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Mellifont Abbey, Ireland

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—Bonnie Thurston

Author of *Maverick Mark: The Untamed First Gospel*

Balaam's Donkey

Random Ruminations

For Every Day of the Year

Michael Casey, OCSO



LITURGICAL PRESS

Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Imprimi potest.
Abbot Steele Hartmann OCSO
Tarrawarra Abbey
April 11, 2018.

Cover design by Tara Wiese. Cover photo provided by the author. Used with permission.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018952991

ISBN 978-0-8146-8463-4 ISBN 978-0-8146-8488-7 (e-book)

Dedicated to those who
during the last half century
have had the magnanimity
to think up nice things to say
about these homilies.

“Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey.”

Numbers 22:28

“God will not abandon any who wholeheartedly seek to know God’s will in truth. In all things God shows them the way according to his will. For those who turn their heart to his will God enlightens a little child to speak his will.”

Dorotheos of Gaza, *Instruction 5*, #68

Contents

Introduction	xiii	Baptist	33
Abask	1	Bargain	35
Abandonment	2	Beasts	36
Abbreviation	3	Beatitudes	37
Abide	5	Being Saved	38
Abomination	6	Being-Toward-Death	40
Absence	7	Blessed	41
Adhesive	9	Bootless	42
Adulthood	10	Boundaries	43
Adventure	11	Bridesmaids	45
Affinity	12	Buses	46
Ambiguity	14	Caesar	48
Ambition	15	Care	49
And	16	Career Path	50
Angels	17	Catholic	52
Anxiety	19	Cause and Effect	53
Apartheid	20	Change Fatigue	54
Appearances	21	Cheap Grace	55
Approachability	22	Cheerfulness	57
As	24	Christlike	58
Ascension	25	<i>Christos anesti!</i>	59
<i>Aurora Leigh</i>	26	Cloud	60
Autonomy?	28	Cold Water	62
Awake	29	Collapse	63
Backup	31	Come as You Are	64
Balance	32	Comfort	66

- Commandments 67
Communion of Saints 68
Community 69
Compassion 71
Competitiveness 72
Confession 74
Conflict 75
Contagion 76
Contemplation 78
Correspondence 79
Corruption 81
Critical Mass 82
Cross 83
Crosscut Saw 84
Crossing the Bridge 86
Crows 87
Curds and Honey 88
Dailiness 90
Daimonic 91
Darnel 92
Deafness 93
Death 95
Death Cleaning 96
Debts 97
Deconstruction 98
Defiance 100
Defragmentation 101
Delicacy 102
Delight 104
Deliverance 105
Denarius 106
Denial 107
Dependence 109
Detoxification 110
Diagnosis 111
Différence 113
Disasters 114
Discipleship 115
Disproportion 116
Diversity 118
Divine Forbearance 119
Divorce 120
Do Not Be Afraid 122
Doggedness 123
Doing 124
Doing Nothing 126
Doublemindedness 127
Dreams 128
Duty 129
Earthen Vessels 131
Echo 132
Ékphobos 134
Elijah 135
Elsewhere 136
End Times 138
Endurance 139
Energy 140
Envoys 141
Envy 143
Epiphany 144
Eucharist 146
Eunuchs 147
Evangelization 148
Evening 149

Every Day	151	Growth	192
Execution	152	Hammers of God	193
Exhilaration	153	Happiness	194
Failure	154	Hard Times	195
Faith	155	Hardness of Heart	197
Falling Short	157	Harvesting	198
Family	158	Hatefulness	199
Fasting	159	Hats	201
Father	161	Hearers of the Word	202
Fear	162	Heaven	203
Fear Not	163	Hell	205
Fence-Sitting	164	Heteronomy	206
Few or Many?	166	Highway	207
Finishing	167	Hildegard	209
Foreign Cows	168	Holiness	210
Frivolity	170	Honesty	211
Fruit-Bearing	171	Honor	213
Gate	172	Hot and Cold	214
Gentleness	173	Humility	215
GIGO	175	Hundredfold	217
Give	176	Immaculate	218
Glory	177	Imperfection	219
Gnats and Camels	179	Improvisation	221
God the Enemy	180	Incarnation	222
Good Friday	181	Inclusiveness	223
Graciousness	183	Incredible	224
Gradually	184	Indefectibility	226
Gratitude	185	Infiltration	227
Gravity	186	Influence	228
Greed	188	Infrastructure	230
Grievance	189	Innocence	231
Grime	190	Integrity	232

Interiority 234
Internet 235
Invisible 236
Ite missa est 237
Jonah 239
Joseph 240
Joy 241
Judgment 243
Kairos 244
Kindliness 245
Kingdom 246
Knowledge 247
Lamb of God 249
Lassitude 250
Law of Life 251
Lazarus 253
Leadership 254
Leap 255
Liberation 256
Light 258
Linearity 259
Linkage 260
Little Ones 262
Lizards 263
Loss as Gain 264
Magdalene 265
Magnanimity 266
Mayan Calendar 267
Meekness 269
Memory 270
Mental Betrayal 271
Meta-experience 272

Metánoia 274
Military Service 275
Mirrors 276
Misery 278
Mist 279
Mixity 280
Moderation 282
Morality 283
Most Vicious 284
Moving On 285
Myanmar 287
Nakedness 288
Negotiation 289
Newton 290
Niceness 292
Nonjudgment 293
Now 294
No Wine 296
Obstacles 297
Ocean 298
Offense 299
Omission 301
Once 302
Originals 303
Orphans 305
Orthopraxy 306
Outcomes 307
Outposts 308
Package Deal 310
Paint Can 311
Paraclete 312
Parousia 314

Patience	315	Restoration	356
Patrick	316	Resurrection	358
Peace	317	Revelation	359
Peacemaking	319	Risk	360
Pearl of Great Price	320	Road	361
Penance	321	Runaway Train	363
Periphery	323	Safety Net	364
Permeability	324	Salt	365
Perseverance	325	Salvation	366
Persistence	327	Sartre	368
Phototropism	328	Scandal	369
Pinocchio	329	Schism	370
Prayer	330	Seasons	371
Promises	332	See More	373
Prophets	333	Self-Doubt	374
Providence	334	Separation	375
Purple	336	Service	376
Pygmies	337	Shame	378
Quality	338	Shepherds	379
Questions	340	Shield	380
Ransom	341	Shortcuts	382
Realism	342	Silence	383
Reconciliation	344	Silly Sheep	384
Redeeming the Times	345	Sin	386
Reframing	346	Slippery Slope	387
Rejection	347	Slowness	388
Rejoice	349	Snapdragons	389
Relax	350	Sowing and Reaping	391
Remain	351	Sponge-Listening	392
Remediation	352	Standover	393
Republican Virtue	354	Stephen	394
Resistance	355	Stirrer	396

- Stop 397
Submarine 398
Subtlety 399
Sub Tuum 401
Subtraction 402
Suffering 403
T-Shirt 404
Talents 405
Temple Tax 407
Temptation 408
Theophany 409
Thoughts 410
Tigers 411
Tipping Point 413
Tongue 414
Torah 415
Touch 417
Transcendence 418
Treasure 419
Tribalism 420
Trinity 422
Trust 423
Truth 424
Two Legs 425
Uglification 426
Unblocking 428
Uncompromising 429
Uncovering 430
Unity 432
Universality 433
Unknowing 434
Unprofitable Servants 435
Unveiling 437
Unworthiness 438
Us and Them 439
Vanity 440
Variety 442
Vianney 443
Violence 444
Visibility 446
Waiting 447
Wakefulness 448
Walk on Water 449
Walls 450
Wavering 452
Whole Story 453
Widow's Mite 454
Windows 455
Winning Your Enemies 457
With 458
Withdrawal 459
Wrinkles 460
Wrong 461
Wrong-Footed 463
X-Ray Vision 464
Yes 465
Yesterday's Troubles 466
You Are What You Eat 468
Zacchaeus 469

