

**April 30, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the Fourth Sunday of Easter, we always read from the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, which is commonly referred to as the "Good Shepherd Discourse." Because priests should model their lives on the example of Christ the Good Shepherd, priestly ordinations are often celebrated on this Sunday. Additionally, this Sunday is associated with preaching about priestly vocations.

This week, Bishop Ricken invited all the priests serving in the Diocese of Green Bay to join him in a meeting to discuss this week's readings and encouraged us to preach on vocations this weekend. Instead of presenting us with a new vocations program, he invited us to pray over the scriptures in a group meditation. Each priest was offered the opportunity to share how God was speaking to his heart through these biblical readings. Unfortunately, it's not common for priests to gather with the bishop with the only purpose of the meeting being to pray together. It really was a touching shared experience

One priest shared that these words spoke to him: "They recognize his voice" (John 10:4b). These are the same words that spoke to me. This priest pondered, whether or not people still recognize the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd? He observed that our world is filled with distractions, noise, and often hours filled with activities, sometimes almost frenetic activity. And amidst all this noise, the sweet and loving voice of the Good Shepherd gets lost. As a result, the Lord is calling, but we cannot hear.

I agree.

There is an antidote to this noise and distraction. We need to slow down and intentionally seek out silence and solitude. We can turn off our music, radios, televisions and other devices, but often it is the noise that arises from within our hearts and minds that distracts us more. These days it takes time to learn to be silent. But it is worth the effort. Silence brings its own reward: "Through silence, we return to our heavenly origin, where there is nothing but calm, peace, repose, silent contemplation, and adoration of the radiant face of God" (from Cardinal Robert Sarah's book *The Power of Silence*).

When we cultivate silence not only in our home environment, but more importantly silence in our hearts and minds, we find that the silence is not empty nor is it quiet. Silence is filled with the presence of God. And in silence, we recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Blessings,

Father Bill

\*I would highly recommend Cardinal Robert Sarah's book: *The Power of Silence*.

**April 23, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Peace be with you and Happy Easter! Today's Gospel is the famous account of the disciples' walk to Emmaus. Like every passage of the Gospels, there are a number of layers of meaning here. I return regularly to this passage in my prayer, and the Lord always draws me into another layer of meaning.

To open up this passage, notice how it can be divided into two parts. First, we are walking with the two disciples and the unknown stranger. This stranger, who is Jesus, although the disciples do not recognize him, is opening up the scriptures "beginning with Moses and all the prophets," so that they might better understand. Second, the disciples invite the stranger to stay with them for dinner. As was the custom at that time, the guest is asked to offer the blessing and break the bread. At the moment, the disciples recognize Jesus, who is living and not dead, but Jesus mysteriously vanishes from their sight.

From the time of the early Christians up until today, this passage was seen as a pattern for celebrating the Eucharist. Like the disciples on the way, we first encounter Jesus through the Word of God. We call this the "Liturgy of the Word." Since, as St. Paul writes to Timothy, "All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching ... that the man of God may be complete, and equipped for every good work" (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Catholic Church has thoughtfully arranged selections of readings from both the Old and New Testaments over a three year cycle to ensure that the faithful have a wide exposure to the Word of God.

At the celebration of the Eucharist, we first encounter Jesus as the Word of God.

For the second part of the celebration of the Eucharist, notice what Jesus does in today's Gospel, "while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessings, broke it, and gave it to them..." What do these words sound like? It is more than a simple table blessing. These words recall Jesus' words and actions at the Last Supper. There while he was at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "take this all of you and eat of it, for THIS IS MY BODY." Luke is making a connection between what Jesus is doing here in Emmaus and what he did with the disciples in the Upper Room at the Last Supper.

We believe that Jesus is truly and substantially present in the Eucharist. For the early Christians, the celebration of the Eucharist was referred to as "the breaking of the bread." So while Jesus vanishes from their sight, he does not leave them. He is still with them, since the bread that was broken is no ordinary bread. The bread that was broken is the Eucharist. Even the disciples make reference to this by saying that "he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

Each Sunday, Jesus meets us on our road, on our journey. He approaches us through the proclamation of his Holy Word and through "the breaking of the bread" – through his real and substantial presence in the Eucharist. My prayer for you is that like the disciples, your eyes may be opened, that you might recognize his presence in your life, and that your hearts may burn within you.

Easter blessings to you,

Father Bill

**April 16, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Christ is risen! He is truly risen!

Normally the Sunday readings are organized on a three-year cycle. The Second Sunday of Easter, that is this Sunday, always has the same reading from the Gospel of John. It is the famous account of “doubting Thomas.”

Why did Thomas doubt?

Being one of the original apostles, Thomas spent the previous three years following Jesus in community with the other apostles. He should have been able to trust them. He heard their testimony, “We have seen the Lord.” He also saw their actions, “when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews...” Their words said one thing, but their actions said another thing. Actions often speak louder than words. Thomas could see from their actions that the Resurrection did not change the actions of the other apostles. So, he doubted.

