

# **Homilies for Weekdays**



# **Homilies for Weekdays**

Solemnities, Feasts, and Memorials

Don Talafous, O.S.B.



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## **January 1, The Octave Day of Christmas; Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God**

Hermann Hesse wrote in a poem, “A magic dwells in each beginning.” Both church and society recognize this and celebrate the first day of the year. At one time the church commemorated the circumcision of the infant Jesus; at present we celebrate the last of the eight days of the feast of Christmas and honor Mary as the Mother of God. Civilly and in popular culture it is a holiday and a day to make new resolves. In celebrating the Mother of God we honor the woman whose “yes” to the angel made it possible for the son of God to take on human life, a human body. We honor her as a necessary partner in bringing us all the blessings of Emmanuel, God with us. We marvel at God’s daring inventiveness in entering our life as a baby. The entrance of the son of God into human life is something so utterly contrary to human reason, to what human thought can predict or expect, that it tells us that the new is possible. In our world, in our lives, this year! It assures each one of us that things can be different in our lives, that God’s grace can produce something new, something better, a new beginning. Most practically, each of us is reminded that *this year* can be different, that with God’s grace and our openness to it we can make changes, stumbling as they may be, and allow grace to fashion us in the likeness of Jesus Christ. It can mean any of a number of new beginnings, depending on our own situation: a resolve to pray more consistently and regularly, a resolve to show more sensitivity to all those whose lives we touch, a determination to make God and others, not ourselves, the center of our universe, an effort to let joyful thanksgiving color all we say and do this new year.

## **January 2, Saints Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen, Bishops and Doctors of the Church**

Though distant from us in time and place—the fourth century and eastern Turkey—St. Basil after a bit of scrutiny comes across as a man of relevant concerns and wisdom. Basil is commemorated today with his friend St. Gregory Nazianzen. They seem remote also if we speak of them as Eastern Church Fathers, all three of these words capitalized.

“Fathers” refers to great thinkers about the Christian faith who lived in the centuries immediately after the apostles. When we call them Eastern, we really mean what we call the Middle East today, countries such as Palestine, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, etc. Nevertheless, no matter how far from us in time and space, Basil and Gregory made a difference for our life in Christ through their influence on the spirituality of people who lived the earliest forms of religious or monastic life. Basil wrote a guide for those who lived in monasteries and this rule stressed that it was more important to learn to live with other Christians in love than to compete with them in self-denial of food, sleep, etc. Practically, that would mean living with others in patience and forgiveness, serving and supporting each other in the community where we live, showing concern for the sick, the suffering, the neglected, and the poor. In his short life of fifty years, Basil put flesh and bones on these ideas by initiating what we would call today soup kitchens and hospitals. In other words, the following of Christ requires of Christians not only that we live in mutual harmony, forgiveness, sympathy, and understanding, but that we see the need to extend this in practical ways (like food, drink, shelter, comfort, and medical assistance) beyond our immediate family or religious house to the world around us. Today we consider this to be a concern for social justice, a necessary consequence of the following of Christ.

### **January 4, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Religious**

Any brief account of the life of the first native-born American citizen to be canonized, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, and her accomplishments is bound to leave some questions unanswered. She was born into a wealthy and educated Protestant family, married a man of similar background, and became the mother of five children. Her husband died fairly young; she became a Catholic and continued pursuing a strong interest in serving the poor, the sick, and forwarding the education of the underprivileged. (As a young, wealthy, Protestant, married woman she had been regarded as a sort of Protestant sister.) This led to the foundation of the Daughters of Charity of St. Joseph, a religious congregation dedicated to education. As a result of this they have become known as the founders of the American parochial school system. She was canonized in 1975. That, basically, is a success story in religious terms. As we should suspect, behind successes there are always struggles. For instance, after her husband’s death, the family’s situation was straitened; her relatives and friends were repelled by her decision to become a Catholic and gave her no support. One wonders

how she survived financially. Further, from the little that is said about them, one suspects that her children may have been in the care of unsympathetic relatives. Did she see much of them? Were they and their relatives sympathetic to her interest in educating the poor? One can only guess that her interest in educating the poor and her rightful concern about her children must have caused some tension. Any realistic account of the lives of the saints we celebrate in the liturgy reminds us that human life is always, in some way or other, a sharing in the sufferings of Christ, something we commemorate every time we are at this table, in this church.