Introduction

In this year leading up to the golden jubilee of my priestly ordination I have whimsically decided to relive some of the homilies I have preached during the last half century. They were delivered in different places around the world and to different kinds of congregations. Mercifully, some of them, especially those delivered during the 1970s, have gone the way of other hot air emissions. Nevertheless, evidence of many remained. Mostly I never wrote out a complete text but, after spending a week or more pondering the liturgical readings, simply jotted down a few points on a 3 × 5 inch card and used this as a blasting-off point for my words. Usually these sprang fairly directly from whatever space I was in at the time and drew their content from whatever happened to be occupying my mind. Afterward I filed the cards away and forgot about them. Until recently.

In tracing my own journey, it became clear to me that it might be useful to translate these outlines into brief reflections and make them available to those whose lives have been marred by the tragedy of not hearing me preach. This meant trying to decipher my handwriting, filling in the gaps, and working out the significance of topical allusions whose relevance is now unclear. Inevitably the refashioning of the previous texts has been seasoned by whatever is going on in my life at this moment; that adds another level of meaning. Above all, in the process of converting them into brief daily reflections, I have modified the language of past decades to meet contemporary expectations. I have reduced the content of the original homilies to about a third of their former length, pruning away much of what was specific to the original time and place of delivery. It is like taking the meat

out of a sandwich and throwing away the rest. Sometimes the reflection summarizes the whole content of the original; in others, I have concentrated on one part and expanded it. As a result, the end product probably has a sharper focus and a bit less padding, although some suggestions of a broader horizon may have had to be clipped.

In decontextualizing the reflections, I have usually detached them from the biblical readings of the day, the feast being celebrated, and whatever events happened to be current at the time they were delivered. Just for fun I have retained a few local references. Each of these pieces has, therefore, three contexts. First there is the original liturgical context in which they were developed; the dates may give some indication of this. Then there is the 2017–2018 context in which I recast in the form of short reflections whatever I had retained of the original homily. The third context is that in which you are reading them—your context, with all its particularities. To my mind, this last is the most important of the three. In the intervening years people have sometimes asked me for a copy of my homilies. Habitually no copy existed. What I always said to them was, “What you hear is more important than what I say.” The same holds true of these written pieces. Whatever echo you may hear in your own heart is much more significant than anything I have written. It is living and active and worth attention.

I have decided to present these reflections under the rubric of systematic randomness. I have picked out cards randomly, mixing up the years and the liturgical seasons of both the original and its later recycling. I have sorted them in alphabetical order according to the keyword that I habitually give to every homily and then assigned them to one day each for the course of a year. I choose randomness deliberately, as a ploy to help the reader think outside the liturgical box and so leave the making of life connections to the Holy Spirit. You will notice that the keywords are not always indicative of the content. Sometimes they were meant simply to trigger a train of thought or to act as some kind of counterpoint.

As I reread the various outlines and attempted to recast them into usable essays I have become aware that there are many themes that recur. This is not surprising since they were originally composed to respond to a limited sequence of liturgical readings and liturgical feasts. I suggest that you read the pieces one at a time; resist the temptation to binge. Take a moment after you have read the text to reflect on your own experience to see whether the reading has sparked any echo in your heart. You may find that prayer flows freely from a few moments of silence. Otherwise I have provided a formula of prayer, following standard liturgical models, that you may (or may not) find useful. The important point is that I see these essays as a starting point for your own reflections and not as the final expression of my own.

Do I practice what I preach? Of course not. Preaching is proclamation, not autobiography. But I have occasionally presumed on the reader's indulgence to include a few personal reminiscences that serve to illustrate a point. As usual, not all first-person statements are totally true; some are merely rhetorical flourishes. And, from time to time, whatever I happened to be reading while the homily was in process makes an appearance in the text.

Mostly it has been an interesting journey for me, and I hope that you, the reader, enjoy at least parts of this book. I have often thought that time spent listening to homilies should be deducted from that spent in purgatory, so maybe reading this collection will have the same benefit. I have eliminated the duds and the duplicates, as far as possible, but I recognize that some of the pieces are better than others. That's the price to be paid for trying to find 366 homilies that could survive a second airing. Despite the fact that my reflections stem from the same cycle of liturgical readings, regularly repeated, I have noticed a fair amount of variety in how a topic is approached. That is probably a good thing. I hope there are not too many repetitions, though it sometimes seems that I have been singing from the same few pages most of my life. Nor am I disturbed by the fact that there are a few examples of what may appear to be contradictions;

these are more likely different emphases. This is inevitable over a fifty-year period. Father Malachy Mara, one of our veterans and a dramatic preacher, used to claim that you were permitted one, and only one, heresy in each sermon. In that case, if there is heresy in any one of these reflections, you will probably find the opposite heresy in another. In this way, I hope, everything balances out in the end.

The eighth-century Palestinian monk Dorotheos of Gaza makes the point that God can use any channel to communicate a message—and this includes Balaam's donkey. I have always thought that the donkey-prophet is the perfect image for preachers of homilies, for they often unknowingly transmit a word that transcends their own competence and understanding. May that happen here!

Michael Casey
Monk of Tarrawarra Abbey
June 15, 2018

January 1 ✚ *Abask*

Today we are abask, not only in the brilliant light of high summer, but also in the warm glow of a newborn year. You will remember the question mooted at the birth of John the Baptist, “What will this child be?” The same wonderment attaches itself to every newborn infant. Each is complete, intelligent and unique, yet so little, so dependent, so vulnerable. Whatever potential the child has is all in the future.

All parents have a dream for their child, perhaps embedded in the name they give, but for the moment the urgent task is nurturance, bringing the unique gifts of the child to a high level of fulfillment. That task will continue for years, if not for decades: helping and encouraging the child to realize its destiny, to endure and overcome setbacks, to be a source of blessing for others.

We are the proud parents of a newborn year. We may not neglect it. We may not leave it to work out its own future. If we do nothing, then decline will set in and the year will die unfulfilled. We wonder what the future of this year will be, but our immediate task is to engage in positive nurturing to ensure favorable outcomes. This requires attention and intelligence, and some degree of self-forgetfulness.

I don’t know whether others take New Year’s resolutions seriously; I must admit I don’t. But it would not be a bad idea to go beyond narcissistic goals of self-improvement to think creatively about what we or I could do in the immediate future to make the world and the church a better place. What could I be doing to enhance goodness and restrain evil? Probably not much, objectively speaking. But if I start small, I may well find momentum growing and something substantial resulting. Give it time to grow.

Abask in the joy of new birth, Mary, the mother of Jesus, kept pondering in her heart all that had happened: wondering, dreaming, hoping, but also nurturing. We too are to join her in this role

of doing what we can to build up the Body of Christ—both locally and universally—looking beyond our own advantage: wondering, dreaming, hoping, nurturing. (January 1, 2017.)

