

What is a Sacrament?

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

All Catholics know that the sacraments are something special. A wedding before a priest is somehow better than just a civil wedding, and a child's baptism causes relatives to fly across the country when they might not otherwise. But why is that? Is it all just pious custom?

The sacraments are special for a rather simple reason: they are the "place" to encounter Christ in a unique way. But can Jesus not meet me anytime, anywhere? He certainly can, but he encounters us in a most intense way in the sacraments. How can the Catholic Church make such a seemingly outrageous claim?

The Incarnation happened not just so that God could give us a road map to heaven or a how-to-manual to achieve life with him. Jesus also came for a personal encounter with each of his beloved human creatures. Out of love, he came to meet us on our level, that of soul *and* body. This was the newness and wonder of the Incarnation: the human being could encounter God himself in the flesh and be transformed by that experience. Yet forty days after his Resurrection, Jesus ascended, body and soul, into heaven. But the logic of the Incarnation continues. Jesus did not leave us stuck to grope along in search of an invisible God who appeared in the distant past. Henceforth, we see and touch him through the visible signs or symbols called sacraments. In the sacraments, we meet Jesus in a real way, not unlike the encounter that Mary Magdalene or his apostles experienced. In the sacraments, we truly come face to face with Jesus himself.

The Gospels have many beautiful stories of the sick, the weak and the outcast meeting Jesus for the first time. Those who approached him with an open heart found that their lives were transformed. It was not simply that Jesus was a great preacher or a kind person. In addition to *showing* people how to attain a share in God's own life, he already began to *give* a share in that divine life. The woman with the hemorrhage touched Jesus' garment and was healed instantly, for "power went out of him" (Luke 8: 43-46). The repentant thief asked the dying Christ for mercy, and he received it: "today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). The sacraments continue Jesus' work of giving us a share in divine life, precisely in an incarnational way: through signs, like the pouring of baptismal water and the very words of Jesus

on the lips of the minister: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

We look for Jesus’ teaching not just in any ancient story about him, but above all in the Bible and the Church’s sacred Tradition at whose origins stands the historical Christ himself. Similarly, we look for a share in Jesus’ divine life not *just* in any ritual or personal prayer, but *especially* in the visible signs that Jesus himself instituted as the most powerful means to attain it. Like his teachings, the sacraments are Jesus’ gifts to the Church. We find each of them mentioned in the New Testament itself, or in the ancient liturgical practices of the Church that reflect the divinely inspired oral teaching of the apostles. The Church can never invent an eighth sacrament!

The sacraments are entrusted to the Church, because any authentic deepening of communion with Christ is always also an intensification of communion with his mystical body, the Church. In the sacraments, we pass into greater union with the whole Church that exists on earth, in purgatory and in heaven. For God calls us not to a solitary friendship with him, but to an utterly universal bond of peace that includes him and all of creation. We can already have a share in that communal peace, in soul and body, here and now ... through the veil of the visible signs called sacraments.

The Last Supper

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

This Holy Thursday, we will hear St. John's Gospel account of the Last Supper: the beautiful story of Jesus washing his apostles' feet. It will be followed by the priest doing just that for some of his parishioners. It is one of the most moving parts of the liturgy in the whole year. Yet we might also be perplexed. Where is the Eucharist in this story of the Last Supper? That is, why does John's Jesus never say: "take this all of you and eat it, this is my body"? After the washing of the feet, why does Jesus sit down and eat what seems to be a normal meal, and why is there no mention of a cup being drunk?

The Church invites us to stumble over this oddity and then to proceed to the deeper meaning of John's Last Supper Account. Jesus washes his disciples' feet "when his hour had come," when the Passover was near (John 13:1). Jesus' "hour" and the Passover are both mentioned in two previous parts of the Gospel: at the wedding of Cana (chapter 2) and at the multiplication of the loaves (chapter 6). John the evangelist wants to draw us into the deeper meaning of Jesus' farewell by pondering the events surrounding Jesus' "hour" and the Passover throughout his Gospel.

At the wedding of Cana, Jesus hesitated to perform a miracle at Mary's request. Yet then he acceded to his mother's demand and turned water into wine. He utterly transformed that which was a simple source of purification and refreshment into a source of delightful and inebriating refreshment. The abundance of wine was immense (100-200 gallons!).

At the multiplication of loaves, Jesus took five loaves of bread and two fish and transformed them into an endless source of food for 5000 people. The next day, Jesus explained that this miracle of bread was really intended to show who *he* is: the bread of life. This bread is none other than his very flesh and blood. The language of the Gospel text is extremely vivid: "he who munches my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (John 6:54). The Eucharist is not a symbol of his flesh and blood, it *is* his flesh and blood.

John invites us to remember these stories when he narrates the Last Supper for us. He writes not for the superficial mind, but for believers who are willing to search for the hidden meaning of his Gospel. He simply skips the narrative of the institution of the Eucharist that the other Gospel writers and St. Paul recount. There is no need for him to present the facts again,

since every 1st century Christian knows them already. Rather, John wants to tell us about this meal's ultimate meaning. In the Eucharist, Jesus stoops down in utter humility and becomes our food, as he stooped down and washed his apostles' feet. He purifies our souls, as he purified a dozen pair of feet. In the Eucharist, Jesus gives an endless abundance of spiritual wine and bread. The soul is made drunk with Christ's divinity, and strengthened with the spiritual nutrients of his holy flesh. In the Eucharist, he transforms our souls into his likeness, so that we can act in his likeness by serving those in need.

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick

Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Everyone loves the Gospel stories about Jesus' miraculous healings. How we wish that we could have been there! Yet in a certain way, we can. The beauty of the sacraments is that they truly bring to us the healing power of Christ. We encounter Christ's power to heal body and soul in a special way in the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. This is only appropriate. Jesus often healed with simple elements like mud or even his own spit, by laying his hands on the sick (Mark 7:32-35) or simply through his words (Luke 5:24-25). Now he heals us through oil, the laying on of hands and prayer by a priest.

The Letter of James describes the sacrament of the sick for us: "Are there people sick among you? Let him send for the priests of the Church and let the priests pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick persons, and the Lord will raise them up. If they have committed any sins, their sins will be forgiven them" (James 5:14-15). The first thing we notice about this ancient ritual is that it is designated for those who are seriously ill. The sick person is too weak even to go the priests himself. This is why we should request this sacrament only if we suffer from a serious illness (for example, cancer), are preparing for a serious surgery, or are advanced in age and experiencing a certain frailty of health.

Many of us can remember the days when this sacrament was called "last rites" or "extreme unction." From the Middle Ages until Vatican II, the Western Church tended to reserve this sacrament to the dying. Since Vatican II, we have recovered its more ancient meaning (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* 73). St. James does not restrict this sacrament to the dying, and neither did the Church in the first few centuries. But old habits die hard. At times, Catholics still wait "until the last minute" to request this sacrament. This is unfortunate, since anointing at the beginning of a serious illness always provides greater spiritual strength to endure suffering, while also occasionally imparting a miraculous physical healing. Many if not most priests have witnessed such miracles shortly after they administered this sacrament. Furthermore, this holy anointing forgives sins, as is clear from the Letter of James, and can thus bring a profound peace of soul to the sick person precisely when he or she needs it most. The sacrament also imparts the strength to resist temptation, such as despair or depression.

The sacrament of the sick is a gift to us from the merciful Jesus, and thus, we want neither to neglect nor to abuse it. While there are no clear universal guidelines on the frequency of its administration, in our current practice at Blessed Sacrament parish, we encourage the elderly who experience frail health to receive this sacrament about every three months, while those who suffer from a serious illness can be anointed about each month. The sudden decline of a very sick person's health also allows for another anointing. Respecting this ecclesial practice helps us to prepare well to encounter the healing touch of Christ.

Mortal & Venial Sins

Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Many Catholics who are in their 50's or older can still remember the long confessional lines each week at their local parish before Vatican II, in contrast to today. The radical drop in the Catholic practice of confession probably has many causes. One of them is found in popular misconceptions about the Catholic teaching on sin. For example, some think that the Church's teaching on mortal sins has disappeared with Vatican II.

In fact, the Church has always distinguished between mortal and venial sins. We already find this teaching in the New Testament: "There is sin which is mortal All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal" (1 John 5:16-17). Some actions are so opposed to the way of Jesus that they involve a choice between the love of a finite good and the love of God. Scripture is so clear on this that the Church is utterly powerless to change the teaching. That is why Vatican II actually did nothing to demote the doctrine on mortal sin.

But how can we tell what distinguishes mortal and venial sins? The Catechism gives us three classic criteria: 1) it deals with grave matter, 2) it is done with full knowledge, and 3) it is done with deliberate consent (CCC 1857). Some of this language is foreign to us.

Grave matter *can* be found in those actions that go against the Ten Commandments and Jesus' completion of the moral law in the Sermon on the Mount. These moral precepts manifest the true way to love God and neighbor, so that acting against them diminishes our love of God and neighbor. But not every violation of those precepts is a mortal sin. Otherwise, the vast majority of Catholics would be falling into mortal sin frequently. From the beginning, the Church has consistently understood certain actions to qualify as "grave matter": murder (including abortion), adultery and the denial of the faith (see the 1st century text *The Didache*). The Church has always understood that these actions are so contrary to the way of Jesus that a person who has freely committed them must be reconciled to God through a sacramental act (i.e. confession).

Other actions against the commandments can also serve as grave matter. Lying to a parent or spouse is far worse than lying to a stranger. Bearing real hate towards someone in our hearts drives out the love of Christ, in contrast to excessive short-lived anger for a person. But the Church does not give us a complete list of mortal sins. Rather, all Christians are called to

fine-tune their consciences so as to be able to discern the presence or absence of grave matter in their actions. The more consistently and intensely we practice the faith, the easier it becomes to hear God's voice speaking within our consciences.

Secondly, mortal sin is done with full knowledge. I must know that something is a sin in order to incur the guilt of sin. Some persons are sincerely ignorant that some types of behaviors take us away from life with God. Difficult family situations, substance-free catechesis and the cultural dominance of a secularist media can often radically mal-form the conscience of well-meaning Christians. Yet the basic moral norms that God has written on the human heart can never be completely eradicated. Furthermore, Catholics can easily refer to Scripture and the Catechism to gain much of the knowledge that they need concerning the morality of certain actions. Where questions remain, we can turn to our local priests and educated lay Catholics for discussion and advice. Every Christian is obligated to form his or her conscience well.

Thirdly, mortal sin is done with deliberate consent. Consent implies that an action is performed consciously, not in altered state of mind. Deliberate consent means that I realize the moral significance of the situation but still make that free choice. Freedom is diminished if an action proceeds from a deeply ingrained habit. Addictions and psychological problems also limit our freedom, thus reducing the moral guilt involved. A chaste husband who breaks down once and sleeps with his secretary bears greater guilt than the sex addict who goes on a week-long binge with prostitutes. This is because the husband has far more freedom to live the virtue of temperance.

Venial sins comprise all offenses against God "below" mortal sins. They diminish (but do not extinguish) our true love for God and take us further away from our true happiness. They keep us from realizing our full potential in the life of virtue. They can become major obstacles to growth in the spiritual life.

The Church asks us to confess any mortal sin *at least* once a year. But the Christian life is not about fulfilling the minimum, it is about following Christ as best as we can. Since mortal sins exclude us from receiving the Eucharist, we should confess them as soon as we are able. Many Catholics do not commit mortal sins, or do so rarely. They too are invited to share in the healing power of the sacrament of reconciliation. I'll discuss why and how often in next week's newsletter.

Why Go To Confession When You're Not a Terrible Sinner?

