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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals (February 1, 2004)

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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MASS

In the anointing with chrism in the Baptismal Liturgy the Church proclaims that each Christian shares in the royal, priestly and prophetic functions of Christ. The manner of our participation in this threefold work of governing, sanctifying and teaching varies according to our adult vocation. In each aspect of our lives we are called to follow the King on his way to the Father, the High Priest bestowing the gift of Life and the Prophet instructing the Church in the Truth which works through love.

INVITATION TO REPENTANCE

How have we responded to the divine gifts from our Baptism? The first benefit of this sacrament in the reorientation of our lives toward God through the obedience of the new Adam and the forgiveness of sins for adults. We acknowledge our weaknesses and rejoice in the divine mercy and forgiveness.

Lord, we have sinned against you: Lord have mercy.
Christ, show us the Father's mercy and grant us your salvation.

HEADINGS FOR THE READINGS

First Reading (Jer 1:4-5, 17-18). Already belonging to a priestly family, the young Jeremiah is called to a new function as a teacher. Instructing the people to be faithful to the covenant did not win him popular acclaim. The assurance of God's presence sustained him.

Second Reading (1 Cor 12:31-13:13). The beautiful "hymn to charity" celebrates the theological virtues conveyed with the gift of new life in Baptism. Proper use of faith, hope and charity involves the imitation of Christ's sacrificial love.

Gospel (Lk 4:21-30). Jesus proclaimed the prophetic portion in the synagogue service and preached effectively. However, people thought that they knew this local boy and failed to respond to the prophetic dimension of his mission. How do we WE react to the Gospel message?

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

President: Through Baptism we have a share in Christ's life with you, our heavenly Father. Our strength comes from your gifts, so in our willingness to serve, we present these petitions.

Reader:

For Pope John Paul and all bishops, that your light guide them in presenting the Gospel to our world.

For all Christians, that they may respond to your call to bear your gifts to the society in which they live and work.

For all those preparing for Baptism, that they may be guided by teachers, sponsors and friends to a love of the Gospel.

For all those who work to bring your peace to their homes, workplace and society, that their efforts may be blessed.

For all who defend the weak who cannot speak for themselves, that they receive strength to persevere.

For all who have died recently, especially those who have no one to pray for them, may they rest in peace.

President: Merciful Father, you sent your Son to reconcile the world to yourself, may all the faithful grow in their calling to imitate the loving fidelity of Jesus, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LORD'S PRAYER

Jesus taught us to exercise our privilege of faith by calling upon you. Together we rejoice in your gift of new life as we pray.

INVITATION TO THE SIGN OF PEACE

The gifts flowing from Christ's presence with us include the challenge to imitate his life of service, accepting each other as brothers and sisters. May the sign of peace foster our growth in the faith that works through love.

COMMUNION REFLECTION

Heavenly Father, may your gifts in Baptism and Confirmation draw us ever more closely to your Son. We unite ourselves with your will to extend his royal, priestly and prophetic work into our world. Renewed by his Eucharistic presence, we ask to pursue his way to works of justice and mercy.

FINAL BLESSING

May the one God draw us into the mystery of life in three persons. May divine blessings sustain us in our response to the gifts of faith, hope and charity.

COMMENTARY

First Reading (Jer 1:4-5, 17-18). The call of a prophet is often presented in a framework that alludes to a time of inadequate royal and priestly leadership. The prophet's main function was to remonstrate with those who were failing in their duties, to guide the people to a renewed Covenant fidelity and thus to prepare them for future challenges. The introduction to the teachings of Jeremiah (1:1-3) spans the period from 627 BC to the Exile in 586.

As in the case of Moses (Ex 3:4-22) and other prophets, God's word came to one who is already chosen as one of the Israelite community. Jeremiah had been set apart from the womb: "A prophet of the nations I appointed you" (1:5). Recognizing human inadequacy, the initial response is invariably an

objection. "Why me?" The divine answer does not promise to repair the flaw; rather: "I am with you to deliver you" (1:8). God provides the strength to accomplish the task. As promised to Moses, Jeremiah experienced the coming of God's word into his life. "Behold, I place my words in your mouth..." (1:9, see Deut 18:18). The work will have two phases: "To root up and tear down... to build and to plant (1:10). The true prophet will admonish and criticize, but only to challenge listeners to take part in the reconstruction of society. A life-time of teaching will bring Jeremiah to moments of self-doubt and persecution, but he should always recall the divine assurance: "I am with you to deliver you" (1:18).

The Christian's incorporation into Christ's role as teacher should be easier than in earlier stages of history. After all, the Prophet like Moses has given us the new commandment and has shown perfect fidelity to the Covenant. However, the myriad challenges of this age may seem overwhelming. "Stand up and tell them all that I command you" (1:17).

Second Reading (1Cor 12:31-13:13). Christians in Corinth were proud of the benefits provided by their education, so St. Paul pointed to the even greater gifts conveyed by Baptism. "... In Christ Jesus you were enriched in every way, with all discourse and all knowledge..." (1 Cor 1:5). Through the seeming folly of the cross, the weak and lowly of this world will shame the strong (1:18-31).

A variety of spiritual gifts flow into the Christian community and its members through the presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst (1 Cor 12:4-11). Paul had heard that some of the faithful thought that certain gifts confirmed their status as an elite group (14:1-19). How easy it is to apply human standards to the spiritual order! A profound corrective is offered in the hymn to charity at the center of Paul's assessment and critique.