This becomes a challenging question for our own faith: Has your faith made a difference in your life? Can others see that? Before we have a chance to preach the Gospel with our words, we are already preaching the Gospel with actions, behaviors, and the way we live our life.

“Thomas... was not with them.” Thomas was not with the rest of the apostles. He was by himself. He was isolated. It is difficult to believe alone. The Christian faith has a strong communal aspect. Jesus said, “for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matthew 18:20). Jesus continues to be present in his church gathered in prayer. This is one of the reasons why Christians must gather on the Lord’s Day. It is simply not enough to pray privately at home. Participating in a Christian community builds up our faith. Participating in Christian community is often a place where individuals powerfully encounter Christ.

Intentionally participating in small Christian communities is a powerful way to grow in the Catholic faith. As Catholics, we are very comfortable gathering in a large group each Sunday for the Eucharist, but we are less comfortable gathering in smaller groups for shared prayer, Bible studies, and mutually to encourage each other in living the Faith. In my experience as a Catholic believer, my faith started to grow, when I found a group of friends in college that desired to grow in their Catholic Faith. We prayed together. We studied the Bible and the Catechism together. We held each other accountable. It was in this community that my faith moved from being an abstract idea to a personal encounter with Jesus. It was in this community that Jesus became real to me. As a priest, I want people to have the same experience that I have had. As a pastor, I don’t know how to begin these small communities, but I am convinced that the more we gather in small communities, the stronger and more vibrant our parishes will become.

Peace and blessings,

Father Bill

**April 9, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Have you ever attended the Easter Vigil? Due to its length and late hour many Catholics will go their entire life without attending. And they are missing out. When this liturgy is celebrated well, the duration hardly matters, but the heart is greatly moved.

The Easter Vigil liturgy always begins in the dark. No lights are left on in the church. No candles are lit. Ideally it begins outside the church (although the unpredictable Wisconsin spring weather often prevents this). In that darkness, a fire is lit. The fire cuts the darkness. From the fire, the Easter candle is lit, and carried into the empty, cold, and dark church greeted with the triumphal song: "The Light of Christ!"

Have you ever seen a single candle burning in the midst of a dark room? Although that flame seems small, it throws off an impressive amount of light. Good Friday represents the pinnacle of human darkness. It shows the brutality of the result of sin: the murder of the Lord on the Cross. Easter Vigil shows God's response to that darkness. The light enters into the cold barren darkness. The light conquers that darkness. Even the most extreme human darkness cannot extinguish the Light of Christ.

This should encourage us. It should bring us hope. There is not a darkness so opaque that the light will not triumph.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it" (John 1:5).

But the light does not remain only with the Easter candle. As the deacon carries the candle further into the dark church, and as the "Light of Christ" continues to be proclaimed, the flame of that candle is shared among those gathered. They receive the light from the candle. "A fire into many flames divided, yet never dimmed by sharing its light..." (from the Easter Exultet). This sharing of the light represents Christ sharing his victory with us. As he overcame the darkness of Good Friday by the Resurrection, he shares the power to overcome all darkness to those who believe in him. And the light grows even brighter by being shared with us.

"Therefore, O Lord, we pray you that this candle, hallowed to the honor of your name, may persevere undimmed, to overcome the darkness of this night... May this flame be found still burning by the Morning Star: the one Morning Star who never sets, Christ your Son, who, coming back from death's domain, has shed his peaceful light on humanity, and lives and reigns forever and ever" (also from the Easter Exultet).

May the light of Christ ever burn brightly in your heart and life, that you may always have the confident faith and hope that there is no darkness, however deep, that can extinguish the flame of faith given to you by the Risen Christ.

Happy and Blessed Easter,

Father Bill

**April 2, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Hear to Serve

**PUTTING OUR BEST FOOT FORWARD**

If the human Jesus was to walk into one of our parish communities, how would we greet him? Would it be with palm branches and cheering? Would we be concerned with His physical well-being and be ready with a dinner? Or would we be like this woman who poured out her love for Jesus in an extravagant way?

“A woman came up to Him with an Alabaster jar of costly perfumed oil and poured it on His head while He was reclining at table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant, and said, “Why this waste? It could have been sold for much and the money given to the poor” (Mt 26: 7-12).

While the disciples were in shock from what seemed to be a waste of costly oil, something that could have helped feed the poor, this woman showed them, and us, the proper way we should worship. We need to show our gratitude towards God. We should always, always give our best to God. We do not give God our second best. Now, if we continue to read in this Gospel, we see Jesus does acknowledge the value of giving to the poor, but He elevates the gifts given to Him on an even higher level.

This is why we always decorate our Churches with the finest things that we can afford. We use gold and silver; we give money to keep our buildings in good repair; we give money to support seminaries, convents, and the Diocese.

Speaking of that, I must give credit to the people of St. Gregory and Holy Trinity Parishes for the way you generously gave from not just your wallets but your hearts as you supported the one by One Campaign and the Bishop’s Appeal. Any time something needs to be fixed or bought, the funds seem to miraculously appear. You understand, just like the woman with the costly oil, about giving God our gratitude, by giving God our very best.

