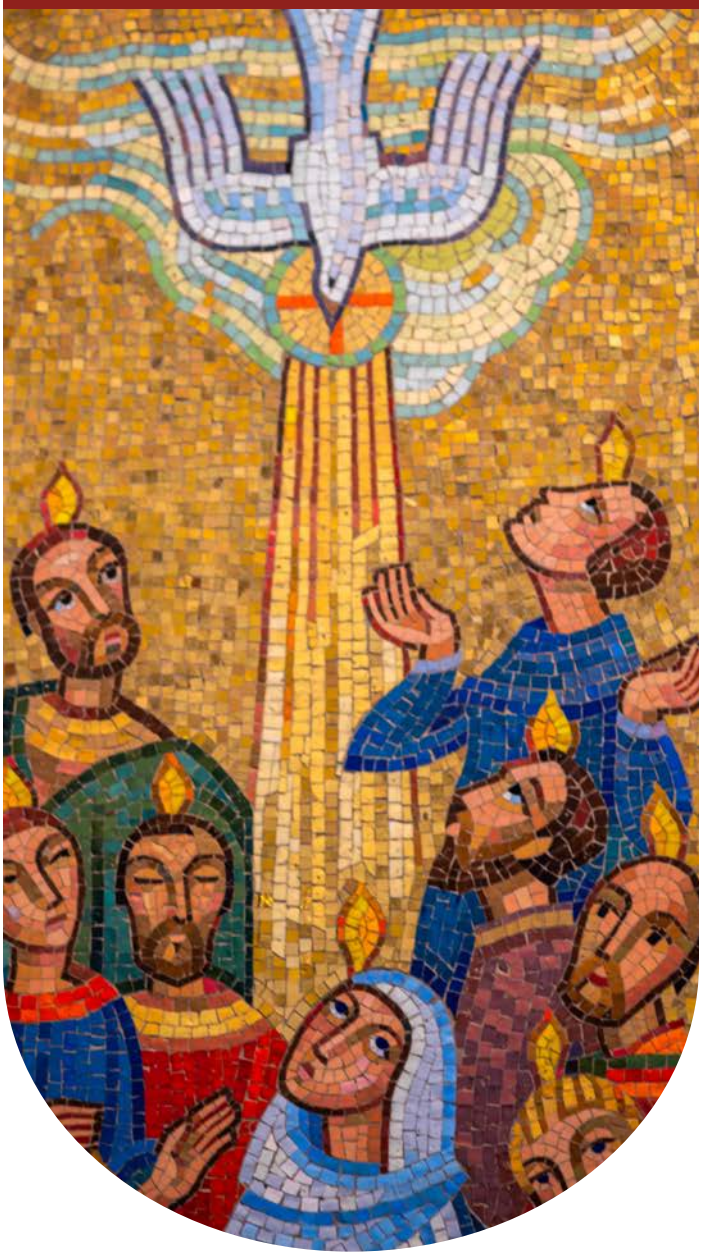
"Northern Spain produced a beautiful way of expressing communion and friendship. With the countryside full of handmade caves, after each harvest, some farmers would sit in a room built above a cave and inventory their various foods. As time passed, the room became known as the "telling room" — a place of communion where friends and families would gather to share their stories, secrets, and dreams. If you needed the intimate company of safe friends, you would head for the telling room. Had they lived in northern Spain, the deep friendship shared by Jonathan and David might have led them to create a telling room... As believers in Jesus, may He help us build our own relational "telling rooms" — friendships that reflect Christlike love and care. Let's take the time to linger with friends, open our hearts, and live in true communion with one another in Him."[46]

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

How much time do I devote to building community? Is membership to the Church crucial and important to my personal walk of faith? Am I excited to worship the Risen Christ on Sunday — with the community? Do I bring my gifts to the Church and share them generously? Have I been hurt by a Church member and have taken a distance form participating as a result? Do I consider myself a loyal son/daughter of the Church? What does that mean to me? Am I genuinely concerned with building a stronger sense of community in my parish? Am I a man/woman of communion or am I divisive by my words and actions? How can I grow in my appreciation for the community that Christ has established? Do I honour and encourage the different vocations and charisms of those around me? Do I forgive the hurts of the community and try to live in communion despite it all?

# 7

## They Gathered In Order To PRAY



The experience of the first disciples was marked by a desire to live in right and personal relationship with Christ, now risen gloriously. Having sent his Spirit to them, the community of believers and followers of the Master, devoted time and heart to nurturing the relationship though a life of deep, authentic and Spirit-led prayer: "They went up to the upper room, where they were staying... all these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren."[47] Prayer was important to them and it ought to be important to us as well. The *Catechism*[48] defines prayer in a number of ways, drawing extensively from both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, including the lives of the saints and mystics. For instance, it refers to prayer as God's gift of grace to us, a surge of the heart; a simple gaze turned toward heaven; a cry of recognition and of love; the raising of one's mind and heart to God; and the encounter of God's thirst with ours, God's thirst that we may thirst for him. In addition, prayer is considered our response of faith to the free promise of salvation and as well as a response of love. It is a covenant relationship between us and God, in Christ; it is the action of God and of man; and it is a communion of life between the heavenly Father and his beloved children. In a certain way, it is likewise a battle waged against ourselves, against Satan the Tempter and against our surroundings. But most of all, I'd like to underscore this special dimension: prayer is a vital, personal and living relationship with the living and true God.