The infused virtues, faith, hope and charity, spring from the new life bestowed in Baptism. These belong to all Christians, no matter what their adult vocation may be. Exciting as the gifts of prophecy or speaking in tongues may seem, they must be at the service of the community for the edification of the mystical Body of Christ. Only the deeds accomplished in union with the sacrificial love of Christ will bear fruit in both time and eternity. Moreover, facets of charity show in the attitude of patience and forgiveness that overcome feelings of vengefulness and jealousy.

Gospel (Lk 4:21-30). The scene in the synagogue of Nazareth draws our attention to the worship setting as a special context for prophetic instruction. Of course, the Temple in Jerusalem was the favored place for God to reveal himself to both priest and prophet, but the written Word of God enriched the lives of those who could not frequent the Temple. So Jesus heard the passage from the Torah (instruction, "Law") of Moses and proclaimed the passage from Isaiah assigned from this particular Sabbath. As a child Jesus had joined the village children in learning the Scriptures, so people would expect that he could address their implications for the congregation. What an extraordinary message! "TODAY this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing!" (Lk 4:21). This insight is on the same level as the words of the angel to the shepherds: "Today in the city of David a savior has been born for you..." (2:11). The immediacy of God's gift in the person of Jesus is confirmed for Zacchaeus (19:9) and the good thief (23:43). In each case the assurance of salvation is offered to those less favored in the society, who accept the blessing as a gift. Some frequenters of the Nazareth synagogue expected special benefits from Jesus, but sometimes unlikely candidates are the best disposed. The great prophets Elijah and Elisha reached beyond the boundaries of Israel to transform the lives of Gentiles. Perhaps the folks of Nazareth did not see themselves to be poor, captive, blind or oppressed. Only those who acknowledge their human weaknesses and needs can be beneficiaries of Jesus' gifts, which are intended to relieve people's ailments as a sign of the kingdom.

"Here is your God...he comes to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf be cleared. Then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the dumb will sing" (Isa 35:4-6).

REFLECTION

Each week the Church gathers the faithful to celebrate the mystery of life; both in public worship and in family prayer we acknowledge that our human experience of existence is enriched immeasurably by Christ's gift of a fuller life, in communion with the living God. However, we should never take for granted the initial gift of human life. God's words to Jeremiah are true for each human being: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you came to birth I consecrated you..." (1:2-5). The biological processes that govern human existence from conception to birth are always at the service of God's plan to set this life apart from the mundane for a sacred and eternal destiny. Jeremiah was dedicated to God's service as a member of the Israelite nation, as a priest and later as a prophet. Who would have foreseen at his birth the important role he would play in Israel's history? Who can guess the contribution that a child born in 2004 will have on the new century? Yet so often people fail to consider even the right of that unborn child to savor the gift of life itself. Of course, abortion and infanticide were known in various cultures of ages past and from early times the Church interpreted the fifth commandment to prohibit such attacks on innocent life. "Do not kill a child by abortion nor kill the infant at birth" (*Teachings of the Twelve Apostles 2:2*).

But never has the attack on the life of the unborn reached the proportions we have experienced in the last three decades. The Church tries valiantly to appeal to conscience on every level, from the individual facing a difficult personal decision to the medical profession and the international order. People of faith can make a contribution, each from our own place in society, some by providing homes for children, others by expressing their convictions in the context of their work, all by moving from prayer into acts of compassion toward those in need.

With simplicity and directness Mother Teresa of Calcutta addressed the issue in the context of the United Nations Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, September 1994):

I am sure that deep down in your heart you know that the unborn child is a human being loved by God, like you and me. How can anyone knowing that deliberately destroy that life? It frightens me to think of all the people who kill their conscience so that they can perform an abortion..." She drew attention to the misuse of resources and human energy because of a myopic vision of the world and the meaning of life. "We are too often afraid of the sacrifices we might have to make. But where there is love, there is always sacrifice. And when we love until it hurts, there is joy and peace.

Knowing St. Paul's hymn to charity, Mother Teresa taught that the greatest response to the divine gift of life and love is to help the poor. Our convictions must find expression in practical efforts to provide alternatives to abortion. "If there is a child you don't want, or can't feed or educate, give that child to me!" What would you or I give up from our relative abundance so that others may enjoy the necessities of life? That is the challenge of the Gospel. In this Sunday's readings the Church reminds us that fidelity to God's teaching will bring ridicule and persecution. The ideals of the prophets and of the Gospel sound wonderful, but the altruistic love demanded by Jesus can be imitated only at a cost. Some people of Nazareth expected to receive the benefits of Jesus' ministry simply because this was his hometown. However, these blessings called for faith in the person and mission of Jesus. Aspects of

his message were hard to take and provoked them to anger. Those following Christ find that the Gospel may bring ridicule and persecution. This was the experience of the prophets of old. Jeremiah was informed that the task would be onerous and the immediate response of many listeners would be negative. Some people do not appreciate learning about their physical or spiritual ailments, even though that knowledge may be the first step toward a cure. No teacher who is demanding should expect popular acclaim, but Jeremiah received the assurance that God would remain with him to deliver him (1:19). That promise of God's presence is the foundation for our confidence today as we proclaim the unpopular truth that every human life is sacred, especially when most vulnerable. The "little ones" have ever needed the care of the Church; those excluded from the protection of law and attacked in the name of someone's "choice" cry out silently for help. May we convince others that these unborn children bear the divine image and a sacred destiny!