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Much of the spiritual life is a mystery that escapes our direct experience, so it is often best understood through analogies. One analogy that many of the saints have favored throughout history is between the life of the body and the life of the soul. For example, if you begin to eat junk food on a regular basis, you'll probably gain weight, increase your level of cholesterol and have less energy. Eating junk food is a delightful experience, but later you pay a price when you have to go on a diet or lack the energy for an enjoyable recreational activity. The life of the soul is quite similar. Acts of vice such as an outburst of anger or acting out one's lust may feel great in the moment. Then comes the morning after. You feel terrible for having hurt others, and the guilt of your fornication begins to eat away at your inmost being. In addition to feeling guilt, vice lead to a diminished strength of soul to do good and to avoid evil.

Our bodies flourish when we follow the physical laws of nature: when we get enough sleep, regular exercise, eat well, balance work, family and recreation. Someone may want a healthy body without exercising or eating well, but this desire is futile. The body will only be healthy by following the laws of nature. When we do not follow them, our bodies begin to act up or break down. This is actually a good thing, a warning sign that we are impeding life from functioning properly.

The spiritual life is similar. God has made us with a natural inclination for happiness, for communion with Him. The Creator has inscribed laws of spiritual nature within us whereby our whole being is ordered (if imperfectly) towards happiness. Following these inclinations or laws is called living the virtues. The virtues are faith, hope, love, prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. We may not like to follow these laws of our spiritual nature, but vice breaks down our soul regardless of our desires or ethical opinions. When we are honest with ourselves and begin to notice the troublesome presence of certain vices within us, then the soul is giving us warning signs. All of us suffer from some vice, and this keeps us from truly flourishing as human beings. Vice keeps us from attaining the profound joy in this life that virtue always brings, a joy that is a foretaste of the life to come.

This is precisely where the confession of venial sins comes in. We believe that the worthy reception of the Eucharist forgives venial sins. Thus, the confession of venial sins is not

strictly necessary. But confession imparts a particular grace that compliments the grace of the Eucharist. Confession offers the gift of a deep and abiding contrition for sins. Contrition is a desire of the heart to cling to God as the source of all healing and a real detestation of sins. Contrition is a motion of the heart away from evil and towards the infinite Good. We bring a certain contrition to the confessional, but the grace of the rite itself brings this contrition to perfection. We manifest and live out this contrition through the penance assigned by the confessor (e.g. prayer, a good work). Through the grace of confession, the contrition within our heart and the penance that we perform externally together open us to God's power to heal us from the wounds of our vices. The grace of confession is growth in virtue. Confession can radically diminish our deeply ingrained vices. It can restore us to full spiritual health and the true joy that comes with the recovery of virtue.

All of this brings us to the question of the frequency of confession. The universal Church currently does not prescribe how often the faithful should confess venial sins. In our pastoral judgment at Blessed Sacrament parish, most Catholics would do well to go to confession about every one to three months. Going more often may inadvertently lead us to overlook the forgiveness of venial sins available in the Eucharist. Going less often may weaken our self-knowledge about our vices and leave us without the aid we need to make real progress in the life of virtue.

There is another marvelous gift available in confession, which we'll discuss in next week's newsletter.

Confession and Purgatory

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

It's time for Catholic trivia. If you die right after going to confession, you will go straight to heaven, right? Wrong! The sacraments are not magical keys that open the pearly gates. Confession before death is a marvelous way to prepare to meet our maker, but many of us will probably need a little more help before we see St. Peter holding the keys to the celestial gates.

Heaven is a state of absolute bliss, of perfect communion with God. All of our imperfections and bad habits that we call vices, including those aspects of our person that irritate others, will have been taken away. This is why the invitation to live with God and our fellow Christians *forever* is such good news. If none of us changed between now and heaven, we might not want to live with certain people forever. Heaven is a place of miracles where absolutely everyone who was ever married will even enjoy spending time with their mother-in-law!

Now if everyone in heaven is and will be without vice, how do they become that way? The answer is simple: either here on earth or in purgatory. All of us develop some vices at a certain point in life, perhaps greed, selfishness, or a tendency to gossip. The more we overcome these vices on earth, the less "time" we spend in purgatory. The more vices we accumulate and take with us to the grave, the more "time" we spend in purgatory. It's hard to speak about time in a spiritual state like purgatory. But such language allows us to distinguish between various degrees of purification that are necessary for one or another believer after death.

God actually does not enjoy watching us spend much "time" in purgatory. He simply wants to prepare us for heaven one way or another. He has therefore given the Church a marvelous gift, a kind of express lane to heaven that can minimize or even bypass purgatory altogether. This express lane is called confession.

Now you might think that I am contradicting myself. If confession is a way to bypass purgatory, then why don't we go straight to heaven if we die right after going to confession? The answer is that the fruit of confession depends on our cooperation with the grace of confession.

Confession always forgives the guilt of all of our sins whenever we confess any and all grave sin committed since our last confession. If we sincerely forget to confess a grave sin,

God's grace still purifies us from that guilt. But each sin leaves a certain wound in the soul. Each sin deepens vice, which brings about an unhealthy attachment to the goods of this world. When we leave the confessional, the guilt of our sins has been wiped away, but we are left to deal with these wounds called vices. These wounds are also called "the temporal punishment for sins."

Confession bring us to a new and deeper awareness of these wounds by leading us to a deeper self-understanding. The penance assigned by the confessor is a kind of medicine that brings about healing from the wounds of sin. The penance assigned by the priest should have some relation to the types of sins confessed (i.e. the vices we acted upon). Ideally, the confessor acts as a doctor of the soul, prescribing a particular spiritual medicine for a particular spiritual illness. When we carry out this penance, the grace of the sacrament intensifies our love for God, enabling us to perform our assigned penance with deep fervor and true contrition. The external penitential act unites with the gift of a new fire of love that burns in the heart to wipe away the wounds of sin. The frequent and reverent use of confession enables us to find lasting healing from our vices, the fruit of which is abundant peace and joy. It might even help us to go straight to heaven.

Christ in the Eucharist

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Many centuries ago, there was a priest in Italy who had struggled mightily to believe that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist. It seemed impossible for him to overcome his lingering doubts. One day, he was once again celebrating Mass. He said the words of consecration over the bread and then over the cup. Having genuflected, he looked down in utter shock. The host no longer looked like bread, but rather like a living piece of human flesh! The chalice no longer contained what looked like wine, but instead he saw real human blood! It was the first of many Eucharistic miracles. After twelve centuries, the flesh and blood have withstood every scientific investigation. The flesh is a piece of human heart muscle, and the blood type is AB. The miracle of Lanciano can still be seen in the town church, just east of Rome.

The events at Lanciano and elsewhere still confront us today with a blunt reality: The Eucharist *is* Jesus' own flesh and blood. Eucharistic miracles are powerful reminders of this central truth of our Catholic faith, but they only confirm that faith. The Church's Eucharistic faith is not based on these miracles, but rather on Scripture understood through Tradition.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses shocking language: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life ... for my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed" (John 6:54-55). At the Last Supper, he uttered the words that we hear at every Mass: "Take, this is my body ... This is my blood" (Mark 14:22-24). Our Protestant brethren interpret these biblical words very differently from the way that we do. So why are we Catholics so insistent that we have it right?

The answer is found in the amazingly consistent witness of Tradition. Around 100 A.D., St. Ignatius of Antioch criticized a pseudo-Christian sect that not only denied that the Word of God had truly taken on flesh in Jesus, but that also refused to approach the Eucharist, not believing it to be "the flesh of our Savior." Around 150 A.D., St. Justin Martyr wrote that in the Mass, food and drink are made "both the flesh and the blood of Jesus." In the 3rd century, Origen spoke of the Eucharist as the "flesh and blood of the Word." In the 4th century, St. Cyril of Jerusalem taught converts that "the bread becomes the body of Christ and the wine the blood of Christ." (see Aidan Nichols, *The Holy Eucharist*, Veritas Press) One could cite dozens if not hundreds of similar ancient Christian texts. Perhaps what is even more amazing is that for the

first 1000 years, no single Christian theologian or preacher explicitly denied that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist. In a Church often filled with controversies around the identity of Jesus and other issues, one cannot find a single voice of dissent on Christ's Real Presence. In the first 1000 years, the only opposition came from pseudo-Christian sects that also denied the Incarnation.

When the ancient saints and bishops of the Church offer a consistent witness on a doctrinal issue, their teaching is considered part of Tradition with a capital T, which is a sure manifestation of the truth taught by Christ himself. Tradition also manifests the oral teaching of the apostles handed down through the centuries. Tradition is like a magnifying glass that allows us to read the fine print of Scripture's hidden meaning.

At each Mass, that hidden treasure of Scripture is in a sense revealed again. We treat the Eucharistic host and the cup with the utmost reverence. We taste bread and wine, but we believe that underneath the appearance, the one consumed is Christ himself. The only proper human response to this marvelous gift is adoration: "Devoutly I adore you, hidden Deity, under these appearances concealed. To you my heart surrenders self. For seeing You, all else must yield." (Hymn by St. Thomas Aquinas)

Who Can Receive Communion?

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Each Sunday, we are blessed to have many non-Catholics in our pews. Numerous non-Catholic spouses, relatives and friends of our parishioners enjoy attending Mass, even regularly. Their presence among us raises a very legitimate question. Why can these persons who often share much of our Catholic faith and lead exemplary lives not receive Communion?

The Church's practice of offering Communion only to practicing Catholics is rooted in her faith in the nature of the Eucharist. Last week we discussed Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist. Because Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, when we go to Communion, we are wholly united to his body and blood. We are not just symbolically united to Christ. Rather, the very person of Christ spiritually enters our souls as his flesh and blood physically enter our bodies. The purpose of Communion is to bring about the total spiritual union with Christ that the physical act of consuming the Eucharist signifies. When we eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood under the appearances of bread and wine, we proclaim with our bodies: "Lord Jesus, I want to be joined to all of you."

The first requirement for the proper reception of Communion is therefore faith in Christ, especially faith that he is truly present in the Eucharist. Many of our Protestant guests have a deep, authentic faith in Christ that also brings them a share in God's life, which we call grace. By faith, they are truly our brothers and sisters in Christ. On the other hand, faith in what the Eucharist is most often remains a point of division with our Protestant brethren. The reception of Christ's flesh and blood can only be fruitful if one believes that his flesh and blood are truly present under the appearances of bread and wine. In the Gospel, Jesus consistently heals the sick because they have faith in him. By believing in Jesus, the sick receive his healing power. Similarly, faith in the Eucharist opens the door of the heart to receive the fruit of the Eucharist.

The second requirement for the proper reception of Communion is union with the Church. This is because the Eucharist is a sign of the Church's unity. The appearances of many grains of wheat and many grapes united in one host and one cup signify the unity of the Church's many members. Communion with Christ in the Eucharist is inseparable from communion with his Church (1 Corinthians 10:16-17; St. Augustine, Sermon 272). When we say "amen" to the words of the minister ("the body of Christ," "the blood of Christ"), we say "amen" to Jesus and

to his Church. It is true that our Protestant brethren are already members of Christ's Church in a certain manner. Yet the fullness of Christ's Church is found in the Catholic Church. Total union with Jesus in the Eucharist is thus also to be a total union with his Church and her fundamental teachings. The non-Catholic who can sincerely say "amen" to the body and blood of Christ would thus be ready to enter the Church through RCIA, since he or she would be ready to accept all of the Church's fundamental teachings.

In the end, the wonder of Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist should lead all of us to a deeper awareness of our own limitations. In other words, the Catholic in good standing would be foolish to take his or her privilege of receiving Communion for granted. Above all, Communion is Christ's free gift of himself which should move us to long for the day when all can receive their Lord, in this life and in the next.