Specifically, Holy Scripture teaches how the mystery of prayer is fully revealed in Jesus, in his teachings and in his own practice of prayer. Lest we forget, we know that there are five essential forms of Christian Prayer, namely, blessing & adoration, petition, intercession, thanksgiving, and praise. In addition, there are three expressions of prayer: vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplative prayer. From our own personal experience and struggles with prayer we often come face to face with the three main difficulties: distractions, dryness, and discouragement or spiritual laziness (acedia). Also, I believe it is valuable to consider the most popular objections to prayer: that is, a misguided and false notions of what prayer really is, thinking that we do not have time to pray, or even doubting its usefulness. The *Catechism* reminds us

that if we respond to these barriers with humility, trust and perseverance, then these obstacles will be overcome.

Looking to what that great disciple and apostle of the Lord, St. Paul taught about prayer, will allow us to better appreciate the gift that it truly is in our lives. In his letter to the Ephesians,[49] he writes: "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people." To the Thessalonians[50] he exhorts: "Pray continually." To the Colossians he advises: "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful."[51] To the Romans[52] he encourages them with the words: "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." It is a known spiritual fact that as we grow in faith we become more and more aware of a need for deep prayer. Again, as St. Paul tells the Romans:[53]"We do not know how to pray as we ought but the Holy Spirit prays within us." It is consoling to call to mind that we have indeed received the Spirit of prayer. Finally, to the Philippians[54] he commends them: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Indeed, how spiritually advantageous it would be if all our parishes and communities developed into authentic, apostolic, dynamic, joyful and life-giving schools of prayer. As St. John Paul II taught: "Yes... our Christian communities must become genuine "schools" of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly "falls in love." Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God's plan."[55]

As friendship in action, prayer allows us to experience the reality that we and God are friends as Jesus taught us: "I call you my friends."[56] What can be greater? What can more truly satisfy the deepest aspirations of our being? God and I are friends. Therefore, prayer is very much about spending time, communicating personally, and intimately with the Someone we love — and doing it regularly. Looking to our friend and Saviour Christ, we notice, as did his disciples, that he often prayed in their midst, and at times, alone. Moved by our Lord's own commitment to prayer, they once asked him: "Lord teach us to pray."[57] Answering them, our merciful Redeemer gave them the model of all prayer: "when you pray, say Our Father..." He was teaching them, as it were, the best prayer ever, the Lord's prayer, the one that came straight from the heart and lips of the Saviour and which the *Catechism* highlights most beautifully. By means of his own personal example, as related in the Gospels, Jesus teaches us not only the content of prayer, but also those inner dispositions and attitudes we are to possess as we approach prayer; namely, purity of heart that seeks the kingdom, forgiveness of one's enemies and a bold and filial faith.[58]

Furthermore, in all forms and expressions of prayer, the *Catechism* underscores the vital importance of the heart and how it needs to be attuned and attentive to God with whom we engage in a spiritual and transforming dialogue of faith: "By words, mental or vocal, our prayer takes flesh. Yet it is most important that the heart should be present to him to whom we are speaking in prayer: "Whether or not our prayer is heard depends not on the number of words, but on the fervor of our souls.""[59] These spiritual recommendations are not new — they reiterate Christ's own teaching when he urged his disciples: "In praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words."[60] We are called to come to prayer with great love, faith and humility in our hearts; these are conditions that allow us to truly enter into that life-changing conversation with the Lord of love and mercy, the Lord of relationships.

Finally, one cannot overstate how much the quality of our life of prayer depends on the state of our heart, which the *Catechism* defines as: "the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives. It is the place of truth, where we choose life or death. It is the place of encounter, because as image of God we live in relation: it is the place of covenant."[61] In addition, we know that: "the Lord leads all persons by paths and in ways pleasing to him, and each believer responds according to his heart's resolve and the personal expressions of his prayer."[62] Of all the different expressions of

prayer, the *Catechism* reminds us that the common denominator, the most fundamental characteristic is composure of heart.[63] But how can we acquire this composure? What does it look like? Basically, it takes on two distinct traits: (i) vigilance in keeping the Word of God, and (ii) dwelling in the presence of the Lord.[64] In a practical way, this means that if we desire and decide resolutely to become men and women of great prayer, truly "pray-ers," then we need to have frequent recourse to God's revealed Word in Sacred Scripture as well as purposefully practice "living" in the presence of God daily. Prayer doesn't just happen by accident — it requires determination, intentionality, and practice so that we can grow in it and benefit from its gradual, transforming power. Most of all, we commend ourselves to the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, the "interior master of Christian prayer"[65] to inspire us, teach our hearts and allow us to experience the blessings of prayer in our lives.

