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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals (February 8, 2004)

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

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February 8, 2004

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MASS

Last Sunday the selection from Jeremiah described the unique sacredness of every human life as the basis for a call to serve God's people. Today Isaiah and Peter recognize the profound need for cleansing from sin in order to respond to the divine call. Through no fault of their own, children are born into a flawed world, disoriented from their true purpose and destiny. Hence comes the need for deliverance and new life.

INVITATION TO REPENTANCE

Our awareness of God's presence overwhelms us, so we acknowledge the sinful condition which we partake and from which we have been rescued by the sacrifice of Christ. Lingering effects of human weakness require the purifying action of the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world.

Lord Jesus, you came to gather the nations into God's kingdom. Lord, have mercy.
You come in word and sacrament to purify and strengthen us. Christ, have mercy.
You will come in glory with salvation for your people. Lord, have mercy.

HEADINGS FOR READINGS

First Reading (Isa 6:1-8). All the earth is filled with God's glory, the illuminating manifestation of the divine purpose. Yet people require the drama of worship in community to becoming fully alert to God's call, and a cleansing preparation for the confident response to serve others in God's name.

Second Reading (1 Cor 15:1-11). The central message of the Gospels, the Paschal Mystery, is transmitted by all Christian teachers: "Christ died for our sins... he was buried and he was raised on the third day..." Like Isaiah, Saul of Tarsus was transformed into a servant of God's people by a special revelation. Paul lived and taught the Gospel as a sign of gratitude for the gift of faith.

Gospel (Lk 5:1-11). Simon's boat became a teacher's chair for Jesus, whose presence also brought astounding success to the fisherman's efforts. Recognizing that God was at work through Jesus, Simon became a learner and later an ambassador of Christ.

PRAAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

President: Heavenly Father, your gifts are the foundations for true peace in our world. Acknowledging that our failings and weaknesses can be an obstacle to your plan, we humbly present these petitions.

Reader:

In imitation of Christ, may the Church mediate the divine gift of forgiveness, leading us to life and peace.

May the teachings of Pope John Paul and the bishops echo the call of Christ for those searching for spiritual gifts.

That parents and all other teachers guide children in their search for their vocation in life.

That the sick and suffering may receive loving care in hospitals and homes.

That all who died recently, especially our friends, relatives and benefactors, enter into the heavenly Jerusalem.

President: Lord, show us how to become witnesses of your glory in the midst of the trials of daily life. We present these petitions in union with the prayer of the Church throughout the world. We ask for blessings through Jesus your Son.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LORD'S PRAYER

United with Christ the High Priest, we ask that our lives correspond more deeply to the heavenly model.

INVITATION TO THE SIGN OF PEACE

Christ called us from selfish concerns to become vehicles of his gifts to those around us. Share a sign of the peace that he brought through the Paschal Mystery.

COMMUNION REFLECTION

Christ's presence in this Eucharistic sacrifice is the application of the Paschal Mystery to the Church and her members, generation after generation. Like Peter, we acknowledge our unworthiness, but rejoice to hear his call to a life of generous service according to our vocation.

COMMENTARY

First Reading (Isa 6:1-8). Moses was instructed to build the ark and the tabernacle according to the heavenly pattern or model revealed on Mount Sinai (see Ex 25:40; 26:30). When Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem was completed, priests brought the ark into its confines. "When the priests left the holy place... the LORD's glory filled the Temple of the LORD" (1 Kg 8:11). Not only was this a replica of the heavenly Temple, it became the favored setting for divine revelation and blessings. Isaiah's faith prepared him for the vision which showed a link between the worship of Israel and the praise of the heavenly choirs. The faithful in the earthly Temple and the holy city should recognize that this is the House of God and the gate to heaven (see Gen 28:17).

Like Jacob, Isaiah was overawed by this privilege, even as he was drawn into the experience to which Temple worship pointed. He acknowledged his sins and was purified so that he would be prepared for God's call to become a prophet. Privy to the heavenly council around the throne of God, Isaiah heard: "Who will go for us?" His aristocratic upbringing would be a good foundation for a ministry to king and nobles, now that he had divine assurance of forgiveness.

Second Reading (1 Cor 15:1-11). Saul of Tarsus had striven valiantly to conform his life to God's will, but his very commitment led to misplaced zeal and persecution of the Church. His life was taken

into the mystery of Christ crucified through a special revelation. "God, who from my mother's womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles..." (Gal 1:15-16). He learned to ground his faith and teaching on the kerygma (a herald's brief message) that the Anointed One (Messiah in Hebrew, Christos in Greek) died for our sins according to the Scriptures... and he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures..." (I Cor 15:4, see Rom 4:25).