The Gift of the Priesthood
By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

The Catholic religion is utterly incarnational. The whole of our faith centers on this wondrous wisdom whereby God chooses to encounter us through physical, finite realities. God's Word and Power came to us through the humanity of Jesus. His Word and Power still meet us in a very human way, namely through Christ's priests.

God encounters us through his priests in three basic ways: when they celebrate the sacraments, when they preach or teach, and when they guide us. In the ordination of a priest, God imparts to him three special spiritual powers or gifts: the power to celebrate certain sacraments (the Eucharist, confession, the anointing of the sick and confirmation), the power to preach on Christ's behalf, and the power to shepherd God's people (see Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 28; *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 6). These supernatural gifts do not come from the community. They are given by Christ himself who acts through the ordaining bishop. No one can presume to have the power to consecrate the Eucharist simply by their personal holiness or popularity in a community. Wisdom in the spiritual life alone does not suffice to speak on Christ's behalf. Experience in management or the spiritual life is not enough to enable someone to shepherd souls. Rather, the priest has received supernatural gifts which surpass any humanly acquired skill or virtue.

At times, we may struggle to recognize the presence of these spiritual gifts in priests because of their evident limitations and faults. Some priests change the liturgy as if they owned it, preach their personal theological opinions instead of the Catholic faith, or fail to lead the members of their communities towards lives of holiness. Priestly ordination hardly imparts the gift of infallibility.

Yet faith by its very nature perceives that which is not evident to the senses. Our Catholic faith calls us to trust that, despite the sins and failings of priests, Christ's power is still at work in them in a unique way. Christ meets us in the sacraments regardless of the presiding priest's personal holiness or lack thereof. Jesus' activity in the sacraments is absolutely certain. When the priest celebrates Mass, forgives sins, anoints the sick or imparts confirmation, it is not so much he that acts as Christ who acts through him as his instrument.

We do not have the same certitude in Christ's presence in the preaching and shepherding ministries of the priest, yet his ordination has still imparted to him a gift with astounding potential. *If* he truly opens himself to the grace of ordination, a priest can enlighten and move souls by his preaching in a manner that cannot be explained by rhetorical skill or theological education. At times, young priests will discuss the astounding change they found in their preaching after ordination, especially as they look back and compare their homilies to the practice sermons that they gave in the seminary. By being genuinely receptive to Christ's power, a priest can shepherd souls with great wisdom and humility. When we marvel at a pastor's ability to guide a parish or find the right word of advice in the confessional, we are beholding not so much his natural administrative or counseling skills as much as the work of Christ the shepherd in them.

The transformation effected at priestly ordination is nothing short of mystical. Yet such a great gift also brings with it a great responsibility to use it well, for to whom much is given, much is expected. We should expect much from our priests, be merciful when they fail and pray that they have the strength to fulfill their calling.

Note on the Recent Vatican Statement About the Church and Ecumenism

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

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A good number of parishioners have requested clarification regarding a document released by the Vatican on June 29 and much discussed since in the media. The document discusses aspects of the relationship between the Catholic Church, the eastern Orthodox Churches and the Protestant Christian communities. I will refer to this text as “the CDF document,” since it was issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), with the approval of Pope Benedict XVI.¹

First, the CDF document was primarily written for Catholic theologians. It uses technical theological language which may not always be accessible to the general public. Second, the CDF document does not intend to offer any sort of comprehensive treatment about the relationship between the Catholic Church and other Christian communities. Rather, it focuses on a very particular issue regarding the use of the term “Church” in theological discourse. Some preliminary remarks are therefore in order.

The Catholic Church has affirmed and continues to hold that Protestants are members of the Christ’s Church by faith and baptism.² Nothing in the recent document denies this conviction. This is why we call Protestants “separated brethren,” that is, brothers and sisters in Christ.

Furthermore, the CDF document makes no pronouncement on the holiness of our Protestant brethren. It does not claim that Protestant individuals are spiritually inferior to Catholic believers. In fact, it says nothing on the perfection or imperfection of Protestant believers, or, for that matter, Catholic believers. Its entire focus concerns the spiritual gifts imparted to Christian communities, not Christian individuals.

¹ The official text can be found at: <http://www.zenit.org/article-20090?l=english> .

² Vatican II, *Decree on Ecumenism*, paragraph 3. The full text can be found at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm, under the Latin title *Unitatis Redintegratio*.

The CDF document consistently uses the term “Church” in a very precise, technical sense. In classical Catholic theology, a “Church” in the full sense of the term is not just a community of Christian disciples. Rather, it refers to a community that, according to Catholic belief, contains all of the “elements of sanctification and truth” imparted by Christ and transmitted through his apostles. The CDF document focuses on this phrase.

The term “elements of sanctification” primarily refers to the sacraments. The Catholic Church believes that Christ instituted seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, reconciliation, holy matrimony, holy orders (bishops, priest, deacons) and the anointing of the sick. Each sacrament involves a unique encounter with Christ and his healing power beyond the simple personal encounter with him in faith and prayer. A non-Catholic can certainly meet Christ in a powerful way without some of these sacraments. These holy rites do not guarantee greater personal holiness for the recipient. Rather, they are more effective means or opportunities to grow in holiness, but depend on the proper disposition of the recipient. Virtually all Protestant communities celebrate the sacrament of baptism. The CDF document does not deny the full validity and spiritual value of this rite, but points out that the absence of the other sacraments is a lost opportunity for our Protestant brethren, without judging their state of sanctity.

Many Protestant communities also celebrate a rite of the Lord’s Supper or communion, and may thus seem to have another sacrament corresponding to the Catholic Eucharist. Vatican II’s *Decree on Ecumenism* affirmed that the liturgical actions of our separated brethren can certainly be the means to a deeper share in the life of grace.³ Vatican II also declared that the Protestant communities “have not preserved the proper reality of the Eucharistic mystery in its fullness.”⁴ This is because the Catholic Church has always believed the complete sacrament of the Eucharist to consist of the very flesh and blood of Jesus transformed through the liturgical action of a properly ordained priest. Vatican II explained that because the Protestant communities have not preserved the sacrament of holy orders, the full sacrament of the Eucharist is not present in their

³ *Decree on Ecumenism*, paragraph 3.

⁴ *Decree on Ecumenism*, paragraph 22.

midst.⁵ For this reason, the Church in the technical sense of the term is absent as well. This claim by Vatican II and the CDF document is hardly new. Already around 110 A.D., St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote, “Let everyone respect the deacons as they would respect Jesus Christ, and just as they respect the bishop as a type of the Father, and the presbyters as the council of God and college of the apostles. Without these, it [the gathering of the faithful] cannot be called a Church.”⁶ The 16th century Protestant reformers either explicitly rejected holy orders as a sacrament (e.g. Martin Luther) or deliberately changed the rite of ordination, introducing a break with the ancient tradition (e.g. Anglicanism).

The term “elements of truth” primarily refers to the public revelation transmitted through the Old Testament and the apostles. The Catholic Church holds that this revelation comes to us in two ways: the Bible and Tradition. With our Protestant brethren, we venerate the Bible as the Word of God. Tradition refers to the oral teaching of the apostles passed down through the generations, the unchanging core of ancient doctrines that may not be explicit in the Bible. Two examples are prayer to the saints and worship of the Eucharist. The content of Tradition manifests itself throughout history, especially in the unchanging elements of the liturgy and the teachings of the bishops meeting in Council (e.g. the Council of Nicea in 325, Vatican II in 1962-5).⁷ Since the Protestant communities do not accept Tradition as a reliable transmission of apostolic teaching, the Catholic Church sees this absence of Tradition as a real loss to the Protestant communities as they seek to understand fully the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In denying the term “Church” to the Protestant communities, the CDF document is essentially pointing to the absence of certain sacraments and the absence of Tradition in their beliefs. Because the Catholic Church holds to the authenticity of all seven sacraments and of Tradition, she cannot consider the absence of any of the sacraments nor of Tradition as superfluous or insignificant. In other words, if the Catholic Church were to recognize Protestant communities as churches in the classical, technical sense of the term, then she would be declaring that most of her own sacraments and Tradition are superfluous to the life of Catholics. The Catholic Church

⁵ *Decree on Ecumenism*, paragraph 22.

⁶ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Trallians*, 3:1-2.

⁷ For example, in the 4th century, St. Basil the Great argued persuasively for the divinity of the Holy Spirit based on the baptismal liturgy of the Church. His teaching bore fruit in the solemn definition of the Holy Spirit’s divinity at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

would be declaring that the Eucharistic presence of Christ's flesh and blood is basically unimportant for the life of Catholics, and this she cannot do. The CDF document repeats the teaching of Vatican II that the Catholic Church alone possesses all the means of salvation, meaning, she possesses all of the seven sacraments, Tradition and the gift of unity around the successor of Peter, the pope. Both the CDF document and Vatican II affirm that the Protestant communities can be real means to salvation, since they already possess many elements of truth and sanctification, such as the gifts of faith, baptism and the Bible.⁸

In modern everyday usage among Christians, the term "church" tends to refer to any community of believing Christians, whether Protestant, eastern Orthodox or Catholic. When the CDF document denies that Protestant communities can be called "Churches," it does not deny that the many communities of Protestant believers are true Christian communities. The CDF document is not using the term "Church" to refer to a gathering of true believers. It is only using the term to refer to the presence of all of the sacraments, Scripture and Tradition.

Every key assertion in the recent CDF document is essentially a repetition or summary of the teachings of Vatican II. There is nothing new in this document. It highlights lesser-known teachings of Vatican II whose theological language may at times be foreign to us. The document's release therefore does not signal an essential reversal in the Catholic Church's commitment to ecumenical dialogue and Christian unity.

⁸ *Decree on Ecumenism*, paragraph 3; Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, paragraph 8.

What the Ancient Saints Have To Teach Us
by Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Why bother studying a group of dead white men who lived almost 2000 years ago?
Shouldn't our Christianity be a little more updated?

There are many reasons to study the writings of the early Christians. First, the early Christians lived in a Mediterranean Greco-Roman culture that was much closer to the culture of Jesus and the apostles than our own. They understood how Jesus and his contemporary Jews thought and lived. They breathed a very similar cultural air and had many similar assumptions about life. By stepping into their world, we come much closer to Jesus' everyday world.

Second, the early Christians were a tiny minority surrounded by a very confident and powerful Roman society that considered Christianity a strange if not dangerous sect. Rome's learned class had trouble taking Christianity seriously, especially notions such as God becoming flesh and the resurrection of the body. In some ways, the social situation of the early Christians was very much like our own today, especially in the Pacific Northwest. The early Christians were surrounded by a world whose basic beliefs and moral values were radically different from their own. The writings of the early saints show us how they dealt with that challenge.

Third, the bulk of Christian theological literature in the first five centuries does not consist of academic textbooks. Rather, we find mostly parish sermons, letters, poems, hymns and stories of saints. Theology in the early Church was not an abstract intellectual exercise. Rather, it was worked out in the concrete situation of everyday life. The first Christian theologians carried out their task as they preached to and prayed with their fellow Christians. The theological masterpieces of the early Church thus often remain much more accessible than the works of many famous contemporary theologians.

Also, the thought of the early Christians is utterly soaked in the Bible. The revelation of Jesus was so fresh and radically new that the early Christians often simply fell in love with it, allowing it to pervade their whole mind and heart. One can hardly read their writings without having a Bible open at the same time. They can thus become excellent mentors for us in our attempt to imbibe the revealed wisdom of God ever-more deeply.