Jesus does also give value to giving to the poor. He told us in Matthew 25:40, “Amen I say to you, when you did it to one of the least of my brothers you did it to Me.” We are called to give to the poor as we give to God. If we give to the poor, we are truly giving to God. God created all people in His likeness and image. God gives the poor their dignity. Giving to God and giving to the poor is linked together.

As we come into Holy Week one of the ways we can give to the poor, to give alms, is to donate to the CRS Rice Bowl. It is not too late to add your change to the box. You can also write a check or put cash into an envelope, mark it CRS Rice Bowl, and drop it in the collection basket or bring it to one of the parish offices.

Catholic Relief Services is the worlds’ largest charitable organization. 93% of what you give goes directly to the poor. (Our tax dollars should only give us that good of a return.) There are so many people in dire need of help. If you haven’t given alms yet, it’s time to put your faith into action. Let us give gratitude to God by giving to His poor.

Viva Cristo Rey,  
Deacon Gary

**March 26, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

How do you feel when it seems like God does not answer your prayer? Today's Gospel begins with an earnest prayer: "The sisters of Lazarus sent word to Jesus, saying 'Master, the one you love is ill.'" Jesus does not promptly respond. Rather he waits two days, and in the meantime Lazarus dies.

Imagine the feelings and thoughts going through the hearts and minds of the sisters. They wait in expectation for their friend, yet he delays. They are disappointed when their brother dies. They have no way of understanding why Jesus didn't come. We sympathize with them, since each of us has had the experience of earnestly imploring the Lord and not receiving the response for which we hoped.

The Lord could cure Lazarus. He is not apathetic to the prayers of his friends. He cares for Lazarus. It would be good to heal Lazarus, but Jesus has something even greater in mind. This is a principle of our relationship with God. God is not satisfied to give us something that is "merely good," nor will he settle for giving us something better. He will only be satisfied to give us the BEST.

There are two responses to the unanswered prayer of Martha and Mary. First we see that Martha and Mary express Faith and Trust in the Lord, even though their prayer seems unanswered. They are confident that Jesus has the power to heal. They trust that even though their brother has died, he will rise on the last day. The other response is that of the crowds, who sneer and deride, "Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?"

It is a much greater miracle to raise someone from the dead than it is to cure an illness. So Jesus, who by his tears, shows that he is not indifferent to our grief, goes to the tomb, and calls Lazarus from the domain of death back to the land of the living. "Lazarus, come out!" Martha and Mary asked the Lord for something good, the healing of their brother. The Lord provided something even greater, that he was raised from the dead. But this is not yet the best.

If Jesus had merely cured Lazarus, the miracle would have been merely private, known only to those who already believed that he was the Messiah and the Resurrection. By raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus not only affirms the faith of Martha and Mary, and his disciples, but everyone who witnessed this miracle began to believe in Christ. The community of Faith was expanded.

Although Lazarus was raised to life here on earth, he will die another earthly death. There is a great life that Jesus wishes to give us. "I am the Resurrection and the Life, whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die," says the Lord.

God will never settle for giving us what is "merely good." But often what we ask for in prayer falls far short of the best that God wants to give us. So we offer prayers, but God seems to respond with silence and delay. Yet, in reality he is deepening our hope and drawing us deeper in faith that the holy desires of our heart may begin to yearn for the great graces that he wishes to give to us. This type of prayer requires us to imitate the FAITH and TRUST of Martha and Mary, rather than the sneering of the crowds.

How do you respond?

Blessings,

Father Bill

**March 19, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Hear to Serve

**I DO BELIEVE, LORD**

In this week's Gospel we hear of a blind man, a man who was blind since birth, a man who was accustomed to living in darkness. He had no idea what it meant to see light until Jesus came and cured him of his blindness. It was only when Jesus gave him the gift of sight that he could understand. When he saw the light, he saw the truth. The man understood better than the Pharisees who Jesus was, he understood that Jesus is the Light of the World. The man could proclaim, "I do believe, Lord."

This Lent we should ask ourselves if we are blind to the "Light of the World." Now, I realize we are not talking about being physically blind from birth. I'm talking about being spiritually blind from sin. This can be so much worse because our life here on earth is short but eternity, well, that's forever.

We become blind to the harm that sin does to us. We think, "My sins are my own. My sins really don't hurt anyone." We let them build and fester inside of us over the weeks, the months, and the years. Pretty soon the eyes of our souls become clouded-over. We lose our ability to see the light. We become cynical, not just towards the world, but towards God also. We stumble around in the dark.

But just as Jesus restored the blind man's hope and confidence through a personal encounter, Jesus will do the same for us through His Sacraments. In this case, the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

I realize I may have just made a whole lot of you flinch. It's a well-known fact that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the forgotten Sacrament. For some reason, it seems the world has come under the attitude that forgiveness from the Lord is something I can do on my own. But if you read through the Bible, you will see that the sacrifices of the people, the forgiveness of sins always involved a mediator (a priest) between them and God.

Back to the point, if we do not have our Spiritual Blindness cured by Jesus in His sacrament of Reconciliation, we will never see the light. We will never understand. We will never receive the graces of His greatest Sacrament the Eucharist. We remain in the dark. I do not wish to sound harsh, but this is the reality. I say these things out of love for Christ and you.