The problem of sin, to which the prophets alert us (see Jer 31:34) have been overcome in the obedient love of Christ. This prepared the way for the gifts of life and faith which the Apostles and others in the Church conveyed to the poor in spirit.

Gospel (Lk 5:1-11). Simon had experienced Jesus' healing power in his own home (4:38-39) but this marvelous catch deepened his appreciation for the Master (Luke's equivalent to "Rabbi") to the point of awe. How could he be worthy of such a sign? It seems to hint that Jesus knew an intimacy with God far beyond what Simon had realized. Thus he addressed Jesus as "Lord," a title usually applied to Jesus in recognition of his unique relationship with God, particularly after the resurrection.

Jesus immediately invited Simon to become a participant in his mission. "From now on you will be catching human beings." Of course, he would need to learn that only through the strength that Jesus provided would he persevere. Then, because Jesus prayed for him, Simon would come back to this challenge and strengthen his brothers (Lk 22:31-32).

REFLECTION

How do we perceive our relationship with God? Does the beauty of a sunrise or a rainbow inspire a prayer of thanks for the wonders of Creation? Indeed, divine goodness, mercy and righteousness should be perceived through the veil of creaturehood. "All the earth is filled with God's glory!" But some people are oblivious to the ways in which God's power and wisdom permeate all reality. Many would miss as well the insight that we must live conscious of the challenge to conform our lives to a sublime model of excellence. "Be holy as I, the Lord your God, am holy!" (Lev 19:2). So a continuing education is necessary for all.

The ancient Israelites recognized that personal and community existence is bound by space and time. Their laws governed the rhythms of life by careful designation of specific times and places for worship. Moreover, coming to worship involved a transition from secular to sacred with prayers and ceremonies that called for an examination of conscience. Thus pilgrims to the Temple in Jerusalem were challenged: "O Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy mountain?" (Ps 15:1). The person was expected to live with integrity in day-to-day existence, dedicated to the one God and honest in human relationships (see also Ps 24:3-6). The drama of worship in the Temple evoked an awareness that we live in God's presence, called to reflect the divine image in the fabric of our lives. Thus, in the year 742 B.C., an aristocrat of Jerusalem named Isaiah was overwhelmed by the divine majesty in the Temple. He perceived two mysterious seraphim, aflame with intensity of their love, worshiping in humble modesty and awe before the Creator and King of the universe. They proclaimed God's supreme holiness, because triple repetition of a term in Hebrew conveys the notion of the superlative. Complete separation from all that is tainted is essential to the concept of holiness in Hebrew, so Isaiah expressed his sense of human sinfulness. "Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips..." (Is 6:5). Well aware of the truth that no one shall see God and live (Gn 16:13; 32:31), Isaiah acknowledged his unworthiness. No doubt he had

recited a prayer of confession as he entered the Temple, but now the transcendence of God took on a deeper meaning.

God never leaves the honest, humble person to wallow in a sense of inadequacy. There is work to be done, and that is why Isaiah was privileged to know God-and-himself in a new way. Important as our own prayers and ablutions are when we enter God's presence, divine action is necessary for us to be transformed. The Israelites used water and fire for purification, so Isaiah experienced cleansing by an incandescent coal from the altar of incense. Words interpret the experience: "Now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged" (6:7). Then he is capable of responding to the divine commission to teach and admonish, uplift and guide the rulers and people of Judah.

The sublime vision of Isaiah has exerted a powerful influence on Jewish and Christian liturgy and spirituality. We all recognize that this text is the source of the "Sanctus" of the Mass. How many have noticed the priest or deacon bowing in prayer before proclaiming the Gospel? "Cleanse my heart and my lips, O Lord, as you cleansed the lips of the prophet Isaiah, so that I may worthily proclaim your holy Gospel." An awesome responsibility is the mission of continuing Christ's work! Do pray that God's servants be ever more worthy of the task.

The Gospel might occasion a smile. Simon, the experienced fisherman, hears a carpenter telling him how to make a catch! How many of us would have ridiculed the advice? But Simon had already seen the carpenter rebuild the lives of the afflicted, so he obeyed. What was his reaction to the marvelous catch? "Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Lk 5:8). In the midst of the mundane he recognized that Jesus manifested God's holiness. There was no dramatic act of purification at this point, but the assurance of divine care. "Do not be afraid!" These words, heard by Zechariah (Lk 1:13), Mary (1:30) and the shepherds at Bethlehem (2:10), prepare for a commission of service. "From now on you will be catching people!" But first the fishermen became learners at the feet of the Master so that they could draw others to the flame of divine love.