God of all ages, look upon your church at the beginning of this new year, and grant that the days ahead may be for us a time of growth in faith and hope and charity. May we work with greater zest to cooperate with the coming of your kingdom, redeeming the times and basking in the light of your love. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

January 2 ✚ *Abandonment*

Jean Pierre de Caussade, an eighteenth-century spiritual writer, is known for his emphasis on the role of abandonment in the spiritual life. By this he meant giving oneself into the hands of the God who can write straight on crooked lines, trusting in the planning of Divine Providence. Abandonment is not the same thing as resignation. It is not a lethal fatalism that withdraws from active involvement and allows one's natural optimism to plummet. Abandonment is a deliberate act of trust, giving greater priority to what we know by faith of God's benevolence in our regard over what appears to be a looming or present disaster.

It is probably true that the response to hard times is the best indicator of character. We are all happy when we win the lottery or meet an old friend. It is not difficult to find joy in such circumstances. But how do we respond when we are treated badly, or when we fall ill, or when trouble strikes our family? Theoretically we accept that bad things sometimes happen to good people, but in practice it is not so easy to deal positively with such situations. Remember what Friedrich Nietzsche wrote: "What does not kill you will make you stronger." Only the stoutest saplings survive the rigors of winter. They alone experience the surging energies of spring and the full flowering of summer. If we struggle too much against our difficulties, they may not accomplish in us the work they were intended to do.

The first component of genuine abandonment is humility. This involves the avowal that I do not always know what is good for me. I am certainly able to discern what is pleasant and what is painful at this moment, but I really do not have the capacity to know what is to my ultimate advantage. Especially, I might add, if I am not in the habit of stepping back and reflecting on past experience. For every door that seems to close, the possibility emerges of my going through a different door—and that may well open up for me a glorious and unanticipated future.

The second necessary component of abandonment is the willingness to express our pain to God in prayer. Abandonment is not simply stoic indifference. It is active rather than passive. It impels us to use our hardship as a springboard to project ourselves into the ambit of God. Just as human relations are often initiated or improved by our asking for help, so our prayer often becomes more heartfelt in times of trouble. We will often find that things are better between us and God if we allow ourselves quietly to relinquish control over our own lives and confidently place them in the hands of God. (August 5, 2013.)

Loving Father, give us the faith to see your providence at work in all that happens to us and around us. Give us the courage to respond boldly to the challenges we meet. Give us the wisdom to learn from our own difficulties the art of coming to the aid of others. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

January 3 ✚ Abbreviation

The Western fathers of the church loved to ponder a text from Isaiah, later quoted in the Epistle to the Romans, which, in the Latin translation, makes reference to “an abbreviated word.” They saw in this little phrase a compendium of the theology of the incarnation. The Word becomes human; the fullness of divinity takes up residence in a body like ours. The eternal Word, in no way contained in space and time, undergoes self-emptying

and accepts to be limited in time and place and culture, in the same way that we are.

When we think of the reality of Jesus' early life, we may be inclined to move away from the eloquent and imaginative speculations of preachers and prefer instead the Gospel of Mark. The evangelist makes the point that, in the eyes of his contemporaries at Nazareth, there was nothing special about Jesus. His life was ordinary, obscure and laborious, like theirs. Like ours. We know that his genealogy was not a litany of saints; he had his fair share of scoundrels lurking in the background. He could not be in two places at once, there were only twenty-four hours in his day, he had to navigate through a labyrinth of assets and liabilities just like us. Quite definitely he was not the gnostic savior of future centuries, an androgynous epiphany whose feet barely touched the ground.

The abbreviated Word demonstrates to us that those elements that we most want to excise from our biographies are not necessarily obstacles to the realization of God's plan in us. In our fantasies we may dream about being not only perfect in character but also endowed with all kinds of gifts and talents. And greatly loved. That is fantasy, not reality. Human life is necessarily abbreviated; we will come to the fullness of life only when, by God's gift, we reach that glorious day when God is all in all. Meanwhile we have to endure a very abbreviated form of human existence. But God doesn't seem to care. This is because God's attitude to us is based not on a momentary snapshot, but on the whole story of our life from beginning to end. Even though we pass through some pretty ugly patches, God still boasts about us, "I was able to bring safely home even someone in as bad a mess as this one." Abbreviated existence may seem like a problem to us; but it is not so for God. (December 28, 2008.)

Father, you so loved the world that you sent your only Son to be like us in all things but sin. Help us to accept and love our earthly reality, with all its limitations and failures, and to place all our confidence in your power to bring us to the

destiny for which you have fashioned us. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

January 4 ✚ Abide

The Greek verb *menein* appears very often in the Saint John's gospel and epistles (about sixty-five times in all). Its usual meaning is simply to remain, to stay, to dwell, to persist. Yet, because it assumes a more solemn note, perhaps it is better rendered as "abide." In the Fourth Gospel it connotes an enduring relationship, such as what exists between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Surprisingly it is also used to indicate the mutual presence of the believer and God. Those who believe in Christ and follow him enter into the life of God and abide there. They are no longer casual visitors or even servants, but friends who receive from Jesus all that he received from his Father. The branches derive enduring life from the vine-stock; grace for grace; it is the source of their vitality and fruitfulness.

There is a behavioral component to this theme. We are exhorted to abide, to remain constant, to be stable in our discipleship. We are to commit ourselves to the struggle of perseverance, knowing that it is not enough to begin a journey; we have to follow it through to the end. Sometimes remaining on the vine is a happy experience, watching the new leaves spring forth and the fruit slowly ripen. But sometimes we pass through winter, when the branches are bare and the future seems bleak. During such inevitable spells of dormancy, the act of abiding takes the form of enduring, doggedness, patience. The land must quietly lie fallow until the time for plowing and sowing arrives.

In particular, Christ calls us to abide in his love. This means that we don't allow urgent and important concerns to cause us to drift away from an awareness of God's love, made visible in Christ. It means fidelity to the practice of prayer and *lectio divina*, despite pressing alternatives and inertia. We are not to pull down the blinds and remain enclosed in hermetic self-sufficiency,

but to allow ourselves to be irradiated by divine love. If we receive love, we will return love, and we will have the capacity to share love. If we do not receive, nothing will follow.

Abiding in love is abiding in Christ's word. We easily lapse into forgetfulness, beset by anxieties, ambitions, enthusiasms, hobbies. We are called to remember. To make a positive, proactive effort to give the words of Jesus a home in our thoughts, both to influence our choices and to solace our troubles.

Our prayer must be, in the words of the Emmaus disciples, "Abide with us, Lord, for it is evening, and the day is nearly done." (May 17, 2009.)

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the source and sustainer of our life. Help us to open ourselves fully to your gifts and give us the courage to remain steadfast in times of temptation and trial. For you are our Lord for ever and ever. Amen.

January 5 ✚ **Abomination**

One of the least quoted verses in the Gospel tradition is Luke 16:15: "That which is highly esteemed by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God." It was spoken by Jesus to the Pharisees in a particular situation, but its gnomic formulation makes it suitable as a general principle. Sometimes what people esteem and pursue is in opposition to what God intends. The divergence begins with the human will, not with God.

The word *bdelugma*, used for "abomination," is sometimes used to indicate idols. Idolatry, in the literal sense, is not a problem for most of us. But Saint Paul understands avarice as its equivalent. "Money is the root of all evil," and those who set its acquisition as their highest goal are, in his mind, idolaters.