### **January 5, Saint John Neumann, Bishop**

John Neumann was born in Bohemia, came to the United States, and was ordained there. Because he spoke eight languages, he was much in demand for work among immigrants. He worked especially among the German immigrants and for the education of African-American children. Sensing a need for more support for his work, he became a Redemptorist. Among them, his generous dedication to these needy people was recognized and in 1852 he became bishop of Philadelphia. He died at the young age of forty-eight, overtaxed, as some of his biographers say, by giving his energy to so many good causes. He was canonized in 1977. Unlike Elizabeth Ann Seton, Neumann was not a native-born American citizen. The various possible readings provided for this feast in the Proper of the Saints suggest such well-known pictures as that of shepherd, fisher of men, servant, any of them apt descriptions of John Neumann. When we hear of him being much in demand in the young country because of his knowledge of languages, we can easily see how very little of his time would have been his own. He was busy *shepherding, bringing in the catch* for Christ, and *servicing* the many needs of lost and confused newcomers. While giving so generously of oneself to answer the needs of others certainly argues for close identification with the self-giving of Christ, it raises a question or two. Would men and women like John Neumann be able to serve their fellow human beings for a longer time if they had played a little tennis or golf, spent some moments with friends or music or some diversion? Do we too easily commend our fellow human beings who burn themselves out in the service of others? Should we perhaps consider what in the long run a more balanced life would do? Perhaps these questions can only be adequately answered in particular circumstances, but they seem to deserve some consideration.

## **January 17, Saint Anthony, Abbot**

In the Catholic world of the last few centuries, St. Anthony usually refers to St. Anthony of Padua, famous for helping people to find things. But 1,500 years ago in the Christian world the name would have immediately been taken as referring to St. Anthony of the Desert, who had been made famous in a book written about him by St. Athanasius. Anthony's subsequent fame spurred many to follow him in his rejection of the world's values and to the desert to live a religious life, to seek God. As a result he is often referred to as the first monk in the Christian world. It is probably very difficult for our contemporaries to appreciate such a drastic search for solitude and God. Too, it is important to remember that Anthony's retreat from the world was not truly negative, as evidenced by his biography, which refers several times to the fact that he was always cheerful, never looked gloomy, that his mind was joyous. Nearly all of us, bombarded as we are by electronic and other media with the values of our present world, would benefit from questioning what we hear and see on our televisions or read in our media. As Anthony would have, we need to ask ourselves if having a better figure and more money, a new and bigger car and cheaper gas for the subsequent travel would add to our happiness significantly. We need to ask ourselves if a longer life and better investments are really the path to fulfillment, if more activity and less solitude are really the way to a balanced and integrated life. Saint Anthony's life tells us too that we need to question not only our nation's policies but also all the values of our culture. We may not need to retire to a hermitage in the desert but we probably would benefit from turning off the television, the radio, the iPod, and giving ourselves a little time for solitude daily. That could help us know ourselves, our real purpose, and God.

## **January 21, Saint Agnes, Virgin and Martyr**

The suggested readings for today in the Proper of the Saints are appropriate for the life and spirit of this Roman martyr who was thirteen years old at the time of her death. In First Corinthians St. Paul tells us that God has chosen "the weak of the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1:27). Compared to the authorities and officers of the Roman Empire a teenage girl certainly qualifies as "weak." In defying their efforts to force her to worship a god other than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Agnes certainly "reduce[s] to nothing those who are something" (1 Cor 1:28). After rejecting suitors in favor of the one,

Jesus Christ, who was her pearl of great price and her treasure, Agnes also overcame by her faith the efforts of her persecutors to make her give him up. Those efforts included putting her in a brothel. There her single-minded devotion to Christ deterred anyone from laying a hand on her. As Robert Ellsberg says in *All Saints* (Crossroad, 1997), she demonstrated “a young woman’s power in Christ to define her own identity versus a patriarchal culture’s claim to identify her in terms of her sexuality” (39). Here again, as a few days ago in commemorating St. Anthony of Egypt, we see another situation in which Christians can define their values in a way not dictated by the surrounding culture’s superficial standards. Despite all the advances that have been made for their dignity and identity, women in our culture are still overwhelmingly defined in terms of sexuality. They and their bodies continue to be used to sell everything from cars to ketchup. In defying our culture’s efforts to thus identify them, women can achieve and celebrate their genuine freedom as God’s creation (see Ellsberg, 40).