Finally, the early Christians articulated most of the basic Catholic doctrines and practices that we have today. In the early Church, one finds the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist,

the basics of the Mass that we have today, a distinct priesthood and Church hierarchy, veneration of Mary and the saints, a clear set of moral standards, an emphasis on the virtues, belief in Jesus' full humanity and divinity, the importance of tradition, a treasury of wisdom on prayer, and more. By studying ancient Christian texts, we discover the historical roots of our own faith.

This coming year, I'll be leading a weekly Tuesday seminar on the writings of the early Christians. The idea actually came from a group of parishioners. Since we'll usually change authors and topics every 1-2 weeks, occasional participants can easily jump in without feeling lost. If you want to deepen your faith, learn how to read the Bible as a Catholic, or grow in your prayer life, then this seminar is for you.

The Salvation of Non-Christians, Part 1

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

The relation between Christianity and the other religions has become one of the great theological issues of our time. One of the most pressing questions concerns the path to salvation or liberation. The Bible teaches us that “God desires all people to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4), a timeless truth that the Catholic Church continues to affirm. But *how* can all people be saved? Traditionally, Christianity has insisted that Christ alone is the way to the fullness of salvation, i.e. everlasting life. Today, many religious thinkers are challenging that stance, proposing that all of the world religions are equally effective paths to eternal life. Thus, there would seem to be no need for Christians to convert Buddhists or members of other religions to Christ. Rather, many theorists propose that if Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims or Jews practice their respective religions well, they will attain eternal life just as surely as we Christians will by following Jesus.

Behind this challenge lies the common assumption that the major religions ultimately aim for the same thing, i.e. eternal life with a personal God. Thus, the different religions become different paths up the same mountain, all leading to the same summit. One way to test this hypothesis is to compare the actual teachings of the religions on the ultimate aim of human life.

Christianity’s teaching on salvation is closest to Judaism. Both emphasize that heaven consists of an intimate communion with a personal God (which we identify as three persons in one God). God is clearly distinct from us. We become like God, but we do not literally become gods. Furthermore, Roman Catholicism, the eastern Orthodox and Judaism have tended to emphasize the spousal nature of this eternal friendship with God.

Islam teaches that the reward for obedience to Allah is the garden of delights. At the center of this after-life stands a direct relationship with God. Allah is really distinct from us. We clearly do not become Allah. Rather, we enter into the fullness of the master-servant relationship. Islam’s Sufi mystical tradition also offers spousal descriptions of our relationship with God, but for most branches of Islam, such a teaching would seem to obscure the central reality that Allah is the master and we are his servants.

Hinduism includes a plurality of views about salvation. The 8th century teacher Shankara inspired its dominant modern branch. He taught that everything *is* God. Human persons seem to be individually existing beings, but this is just an illusion. Through intellectual

training, meditation and rituals, we escape the cycle of reincarnation by becoming fully aware that *you* or *I* do not exist. There is no you or me, only God *is*. Salvation consists of becoming fully aware of that reality.

Buddhism also includes a plurality of traditions, yet these are in remarkable agreement on the basics of liberation. Two Buddhist doctrines are crucial. First, the self does not exist. Persons are nothing but streams of mental phenomena. Second, the goal of life is nirvana, the complete realization that *I* do not exist. The Buddhist scriptures offer few positive descriptions of nirvana, preferring negations such as “deathless” or “without passion.” Buddhism is deliberately non-theistic. Whenever it speaks of gods as “existing,” it refers to higher but temporary beings. Liberation is not about eternal inter-personal communion.

Even a cursory glance at the teachings of the world religions on salvation shows that they often make contradictory claims, and these pertain to the heart of their doctrines. Buddhism deliberately does not aim for eternal inter-personal communion. Neither the dominant branch of Hinduism nor Buddhism allows for the abiding existence of the human self. For much of Islam, the Christian and Jewish notion of the spousal love of God goes too far.

Not only do most of the world religions have radically different aims of life, they also offer particular doctrines and practices that are deliberately geared towards the kind of salvation that *they* propose, and not some generic afterlife. For example, Hinduism’s main branch teaches yoga not primarily as a means to physical health, but rather as a way to attain the consciousness that *I* do not exist, for only God truly is. Buddhism proposes various meditations as effective means to attain the realization of the “not-self,” and to detach from everything, including personal immortality. Both the main branch of Hinduism and Buddhism consider the desire for an eternal communion with God as a great obstacle to liberation that must be overcome.

It turns out that the theorists who propose that other religions are sufficient and effective paths to eternal life with God just like Christianity have to ignore these remarkable differences. Furthermore, if yoga or Buddhist meditations were normal, effective means to eternal communion with God, then the outcome of these practices would be the virtual opposite of what these religions claim. In effect, we would be saying: “the Buddha thought that his meditations lead to nirvana, but he was wrong. They lead to eternal communion with God, which he wanted to avoid.” We would run into similar problems with other religions.

Yet as Catholics, we do hope for the salvation of non-Christians. Next week, we'll discuss how God truly calls all people to life with him.

For more details, you may consult the full text of Fr. Bernhard's lecture on this topic online at www.blessed-sacrament.org/formation.html.

The Salvation of Non-Christians, Part 2

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

In last week's newsletter, we saw how the idea that non-Christian religions and Christianity are equal paths to eternal life with God fails to take seriously the distinct claims that these other religions make about salvation. That left us with the following question: if Buddhism does not save the Buddhist, or Hinduism the Hindu, and so on, then what does?

From the beginning, Christianity's answer has been firmly rooted in the Bible: "God wills that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and human beings, the man Jesus Christ" (1 Timothy 2:4-5). In a single breath, St. Paul presents us with two profound truths. First, God truly calls everyone to eternal life. Secondly, Jesus is the bridge between God and us. Notice that Paul is not just speaking about the Son of God in his divinity. Rather, Jesus in his humanity mediates eternal life to us from the Father. Salvation comes through a particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth, who also happened to be God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus emphasizes that this mediation is unique: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6).

In these and other biblical passages, we learn that Jesus is the one and only Savior. The Bible does not qualify these claims. Jesus and the apostles were not speaking about the path of salvation that pertains only to Christians, leaving open the possibility of other paths. Rather, for any human being at any point in history that is saved, the one savior is Christ. As Christians, we accept the Bible as the inspired Word of God. While there are temporary elements in the Bible (like circumcision, or women having to wear veils on their heads for liturgy), these elements pertain to practices that are relative to time and culture (the veils), or are abrogated in Scripture itself (Paul discouraged circumcision). Vatican II reminds us that when the Bible makes doctrinal claims about God and his saving action in history, it is without error (*Dei Verbum* 11). If the Scriptures could teach error about who Jesus is, then the Scriptures would be utterly unreliable, and no longer the Word of God. If there is one thing the Scriptures must get right, it's who Jesus is. Who is Jesus? He is the unique Savior.

Scripture's clear teaching leaves us with an obvious problem: if only Jesus saves, what happens to all non-Christians throughout history? Vatican II faces this dilemma head-on. First,

following a long Catholic theological tradition, the Council reminds us that open, explicit faith in Christ is not absolutely necessary in every case: “The Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery” (*Gaudium et Spes* 22). In other words, Christ’s saving action sometimes occurs in the depth of the mind and heart, and may even surpass the conscious awareness of the non-Christian being drawn into grace. “Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life” (*Lumen Gentium* 16). By living morally upright lives and seeking the truth with all their heart, non-Christians can be drawn into a saving communion with God. Precisely because this can happen in a way “known to God” but not to us, we must not despair about the salvation of any single person, even if they seem to end this life as atheists or with an apparent refusal to believe in the God revealed in Christ. The Catholic Church refuses to declare with certitude that any particular deceased human being has been damned. To do so would be to commit the sin of judgment.

The Church also refuses simply to dismiss non-Christian religions as demonically inspired or pure obstacles to salvation. In the year 2000, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote: “Some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel, in that they are occasions or pedagogical helps in which the human heart is prompted to be open to the action of God” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Jesus* 21). This means that *some* elements of non-Christian religions may be *partial* paths to eternal life for non-Christians. Yet that path leads to and is completed by Christ.

As Catholics, we are called to hope for the salvation of every person that we meet, regardless of whether they already explicitly believe in Jesus or whether they will explicitly convert to Christ some day. Yet we must not assume that all of them will automatically accept God’s mysterious offer of salvation in the depth of the soul. The safest, surest path to salvation that Jesus has taught us is explicit faith in him, Christian baptism and discipleship (see Mark 16:16). This is why Vatican II reminds us that “everyone ought to be converted to Christ” (*Ad Gentes* 7). We are called to preach the Gospel to everyone while trusting in God’s infinite mercy.

For more details, see the text of Fr. Bernhard’s lecture online at www.blessed-sacrament.org/formation.html.

Rosary Sunday

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

On Sunday, October 7, our parish celebrates Our Lady of the Rosary. This feast has a special place in the Dominican Order, the religious community whose priests serve you at Blessed Sacrament Parish and at the Newman Center of the University of Washington. There are numerous accounts of Mary's special role in interceding for the Dominican friars, especially in the fragile early stages of the Order's existence. In the early 13th century, St. Dominic himself is said to have experienced a vision of heaven. He looked around and saw members of many religious Orders, but none of his brothers dressed in their black mantles and white habits. On the point of despair, Mary came to him and asked what was troubling him. She then opened her large mantle to reveal a great multitude of little Dominicans finding shelter beneath her outer clothing.

Mary was the patroness of the Dominican Order from the earliest years, which is one reason that the Catholic Church has commissioned the Dominicans to promote the rosary. The rosary is a prayer that focuses us on the marvel of God becoming man in Jesus Christ. When we pray the rosary, our words follow those that the angel Gabriel and Mary's cousin Elizabeth addressed to the Mother of God in the Gospel of Luke. Meanwhile, the mind and imagination dwell on particular events in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The rosary is utterly centered on Christ.

The Dominicans exist to pray for the sanctification of the world and to be an instrument for that sanctification by the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus, the Son of Mary. But sound and engaging preaching demands an intense study God's Word and his wisdom as manifested in creation. That is why every Dominican priest who ministers in the Western United States receives eight intense years of full-time formation. Six of those years consist of graduate studies in philosophy and theology. The teaching of the Dominican saints reminds us that only by drinking deeply from the well of God's wisdom in sacred study can our preaching be an effective means for the conversion of souls.

Eight years of full-time formation are not inexpensive. For example, the annual formation expense for Br. Christopher Fadok, who served in our parish full-time last year, is about \$36,000. This figure includes full-time tuition, room and board, medical insurance and all

other basic needs. We currently have about 25 young men in initial formation. In addition, our province sends some of its priests on for doctoral studies. Numerous Dominicans are needed to minister as professors of theology, philosophy or Church history at the Dominican School of Philosophy & Theology (DSPT) in Berkeley, the Angelicum in Rome and other Catholic schools. For example, I (Fr. Bernhard) will begin full-time doctoral studies in Europe in the fall of 2008. After completing my degree, I will join the Dominican faculty at our school in Berkeley or at another institution to educate future priests, religious brothers and sisters from various congregations as well as lay leaders who will minister full-time in the Church. The quality of preaching and catechesis at Blessed Sacrament Parish and at many other parishes throughout the country will greatly depend on the quality of education that the Dominicans can provide in their graduate schools of theology.

Many people also do not realize that the Dominicans receive no financial assistance from the bishops for the education of our future brothers, priests or professors. Diocesan bishops make annual appeals that raise millions of dollars in our own parish and many others, and tax the parish collection 5%. These funds also cover the cost of training diocesan seminarians. The Dominicans do not receive any portion of the diocesan appeals and parish taxes, in this or in any other diocese. The bishops do allow us to make an appeal once a year for the educational needs of our brothers, which we do on Rosary Sunday. All of the funds from this appeal will be dedicated to the formation expenses of Dominican friars, including those who will serve you in this parish.