The consumerist society encourages unprincipled ameliorism; we are always trying to make what we have into something bigger, better, flashier. And every day wants disguised as needs cry out for our attention: money, things, food, sex, status, reputation, knowledge, security, revenge. The list could go on forever. There

is always something that we don't have that we want. And what we want we sometimes pursue with single-minded unconcern for the price that we or others have to pay.

Jesus places before us a stark moral choice: God or mammon. We cannot serve both. The key word is *serve*; we are not to let material benefits enslave us. We cannot do without all these things, but we have to use them in a way that does not distort our outlook on life or our attitudes to things of permanent value. We are not gymnosophists—philosophers who renounce everything and walk about naked—it is far too cold for that. We have to make use of material things; we have even to make friends with them, as Jesus says. But we don't want to become addicted to endless acquisition. Like the ancient Israelites on the point of the exodus, we are admonished to “pillage the Egyptians.” We are to take from our technocratic world all that can serve our fundamental purpose, but insulate ourselves against becoming its slaves. (September 22, 2013.)

Creator God, all that you have made is good, and all creation proclaims your glory. Help us to coexist with the things of this world in a way which is of mutual benefit, so that every creature, each with its own voice, may sing your praise forever. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

January 6 ✚ Absence

Sometimes the best evidence is the absence of evidence. One of the skills of G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown was an ability to look at what was not there, which was sometimes more eloquent than what was. The fact that the dog did not bark is an important component in the solution of the crime.

At Easter it is the emptiness of the tomb that is most striking. The angels could be delusions, but you can't fake nothing. Nothing has nothing to offer the senses, but it shouts loudly to faith. The beloved disciple looked in, saw nothing, and believed.

So we are talking about an absence or emptiness that contains more meaning than a presence. This meaningfulness seems hidden because it is not accessible via the senses and, therefore, cannot be part of our normal rational processes. The chief priests were puzzled and perturbed by the emptiness of the tomb; to them it was absurd, a surd with no meaning. They had no understanding. Their response was action that was both frantic and ineffectual.

How do we access the hidden meaning of what seems to be absurd? The answer is faith. Faith is not darkness, as some seem to assert. Faith is a superior form of experience and illumination. It allows us to be impacted by realities which have no audible or visible footprint in the world of space and time. The fact that faith is not a part of ordinary experience is a pointer to its relative superiority, not to its unreality. Faith is a means of penetrating the fog that results from the interplay of conflicting data. You can argue a case about almost anything by cherry-picking the evidence. As a result, we become distrustful of our capacity to discern the truth and prefer to live in a maelstrom of unsubstantiated possibilities and probabilities. We are used to not being certain about anything. Faith gives us certainty by endowing us with a superior vision.

Sometimes in our own life nothing makes sense. Sometimes, at least, the nonsense is a call to go deeper, to find meaning beneath and beyond the fatuous interplay of events. In fact, this strident absence may be an important signal for us to look elsewhere. It is time to stir up the gift of faith we have received, to recognize that “in God alone does my soul find rest.” (March 24, 2008.)

Loving Lord, you have made us your children and have placed before us the prospect of eternal life. Stir up our faith to embrace the way that Christ set forth, and to show by our lives the reality of the hope by which we live. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

January 7 ✚ Adhesive

Our human experience is often scarred by the anguish caused by separation—being away from those we love, being in conflict, our own inner division. Sometimes even the sense that in our spiritual endeavors we are getting nowhere. Even without such problems our lives are fragmented, broken into bits. Once a moment has passed it is beyond recovery. Our childhood is far behind us, and those who enriched it have long since departed.

When we think of the work of the Holy Spirit, perhaps it is worthwhile to see it as adhesive. The spirit begins the task of integrating all the elements of our life-experience in a single, harmonious whole. What now we sometimes sense is that we are on a journey to wholeness. A journey that will have its culmination only in eternal life, where nothing will be lost, nothing left out, and every moment of our existence will sing in the choir. Theologians define eternity as being “the total, simultaneous and perfect possession of life.”

The adhesive role of the Holy Spirit is to bring our broken lives together through what Saint Bernard termed the “glue of love”: *gluten amoris*. This happens in four complementary ways.

- By helping us to remember, the Spirit brings Jesus into our lives as present and active; a dear friend, a wise counselor, and a strong helper.
- The Spirit progressively brings us to an interior harmony by supporting us in the struggle between good and evil: inspiring us, prompting us, sustaining us in difficult times.
- As the civil war within us loses its ferocity, the Spirit enables us to live in harmony with others, as members of Christ’s Body. The Spirit is the source of unity that enables us corporately to proclaim the Good News to a waiting world.
- As our advocate and intercessor with the Father, the Spirit is the enabler of our prayer, bridging the infinite gulf between us and God, negating our sins, making us members

of God's household and sharers in the divine nature. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the boldness to pray, "Abba."

To open ourselves to the Spirit is to begin the process of transformation that will have its culmination in eternal life. It is a journey to holiness, but it is also a journey to wholeness—one that will benefit not only ourselves but also serve as a grace to all whom we encounter. (June 4, 2017.)

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the lives of the faithful with your abundant grace. Take away the stony hearts within us and give us hearts that are open and responsive so that, guided by your inspirations, we may play our part in bringing all people to salvation and to the loving knowledge of the truth. For you are the source of our hope for ever and ever. Amen.

January 8 ✚ **Adulthood**

I recently heard of a child who did not speak for several years. Eventually, after puzzling many physicians and other experts, he began to speak clearly and then made rapid progress. A year or so later he was asked why he had remained mute. He replied that it was because he did not want to speak. He preferred to remain a baby.

The process of growing up is no fun. It involves our being dragged out of our comfort zone and compelled to accept new obligations and shoulder new responsibilities. In large measure, it is moving out of a period of passivity into activity, with the ever-present possibility that our actions are ill chosen, badly executed, or frustrated. It is easier to do nothing.

Some of us are reluctant to move beyond infancy in our attitudes to religion. We tend to rely too much on the grace of God, forgetting that the effect of grace is to get us moving. Grace gives us the desire to improve matters, the energy to make a start, and the perseverance to keep going even when the novelty has worn off. One of the fantasies that fuels our procrastination is

that somehow God will suddenly sweep us off our feet and fill our lives, so that we do not have to make hard choices or live with the results of them.

Reality is a bit more grinding. As adults, we are called on to conduct an assessment of our situation, to make conscientious choices and to implement them, even though these initiatives cost us a lot of effort. Our faith has to grapple with the fact that, although it is the source of a certain light and guidance, there is still much darkness to overcome and a long, hard journey to endure.

Adult faith clings to God in the subdued light of hope and love. It does not avoid labor and learns to deal with hardship. It seeks and finds God in the undramatic challenges of every day. And it is willing to be delighted when, unpredictably, Christ comes through the closed door and lights up our life. (August 9, 1987.)

Loving Father, help us to grow into the full maturity of Christ. With Christ may we be tireless in doing good and avoiding evil, striving with Christ to show your love to all those around us. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

January 9 ✚ Adventure

We don't hear many exhortations to develop in ourselves the spirit of adventure. Most of us are seriously risk averse. When Jesus invites Simon Peter to come to him over the water, we think him crazy to attempt it and titter at his foolishness. We pay attention to the announcement, "Please remain seated until the boat docks at the jetty." We sit tight, singing to ourselves, "Rock of ages set on high, keep us always safe and dry." What did Peter get from his act of daring? He got wet and cold. We congratulate ourselves that our prudence saved us from that.