Lent is a perfect time to come face to face with the reality of our spiritual blindness. It is time for all of us to experience a personal encounter with Jesus in Confession. It is there that we find healing and are cured of our blindness. In the light of Christ, our sight is restored, and we can see the truth. We too can proclaim, "I do believe, Lord."

Viva Cristo Rey,

Deacon Gary

**March 12, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) offers this beautiful reflection about today's Gospel:

"If you knew the gift of God!"<sup>1</sup> The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him (CCC #2560).

Every religion in the world searches for God. Only Christianity dares to say that God is searching for us. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were hiding from God because they were ashamed of their sin. However, God came searching for them and called out, "Where are you?"<sup>2</sup>

The woman in today's Gospel reading has every reason to believe that God does not love her. She is a Samaritan, and the Samaritans were despised by the Jews. She was divorced many times and was not married to the man with whom she was living. This is why she was fetching water at noon, that is the hottest part of the day. She was ashamed. So she was coming to the well when she thought no one else would be there. Yet, someone was there waiting for her. There she met Christ, who desired not only a drink of water to slake his thirst, but much more desired that this woman would drink the waters of eternal life.

Christ has the same desire for you that he had for this woman. He searches for us. And wants us to drink the waters of eternal life. Like Adam and Eve, we can hide from God. We can avoid him by losing ourselves in distracts and being busy bodies. But what is Christ asking from us?

During this Lent, set aside whatever distracts you from spending quiet time with Christ. Be still. Be silent. And let Christ approach you in prayer. In the silent stillness, we will hear the voice of Christ speak to us, and if we are willing to listen, like this woman, we too will be filled with an excited joy that comes from knowing and loving Jesus.

May you meet Christ, and may He set your hearts on fire!

Blessings,

Father Bill

<sup>1</sup>Gospel of John 4:10

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3:9



**March 5, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the Roman liturgical tradition, the transfiguration of Jesus is always read on the Second Sunday of Lent. This year, we will hear the version from the Gospel of Matthew.

No detail is wasted in the words of Holy Scripture, especially in the Gospels. Pay attention to two details that could otherwise easily be missed: "Jesus took Peter, James and John, and led them up a high mountain (1) by themselves (2)" (Matthew 17:1).

Why was the Transfiguration on a mountain? After all, it could have been on a plain or along the seashore. These were all common places for Jesus to meet his disciples. There are two reasons. Mountains are privileged places of encounter between God and his people. Abraham took Isaac up a mountain. It was on Mount Sinai that Moses encountered God in the burning bush and later received the Ten Commandments. So Jesus is taking his chosen disciples up a mountain to encounter God. Following the disciples up the mountain, we prepare our hearts for an encounter with God.

Mountain climbing involves effort. Peter, James, and John had to work to see the transfiguration of Jesus. Anyone who has ever hiked a mountain knows that the view from the top is worth the effort. During Lent, we voluntarily submit ourselves to penances and sacrifices that require effort and perseverance. We seek a greater reward than a stunning view. We are motivated to overcome our temptations and to draw closer to God. The reward is greater internal freedom and a nearer closeness to God. The more seriously that we apply ourselves to Lent, the greater the joy of the Resurrection celebration. As Catherine of Siena said, "nothing great is ever achieved without much endurance."

Secondly, Jesus took them up the mountain by themselves. He took them away from the crowds. He took them away from the burdens of the daily routine. They had to be alone with him and lifted out of their ordinary existence to see him shining brightly.

This is an important aspect of Lenten spirituality. We leave the crowds behind to be alone with Jesus. This means devoting extra time to be alone with God. Instead of spending time watching videos and TV shows, or listening to podcasts, we take that time to be alone with God. We deliberately seek silence and quiet. When we are alone with the Lord, we get a true sense of his nearness and powerful presence.

Lent should disrupt our daily routine. Routines are good since they help us to navigate our environment efficiently, but they also dull our awareness. We stop noticing. Our Lent resolutions shake things up a bit, and with that shake up, we grow aware of God's presence. We don't need to worry that our daily commitments will be left unfulfilled. After all, Jesus takes them back down the mountain (referring Matthew 17:9). They return to the crowds and to their daily commitments. Yet now they are now strengthened by the mountaintop vision. So, it is with Lent. We must return to crowds and our daily routine, but we return fortified by the graces we have received and encouraged by a stronger sense of the Lord's mysterious presence.

Blessings and Prayers,

Father Bill

**February 26, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We prepare for the celebration of the Lord's Resurrection with the forty day fast of Lent. Nearly all the ancient Churches, along with many Protestant communities, keep a Lenten fast of forty days. This practice that is shared by nearly all ancient Christians most likely originates with the Apostles themselves. So even though Lent is not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament, we can be confident that a forty day fast in preparation for Easter goes back to the very beginning of Christianity. But why forty days?

In the Old Testament, forty is a number associated with periods of purification and redemption. In the book of Genesis, when God sees the wickedness of humankind, he sends a flood to purify the world (see the story of Noah's flood in Genesis 6:5-8:19). It rains for FORTY days; the world floods and is washed clean.