When we pray the Rosary, we gain a deeper trust in Mary, our spiritual mother, who constantly prays for us in heaven. We are also reminded that as Catholics, we belong to a great universal family, which is the Church. Some of our brethren in this family have been called to a life that is particularly dedicated to invite others to become adopted sons and daughters of God, our divine Father, and of Mary, our heavenly human mother. Rosary Sunday reminds us to assist these preachers of the Word in fulfilling their call, which we do by our prayers, and by our financial generosity.

What is True Freedom?

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

The title of this article may strike you as strange. Isn't the answer obvious? Freedom is when I can choose for myself, when I can decide between two or more options, without anyone else restricting my choice.

Today, this is the most widely assumed meaning of freedom. But when we consider the teachings of Jesus, we run into a little problem. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (8:32). In speaking to the Pharisees, Jesus proposes that freedom is the fruit of adopting his teaching. Now if freedom is the ability to do what I want, how can the Pharisees become free by knowing the truth? If no one is restricting their choices, are they not already free?

The Gospel of John alerts us to the fact that the classical Christian understanding of freedom is different from the one that dominates in our culture. Some examples can help us to grasp this classical notion. Anyone has the ability to choose to walk up to a piano and begin to hit different keys. They can do so for as long as they like, but the sound they will produce will probably be quite unpleasant. By contrast, trained pianists have honed a skill for many years. They have the ability to play beautiful sonatas by Beethoven. They *are free* to create beauty and delight others. The person without piano training is incapable of choosing to make such beauty. The untrained musician is, in a sense, not free at all.

We might think of the business manager that consistently engages in fair and just business practices. She always treats her employees with respect, never cheats her customers, and is always straightforward with her investors. By acting with fairness and honesty day after day, she acquires the habit of acting justly. With each passing day, she is more and more inclined to continue to act in this way. In a sense, it becomes more and more difficult for her to act unjustly. Acting with fairness and honesty has become second nature for her. We intuitively admire such persons. We praise them with words such as, "she would never mistreat her employees."

Or we might think of the faithful husband who has consistently expressed his sexual love only with his wife. Over the years, it becomes more and more difficult for him to cheat on his spouse. But he does not feel enslaved by the virtue of chastity. The chaste husband does not

wake up one day and say: “I would really have to try hard to commit adultery. I feel so repressed by my chastity.” We intuitively recognize that this is no loss of freedom, but rather a marvelous way to live. Christ’s truth has liberated him to choose true love each day. It also brings tremendous peace to the marriage relationship. Studies have even shown that married couples that live chastity have the most satisfying sex lives!

Finally, the joy of the saints in heaven gives us the ultimate manifestation of true freedom. The saints who commune with God face-to-face cannot help but choose life with him at every moment. No single saint in heaven ever says, “I’m bored, I think I’ll go and visit hell, maybe that will be more fun.” This is part of their joy, the knowledge that they will never leave heaven, that they can never fall away from God. Their future is utterly assured. When faced with God’s infinite goodness, they cannot help but choose him. But they are hardly slaves. Rather, they are utterly free.

In the classical understanding, freedom is the capacity to choose virtue or the way of Jesus. Freedom is a strength of character, an ability to come closer to perfect happiness. Persons who insist on doing “whatever they want” do not really find freedom much of the time. Rather, they often find unhealthy attachments to money or status, or even addictions to drugs, alcohol, sex or pornography. All too often, the false freedom of following one’s every whim and fancy really leads to enslavement to vice. For example, persons who are overly attached to their social status become less capable of acting with honesty when being honest might compromise their reputation. False freedom can take us right down the road to despair.

But true freedom leads to happiness and lasting peace. Real freedom comes when we follow the morally upright path that God has revealed to us. The Christian paradox is that our true freedom comes when we follow the will of another. When we choose the path of virtue each day, we will find our true fulfillment in the freedom that comes from living in harmony with God. In following that path, we will come to discover the joy of the saints.

The Moral Law & Freedom
Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Last week, we discussed the Christian understanding of freedom as the capacity to choose the path of Christ, not the ability to do whatever we want. This biblically rooted vision of freedom is intertwined with a particular vision of the moral law.

Today, the term “moral law” is often treated as some kind of threat or disease. Such thinking is far from the Jews and Christians who first received the revelation of God. In the Old Testament, we see Israel encountering the living God and entering into a relationship of love with him. God in turn gave Israel certain moral laws, such as the Ten Commandments. These moral precepts were not seen as foreign impositions on the Israelites’ personal freedom. Rather, they were recognized as part of God’s self-revelation. The Ten Commandments gave the Israelites a partial glimpse of God’s beautiful face. This is why the Psalmist often proclaims his great love for God’s law. Meditating on this law day and night, as well as putting it into practice, were (and are) the pious Jew’s paths to loving communion with God (e.g. Psalm 119:35, 72, 97).

Jesus continued and completed the revelation of the Old Testament, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. Here, the new Moses sits on a mountain and speaks with authority. His standards are lofty. From now on, hating one’s brother or sister is like murder. Yet Jesus also exhorts his hearers to be “perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). By following the law, we do not simply keep the divine lawmaker content and “on our side.” We actually become holy and happy like our heavenly Father. This is because the moral law is an expression of God’s wisdom and beauty. By reflecting on and living Jesus’ teachings, we gain an ever-clearer glimpse of his beautiful face. As Christ recreates us in his image, the beauty of his face is reflected in our lives. We become living icons of the Son of God as we imitate his selfless love.

Becoming perfect like our heavenly Father may sound like mission impossible. Who but the really holy people could ever live up to this celestial standard? Yet Jesus is not demanding the impossible. We really can do it, but only with the help of God’s grace. In baptism, Jesus breathes his Spirit into us. The Spirit gradually redirects our inclinations away from their excessive attachments to the limited goods of this world (like food, the approval of others, our looks, or our bank accounts) and towards the things that last (like wisdom, friendship, prayer and

peace of mind). The Spirit gradually reorders our desires and molds our conscience, where he speaks to us. The Spirit directs and empowers us to be faithful to Jesus' moral law, which is simply a way of seeking his beautiful face.

Christian theologians have long recognized the harmonious connection between the divine moral law and human freedom. Since freedom is really the capacity to choose the way of Jesus, and since the moral law reveals that way, then choosing to follow God's law leads us to greater freedom and happiness. The truth of Christ sets us free. This is why the chaste husband (or wife) we discussed last week grows in freedom precisely when he (or she) follows the path of chastity (and thus also happens to find a better sex life).

All-too often, Christian morality can be perceived as a set of antiquated ethical rules. The commandments can strike people as arbitrary, or simply the reflections of one particular culture. This may be because many times, people learn about the content of the moral law but not the reasons for the law. Perhaps we encourage others not to gossip or neglect their neighbor in need, but then we fail to explain why they should behave differently. The Gospel will only become Good News for others when we can point to the happiness and the true liberation that comes from a life of virtue and Christian discipleship. The law of the Gospel will be Good News for others when they see its fruits in our lives and in the lives of the saints to which we expose them.

Why should we obey Christ's teachings? Because it will lead us to a peace and a personal fulfillment that we will never find anywhere else, the peace that comes from being recreated in God's likeness.

Tolerance, Part 1: A Brief History

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Today, few words are used as frequently in society as the term “tolerance.” Our popular culture prides itself on having become ever more tolerant. At times like this, the virtue of wisdom moves us step back and ask: what is true tolerance anyway, and how does it relate to our Christian faith?

First, where does the word “tolerance” come from? Its roots are in the Latin term *tolerare*, which means “to put up with” or “to endure.” The original meaning includes a certain judgment. Tolerating someone or something meant that someone else’s beliefs or practices were considered false or harmful, but still allowed to exist. This type of tolerance was applied inconsistently in the societies of old. The pagan Roman Empire tolerated most non-Roman religions and (usually) Judaism, but tended to marginalize or persecute Christians. Christendom also tended to tolerate minority religions such as Judaism and Islam, with obvious exceptions (e.g. the mistreatment of Jews in early modern Spain). Islamic societies usually tolerated Christians and Jews, though these religious minorities were also phased out through economic pressure. In each case, the dominant class considered the religious minority to be in error, but was usually willing to put up with its existence for the sake of a greater good, such as social harmony. Also, religious minorities were generally not forced to change their beliefs and practices.

The nature of tolerance shifted significantly in the early modern era. Europe was torn apart by terrible religious wars between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Philosophers such as John Locke responded with a new approach to tolerance. Henceforth, the state was to remain above divisions between Christian denominations. This meant that religion was to be privatized. One could be Catholic or Protestant in a Church building and in one’s home, but public life (especially laws) was to remain religiously neutral. Since religion led to terrible wars, the secular state seemed to be the pathway to peace. Locke and other philosophers had tremendous influence on modern politics, as seen by the secular nature of most Western states today.

In the past few decades, the meaning of tolerance has shifted once again. Our contemporary culture has become increasingly aware of the ways in which various minority groups have suffered in the past. One thinks of the many types of segregation imposed upon

African-Americans. Small religious minorities such as Muslims or Hindus have often felt unwelcome. Homosexual persons have often encountered real hatred simply for being homosexual. As a result, numerous intellectual, religious and political leaders have promoted a new form of tolerance. Rather than “enduring” the other (as in ancient or medieval times), rather than simply allowing the other’s religion to exist in the private sphere (John Locke’s philosophy), today tolerance can often mean accepting the other person’s culture or lifestyle, in the sense of withholding all judgment or critique. At times, tolerance can even mean approving of another’s culture or lifestyle. Clearly, it is difficult to summarize the various ways in which tolerance is used today. Yet we can perceive a trend in which tolerance often means the acceptance of the actions or beliefs of others.

Especially since Vatican II, Catholics have come to recognize more fully the value of religious tolerance, meaning respect for the religious freedom of others. We have become more aware of the need to promote the real equality of the races. We have made greater efforts to recognize the dignity of every human person, including homosexual men and women. There remains much room for growth in these areas for many Catholics, not to mention other Christians.

The new meanings of tolerance also pose another kind of challenge for us and our Christian faith. At times, today’s tolerance seems to lead to the marginalization of certain groups. For example, the media or certain cultural leaders sometimes label more traditional Christians who maintain that marriage is a union of one man and one woman as “fundamentalists” or “bigots,” terms which are clearly intended to elicit a dismissal of their belief as irrational. Such discourse can also easily overlook the crucial Catholic distinction between accepting the person in love and refusing to accept some of their actions. In the state of California, it will soon be illegal for public school teachers to make any moral differentiation between heterosexual and homosexual unions. The State of Washington is trying to force Christian pharmacists to fill prescriptions for drugs that kill human embryos, despite the Christian conviction that embryos are human beings whose dignity must be respected.

At times, the campaign for tolerance can propose one particular vision of human life as the norm that everyone seems obligated to accept. Henceforth, Christian teachers in California must pretend that homosexual and heterosexual unions are morally equal. Henceforth, Christian pharmacists in Washington must pretend that the dignity of the human embryo is irrelevant.

Such policies do anything but make traditional Christians, Jews, Muslims or Buddhists feel accepted in our society. The new tolerance has the potential of diminishing religious freedom. It could end up imposing one worldview upon everyone.

Yet there really is such a thing as Christian tolerance, which we will discuss next week.