Yet Peter is rebuked not for his brashness, but for his doubt and hesitation. Not for having a dream and pursuing it with enthusiasm, but for paying too much attention to the negative data coming from "reality." For every good action we envisage, there

will probably be a thousand difficulties and obstacles. Impetuosity is probably the least of our vices. Our problem is that we try to play it too safe. We don't want to do anything that does not have a positive outcome guaranteed.

Apart from getting wet and cold, Peter probably gained a new sense of his own limitations and a correspondingly stronger recognition of his need to depend on Christ. That works out at a net gain. On one level he failed, but his failure brought precious insights that those sitting safely in the boat never received. Peter failed often; the reason for this is that he often stuck out his neck while the others held back. Peter dared to live dangerously. And this is also our vocation. Perhaps we underestimate the seriousness of the vice of timidity.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples of Jesus are described as having received from the Holy Spirit the gift of boldness, and these lukewarm, lily-livered followers became ardent leaders, unafraid to appear before kings and governors to speak the Good News that had been entrusted to them. Our faith derives from theirs. If, after Pentecost, they had remained closeted in the upper room, saying their prayers and being nice to one another, we would never have had the fire of new life kindled within us. They ventured everything, and we are the beneficiaries. Perhaps we too should risk praying that the Spirit infuse into our stale discipleship a stronger sense of adventure. (August 11, 1996.)

Come, Holy Spirit, stir up in us that boldness with which you filled the apostles. Give us the courage to give ourselves to the task which the Father has entrusted to us, confident that we also will receive power from on high. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

January 10  *Affinity*

I have heard it said that the most effective police forces are those that draw the majority of their members from the same background and class as the criminals with whom they deal. Such

May 3 ✚ Father

When Jesus instructs us to address God as Father, he does not intend this to be taken as the apotheosis of the beliefs and values of a patriarchal society. The everyday term *Abba* belongs more to the breakfast table than to the throne room. In encouraging us to use it in speaking to God, Jesus is emphasizing that we may dare to inject into our prayer a high level of intimacy. This represented a rereading of the theology of the Hebrew Scriptures—the universalization of the singular closeness permitted to Abraham and Moses and a few others.

It seems to me that part of the reason why Christianity was largely victorious over paganism in the age of Constantine was its emphasis on a God who was loving and who calls forth love from us, so unlike the multitude of capricious and demanding deities who had to be served and placated. Our relationship with God is not so much specified by external laws and regulations; it is a matter of heart speaking to heart—to recall the motto chosen by Cardinal Newman: *cor ad cor loquitur*.

This devotional aspect of Christianity is not something to be spurned in favor of a more “rational” approach. In fact, devotion has been described by Edward Schillebeeckx as the living skin of religious experience (*Essays: Ongoing Theological Quests*). It is not to be identified with sentimentalism or pietism. Feeling is integral to human experience. Unfeeling religion easily becomes harsh, rigid, and judgmental. When people cease religious practice because it is boring, arid, or sterile, it is really because feeling has fled from their exercises of piety.

Feeling is not everything, but it is not nothing. We do not have to be able to explain it rationally. We are more likely to continue in prayer if it is marked by a sober sense of being content and comfortable in the presence of God; there may be storms on the surface of our life, but deep down we are possessed by an assurance of God’s unconditional love, confident in being accepted as we are, and unashamed of our ongoing need for forgiveness and mercy.

When the son of Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos was stopped by a policeman for speeding, the outcome was certain. The policeman was sacked. This example may serve as an extravagant image of God's attitude toward us: "If God is for us, who could be against us?" "Even though our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts." Our many sins and failings may not be enough to get us into trouble. That is because God is our Father. (July 28, 2013.)

Loving Father, open our hearts and minds to be mindful of the many events in our life that bear witness to your unchanging love for us. Help us to go through life confident that we can never move outside your loving acceptance and your powerful help. We ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son. Amen.

May 4 ✚ Fear

Martin Seligman has given us a recipe for a healthy and happy life: to recognize one's highest gifts and to use them at the service of something greater than oneself. Three ingredients: recognition of gifts, their employment, and a higher vision. If I sing like a nightingale, I need to acknowledge that gift, to develop it, to discipline myself to protect it, and then to use it not merely for self-congratulation, but to bring joy and uplift and, perhaps, healing, to others. If I don't I will be unhappy, and maybe I will become ill. Those who do not use their gifts in this way become frustrated and resentful, projecting their problems onto others, blaming them, and ultimately withdrawing their services and themselves from involvement with others.

We find the same principle in the parable of the Talents. The servants are given money as a stake to begin an enterprise in their master's name. The qualities required of them are honesty, industry, energy, and initiative. Presumably the master recognized these gifts in them; otherwise he would have been throwing his money away. The servant who failed to yield a profit tells us why: he was afraid.

Not all fears are harmful, but many have a paralyzing effect that inhibits us from realizing our potential. Many unreasonable fears come from a hyperactive imagination. Let loose, they can create an alternative world that overpowers our relationship with reality. Tsunamis happen, but that is no reason to avoid taking a walk along the beach. A vivid imagination can be our friend in allowing us to see around corners, but, like a horse, it needs bridle and bit to ensure it does not carry us off to where we don't want to go.

We must value our gifts and own our responsibility to deploy them. We build up the boldness to do this if we allow ourselves to be seduced by the vision of something greater than ourselves. Our gifts are not merely for self-gratification. They are meant to serve others, to serve all others, to serve the cosmos. And if something is worth doing, as Chesterton noted, it is worth doing badly. Even if our goal is lofty beyond what we see as our capacity, we need not fear that God who has given the gift and inspired the vision will not bring to completion any good work that we have begun. If fear forces us to bury our talent, then our life will be pretty miserable. (November 16, 2008.)

Lord Jesus Christ, give us a spirit of boldness so that we may gratefully use the talents you have entrusted to us to advance your kingdom. May we play our role in reducing suffering in the world, and in being bearers of Good News for all. For you are our Lord for ever and ever. Amen.

May 5 ✝ **Fear Not**

When Jesus comforted his followers with the words “Fear not, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom,” he was saying something to which we also might well pay attention. We do not always admit to our fears; we act as though we are not under their influence, even though it costs a lot to keep up the façade. Fears cause us to hold back, to keep something in reserve, to have a Plan B ready, just in case.

It has been said that fear is a greater threat to faith than doubt. Doubts can be assuaged by the comforting presence of someone who gives us a guarantee. Fear, on the other hand, cripples our sense of solidarity and our *joie de vivre*. Faith is allied to courage and confidence and perseverance. Fear undermines all these qualities and makes us timid and tentative. We lack the boldness that is necessary to do the unexpected and original.

Often our courage drains out of us because we feel that we are in a minority; we are only a little flock faced with a great task. Here it is good to remember the story of Gideon in the book of Judges. The Lord sent away the men of Gideon's army until no more than three hundred soldiers remained. With these Gideon was commanded to face the hosts of Midian and Amalek, which were as thick as a swarm of locusts. The victory that followed was not Gideon's but God's. "Nothing is impossible for God."

It is probably true to say that the grace of fervent Christian living is welcomed only by relatively few. The Gospel places demands on us that may sometimes seem excessive. But the work is God's. We play our part. Often that will mean acting in a way that is the opposite of heroic, working with the few resources that are at hand. But nothing is impossible for God, and we can be sure that "it has pleased the Father to give you the Kingdom." (August 12, 2001.)