### **January 24, Saint Francis de Sales, Bishop and Doctor of the Church**

Although St. Francis lived in a period of hostility between Catholics and Protestants, he himself managed to teach a spirituality of gentleness, common sense, and love. Martin Luther had died twenty years before his birth and John Calvin three years. As a priest and later as a bishop in the same area where John Calvin’s greatest influence was felt—Geneva, Switzerland—St. Francis knew this hostility well, felt it in his own life, and was influential in attracting many Catholics back to the Catholic faith. The essence of his teaching came out in a very popular book he wrote called *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Its popularity may have motivated some of his detractors who accused him of making it too easy to become a saint. What St. Francis taught and exemplified was moderation rather than extravagant penitence, that any life of honest work was capable of being lived as a Christian life, and that it was more important to begin again with trust in Christ after a fall than to uselessly bewail one’s sins. If someone considers this “too easy” it may mean that he or she has an overly dramatic idea of what life in Christ is. Those who try to live this life day after day assure us that it takes greater trust and fidelity than an occasional spurt of generosity. One of the dangers in singling out the great saints for our imitation is that we can get the impression that miracles and extraordinary phenomena are essential to Christian life. These get the

headlines. Sharing the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Lord is for most of us not a one-time event, but a matter of daily and loving faithfulness to relationships, to prayer, to our work, and of patience with the difficulties that accompany these. If we partake in this altar often, even daily, we realize that our participation with Christ is similarly daily and often unsung, unnoticed, but fruitful in the long run.

### **January 25, The Conversion of Saint Paul, Apostle**

For many hearers what must stand out in the first reading suggested in the Proper of Saints is the conversation that follows when the great light apparently flattens Paul on the ground. A voice says to Paul, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” and elicits from Paul a question in return, “Who are you, sir?” (Acts 22:7–8). And the answer, “I am Jesus the Nazorean whom you are persecuting” (Acts 22:8). One approach here might be to emphasize that such sudden and dramatic conversions are the exception, not the rule. Most of us, in order to approximate the example of our Lord in our own lives must inch forward day by day in new beginnings. Even for St. Paul the struggles that follow in his life indicate that this great moment was not the end of the effort needed to follow Christ. But contending for our attention is the other point here: that Christ identifies himself with his members, something central to the Christian faith and of seemingly infinite applicability. Do any of us ever fully recognize the implications of this identification of Christ with his members? How would it affect our daily behavior if it were foremost in our minds and hearts continually? In Matthew 25 Jesus gives us a graphic and concise picture of what it means. As often as we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the sick, and visit prisoners, we are doing it to this same Christ, Jesus himself tells us there. If we were all to act on this continually, would that be a mass conversion that would truly transform our world? This is the closing day of the eight days of prayer for Christian unity. What would be the impact if Christians all over the world, no matter what their differences, would unite in doing these works of love for Christ in all his suffering members?

### **January 26, Saints Timothy and Titus, Bishops**

The Pastoral Epistles, found in the New Testament, consist of two letters to Timothy and one to Titus. They were written some years after the death of St. Paul but nevertheless were ascribed to him, probably to

give them more authority. The word “pastoral,” whether used to speak of a symphony by Beethoven or of letters in the New Testament or to characterize a good minister of the Gospel, refers to shepherding or a life lived out in the open, most likely caring for sheep or goats. Whichever letter is chosen from the Proper of the Saints for the first reading, the author is writing to Timothy or Titus as men charged with the care of the Christian flock in some particular area in order to encourage them to be faithful and, we might say, pastoral. Until the latter part of the twentieth century the word “pastoral” was pretty well limited in its use to popes, bishops, and priests. But since then it has become clearer that the word can be applied to the activity of many in the church: those who administer parishes (whether priests or lay), those who head religious education in parishes, those who help direct music and liturgy, those who assist in taking Communion and consolation to the sick and dying, those who teach, etc. It can be extended very far insofar as all of us, in some sense, as members of Christ’s body, are entrusted by our baptism to share in the ministry of Christ to our fellow Christians. Though the word can refer to administration, it is probably more helpful to think of it as describing the manner in which priests or anyone care for their fellow Christians. The manner has to be like that of Christ himself: gentle, forgiving, prayerful, generous, patient, sacrificial of time and energy, hopeful.