Tolerance, Part 2: A Catholic Understanding

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

In last week's newsletter, we surveyed the historical development of the meaning of tolerance. We noted that in today's society, the promotion of tolerance can both serve to promote greater respect for certain minority groups that were excluded in the past while also having the potential of marginalizing other groups. The meaning and practice of tolerance is clearly one of the great issues our time. But what is a Catholic understanding of tolerance?

A Catholic approach to tolerance begins with the conviction that God has created every human being in his image. The implications of this biblical belief that we share with Judaism are profound. Simply because God has made each human being, he or she has a dignity that cannot be taken away. That is because their very being reflects the beauty and goodness of God. This is why our Catholic faith calls us to treat every human being with respect and dignity. Expressing hate towards a person because of their skin color, religion or sexual orientation is actually a grave offense against God, their Creator.

Secondly, being made in God's image means, among other things, that we have been given the ability to choose or reject God. God invites us into a life of friendship with him, and friendship cannot be forced. Here we have the foundation of a Catholic understanding of religious tolerance. With the benefit of two thousand years of Christian reflection upon the meaning of revelation, Vatican II was able to recognize the importance of religious freedom in a new way. This meant that the state was not to impose one form of religious belief or another, since this would violate the very image of God (Vatican II, *Declaration on Religious Liberty*, #2). This tolerance was exemplified by Pope John Paul II's efforts to assist Muslims in Rome in the construction of a large mosque.

Thirdly, a Catholic approach to tolerance is rooted in a conviction about the nature of truth. Because God creates everything in wisdom, all of creation reflects something of his truth. Since God has made every human being with the capacity for his truth that he has inscribed in creation all human cultures reflect some of God's truth, even when Judeo-Christian revelation is absent. Christian tolerance begins with the firm conviction that truth is objective, not relative. Precisely because truth is objective and ultimately found in the wise Creator God, the Christian is called to be open to the reflections of God's truth that are present (in varying degrees) in every

person and culture. Christian tolerance begins with the firm belief that we have found the truth in Jesus Christ, but since this truth is divine and infinite, we can always grow in our understanding of that truth with the help of others, even non-Christians. The Christian conviction that Christ is the truth (John 14:6) leads directly to dialogue with those who do not think the way we do. This does not mean that we can compromise on Christ's clear teachings, such as his inspired moral instruction. Rather, our grasp of Christ's teachings can attain new depths with the help of others.

Fourth, because God has inscribed many truths in creation and in the human heart, we can gently challenge others who may not share our religious beliefs to recognize certain moral truths that are available to all. For example, most studies show that children tend to grow up healthier when a mother and father raise them. Virtually every human culture in history seems to have understood this. Thus, Christian tolerance calls us to balance respect for single parents and recognition of their often heroic accomplishments with efforts to promote the unity of families, so that as many children as possible can be raised by a mother and father. Of course, we recognize that some married couples must separate because of real abuse in the relationship, and that such separations are also for the good of the children.

Fifth, tolerance is a means to an end, not an end in itself. We are not tolerant for the sake of being tolerant. Rather, tolerance and all other virtues that we live out are for the sake of helping others find their true fulfillment in communion with God. Tolerance is ultimately for the sake of helping others to freely find the truth of God. Therefore, if tolerance seems to move us to approve of a form of life that directly contradicts God's design for the human being, then our tolerance has become false, or an end in itself. If tolerance moves us to support others as they turn away from God, then our tolerance has become detached from authentic love.

It is crucial that Catholics today participate more than ever in the ongoing debate surrounding issues of tolerance. At times, our secular popular culture can sideline various religious voices, both Christian and non-Christian, unless those voices already agree with an agreed-upon secular norm for human life. Catholics have a mission to encourage our media and cultural leaders to practice true tolerance, one in which public discourse is open to the wisdom of Christianity and that of other religions. Only then can true tolerance be attained.

The Basics of Prayer, Part 1: The Teachings of Jesus

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

If you've visited the local bookstores lately, you may have noticed the considerable size of the spirituality section. It is just one sign that the hunger for prayer is everywhere in our society, and in our Church. Our post-modern culture provides a vast array of choices, with countless spiritual writers offering advice on prayer or meditation. The faithful Christian must learn to choose well. Many of us may find a particular saint or contemporary spiritual writer who helps us the most in figuring out the details of our prayer life. Yet each Christian also needs to form a foundation of prayer in the words and example of Jesus himself. For he is the ultimate and unsurpassable spiritual master.

What does Jesus teach us about prayer? Perhaps the first thing that strikes us in the Gospel stories is the simplicity of Jesus' approach to prayer. At the heart of Jesus' way of praying is the simple act of communion with his Father (e.g. John 17). We can define prayer as intimate conversation with God. We say to him what is on our mind, and then we listen for his voice. Whatever methods we might employ to focus ourselves will always be a means to this one goal of communion.

If Christian prayer is essentially communion or conversation with the God who loves us, then it clearly presumes faith in God's revelation. The Christian does not seek to construct a personal faith from the ground up through religious experiences attained in prayer. We do not begin by reaching out to a completely unknown God or a nebulous plane of consciousness. Rather, we begin by reaching out to the God who has already reached out to us in the ancient story of Israel, in the person of Jesus and in our baptism. Communion with God presumes that I believe in the Triune God who is a communion of persons initiating communion with us. It presumes the acceptance of Jesus' teachings. This is why the study of our faith, especially of the Scriptures and the great documents of faith (like the Creed) greatly enriches our prayer life. When we grow in our knowledge of God by study, we desire to dwell with him more and more.

Thirdly, Jesus teaches us various ways to pray. Jesus prayed communally in the synagogue and the temple, and instituted the perfect liturgy at the Last Supper. Christian prayer is therefore never exclusively private. Jesus also often sought to pray in solitude, especially in the desert or the mountains (e.g. Matthew 14:23). He taught us to go to our room, lock the door

and pray to the Father in secret (Matthew 6:6). There we express our innermost thoughts, hopes and fears, dwelling in silence with the God who dwells within us as his temple. We also find Jesus emphasizing vocal prayer, such as the Our Father, which is the perfect prayer. He offers prayers of praise for the Father (Matthew 11:25-27), expressing intense joy and gratitude. Jesus offers prayers of petition (the raising of Lazarus in John 11). He also utters a lament on the Cross (Mark 15:34), followed by a prayer of trust (Luke 23:46, Matthew 27:50). While many of us are drawn to one particular kind of prayer (e.g. charismatic praise, vocal petitions, or a quiet dwelling with God), Jesus reminds us to integrate various forms of prayer at different times in our life.

Fourth, we often find Jesus praying in times of loneliness or distress. His forty days in the desert involved fasting and many temptations by the devil. His prayer to the Father in the garden at Gethsemane did not allow him to avoid the Passion, but prepared him for it. Jesus did not promise us an abundance of consolations or good emotional experiences during prayer. If anything, prayer leads to a deeper self-knowledge, which can often be very painful, as God gradually unveils to us our fallen side and inspires us to grow. The frequency of anything like religious experience or a sudden, supernatural consolation in the emotions is thus no reliable measuring stick for our progress in prayer. Rather, our greatest growth may well occur when we experience nothing in prayer, when we struggle to remain attentive, or when God seems utterly silent (think of Jesus on the Cross). Our most intense communion with God occurs at the most profound depths of the mind and heart, which usually remain beyond our perception. God's grace is immaterial and invisible. When we have some perception of God's presence to us during prayer, then we are receiving an occasional gratuitous blessing that may have little to do with our growth in holiness. Our feelings and perceptions tell us little about our prayer life, but consistent growth in virtue speaks volumes.

Jesus' teaching on prayer is beautifully simple yet profound: talk to God and listen. Still, we are often left with questions about prayer. We will deal with some of those next week.

The Basics of Prayer, Part 2: Waiting for God

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Last week, we noted that prayer is essentially conversation with God. In this way, it is not unlike the interactions we have with our best friends, the persons with whom we share our deepest joys and sorrows. Yet conversation with God is also very different. We cannot see him with our eyes, nor hear him with our ears. Because we are seeking communion with the hidden God, prayer can be a great challenge. As we learn how to pray, we must learn to listen in a new way.

Unlike our human friends, God does not respond whenever we speak to him. The timing of his answer is almost always unpredictable. We can think of prayer as a kind of waiting for God. We believe that the holy Trinity already dwells in our souls because of our baptism. Prayer is therefore waiting for God to manifest his hidden presence, since the lover seeks to touch the beloved. Prayer also begins with the recognition that parts of our lives are still shrouded in spiritual darkness. Recognizing our failings and limitations therefore leads to a deeper longing that the Father's presence would fill the still empty parts of our lives. When we take time out to pray, we can thus begin by first acknowledging our utter need for God. We also begin by remembering that God is worth loving simply because he is good, not because he will give me something that I want.

But then comes the hard part. Waiting for God may often seem quite difficult. We are probably used to having our brains constantly stimulated by information and images. In some ways, our high-tech culture is quite anti-contemplative. Prayer can therefore become extremely frustrating. We struggle to sit still and calm our imaginations. During our time of prayer, the mind easily drifts to the work and errands that await us, or the movie that we saw last night.

Perhaps the first thing to remember is that deep attentiveness to God is ultimately a gift of grace. While there are certainly practical steps I can take to improve my attentiveness, the goal of prayer is not the mastery of a particular method of concentration, though the latter can be quite helpful. Rather, the very act of taking time out to pray is so pleasing to God that he ultimately (but perhaps only occasionally) graces us with a deep awareness of his presence. In the end, I cannot make myself be attentive to God, only the Holy Spirit can.

Yet there are some practical steps that we can take to deal with distractions. Perhaps the most important factor is how I prepare to pray. What is it that I do in the time before I pray in a quiet room of the house or in a Church? Do I allow my brain to be bombarded with information from the radio or the internet? Also, do I give God a few minutes when I know I will be most alert and composed?

Secondly, have I chosen a way of prayer that suits my “spiritual personality”? Some people would love to just sit quietly in God’s presence, but their natural disposition screams for images and ideas. Rather than fighting against their very nature, they can make much progress by focusing their restless minds with a slow reading of Scripture or by gazing on holy images (icons, depictions of biblical scenes, etc.). Not everyone was made to seek God in inner silence.

Thirdly, the saints recommend having recourse to short vocal prayers when our mind wanders. St. Teresa of Avila recommends the frequent recitation of the *Our Father*. The great spiritual masters of the eastern Orthodox Churches made immense progress by frequently reciting the *Jesus Prayer*: “Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me.” Such prayers can help us to push aside distractions and stir a deeper desire for God within us.

Fourth, spiritual masters like John Cassian and St. Thomas Aquinas recommend short but frequent periods of prayer when we are not able to pray well for a long period of time. They remind us that prayer is fruitful not so much because we give a certain amount of time to God, but because we allow the heart to soar towards Christ with fervor and devotion. This does not mean that the amount of time that we give to God is superfluous. When we love another, we naturally want to spend more time with them. But sometimes, our weak natures only enable us to express a deep desire for God for a short period of time.

Ultimately, though, we should not be too worried about undesired distractions. Countless Catholics are frustrated by their inability to remain focused when they pray, despite having solid intentions and doing all that they can. The saints remind us that when we bring a sincere intention to remain focused on God but cannot keep our minds from wandering, he remains pleased with our prayer. The fruitfulness of prayer is ultimately determined by our sincerity of heart, not our immediate experience.

The Basics of Prayer, Part 3: Incarnational Prayer

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

One of the most beautiful aspects of our faith is the Incarnation, the belief that God truly came to earth and took on a real human nature. At the heart of Christianity, we find the ultimate affirmation of communion between the divine and the human. The Incarnation inevitably shapes the nature of Christian prayer, because prayer is ultimately about seeking deeper communion with the God who has come and dwelt among us.