## ANECDOTAL ILLUSTRATION

Some years ago, a young girl was very sick and was not expected to recover. Because of her love for Jesus, she was troubled that she had not been able to do more for Him in her short life. Her pastor suggested that she make a list of people in their little town who needed Christ and pray that they might put their faith in Him. She took his advice, made a list, and prayed often for each person.

Some time later God began to stir a revival in the village. The girl heard of the people who were coming to Christ and prayed even more. As she heard reports, she checked off the names of those who had been led to the Lord.

After the girl died, a prayer list with the names of 56 people was found under her pillow. All had put their faith in Christ — the last one on the night before her death.

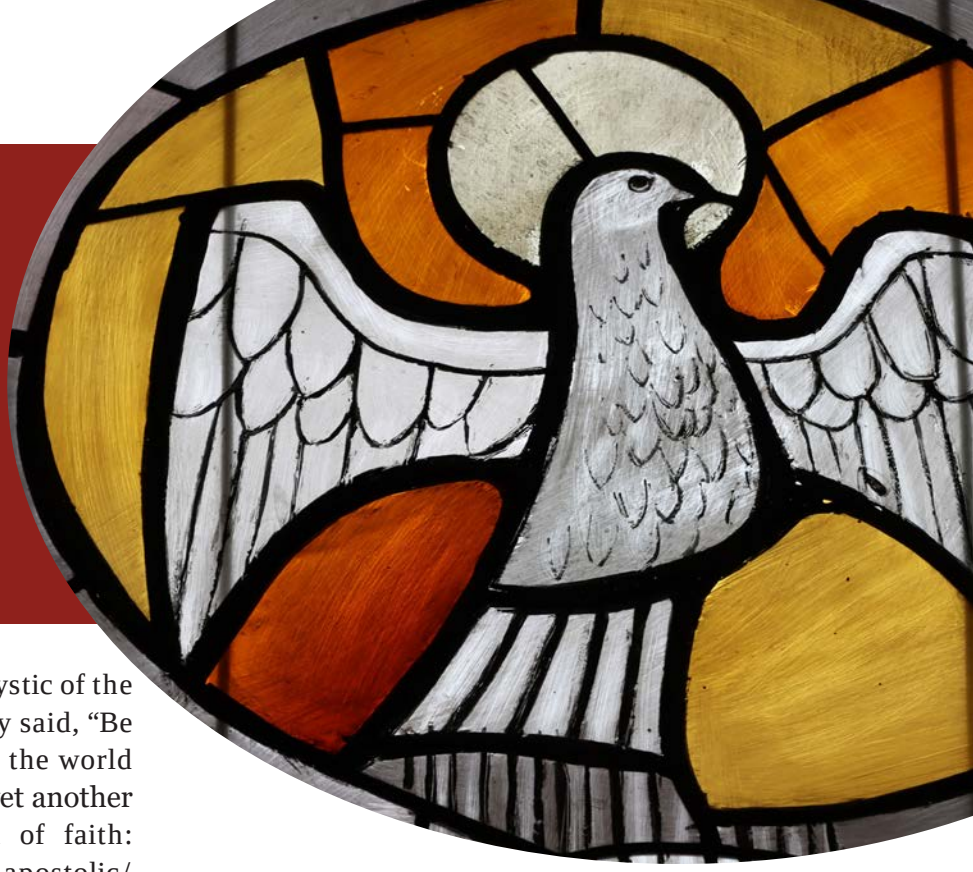
Such is the power of definite, specific, fervent prayer. Do you have a prayer list?[66]

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

How important is prayer to me and how much time daily and weekly am I devoting to it? Am I convinced that Christ speaks to me in prayer and that as his disciple I need to make the necessary effort to cultivate this means of sanctification? Which definition of prayer speaks to me more than others and why? Of the different forms and expressions of prayer, which am I more conformable with and why? In taking a deep look at my heart, is it disposed and ready to encounter the Lord in prayer? What are the most difficult obstacles for me when praying? Can I recall when I felt the presence, love and action of God in my prayer time? Is there someone in my circle of family, friends and community that I can turn to for help in growing in my prayer life? Perhaps the pastor of my parish? Perhaps there are online resources that I can benefit from in coming to understand and appreciate more fully the gift of prayer?

# 8

## The Received MISSIONARY ZEAL: Setting the World on Fire



It is commonly accepted that the fearless mystic of the 14th century, St. Catherine of Siena famously said, "Be who God meant you to be, and you will set the world on fire." This advice comes to encapsulate yet another essential element of our Christian walk of faith: passionate evangelization, also known as, apostolic/ missionary zeal. Stemming from Christ's own Great commission, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you,"[67] it is key to the life of every follower of Jesus to make every possible effort to teach, witness, share and announce the Gospel of the Lord, in season and out of season. This apostolic endeavour is not to be confined to the expertise of a chosen few, though throughout the centuries of the life of the Church there have emerged numerous men and women who dedicated the entirety of their life to doing so, and often in harsh, perilous, and distant lands.