After the Lord God rescued His people from slavery in Egypt, they wandered in the desert for FORTY years. During that time, the book of Numbers recalls how the people were tempted to return to Egypt because they desired to eat the cucumbers, melons, and onions that grew there (see Numbers 11:4-6). They also grumbled against the Lord and He sent serpents to chastise them (see Numbers 21:4-9). Most grievously, they turned away from the worship of the true God to worship a golden calf (see Exodus 32:1-24). The Israelites were called out of slavery, but they needed FORTY years of trials to be purified before they could enter the Promised Land.

In the book of Jonah, God turns away from wrath that He was going to visit upon the city of Nineveh because they fasted for FORTY days (see Jonah 3).

Before beginning His public ministry, Jesus fulfills the Old Testament model by enduring FORTY days of temptation in the desert. Noah, the Israelites, and the Ninevites all fell short, Jesus succeeded. Noah fell into sin soon after the flood subsided. The Israelites continually doubted and grumbled against the Lord God, even as God blessed them with manna from heaven and water from the rock! The Ninevites would later go on to conquer and oppress God's people. Yet, when Jesus was tempted in the desert, He was not conquered. Jesus was victorious!

We begin our annual FORTY day period of penance and purification in preparation for Easter. Like the world in the time of Noah, we needed to be washed clean. Not by waters that will flood the earth, but by the blood and water that flows from the side of Christ Crucified. Like the Israelites, we have been called to be part of God's Holy People, but also like them we often refuse to go where the Lord leads us. We need the FORTY days of Lent. Yet, unlike the world in the time of Noah, and unlike the Israelites in the desert, we are not left to our own devices as we enter the desert of Lent. Like Christ, we are led by the Spirit.

Our need for God's mercy is great, so our Lenten sacrifices and penances should be significant. Yet, our confidence should be great, since the Spirit of God has been poured out upon us through the waters of baptism and the anointing of confirmation. The Spirit leads us.

Blessed and Joyful Lent,

Father Bill

**February 19, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. Lent's purpose is explained by the readings for Ash Wednesday. St. Paul is clear, "be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20, 2nd reading). The Prophet Joel appeals to us, "return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts ..."

(Joel 2:12-13, 1st reading). It requires humility to admit that we have sinned and to recognize our need to be reconciled to God. During Lent, we take responsibility for the wrong that we have done.

Lent is a penitential season. Penances are sacrifices that we voluntarily adopt as signs of our repentance. Penances should not be easy! They should require effort and to a certain extent they should be uncomfortable and inconvenient. If your Lent is easy, chances are you are doing it wrong.

The three practices of Lent are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. All three of these come from the Ash Wednesday Gospel. Jesus gives the instruction. "When you give alms... When you pray... When you fast..." (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18). Jesus is not saying, "If you give alms... if you pray... if you fast..." Jesus is not offering these practices as an option or a suggestion. For Jesus, these are requirements.

Almsgiving is the generosity that we show the less fortunate. Almsgiving detaches us from an inordinate attachment to material possessions. Almsgiving is an effective remedy to selfishness and greed. Almsgiving helps us to resist the temptations of the world.

Prayer is absolutely necessary for the Christian life. Every spiritual master says that Christians must pray for a minimum of at least twenty minutes a day. It is not popular today to talk about the devil. But he is real. "Be vigilant, your adversary, the devil, prowls like a roaring lion, seeks to devour you" (1 Peter 5:8). We are engaged in spiritual battle, whether we realize it or not. That is why we hear these words in the opening prayer of Ash Wednesday Mass, "Grant, O Lord, that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service..." This prayer sounds like a call to battle, because Lent is a call to battle and prayer is our weapon. And as almsgiving is the remedy to the temptations of the world, prayer is our remedy against the temptations of the devil.

Lastly, Jesus talks about fasting. Fasting is hardly mentioned anymore, even though for centuries it was a normal part of Christian spirituality. Fasting is the voluntary restriction on calories to awaken hunger. The benefit of fasting includes a strengthening of self-mastery, the physical hunger of the fast awakens a spiritual hunger for God. Fasting helps us to grow in gratitude, and through fasting we gain the strength to do hard things. Since it is an act of self-discipline, it is a powerful remedy to any temptations of the flesh. Fasting should never endanger one's health, but most people in moderate health can engage in some moderate fasting.

In the next few days, take some time to reflect over what the Lord is calling you to do for Lent. Make your resolutions concrete. Write them down. The more seriously that we embrace the sacrifices of Lent,

the greater our joy at Easter. So my prayer for you is that your Lent may be hard so that your joy at Easter may be even greater.

Blessings,

Father Bill

**February 12, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

The Deacon's Book Report

Mass and realize that there is more to the story than what is being read? Have you ever wondered how all of the readings fit together?

I have to admit that when I first dove into reading the Bible I went in feet first without any plan. I hoped that when I hit the water, whatever God wanted me to know would wash over me. That turned out to be an okay plan. However, when I truly felt moved to not just read Scripture, but to study it, I needed a guide or an outline. A book that is really helpful is New Testament Basics for Catholics by John Bergsma.