Prayer is essentially conversation with God. As Christians, we do not pray to a distant, abstract divinity, but rather to the God who has become utterly tangible in Jesus. Christian prayer is about talking to a person who has a concrete history, as we find it in the Gospels. As in any conversation with a friend, we use the other's name. At the center of Christian prayer, we find the practice of invoking Jesus' name. The very first Christians clearly did this, for St. Paul can simply assume that the Corinthians "call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:2). Paul was a pious Jew who understood the ancient tradition of calling upon the name of YHWH in prayer. Now that the Son of God has become flesh, *Jesus* becomes a sacred name. Uttering the very word is a way of placing ourselves in God's presence and inviting him into our hearts. This ancient practice has been preserved most beautifully by the eastern Orthodox and the great tradition of the *Jesus Prayer*: "Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me."

When God became man, he manifested in the most powerful way possible the goodness of the human body. The spiritual life is not about the soul's escape from the trap of the body, but rather the sanctification of the whole person, body and soul. Jesus came to sanctify the flesh, not just the soul. Our bodies have already been made holy beginning with our baptism. This means that we are to pray to and worship God with our whole being, body and soul. St. Paul exhorts us: "Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God" (Romans 12:1). Christian prayer is therefore not exclusively a conversation with God within our spirit, but also a communion with God that involves our whole being. What does this mean?

Throughout history, many great Christian saints and contemplatives have practiced a prayer of stillness: standing, sitting or kneeling quietly before God and seeking to encounter him in silence, in the depth of the soul. This type of prayer is becoming popular again in our day.

But each of these saints understood that their prayer life must consist of more than this prayer of stillness. God also called them to converse with him in a way that actively employs the body. The saints used many kinds of bodily gestures to commune with God. They would raise their hands, make multiple genuflections or prostrate themselves on the ground. They would use their voice to express the full range of human emotions, including joy, gratitude or lamentation. They would sing, whisper or even yell. Perhaps the best example of this “incarnational prayer” is found in the life of St. Dominic. In using a wide range of bodily gestures and vocal expressions, the fervor, excitement or worry that filled Dominic’s soul would burst forth in his outer expressions. At the same time, when he became tired or distracted in his soul, he would employ bodily gestures of worship to increase his inner fervor.

These two elements of incarnational prayer, that is, the invocation of Jesus’ holy name and the bodily worship of God, also remind us that Christian prayer is essentially distinct from non-Christian forms of meditation. We may be able to learn a great deal from certain methods of meditation found in non-Christian religious traditions, yet any such methods are ultimately aids for the attainment of a higher purpose, the personal encounter with Jesus, the God-man. Unlike Hindu or Buddhist meditation, the goal of Christian prayer is not the attainment of a new state of consciousness, but the communion of body and soul with a concrete person, the Lord Jesus. When I learn to pray well with my whole being, then Christ comes to dwell within me, body and soul, in an ever-more intense way.

Pope Benedict XVI On Hope, Part 1

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

For the encyclical, go to www.vatican.va

Two short years after his beautiful reflection on charity, Pope Benedict XVI has released his second papal encyclical or letter, entitled “Saved by Hope” (*Spe Salvi* in Latin). Those thrilled or pleasantly surprised by his meditation on love will hardly be disappointed by this profound new work.

Why did Benedict choose to write on hope at this time? It seems to be a natural follow-up to his letter on love, since hope and love are two of the three theological virtues (faith being the third). The encyclical itself also gives us a clue. The pope addresses those who place their faith and hope primarily in scientific progress, in other words, those who accept the worldview of today’s secular Western culture whose main philosophy is atheistic or agnostic. Finally, in a recent speech, Benedict noted that young people often end up in hopelessness by being taught false loves, especially through consumerism or the sexual misuse of the body. Thus, the pope’s new encyclical seeks both to deepen the understanding of Christians about their own faith and to dialogue with a Western culture that is sliding into hopelessness.

Benedict begins by relating hope to the virtue of faith. Hope is founded on the firm belief that life will not end in emptiness, no matter how difficult it may be. Yet hope is not just a matter of knowing that there will be a happy ending. Hope rooted in faith transforms the present. Benedict cites the example of a 19th century African slave named St. Josephine Bakhita. After years of enduring immense cruelty and abuse, she discovered her dignity through the Gospel, and eventually became a religious sister in Italy. Even though Christ did not come to overturn all oppressive political and social structures, Christian hope begins to transform society from within, one step at a time.

Faith, then, is the foundation of hope, yet faith is not simply an interior attitude. Rather, faith makes present to us a new life, a supernatural existence that becomes the basis of our security, replacing such fragile sources of security as material possessions. This is why any Christian can attain a tremendous awareness of his or her own dignity even amidst great poverty or deprivation. Several times in the encyclical, Benedict emphasizes the importance of detaching from finite goods in order to open ourselves to true love and freedom. True dignity is not based on how successful we are by the world’s standards, but simply on the realization that we are

loved by Christ. When my sense of self-worth comes from my relationship with Jesus and not my bank account or what others think of me, then I can find true freedom and joy.

The full fruition of Christ's love is what we call eternal life, which is complete and unending communion with the God who is love. The main object or aim of our hope is eternal life. Yet our age is so poorly catechized that we can easily fail to grasp the beauty of that life. Here, Benedict offers a beautiful insight on the classical understanding of eternity as a constant "now." He notes that eternal life is not an endless, monotonous succession of days, but rather a supreme moment of satisfaction in which we plunge into the infinite ocean of love. Eternal life is far from the gods of Greek mythology playing harps on clouds and stirring up trouble on earth to break out of their boredom. Rather, it is like the ecstasy of lovers as they embrace, an experience whose intensity simply continues to grow into eternity.

Yet this vision of eternal life may sound like a sophisticated form of escapism. Furthermore, it may seem like an escapism for me, a radical form of individualism that ignores our social realities. And so modernity has often turned its hope away from salvation for the individual and instead placed its faith and hope in human progress. Henceforth, the human being will work out his own salvation here and now. One thinks of the scientific revolution that seeks greater control of the universe, the French Revolution that strove for social equality, or the Marxist revolutions that sought economic equality. Yet even agnostic philosophers are beginning to realize that none of these modern developments have led or will lead to paradise on earth. Even marvelous technical advances can do great harm (will we soon clone human beings to harvest their body parts?). Scientific progress becomes dangerous when it is not matched by ethical progress.

And here, the human being is in need of faith, to remind us of right and wrong, and of God's sovereignty over creation. Here, human beings need hope to remind them that they cannot build paradise on earth, but can only receive it as a gift in eternity. Scientific progress is wonderful, but it needs to be guided by standards higher than our physical well-being. Christian hope opens our eyes to the ultimate purpose of human life.

Pope Benedict XVI On Hope, Part 2

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP For the encyclical, go to www.vatican.va

In last week's newsletter, I considered the first half of Pope Benedict's new encyclical *Saved By Hope*. I concluded by noting Benedict's challenge to a secular worldview that tries to see all of life through the lens of scientific progress. Such a vision fails to recognize the full dignity of the human being as infinitely loved by God.

Yet Benedict also engages in a healthy self-critique of modern Christianity that may surprise his secular readers. He freely acknowledges that our vision of salvation has become too individualistic. Too often, Christian hope has been directed mainly at heaven for me. Christians cannot disengage from the world and simply practice their religion in private, nor should they ignore the real social implications of the Gospel. Ironically, it is by truly loving God that I find the power to detach from the material goods around me, and thus become capable of loving others in a radical way. Through detachment, I am able to act so that others may flourish, instead of acting mainly for my own material or social advancement. Authentic hope leads away from spiritual self-centeredness. By hope, I have the certitude that my sacrificial love for others will never be in vain.

Yet learning detachment is usually a painful process. Benedict shows how prayer teaches us hope. Following St. Augustine, he describes prayer as an exercise of desire for God. In prayer, we tell God how much we long to be with him. When the Lord responds, he wants to give us a share in his sweetness. But our hearts are often filled with vinegar, preventing us from receiving the sweetness of divine honey. And so, through prayer, God begins to empty the vinegar from our hearts. Gradually, he shows us our dark side, our self-centeredness, our excessive attachments to superficial things, or the conscience that is numb to the real evil that we do. Yet this painful process of self-reform leads to a new awareness of God's goodness.

Benedict then moves to what may be the highlight of the encyclical, his explanation of human suffering in light of Christian hope. We live in a culture that treats suffering as perhaps the greatest evil, the one thing to be avoided at all costs. Benedict shows how suffering is not the worst that could happen to us. He cites the experience of a 19th century Vietnamese martyr named Paul Le-Bao-Tinh. Amidst chains and tortures, Paul found astounding joy: "God has delivered me from these tribulations and made them sweet, for his mercy is for ever." Paul

wrote these words while he was in prison! Had he gone mad? Not at all. “I am not alone – Christ is with me ... In the midst of this storm I cast my anchor towards the throne of God.”

But suffering is not just meaningful for martyrs. Rather, it is the true measure of humanity. A society that cannot accept its suffering members and exercise compassion becomes inhumane. For when suffering becomes the greatest evil, then avoiding suffering becomes more important than living the truth and enacting justice. When suffering becomes the greatest evil, then my comfort or the comfort of society takes precedence over everything else. So love only matures when we are willing to suffer in love.

Hope clearly calls the Christian to work for justice in this world, especially when justice demands sacrifices. Yet our desire for justice seems perpetually frustrated. God has not brought complete justice to the earth, and human efforts to bring absolute justice consistently end in disaster (the bloodbaths of the French and Marxist Revolutions). Christian hope therefore also looks for God to bring complete justice in the next life. In fact, the impossibility of justice in this world can be a powerful argument for the reality of eternal life. For only if there is an afterlife, and only if the kind of afterlife we attain is partly a result of our actions on earth, will justice ever be served.

Benedict is clearly challenging the dominant contemporary trend to downplay Christ’s function as judge at the moment of our death. If our sins have no consequences in the next life, then divine justice vanishes. Such is Dostoevsky’s rightful protest in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. The unbeliever who thirsts for justice will never accept a God who does nothing about our wrongdoing.

Yet God’s justice is tempered by mercy. Benedict interprets the parable of the rich man and Lazarus as a story about purgatory, where the rich man is given an opportunity to overcome his materialism and self-centeredness (Luke 16). Even great sinners can be saved by clinging to God with faith, hope and love. Yet they must still be purged of their spiritual deformities in order to enjoy communion with God in heaven. Only when Christ teaches me to stop clinging to finite goods will I be free to cleave to him with all my being.

As we enter a new year, Pope Benedict offers us a profound meditation that can help us mature in the Christian life and share the good news with those who have little or no hope. Perhaps our New Year’s resolution should be to learn the virtue of hope again, and manifest it to others in love.

The Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

This coming weekend, our parish will sponsor two evenings of lectures on ecumenical theology. We will host a Dominican friar from Rome, a Lutheran scholar from South Carolina, as well as a Free Methodist elder and professor from Seattle Pacific University, as they discuss the future of Protestant - Catholic relations. As we approach this unique event, we want to step back and consider the purpose of dialogue with our Protestant brethren.

In 1964, Vatican II offered a blue print for the Catholic Church's approach to ecumenical dialogue. It deplored the divisions within Christianity as contrary to the will of Christ (*Decree on Ecumenism* 1). The Council admitted that all sides shared responsibility for these divisions (i.e., the split was not just Martin Luther's fault). Furthermore, it insisted on calling Protestant Christians "separated brethren," not "schismatics" or "heretics." Our Protestant brethren share a real but incomplete communion with us (ibid., 3). The task of ecumenism is therefore to work towards the full and visible union of all Christians. We cannot yet share the Eucharist, but doing so in the future should be our burning desire (ibid., 4).