In an address to the members of the Pontifical Mission Societies on 22 May 2025, Pope Leo XIV emphasized the promotion of authentic and compelling apostolic zeal, understood as an essential aspect of Church renewal. These insights are likewise valid for all those who bear the name of Christian:

"You are called to cultivate and further promote within your members the vision of the Church as the communion of believers, enlivened by the Holy Spirit, who enables us to enter into the perfect communion and harmony of the blessed Trinity. Indeed, it is in the Trinity that all things find their unity. This dimension of our Christian life and mission is close to my heart, and is reflected in the words of Saint Augustine that I chose for my episcopal service and now for my papal ministry: *In Illo uno unum*. Christ is our Saviour and in him we are one, a family of God, beyond the rich variety of our languages, cultures and experiences. The appreciation of our communion as members of the Body of Christ naturally opens us to the universal dimension of the Church's mission of evangelization, and inspires us to transcend the confines of our individual parishes, dioceses and nations, in order to share with every nation and people the surpassing richness of the knowledge of Jesus Christ (cf. Phil 3:8)."

The Upper Room also marked the community of disciples of Jesus in a way that highlighted their apostolic and missionary character. As protagonist of the great evangelizing work of the Church, the Holy Spirit moulded the Church, fashioned her into a reality that is centred on Christ. With her gaze intent on him, she is spurred forth in the world to share the greatest message from a loving and caring Saviour. It is part of the Church's very own DNA to be thrust forward, to be reaching out, to be mission-minded, to be concerned about all people; embracing the new way of the Gospel, she is to witness to all that God has accomplished in Christ for our benefit. If the Church — if we — does

not stay focused on her mission, she will not fulfill her Spouse's will: "But when Christian life loses sight of the horizon of evangelization, the horizon of proclamation, it grows sick: it closes in on itself, it becomes self-referential, it becomes atrophied. Without apostolic zeal, faith withers. Mission, on the other hand, is the oxygen of Christian life: it invigorates and purifies it. Let us embark, then, on a process of rediscovering the evangelizing passion, starting with the Scriptures and the Church's teaching, to draw apostolic zeal from its sources."[68]

The Upper Room experience of the early Church was the nucleus of a divinely commanded, Christocentric, Spirit-led family effort to bring the good news to all people. The context was that of a pagan empire, and the resources were few — but the apostolic zeal and excitement were bountiful. Today too we are living in a post-Christendom, post-modern age. We understand deeply that the Church's role in evangelizing people is not reserved to a select few, "the professionals." Every baptized faithful member of Christ's Body has that same mission. Missionary and apostolic zeal is a *sine qua non* for truly living the adventure of the Christian faith. How much healing and love, truth and compassion, mercy and renewal does our fragile and sickly world need! In the heart of every faithful there needs to be born a sense of the urgency of bringing Christ's Gospel to all, to each man and woman. Their poverty and lack of resources did not dissuade or discourage the early Christians from sharing their greatest treasure: Jesus. They were animated by abundant hope, joy, and enthusiasm in building the Kingdom: "For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I have made you a light to the Gentiles, that you may be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth.'"[69]

## ANECDOTAL ILLUSTRATION

Between 24-26 May 2014, Pope Francis embarked upon a significant apostolic journey: a Pilgrimage to the Holy Land on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Meeting between Pope St. Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem. On the last day of the pilgrimage, the Supreme Pontiff celebrated Holy Mass in the Upper Room. Here below is an extract of his homily which is rich in faith and devotion and challenging in our calling for greater zeal and witnessing in the Church's mission. Perhaps we can consider especially this passage when we are before the Lord in silent adoration and meditation.

"Here, where Jesus shared the Last Supper with the apostles; where, after his resurrection, he appeared in their midst; where the Holy Spirit descended with power upon Mary and the disciples, here the Church was born, and she was born to go forth. From here she set out, with the broken bread in her hands, the wounds of Christ before her eyes, and the Spirit of love in her heart.

In the Upper Room, the risen Jesus, sent by the Father, bestowed upon the apostles his own Spirit and with his power he sent them forth to renew the face of the earth (cf. Ps 104:30).

To go forth, to set out, does not mean to forget. The Church, in her going forth, preserves the memory of what took place here; the Spirit, the Paraclete, reminds her of every word and every action, and reveals their true meaning.

The Upper Room speaks to us of service, of Jesus giving the disciples an example by washing their feet. Washing one another's feet signifies welcoming, accepting, loving and serving one another. It means serving the poor, the sick and the outcast, those whom I find difficult, those who annoy me.

The Upper Room reminds us, through the Eucharist, of sacrifice. In every Eucharistic celebration Jesus offers himself for us to the Father, so that we too can be united with him, offering to God our lives, our work, our joys and our sorrows... offering everything as a spiritual sacrifice.

The Upper Room also reminds us of friendship. "No longer do I call you servants — Jesus said to the Twelve — but I have called you friends" (Jn 15:15). The Lord makes us his friends, he reveals God's will to us and he gives us his very self. This is the most beautiful part of being a Christian and, especially, of being a priest: becoming a friend of the Lord Jesus, and discovering in our hearts that he is our friend.