It gave me an overview and an outline for each of the Gospels. It helped me to see that each Gospel was written for a specific audience. They are not just a collection of the stories Jesus told or a history of what He did. The Gospels are written in a purposeful and inspired way. Sometimes though, we can miss a lot because we do not know the "backstory". We miss the obvious clues in scripture. This is where this book is really helpful. The author gives so many nuggets of information and a lot of the Old Testament "backstory". This book was easy to follow and was extremely interesting.

One example I found interesting was the very first line in The Gospel of Matthew that we hear just about every Christmas Eve. Matthew begins, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." In this very first line Bergsma explains that Matthew has connected Jesus to three of the most important men in the Bible - Adam, David, and Abraham. This line fulfills the Old Testament prophecies of the coming of the Messiah.

When Matthew says, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ," there is only one other place in the Bible where we hear this phrase. In Genesis we hear, "This is the book of the generations of Adam." Matthew is telling us Jesus is the "The New Adam".

When Matthew calls Jesus "The Son of David," we should pay attention to the word "the". Matthew didn't say "A Son of David". David had many, many sons and descendants. Jesus isn't just a son, Jesus is "The Son".

Matthew also called Jesus, "The Son of Abraham". Again using the word "the" instead of "a" Matthew is telling us Jesus is the one whom God spoke to Abraham about when He said, "I will establish My covenant with you and with your seed after you, and by your seed shall the nations of the earth be blessed." (Did you ever think by using "The" instead of "A" would make a world of difference?)

(John Bergsma also wrote Old Testament Basics for Catholics and Psalm Basics for Catholics which are also very helpful.)

There are many more examples, and I cannot say enough good things about this book. So if you want to dig deeper into scripture, if you want help uncovering nuggets of information that will help you

understand the early Church and people of a different time, or if you want to better understand how the Words of Christ can change your life, this is a book I highly recommend.

Viva Christo Rey,

Deacon Gary

**February 5, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In northern Israel, there is a lighthouse in the middle of the desert. Since deserts are unusual places for lighthouses, it begs the question: why would you expect to find a lighthouse there? Truth be told, I am exaggerating a bit. The northern area of modern Israel, which we call Galilee, is much drier than Wisconsin, it is hardly a desert. And the lighthouse that I am speaking of is not an aid to navigation, but rather the great church of the Basilica of the Annunciation that is built over the site of Mary's house in Nazareth. The architect of this great church intentionally designed the dome to be a great lighthouse, a light that can be easily seen from anywhere in Nazareth and even beyond.

Lighthouses have two functions. They direct ships into safe harbors and warn them of hazards on the sea. Christ called himself the Light of the World (see John 8:12). By this he meant that we should look to him to be the light by which we navigate our lives. His word is a sure guide that warns of the dangers of the world, the flesh and the devil. Just as the light of a beacon cuts through the gloom of a deep fog, his words are a light of hope that cuts through the dark gloom of sin, death and despair. And it is by his light, and his light alone, that guides us safely into the harbor of heaven.

What is even more amazing is that he calls us to be light too. In this Sunday's Gospel, he calls us with these words, "You are the light of the world." He tells us that we cannot hide the light of the Gospel under a bushel basket, but rather we must be a lamp set on a lampstand to give light to the whole world. Christ's language is strong here. He is not making a recommendation or a suggestion about sharing the Light of the Gospel. Rather he is making it clear in no uncertain terms that every Christian is required to share the Light of the Gospel with others.

These words naturally make most of us uncomfortable. The wider culture discourages us from sharing our faith with others. Although the faith is deeply personal, it is not a private matter. Not only does Christ require us to be a light unto others, but the world is also desperately in need of us to share the Light of Christ. Our world is filled with fear of war and rumors of war, confusion, despair, and pessimism. If Christ has conquered death, can he not also conquer war and violence? If Christ has conquered death, can he not also conquer despair and pessimism? Can he not be the light of clarity in times of confusion? The answer to all these questions is a YES. And we are called to proclaim Him in whom we believe and in whom we place our trust.

Let us be confident that through the power of our baptism we share in his victory. Let our confidence be bold, that through the gift of His Spirit, our words and actions may proclaim that Christ is the light.

Blessings,

Father Bill



**January 29, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In this Sunday's Gospel, we hear the familiar words of the Beatitudes. These enigmatic proverbs reveal Jesus' plan for our happiness. Aristotle states that happiness is what all people seek, but he finds it difficult to describe happiness. In seeking happiness, people often try to find it in possessions, financial security, honor and esteem, power or influence over others. The wisdom of Aristotle, the inquiry of modern psychology, and the experience of many people all agree that these pursuits do not lead to greater happiness.

Jesus offers a plan for happiness that does not seek riches, honors, or power. He says, rather, that it is the poor, the lowly and the meek that will be truly blessed and happy.

We don't expect this.

Very few people would seek poverty, lowliness and humility as a path towards happiness. Jesus is not just speculating about happiness. He is not offering an untested theory. Jesus lives the beatitudes, and by the demonstration of his life, he shows us that the path of the beatitudes is the surest way to happiness.