Loving Father, send us the Spirit of boldness, that we may stand before kings and governors, not quaking with fear but firm in our faith. Give us the confidence that you are accomplishing your plan to bring all things to completion in Jesus, your Son. We make this prayer in his name. Amen.

May 6 ✚ *Fence-Sitting*

There is a great scene in the Bible where Joshua assembles the entire population at Shechem and tells them, "Choose today whom you will serve." Unsurprisingly then, and throughout their history, a large proportion of the people preferred to sit on the fence and keep their options open. We don't have to go back

thousands of years to discover this tendency. We can find it in ourselves. In many matters we prefer not to give our full commitment until we accumulate more data and, especially, until we can know for certain how things will turn out.

What a difference it would make if there were fewer fence-sitters, if more people were committed, intense, passionate, and energetic. It doesn't take many wholly committed people to galvanize the rest. It is not unusual for administrators of all kinds of institutions to be champion fence-sitters. They will change something only if a bomb is put under them. When from below there is a dense enough push for change on a particular issue, then they will act, if only to guarantee a quiet life for themselves. If we want to produce a more just society or a more transparent administration, we have to organize. Organization needs organizers, people passionate enough to bestir themselves.

The model on which some theoreticians base their reflections is that of the church as a perfect society. It doesn't take long to discover how hollow is this claim. In every age, and not only ours, the church has had its limitations, and the ranks of the clergy have not been restricted to bright angels of virtue. The spottiness of the church reflects the inherent condition of all its members; in this age we cannot expect to find only saints. The point is that this is no reason to withdraw our support or our fidelity. If God can cope with the church's imperfection, there is no reason for us to bail out. Or to remain inert.

In Western countries more people are becoming obese; the danger is that our thinking becomes flabby as well, and we leave that task to others. We go with the flow. Drifting with the current will not take us anywhere good, nor will we find much excitement if we keep sitting on the fence. Maybe we should take the risk and try a little initiative to make the world and the church better places. (August 24, 2003.)

Lord God, you call us to fight the good fight and to be active in redeeming the times in which we live. Rouse us from our slumber and give us the courage to engage with the issues of

our day, and guide us by your Spirit of wisdom and prudence. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

May 7 ✚ ***Few or Many?***

Jesus seemed reluctant to respond to the disciples' query about how many would be saved. Perhaps this reticence can be seen as having a moral purpose, as if to say, "Don't you worry about the number of the elect, just make sure that you are included among them." In this case, even though the twelve disciples were his closest followers, they were being admonished that there were no guarantees, no privileges, no reserved seats. They, like everyone else, had to maintain their efforts to enter through the narrow gate and to keep walking on the demanding road of discipleship. Yes, they were invited to the wedding feast, but they needed to wear the appropriate wedding garment. They needed to keep their lamps filled with oil. They needed to stay awake. And the same applies to us.

Maybe we can approach matters from another angle. Perhaps "few or many" is a false formulation. Perhaps the phrase should read "few *for* many." Some are called to play a more heroic role for the sake of the others. They are the salt that seasons the whole, the leaven that causes the entire dough to rise. Maybe we should think of salvation less in terms of individuals passing the examination at heaven's gate and more in terms of the whole of God's faithful people entering into the life that Jesus has won for them. The whole Body of Christ will be saved, and, by God's grace, the different members of that Body will all have different and distinctive parts to play in the process. Just as Christ gave his life for the sake of the many, those members whom we call saints make up in their own lives whatever was left undone in the work of the Head. In the same way that Saint Paul affirms that an unbelieving husband is saved by a believing wife, so the faith of the "little flock" has a positive outflow to those to whom the Good News has not arrived.

Every small deed done for God is an ecclesial act. It is not merely a meritorious act that belongs to the individual who performs it; it is an ecclesial act, continuing the work of Christ. Its effect is to bring closer the day when all will believe and rejoice in the knowledge of the truth. (August 25, 2013.)

Loving Father, you so loved the world that you sent us your only Son so that all who attach themselves to him might come to a more abundant life. Keep us firm in our faith and joyful in hope so that our lives may become an expression of Christ's love. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen.

May 8 ✚ Finishing

Discipleship is not something into which we enter on the spur of the moment. It is meant to be a cold-blooded decision. Jesus talks about building a tower. He advises us to look before we leap, to know what we are getting into, not to start what we cannot finish, and once we start to keep going until we finish. All these suggestions make sense. We would do well to follow them. Finishing is more important than beginning. And more challenging.

Since any relationship, including that of disciple and master, is a two-way process, we are entitled to ask whether the Lord follows his own instructions. Does he practice what he preached? Saint Paul tells us that we are God's building. Did God consider the potential liabilities when we were chosen and called? The psalmist tells us that God knows the dust of which we are made so, I suppose, we have to expect that God knew something of our weakness, blindness, and malice before beginning to deal with us. So even those ugly things in us, about which we scarcely dare to think, were taken into consideration by God. God was not buying a pig in a poke.

God is always working to complete the good work that has been begun—to avoid the possibility, raised by the psalmist, that enemies will say to us, “Where is your God?” Our growth in

holiness is God's work; we are not permitted to think that God is uninterested in its outcome.

Jesus also talks about calculating the odds before we go to war, whether our ten thousand have a chance against an enemy's twenty thousand. Here again, God is not uninformed or unprepared. Those predestined are called, and those called will certainly be saved. If God is for us, who can be against us?

From God's side, all is settled. We who walk by faith and not by sight cannot always perceive this; we are sometimes afflicted by hesitations and doubts. We have to remember that what seem to us to be serious obstacles to completing the work of sanctification are, in God's sight, no more than pesky flies on a summer's day. They can distract and annoy, but ultimately they are not life-threatening. God will bring to completion the work that has been begun and, in reality, in Christ the bulk of the work is already finished. (September 5, 2010.)

Loving God, you have called us to follow Christ and to walk the road to a more abundant life. Help us to keep making progress on this path, confident that you go ahead of us and accompany us, and that you provide a remedy for all our mistakes. We make our prayer in the name of Jesus, your Son. Amen.

May 9 **Foreign Cows**

There is an Irish proverb that says, "Cows from beyond the sea have long horns." What it means is that we more readily attribute greater authority to whatever is strange and unfamiliar. A shaven-headed Tibetan monk in exotic robes is obviously wiser and more spiritual than the parish priest or my next-door neighbor. Or so it seems. There is another similar proverb: "Familiarity breeds contempt." And Jesus himself lamented that prophets were not received in their own country.

Perhaps we need to be critical of such an attitude because it leads to the conclusion that if God were to speak, if God were

to call us to conversion, it would be by means of something strange and dramatic. We want to be spiritually entertained. We find the still, small voice by which God habitually addresses us too unemphatic, ambiguous, and, perhaps, too respectful of our freedom. According to legend, the disciples of Saint John the Evangelist were dissatisfied with his continual preaching on the theme “Love one another.” They hoped for something a bit more scintillating.

God speaks in various ways, and we need to listen for them all: through conscience, through those closest to us, through the liturgy, through what we read, even through homilies. And, as Saint Augustine points out, God can speak to us through the rebukes given us by our rivals or enemies. God continues to address us, but somehow the message doesn’t get through to us because we are hoping for something different. God does not communicate to us an overwhelming insight into the meaning of life. The message is simply for today, and it is often a very minor revelation of a step that can be taken. Perhaps slightly to upgrade our own life. Perhaps to offer something to somebody else. Perhaps to step back from an unseen danger. The word comes to us simply. It is so easy to ignore. But to take our cue from it may well be the beginning of a major grace in our life.