The Upper Room reminds us of the Teacher's farewell and his promise to return to his friends: "When I go... I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (Jn 14:3). Jesus does not leave us, nor does he ever abandon us; he precedes us to the house of the Father, where he desires to bring us as well.

The Upper Room, however, also reminds us of pettiness, of curiosity — "Who is the traitor?" — and of betrayal. We ourselves, and not just others, can reawaken those attitudes whenever we look at our brother or sister with contempt, whenever we judge them, whenever by our sins we betray Jesus.

The Upper Room reminds us of sharing, fraternity, harmony and peace among ourselves. How much love and goodness has flowed from the Upper Room! How much charity has gone forth from here, like a river from its source, beginning as a stream and then expanding and becoming a great torrent. All the saints drew from this source; and hence the great river of the Church's holiness continues to flow: from the Heart of Christ, from the Eucharist and from the Holy Spirit.

Lastly, the Upper Room reminds us of the birth of the new family, the Church, our holy Mother the hierarchical Church established by the risen Jesus; a family that has a Mother, the Virgin Mary. Christian families belong to this great family, and in it they find the light and strength to press on and be renewed, amid the challenges and difficulties of life. All God's children, of every people and language, are invited and called to be part of this great family, as brothers and sisters and sons and daughters of the one Father in heaven.

These horizons are opened up by the Upper Room, the horizons of the Risen Lord and his Church."

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

To what extent do I consider myself a disciple intent on making other disciples? How comfortable am I in inviting people into our ongoing journey of faith? Am I disposed to reach out to family and friends, neighbours and foes to speak to them simply about loving Jesus and following him in every sphere of life within the context of a community of other disciples? Do I feel compelled to help others grow in grace, obedience, and Gospel purpose? What do I think of the Pope's affirmation that "mission is the oxygen of Christian life?" Am I supportive of those men and women who have forsaken all things and embraced the call to go to far away lands to bring to others the treasure of the Gospel? When we grow in our knowledge of Jesus, the desire to make him known emerges. Do I have genuine zeal for souls, to win as many people as possible for the Lord? Am I concerned that many go through life without ever knowing who Jesus is and what he accomplished out of love for us? To have the heart of a missionary means putting Jesus first in every part of our lives: how am I doing with this foundational attitude? Am I willing to put the needs of others before my own and share Jesus' love and hope with them, even to the point of my own self-sacrifice? Can I name a time when I was able to surrender my will and my plans, my agenda and my dreams to the Lord when he asks me to do so?

# 9

## The Gift of the Mother — "With MARY the Mother of Jesus"[70]

Scripture relates that there in the Upper Room, praying with the disciples, was Mary the Mother of Jesus.[71] How fitting it was that she who conceived and bore Christ with love beyond all telling was present there when Christ's Mystical Body, his new ecclesial family, was formed and welcomed the gift of her Son's Spirit. As she cooperated and consented in conceiving Christ at the Annunciation, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, so too the same Holy Spirit came down upon her and the disciples in the Upper Room at Pentecost and the Church was publicly manifested. She was and is the associate of Christ, the new Eve who supported and aided the new Adam in the world's redemption. She was the humble and loving servant of Yahweh, the Daughter of Zion who gave everything she was and had for God's purpose: "the Blessed Virgin was on this earth the virgin Mother of the Redeemer, and above all others and in a singular way the generous associate and humble handmaid of the Lord."[72] How blessed were those moments when the new ecclesial sisters and brothers of Christ — his disciples — were being consoled, encouraged, inspired and mothered as the bourgeoning early Church community. How wonderful it must have been to hear the stories of Christ from the lips and the heart of his own Mother. How incredible it must have felt to celebrate Christ's death and resurrection in the breaking of the bread, participating in the sacred mysteries, in the very presence of she who had conceived and given birth to the Bread of Life himself Incarnate. What an experience it must have been for the disciples to be able to turn to her and ask her about him, for they realized that no one on earth knew and loved Jesus more than his own Mother. What spiritual insights and great hope were the apostles and other disciples able to receive as they honoured *The Mother* living in the midst of the community with them, in the Cenacle. While in the Upper Room, she "aided the beginnings of the Church by her prayers."[73] She was that palpable, living maternal presence, and memory of Jesus for the believers who sought her out and invited her into their homes and lives.