"Blessed are the poor..." What does it mean to be poor? The poor do not have the resources to provide for their own needs. The poor depend upon others. The saintly, now deceased, archbishop of Chicago, Francis Cardinal George, said that the poor cannot afford their own necessities, but even more so, the poor cannot afford any illusions about their lives.

A person who lives the beatitudes has no illusions about their lives. They accept that their own efforts fall short of providing for what the human heart truly seeks. They know that they have little control over the course of their lives. This realization overwhelms many in our world today. But a person who lives the beatitudes is not defeated.

Jesus looked toward His Father. He knew that His Father, who provided for the flowers of the field and the birds of the air, would also provide for Him. A man or a woman of the beatitudes does not stop at their poverty. Rather, when all the illusions of life are stripped away, then they begin to trust. Imitating Jesus, they lift their eyes toward their Father in heaven, and with a grace-filled trust they can pray "...give us this day our daily bread..." They believe that God can provide for them, since even God's weakness is stronger than human strength, and even God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom (see 1 Corinthians 1:25).

Blessings,

Father Bill

**January 22, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Gospel that is read at Mass this Sunday includes Jesus' first recorded sermon. It is only one line, and can easily be committed to memory.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17b).

The early baptism practice of the church dramatically illustrates repentance. When an adult was baptized in the early church, he or she would be asked to make their baptismal promises. "Do you reject Satan? And all his works? And all of his empty promises?" The catechumen would be facing in a westerly direction while responding to these questions with a hearty "I do." After responding to the last of these questions, the catechumen would spit towards the west, and then turn towards the east.\* Only after turning towards the east did the catechumen continue to make their baptismal promises. "Do you believe in God..."

Repenting is literally turning in a different direction.

This ritual illustrates a basic principle: Before we embrace the Faith, we must turn away from evil and immorality.

Although REPENT is Jesus' first recorded word, I hardly recall any homilies or religious lessons that focused on Jesus' call to repentance. Repentance has not been a common theme of preaching or teaching. As a preacher, I can say it is difficult to echo Jesus' call to repentance. Like any other discipline, very few people enjoy hearing a call to repentance. This goes a long way towards explaining my own hesitation to preach about repentance, and the glaring negligence among preachers and teachers of the faith.

Yet, Jesus' words cannot simply be set aside. It does not matter if they are challenging or unpopular, Jesus' words cannot simply be set aside.

Although Jesus' first sermon was extremely short, it is also extremely challenging. Repentance is difficult. Repentance requires humility. Humility is required to accept that we are not perfect, and often we are attached to sinful words and actions. Repentance is frustrating. Sin, evil and immorality seem to be "sticky." And even when we recognize that we are attached to words and actions, it is often only through the challenging path of penance, prayer and fasting that we are able to break the bondage of sin in our lives.

Despite the challenges and struggles that repentance entails, those who take this commitment seriously often find that repentance is the first step towards joy. Jesus never asks us to sacrifice without promising that we will receive something even greater in return. If Jesus' first word is REPENT, recall also some of his last words, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be full" (John 15:11, ESV).

Blessings,

Father Bill

\* The east symbolizes the direction from which Christ will return. To face east is to face Christ. This is why the priest traditionally faces east while celebrating Mass, and why Catholics are traditionally buried facing east.

**January 15, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Hear to Serve...

**PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE**

Do you remember these words of St Paul; "Love is patient, love is kind, love does not seek its own interests, love is not quick tempered, love bears all things, believes in all things, hopes in all things, and endures all things?" These words taken from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is a popular choice for young couples on their wedding day because they set the tone for how they hope their love grows for each other. Related to this is today's Psalm 40. The psalmist starts out with, "I have waited, waited for the Lord." How many times have we done the opposite of what St. Paul tells us? How many times have we lost patience with the people we love? How many times have we lost our patience with the Lord?

There have been too many times in my life when my patience has been nonexistent with my loved ones and with others. I wanted to wait for no one. I wanted people to respond immediately. There also have been times I expected God to be quicker in His response to my prayers and requests.

Even though we may have to wait, remember that God is never far away from us. God's love is always there for us because we hear that God has stooped down and heard our cry. But like any good parent, God doesn't always give us what we ask for on our timetable. Like any good parent, God can see beyond the immediate problem, God can see the real problem and the real solution. We are like little children who can only see what is immediately around us.

When God does act, He gives us a lasting joy. "He put a new song in my mouth." So often we fall victim to temporary happiness, the joy that the world offers us. As I think back on my life I can remember all the times I thought I would find lasting happiness in material things and in doing things my way. I remember all the times it didn't last, and I was left not with a new song, but a bitter taste in my mouth.

We have to realize that our true happiness lies in our obedience to God and His ways. As we hear, "To do Your will, O' God is my delight." This is what St. Paul re-confirms as he tells us, "Love does not seek its own interest. True love is not a random act. True love is a willful act. This is what God has done for us. It was God's willful act when the Word was made Flesh so we could be saved from our sins.