### **January 28, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Priest and Doctor of the Church**

Like most of the saints (no matter how many extraordinary events their biographers recount), in fact, like every human being, the life of St. Thomas Aquinas was not free of struggle and contention. To expect it to be otherwise seems unrealistic. Thomas had to contend against his parents in order to join the Dominicans; later, as a teacher and writer in Paris, he ran into serious ecclesiastical opposition to his writings. The first reading suggested in the Proper of the Saints appropriately speaks of wisdom, certainly applicable to the voluminous writings of St. Thomas Aquinas that were composed over the course of less than fifty years of life. Even though his theological writings have had a tremendous influence on the Catholic Church, an event that occurred a couple of years before his death possibly has even more significance for most of us. Though he had not finished his great work, he said that an experience he had while at Mass prompted him to cease writing. As Paul Burns notes in *Butler’s Saint for the Day* (Liturgical Press, 2007),

Aquinas said: “All I have written seems to me like straw compared with what I have seen and what has been revealed to me” (45). The gospel suggested for the day, Matthew 23:8–12, seems to point in the same direction. There Christ tells his followers not to be called Rabbi or Master because “You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. . . . you have but one master, the Christ” (Matt 23:8, 10). While it is necessary for us human beings to attempt to speak what we believe and understand of our faith, and to have masters in technical fields, it is equally important to remember how inadequate is all we say of the mystery that is God. We may teach, speak, and write of God, but ultimately the true nature of God escapes us. Saint Thomas Aquinas himself, while strong in his insistence on the rational basis of faith, said, “The ultimate human knowledge of God is to know that we do not know God” (Burns, 45). The religions of Asia put it this way: Those who know don’t say, those who say don’t know.

### **January 31, Saint John Bosco, Priest**

“[W]hoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me” (Matt 18:5). This last verse of the gospel suggested in the Proper of the Saints for today captures well the spirit and work of St. John Bosco. To accurately describe John Bosco’s work, it might be good to even amend the text to read, “Whoever searches out such young people searches for me.” The work, the mission for which and in which John Bosco became famous and so effective arose from his observation of the many young, lost and uncared for, who came to the big cities of Italy looking for jobs during the period of industrialization. His work was marked by great trust in God, described beautifully in the opening reading: “Have no anxiety at all, . . . make your requests known to God” (Phil 4:5, 6). The other great characteristic of his work was its practicality, its common sense, how down-to-earth it was. He not only housed his charges safely in a place of prayer, work, and recreation, he also provided training for them and useful occupations as janitors, shoemakers, binders, printers, ironworkers, etc. From providing such a holistic approach for six boys, he eventually was doing the same for eight hundred. To solidify the work he founded the Salesian Congregation. Today they operate similar programs in over one hundred countries. Unlike theorists contemporary with him and many revolutionaries since his time, he did not attempt to challenge the social system but did what he could for a limited clientele, much as Mother Teresa did in her life work. It may be a temptation for many

of us to wait for social changes that will alter the injustices we see in our world. But surely our participation at this Eucharist and our life in Christ require of us as a consequence that we do what we can in our own milieu, our own time, and with what talents and means we have to alleviate suffering and injustice around us.

## **February 2, The Presentation of the Lord**

Whatever the Jewish background for it, Luke is intent on celebrating the dedication of the child Jesus to God and to his mission in a ceremonial way in the temple. Too, he highlights this beginning of the consecrated life of Christ by the oohs and ahhs of Simeon and Anna over this special baby. Celebrating this event will have more of an effect in our own lives if we see in it something basic to every human life, not only that of the son of God. The offering of the child Jesus to God highlights the fact that all human life, all life, comes from the hand of God, belongs to God, and that all our joy and fulfillment come in voluntarily and generously using that life and our time in the service of God and our world. All life, all time belong to God. Our joy consists in our free and daily recognition of this. In our baptism we or our godparents were given a candle lit from the paschal candle, that symbol of the presence of Christ in us, our sharing in his life, strength, and dedication to God. In a breviary reading for today, St. Sophronius links this to today's blessing of candles when he says: "Let no one fail to carry a light" to meet the Lord, to join him in his presentation. The presentation of the child Jesus in the temple coupled with the blessing of the candles reminds us of that burning candle given us in our baptism. Is it still burning? Do we work through prayer and practical love for those around us to show that Christ lives in us, that the light of Christ is in us? Our participation at this altar and in this service carries with it the implication that how we use our lives will serve God through and with the Lord whose body and blood nourish that life.