However, we must not regret that we were not there in the physical Upper Room when these singular events took place since, in the communion of saints and by divine providence and wisdom, she has become *our mother*, the universal mother, the mother of all believers, mother of all "the faithful, in whose birth

and education she cooperates with a maternal love."[74] She stands by us, walks with us, prays with us and for us; she lifts us up when we are down, consoles us when we are troubled, smiles upon us when we need encouragement and always points us to her Son: "Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this salvific duty, but by her constant intercession continued to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties, until they are led into the happiness of their true home. Therefore, the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the Church under the titles of Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix."[75] She played a most unique role in Christ's mission of salvation for God so willed to send us his Only Begotten Son through Mary and to solicit her unique cooperation as the plan of redemption was unfolding: "For all the salvific influence of the Blessed Virgin on men originates, not from some inner necessity, but from the divine pleasure."[76]

Mary of Nazareth is our sister insofar as she shares our common human nature and is with us daughter of Adam; she is our model since no one has followed Christ as his perfect disciple like Our Lady did; she is the pre-eminent and singular member of the Church community in the communion of saints. She is the excellent exemplar/type of the Church, as the faithful looks to her so as to understand how they are called to be united in faith and charity; she is our mother in the order of grace, given to us to "shine forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, as a sign of sure hope and solace to the people of God during its sojourn on earth."[77]

Sacred Scripture teaches us that Mary was a Woman of the Word who was familiar with God's revealed Word which she meditated and lived;[78] she was docile to the Holy Spirit as the Lord's Handmaid;[79] she is the Woman of the "Yes," always accepting and fulfilling God's plan for her life;[80] she was a woman of great spiritual depth pondering God's words and actions;[81] she always turned to Jesus when a solution to a difficulty was to be found;[82] she adored and magnified the Lord with her words, her heart and her actions;[83] she was a loving, trusting, faithful disciple of her divine Son Jesus;[84] she consented to the sacrifice of her Son on Calvary and did not leave his side in the hour of need, the hour of mercy;[85] and today, she accompanies the Church community as that loving and wise maternal presence.[86] We can certainly learn a great deal from Our Lady in terms of our walk of faith and that of our family and community.

In conclusion, we understand that the Blessed Mother bears today (and till the end of time) the unique mission and ministry of bringing souls to Christ. By getting closer to the Mother, we will have greater access to the Son; by befriending the Mother we shall grow in our relationship with the Son. If we decide to obey Christ and entrust/consecrate ourselves to her, we shall live abundantly, authentically and passionately in him, through him and with him. In the inspiring and anointed words of Pope St. Paul VI: "Since Mary is rightly to be regarded as the way by which we are led to Christ, the person who encounters Mary cannot help but encounter Christ likewise. For what other reason do we continually turn to Mary except to seek the Christ in her arms, to seek our Savior in her, through her, and with her? To Him men are to turn amid the anxieties and perils of this world, urged on by duty and driven by the compelling needs of their heart, to find a haven of salvation, a transcendent fountain of life."[87]

## ANECDOTAL ILLUSTRATION

Acclaimed by many as the most significant Catholic author of the twentieth century, Georges Bernanos (1888-1948), was a fervent Catholic who in 1936 published *The Diary of a Country Priest*, a classic novel that recounts, in a poignant fashion, the life and ministry of a young French country priest. The curate is assigned to Ambricourt, an isolated, provincial parish in a French village and, though sickly and filled with self-doubt, grows in self-awareness and learns to appreciate and serve his flock. Moreover, he grows to love them even though he does not immediately experience any appreciation on their part. He is melancholic at not being able to convince his parishioners of the need for a more serious life of faith and devotion which speaks to his own humility and zeal. Marked by inexperience and insecurity on a personal level, he is disillusioned at his apparent unsuccessful ministry to win over the souls of his rural parish. *Tout est grace* — all is grace — are his final words as he dies from stomach cancer.

The following quote is part of a larger conversation between the older and experienced curé of Torcy and the protagonist of the novel, the young curé of Ambricourt. The seasoned pastor understands his confrere's struggles and offers some sound advice — and the Blessed Mother is part of the consoling words he imparts to the young country priest: "Do you pray to Our Lady?" he asks. "Why naturally!" is the surprised response. And then the older priest delivers a most moving and devout monologue, one of the finest tributes to the Mother of God.

"We all say that — but you pray to her as you should, as befits her? She is Our Mother — the mother of all flesh, a new Eve. But she is also our daughter. The ancient world of sorrow, the world before the access of grace, cradled her to its heavy heart for many centuries, dimly awaiting a virgo genetrix. For centuries and centuries those ancient hands, so full of sin, cherished the wondrous girl-child whose name even was unknown. A little girl, the queen of Angels! And she's still a little girl, remember! The Middle Ages understood that well enough.... But remember this, lad, Our Lady knew neither triumph nor miracle. Her Son preserved her from the least tip-touch of the savage wing of human glory. No one has ever lived, suffered, died in such simplicity, in such deep ignorance of her own dignity, a dignity crowning her above angels. For she was born without sin — in what amazing isolation! A pool so clear, so pure, that even her own image — created only for the sacred joy of the Father — was not to be reflected. The Virgin was Innocence. Think what we must seem to her, we humans. Of course, she hates sin, but after all she has never known it, that experience which the holiest saints have never lacked, St. Francis himself, seraphic though he may be. The eyes of Our Lady are the only real child-eyes that have ever been raised to our shame and sorrow. Yes, lad, to pray to her as you should, you must feel those eyes of hers upon you: they are not indulgent — for there is no indulgence without something of bitter experience — they are eyes of gentle pity, wondering sadness, and with something more in them, never yet known or expressed, something which makes her younger than sin, younger than the race from which she sprang, and though a mother by grace, Mother of all grace, our little youngest sister."