This willful act of true love is what we must reciprocate. This means that to love God we must give up our pride and our selfishness. We must give up our attitude of my will be done, and remember it is, "Thy Will Be done." When we do this, we can then proclaim, "Here I am Lord, I come to do your will." It is then that love can endure all things, and not wither and die.

Let us take to heart the words of Psalm 40 and the words of St. Paul and allow them to set the tone for our lives. Let us remember that Love is patient and let us seek God's will and not our own so that our love can bear all things and put a new song of joy in our mouths.

Viva Christo Rey, Deacon Gary

**January 8, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This Sunday, we celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord. In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear the familiar story of the Magi from the East who come to search for the newborn king, and to offer them their precious gifts.

What I find interesting is that the Magi are primarily concerned with what they give to Jesus, rather than what Jesus can give to them. How would it change our experience of Mass if we approached the celebration of the Eucharist in the same way?

At each Mass, we hear the priest say these words during the offertory, "Pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father" (emphasis added). What is the sacrifice that you offer?

The Second Vatican Council taught that Mass is primarily an act of worship. We don't use that word "worship" often, but it means to give to God what he deserves. He deserves our praise, and sacrifices. People will sometimes say they do not come to Mass because they "don't get anything out of it." It's hard to understand how someone can truthfully say that they "don't get anything out of Mass," since at Mass we receive the Word of God proclaimed as a living Word, and we receive the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus, when we receive the Eucharist. We get a lot out of coming to Mass!

But even if we feel that we don't receive anything from coming to Mass, nonetheless, we should imitate the Magi and come to Mass not to receive anything but rather to offer the gifts of our time, talent, and treasure to God. These words are echoed beautifully by the popular prayer often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "...for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

What can we offer to the Lord? Again, we look to the example of the Magi. They offered gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. While each of these gifts have a symbolic value, it is also true that they are expensive and rare. These gifts were the very best gifts that they could offer. So, while we may not have gold, frankincense, and myrrh to bring forward, we too should offer our very best gifts. Perhaps, we could offer the Lord our undivided attention, rather than distracted thoughts during our times of prayer and during the celebration of the sacred liturgy. Time is more precious than gold, and hence the time we spend in prayer is a sacrifice most precious to the Lord.

Each of us has different gifts and talents to offer Him. But the principle is the same for us all. Whatever we offer to the Lord should not be marginal or from our leftovers. Rather, in imitation of the Magi, we should offer the best that we have.

We should not hesitate in our generosity with the Lord. The Magi returned to their native land with more than they gave because the Lord filled them with the richness of His Word. Whatever we give to the Lord, He receives, He transforms, He multiplies, and He returns it to us. We see this in the Eucharist. We offer Him bread and wine. He receives it. And by the promise of His words, the bread and wine become His Body and Blood. He returns this greatest of gifts to us when we come forward to receive Holy Communion, and we are enriched by His grace and the gift of eternal life.

Blessings and Merry Christmas,

Father Bill

**January 1, 2023**

**Year of Mary**

**October 1, 2022 to December 8, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Even if today was not a Sunday, January 1 would be a Holy Day of Obligation for Catholics. It is not only the secular celebration of the New Year, but it's also the Solemnity\* of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God.

A week ago, we celebrated the Birth of Jesus, and today we honor his Mother, Mary. This is in fact the oldest feast day dedicated to the honor of Mary on the church's liturgical calendar. On this day we rightly honor Mary as the Mother of God. This is a title that Mary received in the earliest days of Christian history.

This is a controversial claim. The Roman Empire was brought to the brink of civil war between the factions that honored Mary as the Mother of God and those that did not. Even in our own day, many Protestants will say that it is idolatrous to call Mary the Mother of God.

To clear up this controversy, we first recognize that everything we teach and believe about Mary is taught that we might have a better understanding of who Jesus is.

By calling Mary the Mother of God, we are not saying that she is the source of the divinity of Jesus. Rather we are recognizing that the child she bore was both fully human and fully divine. If she is not truly a mother, then Jesus is not truly human. If she is not truly the Mother of God, then Jesus is not truly God. If Jesus Christ was not human, then human nature is not redeemed. If Jesus Christ is not God, that is if he is "merely a man," then he could not save us. By calling Mary the Mother of God, we recognize both the divinity of Jesus and His incarnation.

This might all seem overly theological, but that does not mean it's not important. After all, Jesus himself taught that the greatest commandment was "to love the Lord with all your soul, all your heart, and all your mind" (emphasis added, see Matthew 22:37). This means that an essential part of being a Christian is devoting our mind to understanding our beliefs better. The direct application to our lives may not always be that apparent, but it does delight God that we want to learn more about Him, and to understand Him better.

Entrusting you to the prayers of Mary, our Mother,

Father Bill

\* The Catholic Church has three ranks of feast days: Memorials are the lowest rank, and most saints are assigned as Memorials; Feasts hold the middle rank, and are reserved for more important saints, and some of the Mysteries of the life of our Lord, or our Lady. The highest ranking feasts are called Solemnities. These are considered as important as Sundays, and often if they fall on a Sunday, the Solemnity will be celebrated instead.