When it comes to problem-solving we will usually find that a complex situation is resolved not by a single complicated intervention, but by a dozen insignificant little interventions, each untying one of the knots that binds us fast. The steps toward a more abundant life are not exotic but familiar, everyday gestures that collectively have more punch than the big intervention for which we were hoping. (July 18, 2016.)

Loving Father, you enter our lives in many different ways, and your words of comfort and challenge are often very subtle. Help us always to listen to the promptings of your Holy Spirit so that we turn away from evil and become the persons you intended us to be. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

May 10 ✚ *Frivolity*

There is an attractive rusticity about the Cana miracle as told in the Fourth Gospel. It could easily be the subject for a Brueghel painting. Jesus' friends are not only poor and unlearned, they are also thirsty. Those of us with a more refined sense of propriety may be offended by the event; the miracle seems frivolous to the point of scandal. In a world full of human suffering, why squander a miracle on such a trivial benefit? If Judas had been present he might have said, as he querulously remarked at the anointing at Bethany, "Why this waste?"

The evangelist is smarter than we are. He sees the miracles that Jesus works not just as a temporary fix to a problem or an entertaining demonstration of power, but as "signs." The miracles point to something beyond themselves. As is often said, it is the thought behind the gift that matters. One rose can serve as a sign of love just as effectively as a hundred roses.

The signs that Jesus worked were perceived as signs only by those with faith. Many years ago an older brother pointed out to me the difference between dogs and cats. If you point, the dog looks in the direction you are indicating; the cat looks at your hand. The cat does not recognize the pointing finger as a sign; the dog does. To those with faith the miraculous wine gives a message of the all-powerful love of God revealed in Jesus. The believer follows the sign to the object it is indicating. To the unbelieving it is simply a matter of extra wine—and the prospect of a bigger hangover.

All that Jesus did to signal his Father's love is marked by both gratuity and abundance and brings in its wake happiness and rejoicing. The miracle at Cana may be insignificant in its contribution to world history, but it made some people happy. And that is an achievement that does not deserve to be labeled "frivolous." And, as a sign, the incident points beyond the present to a more profound celebration when with Christ we will drink the new wine in the kingdom that is to come. (January 15, 1995.)

Lord Jesus Christ, you came among us to share our joys and our sadness. Help us to become ever more conscious of our solidarity with all, and inspire us to be a source of joy and happiness to those who are a part of our life. For you are our Lord for ever and ever. Amen.

May 11  **Fruit-Bearing**

Jesus makes the point that the only way that a seed can produce its fruit is by dying. Death is the doorway by which we enter into life. It is not easy for us to appreciate how this stark message can be termed “Good News.”

When we are in the midst of life, full of gratitude for God’s beautiful gifts—enjoying the resources we have, the love in which we share, good health and life itself—it seems like a cruel sentence that we must relinquish all of these in order to obtain what Christ has promised. Like some of the first disciples, we are inclined to complain, “This is a hard saying; who can bear it?” Such a precept is indeed a narrow gate, the eye of a needle at which we affluent camels balk.

No wonder that there is a near-universal tendency to water down the costly demands of the Gospel discipleship. We try to transform Christianity into a feel-good or do-good religion, a means of enhancing our present life.

Real Christianity is unthinkable unless we understand it in terms of a future life. “If for this life only we have hope in Christ Jesus, then, of all people, we are the most to be pitied.” Faith is necessarily connected with the unseen realities of eternal life. This future existence, “which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered our heart to imagine,” is what gives meaning to our present experience of suffering and will make even our death seem tolerable. When Jesus bids us take up our cross, it is not intended as a call to a life of misery or a summons to annihilation; it is, rather, an invitation to give priority to the highest

gifts of God, to set our hearts on things that are above and not on those which are on the earth.

The seed that dies does no more than relinquish the mediocre level of existence with which it is familiar in the process of moving to the more bountiful stage of its natural life cycle, bearing fruit. Death in all its myriad forms is a natural element in life as we know it. The Good News to which our faith leads us is that our final death is not the end, but rather an entrance into a higher, more fruitful, and, ultimately, more satisfying form of life. The tender compassion of our God has prepared for us something far better than anything we have yet experienced, and it is worth losing anything and everything in order to obtain it. (Undated.)

Lord Jesus Christ, help us to understand that your call to the cross is not folly or scandal but a call to entrust ourselves to the power and wisdom of God. Strengthen our faith so that in times of trouble we may remain full of hope and optimism. For you are our Lord, for ever and ever. Amen.

May 12 ✚ Gate

In the late 1970s, while I was in the Philippines, a late-night exchange of anecdotes led my companions to conclude that I had been visited by a *kapre*, the cigar-smoking giant that lives among trees and can sometimes be heard whistling in the darkness as it comes to observe humans. Wide-eyed with wonder, my informant told me that, above all, I was not to accept the invitation to follow the *kapre* because I would be led to a tiny hole in the ground and, if I entered, would suddenly find myself in a cavernous space from which there was no exit.

In the intervening years I have occasionally pondered the significance of the image: a small hole leading to an immense space. It is probably an indication of the belief that our familiar earth is not far distant from another, more mysterious zone, and that there are places on earth that are much closer to heaven than others. The Celtic tradition calls these “thin places.” These are

sacred places where God seems nearer to the believing heart and where prayer comes more readily.

In the liturgy for the dedication of a church building, the edifice is described as “the house of God, the gate of heaven.” The material building, whether grand or rustic, is seen as the doorway to heaven. A gate is for passing through. Nobody stops at the gate or even takes much notice of it. The mind is fixed on what is ahead. The church building, likewise, is intended to take us beyond itself into the invisible world of spirit. It does this in two different ways. Either it leads us through images—the artwork suggesting an alternative vision of reality and a reminder of the content of our faith—or the church building can help us to pray by its bareness, its lack of distraction, its call to a concentration on deeper and loftier realities.

In his Rule, Saint Benedict decrees that the place of prayer should be what its name indicates and, therefore, nothing else should be done there or left there. When we enter a church, we should allow ourselves to be drawn beyond its material details, seeing it especially as the gate of heaven—an invitation to lift up our hearts and to seek the realities that are beyond and above. Even the humblest building can have a sacred character, giving us access to the vastness of the sphere of God. We go to a church because we want to meet God, not to comment on its architecture. (September 9, 1999.)

Loving Father, you have imprinted on our souls the affirmation that we are citizens of heaven; this is our homeland. As we make our way on this earthly pilgrimage, keep us mindful of where our journey ends and teach us to act in a way that expresses our heavenly identity. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen.

May 13  Gentleness

I happened to see the final episode of a reality-TV series entitled *The Edwardian Country House*. Although those involved were

only play-acting, and the series was heavily scripted, there were strong emotions at the end. Those who played the bosses were weepy that after three months their role was ending; those who played servants couldn't get away fast enough. Not a bad reminder that, for all the rhetoric, being a servant is not much fun. I heard of a bishop who was honest enough and blunt enough to omit the prescribed words "me your unworthy servant" because he felt them to be untrue.