## **February 5, Saint Agatha, Virgin and Martyr**

After the authorities tell you that we know nothing about the actual life of St. Agatha, it is pretty daunting and presumptuous to try to say anything. But we do know that she was honored very early in Christian times and churches were built in her honor. But we are very short on details about why she was honored except that she

was martyred. Even there the details about her martyrdom that one occasionally hears seem to be more the product of imagination than of history. The gospel suggested in the Proper of the Saints for today, Luke 9:23–26, is in itself, apart from St. Agatha, always relevant. There we are enjoined to take up our cross daily. Almost any of us Christians with the use of reason recognize that the cross is, along with the resurrection, part of the Christian life. It is what is presented each day on this altar before our eyes under the appearances of bread and wine. And the implication is that as members of Christ we will be living after the pattern of his life. Most of us realize that we are better at the theory of this than at the practice. For us fairly comfortable Christians, any suggestion of martyrdom, if we're honest with ourselves, is practically unbelievable. How could you or I think of martyrdom as a way to follow Christ and his cross when even a bad cold can get us seriously down, when working with a difficult person can poison our life, when being passed over for a promotion leaves us in a stew, when the breakup of a relationship can render us inoperative? Someone has written that the only true crosses are those we have not chosen ourselves. Perhaps that's where we should start: trying to see and accept the difficulties, pains, worries, disappointments, illnesses, and irritations of our lives—trying to see that somehow these will fit into making us more like Christ.

### **February 6, Saint Paul Miki, Priest and Martyr, and His Companions, Martyrs**

The proper readings proposed for today bring together crucifixion (Paul Miki and his companions were crucified) and the injunction to preach the Gospel to all nations (they were evangelizing the Japanese). Christianity had come to Japan about fifty years before this through the work of St. Francis Xavier and others. How well Christians were tolerated in Japan depended very much on those who were in power. And that meant toleration was on and off until at least the middle of the seventeenth century. In 1597 Paul Miki, two other Jesuits, six Franciscans, and seventeen laypeople were crucified for their faith. Over the next fifty years thousands were put to death, and from 1637 to 1638 reports are that twenty-five thousand people were put to death. Again, as in the case of St. Agatha and other martyrs, the church in presenting these people for our consideration and honor seems to be proposing a very high ideal to us, one that really humbles us and conceivably might motivate us to a closer following of the Lord. Looked at

from one viewpoint, these constant reminders about men and women whose love for Christ led them to suffer torture and death for him tell us that all the vicissitudes of daily life, things like the cost of heating the house, our arthritis, our fears about what our teenager is doing this evening, the rejection of an application, our sadness at mother's cancer, even the neighboring dog's constant barking, all these are the ways through which we come to a closer likeness to Christ himself. They tell us that Christian life is not some difficult science but a time-tested and proven way of dealing with all that happens and is part of the fabric of daily life for any one of us.

### **February 10, Saint Scholastica, Virgin**

The significance of the readings proposed for today in the Proper of the Saints becomes clear only when we know a little about the life of Scholastica. And "little" is the right word. What we know about her comes in the course of a book on her brother St. Benedict by St. Gregory the Great. There we have the story of Benedict coming from his monastery, a short distance from where Scholastica and her religious sisters lived, to spend some time discussing their life and way to God. The discussion apparently was very satisfying to both of them, and Scholastica especially wanted it to continue throughout the night. Benedict was a bit more of a stickler, saying in effect, "I have to be back in the monastery by 10:00 p.m." At this rigidity Scholastica laid her head down on her arms and prayed fervently to God. A moment later a cloudburst occurred and Benedict was unable to return to his monastery. Benedict said in effect, "Now look what you've done, sister!" Gregory does not record that Scholastica chuckled to herself but that seems a very likely possibility. In any case, Benedict seems to have been able to get over his unhappiness with this and they resumed their nightlong conversation. The first reading tells us that many waters cannot quench love, which can probably be applied to this story. The gospel story of Mary and Martha suggests that Scholastica, in desiring that the two of them sit and talk the whole night through, is to be commended as Mary was because she "has chosen the better part" (Luke 10:42). Most of us at some time in our lives are in a situation where we need to bend the rules in order to satisfy the demands of love, the needs of others, some unexpected difficulty or pain in others. A similar priority is evident in the life and words of Christ when he so often pointed out to his opponents that human needs take priority over rules and regulations.