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

Twice in his Gospel account (2:19 and 2:51) St. Luke reports that Mary pondered and treasured, in other words, she took to heart and meditated on the words she heard and the actions that were taking place in her and around. She possessed a pondering heart, a sensitive heart, one capable of learning and of being taught, of feeling and being compassionate; of reflecting and of treasuring, of forging and of deciding. Her heart is consequently the model of the heart of every disciple of Christ. Let us, therefore, take inspiration from the insightful Marian teachings by the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, and Pope St. John Paul II, allowing them to guide our questions as we ponder them with Mary's heart.

**How am I honouring Jesus' Mother?**
"While the Mother is honoured, the Son, through whom all things have their being and in whom it has pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell, is rightly known, loved and glorified and that all His commands are observed."[88]

**What virtues of Mary can I list and try to imitate in my life?**
"The followers of Christ still strive to increase in holiness by conquering sin. And so they turn their eyes to Mary who shines forth to the whole community of the elect as the model of virtues."[89]

**As we get involved in the life of the parish and other communities of faith seeking to spread and strengthen the Kingdom of Christ, are we truly animated by Mary's maternal love?**
"The Virgin in her own life lived an example of that maternal love, by which it behooves that all should be animated who cooperate in the apostolic mission of the Church for the regeneration of men."[90]

**Which teachings of our Catholic faith do we see exceptionally and beautifully embodied by the Virgin Mother?**
"For Mary, who since her entry into salvation history unites in herself and re-echoes the greatest teachings of the faith as she is proclaimed and venerated, calls the faithful to her Son and His sacrifice and to the love of the Father."[91]

**Is my and our devotion to Mother Mary true and authentic? Am I willing to love her as Christ did and emulate her virtuous lifestyle?**
"Let the faithful remember moreover that true devotion consists neither in sterile or transitory affection, nor in a certain vain credulity, but proceeds from true faith, by which we are led to know the excellence of the Mother of God, and we are moved to a filial love toward our mother and to the imitation of her virtues."[92]

**Have you taken her home yet?**
"The Marian dimension of the life of a disciple of Christ is expressed in a special way precisely through this filial entrusting to the Mother of Christ, which began with the testament of the Redeemer on Golgotha. Entrusting himself to Mary in a filial manner, the Christian, like the Apostle John, "welcomes" the Mother of Christ "into his own home" and brings her into everything that makes up his inner life, that is to say into his human and Christian "I": he "took her to his own home." Thus, the Christian seeks to be taken into that "maternal charity" with which the Redeemer's Mother "cares for the brethren of her Son," "in whose birth and development she cooperates" in the measure of the gift proper to each one through the power of Christ's Spirit. Thus, also is exercised that motherhood in the Spirit which became Mary's role at the foot

## Conclusion

This **nine-step journey** that began in the Upper Room has led us to perhaps re-discover the essential elements that make up the authentic Christian life. I have endeavoured to outline, explain and explicate those truths of the faith that have come to us through Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, accompanied, translated, interpreted and taught by the Church's Magisterium. To live for Christ and in Christ requires that we surrender our hearts to him — and we are able to do so better by understanding more deeply who he is and the discipleship to which we are called. I have attempted to unearth those fundamentals of our life as disciples of the Teacher and Lord[94] and which mark our personal and ecclesial existence in answer to the universal call to holiness. The saintly Fr. Olier put it succinctly: "To live supremely for God in Christ Jesus our Lord, so much so that the inner life of His only Son should penetrate to the inmost depths of our heart and to such an extent that everyone should be able to say 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.'"[95]

This reflection on the Upper Room provides the opportunity to take a long, honest look at our walk with the Lord and to seriously consider the quality of our relationship with him. Hopefully, the illustrated characteristics of the Christian life, and life in community, have reminded us of the victory of Christ over sin and death and the Holy Spirit's divine animation and vivification of our life. We have received the new life of the Resurrected Lord and live daily in the hope of eternal life once we will have made our contribution to spreading his Kingdom while on earth. The *Catechism* summarizes it brilliantly: "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. He calls together all men, scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church. To accomplish this, when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son as Redeemer and Savior. In his Son and through him, he invites men to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life."[96]

In the Upper Room, we gather to encounter Christ and it becomes the due north on our internal, spiritual compass. Though a physical place in the Land of Our Lord, the Cenacle has taken on a spiritual and ecclesial metaphor that elucidates a significant spiritual reality for us. We are called to enter our Upper Room daily and experience the freshness and novelty of living for the Lord and witnessing to his truth and love, his dream for us, his compassion for all. We venerate the presence of the Lord in the Upper Room and in each of its above-numerated nine dimensions. I am convinced that it is time to rediscover the importance of the Upper Room in our spiritual walk, to appreciate its meaning for us today. I pray that you may invest some time and effort in reading and pondering upon these reflections, alone or with others, at home or in community. Be inventive and creative in using this resource as you deem it most profitable for your walk of faith and your growth in Christlikeness.