Those who are paid to serve on a nine-to-five basis can assume the appropriate attitudes during work hours and hang them up with their uniform when they are off duty. Real servants are on call 24/7; they live over the shop, as it were. Their needs and preferences are considered unimportant. That is probably why we no longer have many such people—effectively, they are slaves.

It is very rare to find a person who has sincerely internalized the qualities of a servant: hardworking, nonassertive, self-effacing, obliging. This is the quality that is designated in the New Testament by the words *meekness* or *gentleness*. The best way to define this quality is by thinking of its opposites: harshness, violence, bossiness, imperiousness, assertiveness, heavy-handedness, and so on. To eschew such ways of interacting with others demands great strength of character. It means living by the fruit of the Holy Spirit, in the way set forth in the Beatitudes. It is not so easy to offer the other cheek when struck, not so easy to go the second mile, not so easy not to take offense when insulted. To be gentle means being very strong.

I can compel you by power, but I can draw you by gentleness. I can drive you by force, but I can lead you by gentleness. I can crush you by arrogance, but I can nurture you by gentleness. I can destroy you by vengeance, but I can forgive and heal you by gentleness. This is the way of Christ. This is the litmus test we can apply to ourselves, whether we be leaders or followers. (October 19, 2003.)

Jesus, meek and humble of heart, teach us the way of gentleness. Help us to use whatever authority we have with the

utmost respect for others, as a sincere service of the community and not as a convenience for ourselves. Help us also to respond to hostility with meekness and humility, and let us make peace before the sun goes down. For you are our Lord both now and forever. Amen.

May 14 ✚ GIGO

Eating habits have changed in the last thirty years. In a country like Australia, where the quantity of food is more than sufficient, we have begun to pay attention to what we put into our mouths. We like our milk to come from contented cows and our vegetables to be grown organically. We wear our spectacles when we shop for groceries so that we can scrutinize the labels to ensure that the products we purchase adhere to the high standards we have set ourselves. This is a long way from a period when suppliers were able to put sawdust in strawberry ice cream to make it grittier, or colorants in tea to give it a deeper hue. We are more conscious that we are what we eat, and so we take steps to ensure that our diet is appropriate.

Perhaps we are not so careful about what enters the mind. The things that we allow to be introduced into our thinking also have a role to play in shaping who we are and what we will become. Because many of us suffer from a chronic tendency to boredom, what we seek, above all, is to be entertained. Light amusement, we think, is simply a means of relaxation. It does no harm. We need to question that. Entertainment always comes embedded in a system of beliefs and values that, often enough, it seeks to communicate to the recipient. Every dictatorship knows the value of using popular media to transmit a message. And of suppressing any freedom of expression which might undermine the total credibility of the party line. Cartoons can easily be subversive; a politician drawn with a boozy red nose is not taken seriously because we mindlessly imbibe what the media want us to believe.

In the early days of computers we were warned of the GIGO principle: garbage in, garbage out. Computers are not infallible. They depend on how they are programmed. If the data is wrong, the conclusion will also be wrong. It is the same with humans. If only bad data goes in, then the conclusions we draw and the decisions we make will inevitably be blighted.

You may say, "I don't have much exposure to mass media, so I am safe." Perhaps. Media usage is generally underreported. We don't want to admit how much of our day is passed under its influence, directly or indirectly. Garbage in, garbage out. If we want to upgrade our lives we need to look at the quality of what enters our mind. Maybe we need to dig deeper. Perhaps to ask questions before we swallow: what are they selling? Perhaps we need to turn to cooler media for balance: reading, reflection, adult discussion. (January 25, 2004.)

Creator God, you have endowed us with reason so that we may find our way to you and learn to live a wholesome life with others. Give us a discerning mind, so that we can perceive what is good and noble and uplifting, and the courage to turn aside from all that debases your creation. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

May 15 ✚ Give

One of the tricks that professional writers and speakers use is occasionally to throw in an unusual word that jolts us back into attention. They know that there is a danger that our concentration will lapse if it is unstimulated for too long. This can be a misfortune because, sometimes, the most important words are simple and familiar.

I would suggest that one such word that we encounter often if we read the Bible is *give*. It is frequently applied to God. God gives gifts to his people: life, the promises, identity, guidance, protection. In the Fourth Gospel especially the word is used so often that translators try to spice up their text by using different

renderings. There is an advantage, however, in sticking with the simple expression, which leads us to the conclusion that the nature of God is to give. It is our nature to receive from God.

Christ is God's self-gift to humanity. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." He came to reveal God's giving nature. In his time on earth he gave to others teaching, healing, peace, comfort, courage, abundant life. Above all he gave himself; he is our Immanuel: God-with-us. Not only was Jesus God's gift to the people of Palestine two millennia ago, he is also given permanently to us by the power of the Holy Spirit. He continues to bestow his gifts on us through grace. Interiorly when we are at prayer. In the Scriptures. In the church. In the sacraments.

When Jesus was speaking to the Samaritan woman he exclaimed, "If only you knew the gift of God." I suppose he would say the same thing to us. If we can get some inkling of God as giver, then perhaps we would pay more attention to our present possibilities of receiving whatever we need to flourish. Nothing is impossible for God; it is only our lack of faith that closes our hearts so that we cannot receive what God is preparing for all who love him. (August 4, 2002.)

Eternal Father, you gave us your Son, you give us your Spirit. Help us to open our hearts to receive your gifts so that our lives may be forever marked by praise and thanksgiving. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen.

May 16 ✠ Glory

I have seen a device advertised as a means of personal defense. It is an exceedingly bright light that startles, blinds, and disorients a potential attacker so that the user can take the opportunity to escape. I don't have one, but the advertisement is a good reminder that light is not always a friendly force. Sometimes we are happier in the shadows of twilight.

There are three kinds of brilliance: one that oppresses, one that dazzles, and one that attracts. Light that oppresses makes

us conscious of our own poverty and dirtiness. The brilliant know-it-all is not a comfortable companion because we are constantly being excoriated for our inexcusable ignorance. Light that dazzles us is light that takes up all available space so that it is as though we cease to exist. We are lost in admiration, yet we feel unwilling to approach. Light that attracts is that which appears at a distance and which draws first our eyes and then our feet to itself. We see it and want to come closer. Like Moses and the burning bush, first the extraordinary sight seizes our attention, then we feel compelled to move toward it, and then, as we approach, we are filled with a delightful sense that we are in the presence of the sacred and hasten to remove our shoes.

The glory of God is the attraction by which we are drawn toward the ultimate mystery. An encounter with it kindles in us a desire that can never be satisfied. The more we experience the infinite variety of the divine, the more we desire it. Our desire is never satiated. When our desire reaches out to God, so Saint Bernard tells us, it is like throwing oil on a fire; it burns ever more fiercely. Desire for material things disappears once we possess them. Being drawn into the glory of God has the effect of making us desire to be drawn ever more intensely into the mystery. Pseudo-Denys describes this ongoing penetration as like the action of a corkscrew: going ever deeper into a single and simple reality, but always finding something new. Even though we remain somewhat fearful in the presence of the all-holy God, we are fascinated and spellbound by it, and desire ever more.

This encounter with God's glory is the means by which we are also sanctified. "With unveiled face we all gaze on the Lord's glory; we are transformed from glory to glory into his very image as by the Lord who is Spirit." (October 24, 2009.)

Loving God, you have planted in our hearts the desire for eternal life with you. Help us to set lesser desires aside and to follow more earnestly on the road mapped out for us by your Son, who is our Lord for ever and ever. Amen.