## **February 14, Saints Cyril and Methodius, Bishops**

In a way it's too bad that we had to lose the poetry of St. Valentine, no matter how lacking in historical truth, only to have him replaced by two saints whose recorded lives sadly enough revolve around disheartening examples of pettiness and ambition among church officials. Knowing more about the difficulties of Cyril and Methodius in bringing the Gospel to the Slavic peoples will not inspire most of us. Their difficulties came as a result of what we could call turf wars between officials of the church in Eastern Europe and those in the Roman West. The lives and activities of the two are a constant record of the conflict between Eastern and Western Christianity at the time, a very unpleasant sight and another scandal in the eyes of unbelievers. Much of it shows pettiness and competition, rather than cooperation in evangelizing non-Christian peoples. Other missionaries, from further west, resented their influence and success. Church authorities were also hostile to the brothers' use of the language of the people in their missionary work. The two brothers seem to have had to spend an inordinate amount of time in Rome pleading their cause and their mission. One can only imagine the frustration and temptation to impatience that must have accompanied them as they strove, accompanied by all this unnecessary harassment, to preach the Gospel to the Slavs. The pains of their lives tell us that anyone, any person, or any institution that means a lot in our lives can also be the bearer of the cross in our lives. The old popular song says all too well: "You always hurt the one you love." If that happens to us because of those we love and trust, we can be assured that very likely we can be the same cross and discomfort to others. Perhaps this is a good time to remember that we should "Do to others whatever you would have them do to you" (Matt 7:12).

## **February 22, The Chair of Saint Peter, Apostle**

About a week ago we heard of the trials inflicted on Sts. Cyril and Methodius by competing bureaucracies in the church. The Lord himself warned us about the scandals that would come among his followers and our times have seen a host of them. Today's feast seems to be a feast in celebration of a position in the church that historically has given us its share of scandals through a number of its occupants. Its subject is the Chair of Peter. "Chair" traditionally and currently also is used for the position of the person who heads an organization or group, or supervises a discussion or plans. Today's gospel suggested by

the Proper of Saints is but one example of the position Peter held among the early disciples as their spokesperson, the one who articulated their belief and spoke on their behalf. Eventually this position was associated with Rome and in time the person holding the position was called a bishop and then pope. The first reading presents beautifully the ideal for such a leader: the leader is not to lord it over others or to serve for personal gain. The man associated with it on this feast day, Peter, is a good example of the strengths and weaknesses that beset any leader. While few of us will ever hold a position as exalted as that of Peter, having such a man as an example is instructive and encouraging for all of us lesser human beings. One might say that the heights and depths of human nature find exemplification in Peter. Passionate devotion to Christ is coupled with betrayal and weakness; honor and rebuke come to Peter from Christ. While in today's gospel he is honored by Christ as the rock on which Jesus will build his church, the verses immediately following this selection show Peter being addressed as Satan by Christ because of his lack of understanding. The mix of weakness and strength in Peter is familiar and consoling for us; his love for Christ and his ability to start over again is always timely for any of us.

### **February 23, Saint Polycarp, Bishop and Martyr**

The ancient account of the martyrdom (written by his congregation) of today's St. Polycarp in about 155 is probably the oldest such story we have in Christian history. It pictures the burning to death of Polycarp in language and images relating the martyr to the sacrifice of Christ and the Eucharist. The chief of police making the arrest is named Herod; Polycarp comes into the city on a mule. As he lies bound in the midst of the flames his body appears to be "not burning flesh, but bread that is baking." The name Polycarp means "much fruit" reminding us of the gospel teaching that the only way the grain of wheat can be productive is through dying, self-giving. This passionate account suggests how irreplaceable is the example, the witness, of each of us for the faith of all. Our faithfulness to prayer and worship; the hope, joy, and faith we offer in the midst of cynicism, sadness, opportunism, and hopelessness; our good spirits and resistance to whining—there are as many ways to be daily witnesses as there are personalities among us. As parents know, their little children are observing them all the time, picking up cues, habits, learning how to behave. Similarly what we do and say, how we act, how we interact with others, all this is affecting others around us for good or ill. Like the martyrs, if on a less dramatic stage,