Let us conclude with the inspiring, consoling and compelling words of Pope Leo XIV, his very first address shortly after his election to the See of St. Peter: "God loves us, God loves you all, and evil will not prevail! All of us are in God's hands. So, let us move forward, without fear, together, hand in hand with God and with one another! We are followers of Christ. Christ goes before us. The world needs his light. Humanity needs him as the bridge that can lead us to God and his love. Help us, one and all, to build bridges through dialogue and encounter, joining together as one people, always at peace."[97]

† Frank Card. Leo

# Endnotes

1 For a more fulsome explanation of the Eucharist, see the CCC, 1322-1419

2 Luke 22: 7-38

3 CCC, 1374

4 “The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life”, Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, no. 11

5 For a more fulsome explanation of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, see the CCC, 1536-1600

6 Cf. the priesthood of the believers referred to as a “holy priesthood” 2 Peter:5 and “royal priesthood” 2 Peter:9.

7 “Holy Order and Matrimony, are directed towards the salvation of others; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so. They confer a particular mission in the Church and serve to build up the People of God” — CCC, 1534

8 CCC, 1546

9 John 13:4-5

10 John 13: 1

11 Matthew 20:28

12 CCC, 910.

13 For a more fulsome explanation of the Resurrection of Christ, see the CCC, 638-658

14 CCC, 638

15 CCC, 642

16 Mark 16:14; Luke 24:36-43; John 20: 19-23

17 John 14:19

18 Adapted from a talk by N.T. Wright

19 Acts 2: 1-47

20 See Leviticus 23:15-21; Deuteronomy 16:9-11

21 CCC, 766

22 Cf. CCC, 733

23 Cf. CCC, 736 and see Galatians 5:22-23 for a list of the fruit of the Spirit

24 CCC, 737

25 Father Jean-Jacques Olier, founder of the Society of St. Sulpice

26 For a more fulsome explanation of the Holy Spirit, see the CCC, 683-747

27 See www.epriest.com

28 CCC, 740

29 Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15

30 Cf. Galatians 5:25; Matthew 16:24-26

31 CCC, 747

32 For a more fulsome explanation of the Church as communion and community, see the CCC, 748-870

33 CCC, 752

34 Cf. CCC, 758-769; Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 1

35 CCC, 748: The Church has no other light than Christ’s; according to a favorite image of the Church Fathers, the Church is like the moon, all its light reflected from the sun

36 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 2-4

37 Cf. 1 Corinthians 12; *Lumen Gentium*, 4:7; *Gaudium et Spes*, 32

38 *Treatise* 1,6

39 Ephesians 2: 19-22

40 Acts 17:28

41 Cf. John 13:35

42 Acts 4:32

43 Cf. John 10:10

44 Matthew 16:18

45 Acts 2:42

46 Anecdote by Marvin Williams, https://odb.org/2023/03/26/the-telling-room

47 Acts 1: 12-14

48 CCC, 2558-2565

49 Ephesians 6:18

50 1 Thessalonians 5:17

51 Colossians 4:2

52 Romans 12:12

53 Romans 8: 26-28

54 Philippians 4:6-7

55 St. John Paul II, Apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 33

56 John 15:15

57 Luke 11: 1-4

58 CCCC, 544

59 CCC, 2700

60 Matthew 6:7

61 CCC, 2563

62 CCC, 2699

63 CCC, 2699

64 CCC, 2699

65 CCC, 2672

66 Henry G. Bosch, "Our Daily Bread, March-May, 1996, page for April 3," in Galaxie Software, *10,000 Sermon Illustrations* (Biblical Studies Press, 2002)

67 Matthew 28: 16-20

68 Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 11 January 2023

69 Acts 13:47

70 For a more fulsome explanation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, see the CCC, 484-511; 963-975; also, Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, Pope St. Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*; Pope St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater* and his 70 Wednesday General Audiences/Catecheses

71 Acts 1: 12-14

72 *Lumen Gentium*, 61

73 *Lumen Gentium*, 69

74 *Lumen Gentium*, 63

75 *Lumen Gentium*, 62

76 *Lumen Gentium*, 60

77 *Lumen Gentium*, 68

78 Luke 1:54-55

79 Luke 1:35

80 Luke 1:38

81 Luke 2; 19,51

82 Luke 2:3-5

83 Luke 1: 46-55

84 Matthew 7:21

85 John 19: 25

86 Acts 1:12-14

87 Pope Paul VI, Encyclical *Mense Maio* ("*The Month of May*"), 1965, no. 2

88 *Lumen Gentium*, 66

89 *Lumen Gentium*, 65

90 *Lumen Gentium*, 65

91 *Lumen Gentium*, 65

92 *Lumen Gentium*, 67

93 Pope St. John Paul II, encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, Mother of the Redeemer, #45

94 Cf. John 13:13

95 Father Jean-Jacques Olier, founder of the Society of St. Sulpice

96 CCC, 1

97 Pope Leo XIV's Greetings to Rome and to the world, 8 May 2025