The past forty years have included real progress in mutual understanding among Catholics and Protestants. The parties have often realized that they already share much in common in their understanding of the gift of faith, baptism, Scripture and evangelization, to name a few areas. Yet today, ecumenism seems to be passing through a difficult phase. Having discovered our commonalities, the time has come to explore our differences, and this can be painful. In other words, in order for progress towards unity to continue, Catholics and Protestants must face certain hard questions, including our differences on such key issues as the relation of the Church to the individual believer, the papacy, the sacraments and tradition.

The attainment of ecumenical unity through dialogue is not a matter of finding the right compromise. That is, we cannot adopt a secular model of negotiation, where each side gives up something that it holds dear in order to reach agreement. The goal of ecumenical dialogue is to enter more deeply into the fullness of the truth revealed in Christ. The full richness of truth is not attained by compromise, but through a path of discovery. What does that mean?

As Catholics, believe that the Roman Catholic Church has received the fullness of Christ's truth through the apostles. However, because Christ's truth is infinite, we cannot fully

grasp its richness in this life. This means that the Church will always need to grow into a deeper understanding of Christ and life in him.

For instance, the truth needs to be articulated in sentences. For example, the Catholic Church has often emphasized the truth that the sacraments are means to receive God's healing grace. If the Catholic Church's teaching on the sacraments focuses too exclusively on such language, we can lose sight of the greatest gift that we receive through the sacraments, which is a real personal encounter with Christ. Ecumenical dialogue can help us to discover when our doctrinal language has become inadequate for the expression of certain beliefs. It helps us to see when we fail to articulate the centrality of Christ in the life of faith.

Secondly, some truths are more important than others. The Roman Catholic Church has always believed that the Bible is the Word of God. However, in modern times, our customs may have placed too little emphasis on this central truth and failed to manifest the importance of Scripture in the liturgy and daily life. Ecumenical dialogue helps us to bring central truths back to their proper place in the life of the Church. Through dialogue, our Protestant brethren challenge us to rediscover the richness of our own tradition that we have overlooked.

Finally, the Church concretizes the truth of life in Christ through particular practices. For example, certain forms of prayer such as the liturgy and the rosary teach us to integrate into prayer both the body (by liturgical gestures) and our imagination (by meditating on the events of Jesus' life). Yet we also know that the first Christians integrated a vast range of human emotions and vocal expressions in charismatic prayer, a practice that was later largely lost in the life of the Catholic Church. Through ecumenical relations, our Protestant brethren have again taught us the rich practice of charismatic prayer, so that we integrate yet another aspect of human existence (certain human emotions) into our way of relating to God. There are many other hidden gifts of the Holy Spirit that remain to be discovered as the Gospel bears fruit in other cultures. In fact, Pope John Paul II has described ecumenism as an exchange of spiritual gifts.

Our Protestant brethren accompany us on this path of discovery. Ecumenical dialogue will challenge them to ponder the place of a hierarchical teaching office in the Church, devotion to the saints, or the power of the sacraments. Such dialogue will lead them to ask questions that would otherwise never emerge. Dialogue leads them and us into a process of greater self-reform and a deepening understanding of the infinite wisdom of Christ.

The Virtues, Part 1: The Pursuit of Happiness

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

“Good morals lead to happiness.” To some of us, this statement might sound strange or suspicious. Some may associate the term “morals” with a life of constant self-denial that leads to heaven, but not to joy or happiness in this life. “Good morals” seem to evoke Puritanism or a life of suppressed emotions and bodily urges. Others may think that happiness is attained when people can follow their own path, their own philosophy of life, and not someone else’s understanding of ethics.

Our first reaction to this statement reveals the extent to which we have unknowingly accepted certain modern ethical assumptions that would look quite strange to Jesus and the saints. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preached the beatitudes. “Blessed are the poor in spirit ... blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5). One can also translate the word “blessed” as “happy.” The beatitudes lead to happiness. Secondly, notice that Jesus spoke in the present tense. He promised that happiness can begin in this life, though it will only be complete in the next (“they will see God”). Finally, the Sermon on the Mount offers Jesus’ summary of the moral life. It stands at the heart of any authentic Christian ethic. Therefore, Jesus’ moral teachings lead to happiness. Good morals do lead to happiness, even this side of heaven.

Jesus told us *that* this is the case, but *how* can this be? We can begin to answer that question by considering our understanding of happiness. What is it? We can agree that in the depth of our hearts, we all seek happiness. Indeed, happiness is something which human beings desire above all else. People pursue a certain profession, wealth, a good marriage, a family, recreation and friendships because they believe that these will bring them (and others) happiness, not vice versa. The fact that everyone seeks happiness is a sign that the Creator himself has planted this longing in the depth of the human heart. This is good news. God wants us to pursue happiness, not misery.

But shouldn’t everyone be free to determine what happiness will be for them? Isn’t happiness relative? Perhaps it would be, if creation were a mere myth. Yet God has created every human being in his image and likeness (Genesis 1). God did not create an utterly chaotic world in which each being determines itself. Rather, he created the world through the Word, through Wisdom (John 1). The human being has an order inscribed within it that reflects this

Wisdom. Our human nature is not like a piece of plastic that we can mold however we want, but a reflection of divine Truth and Beauty.

What kind of order has God inscribed within us? He has made the human mind to know infinite truth, and he has made the human heart to love infinite goodness. God has created us to be restless until we come to a direct encounter with Truth and Love itself. “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you” (St. Augustine, *The Confessions*). Why is the human desire for money limitless, or why is physical pleasure never enough for those who pursue it wholeheartedly? Because some strive to fulfill their bottomless longing for truth and love through the attainment of limited, earthly goods. Finite things cannot satiate infinite longing. “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God.” Jesus promises the fulfillment of happiness in the loving vision of God. The pure heart is not just a heart cleansed from sins of the flesh, but a heart whose singular aim is the love of God. The deepest longings of the human heart are for perfect truth and love. This is our objective happiness. It’s for everyone.

The aim of the Christian life is perfect happiness (life with God in heaven) and a foretaste of heaven in this life in the peace and joy of the Holy Spirit (blessed *are* the pure of heart). How do we attain this two-fold happiness? By living according to the pattern or order that God has inscribed within our very being. God has created us in such a way that when I act according to God’s ways, I move closer to partial happiness in this life and complete happiness in the next. My whole being bears the imprint of God’s wise order, so that, when I employ my body and soul as he intended, I begin to find my true fulfillment. This is the Christian paradox: pursuing *my* way to happiness actually leads to misery and despair, since I thus move away from God, who alone is infinite truth and love. But giving up my way to pursue *God’s* way leads to my authentic fulfillment.

When I employ my body, my emotions, heart and mind as God intended, I am living what we call the virtues. And the perfect teacher of the virtues is Jesus Christ. His words and deeds are the ultimate education in virtue, or the moral life. The purpose of God coming among us in Christ was to show us the path to happiness.

But what exactly is virtue? I will begin to answer that question next week.

The Virtues, Part 2: A Definition
By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Last week, I discussed the universal pursuit of happiness whose single aim is communion with the God who is Love and Truth itself. Every human being seeks Love and Truth. God has made us in such a way that when we act according to his ways, we move closer to our objective happiness, which is life with God here and hereafter. Following God's ways is called living the virtues. But what exactly is virtue?

Let's begin by listing the classical virtues. First, we have faith, hope and love, which are gratuitous gifts from God. Then, there are the four "cardinal virtues:" prudence (or wisdom), justice, temperance and courage. In this series, we will focus on these four latter virtues, which are also called the "acquired virtues." What do these virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and courage have in common?

The cardinal or acquired virtues are semi-permanent qualities of the soul. They are like muscles of the soul. To acquire physical strength, I need to lift weights or jog on a regular basis. I do the same physical exercise over and over again. As I build muscle, I become a healthier human being. Similarly, our "soul muscles" means that we attain greater spiritual health by repeating the same wholesome actions over and over again. Consistently engaging in virtuous acts like being kind and generous to the poor forms lasting habits within us. After a while, being just to the poor becomes second nature. I simply do it, often without even thinking about it. The just person is not just one who avoids stealing, but one who consistently treats others with respect and dignity. He or she gains an in-built tendency to act justly. Such a person becomes more pleasing to God, and (with the gift of God's grace) moves closer to their ultimate aim, which is perfect communion with the Trinity.

The virtues combine to form good habits of action. They are not straightjackets or restrictions on us, but rather elevate and direct our natural capacities so that we may flourish as persons. The virtues train us to use the mind, the heart, the emotions and the body in the way that our loving Creator has made them to be used. Virtue is all about character formation. It means that we are the sum of our actions, not just our intentions. The road to despair is paved with good intentions, but the road to true happiness is paved with wholesome actions done for the right intentions.

A virtue is acquired gradually over time. It demands consistent effort. Once acquired, it is not easily lost. A person who has a tendency of lying will find it difficult to stop at once. We see the same difficulty in those who tend to overeat or easily lose their temper. On the other hand, a person who consistently practices truth telling will actually find it difficult to start lying on a regular basis. If someone were to accuse a known truth-teller of lying, we would probably disbelieve the accusation and say that it “goes against his or her nature.” Our very language alludes to the presence of virtue.

Virtue is not just about acting rightly. Virtue forms internal dispositions. The word “internal” refers to the mind, the heart and the emotions. The truly courageous person faces an obstacle with a certain ease, promptness and joy, not fear and trembling. Perhaps someone began developing courage by facing danger (the abusive language of a co-worker who constantly gossips) with fear and trembling. But by confronting evil (gossip at work) when it needs to be done over and over again, the fear gradually diminishes. Being courageous becomes easier. Doing what is good eventually brings a certain delight to the mind, heart and emotions. The virtues transform our emotions and direct our desires more and more in the way of God.

We can see that living the virtues means much more than following a set of rules. We have important rules such as the Ten Commandments to keep us from consuming spiritual junk food. An athlete has to eat well, and so does the Christian pursuing holiness. Keeping the Commandments is like keeping a good diet. It prevents the decay and death of the soul. Yet that is just the first step in character formation. A man can keep the sixth commandment perfectly by avoiding lust and adultery, yet if he cannot express affection for women in a healthy, appropriate way, he has not yet acquired the virtue of chastity (which is part of temperance).

For the cardinal virtues, perfection is found in the mean or in the middle. The daredevil is not courageous, he is reckless. The Puritan is not temperate, but a suppressed individual incapable of enjoying creation as God intended. The mother who works 80-hour weeks at a wonderful non-profit organization is not growing in justice, but giving too much for one cause while neglecting her family. Rather, balancing the demands of her profession and the care of her family leads to growth in the virtue of justice.

We can see that the virtues are somewhat complex, yet utterly commonsensical. By learning to act virtuously, we become fulfilled human beings. Next week, we will ponder some elements of the virtuous act in greater detail.

The Virtues, Part 3: An Overview of Prudence

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

When you think of the term “prudence,” what is the first thing that comes to mind? Perhaps you imagine the shrewd businessperson. Prudent persons are cautious and look to minimize risks for themselves. Yet such prudence is far from the classical virtue that bears the same name.

Not only is true prudence or practical wisdom a strength of character, it is even biblically rooted. Wisdom begins with fear or reverence for God (Proverbs 1:7), that is, recognizing that God is wise and that my knowledge is quite limited. St. Paul often exhorts his readers to practice prudence (e.g. Ephesians 1:5). When properly understood and implemented, prudence leads to holiness.

So exactly what is this virtue of prudence? It is an acquired skill or capacity of the soul to make good decisions. It means having a tendency to make good choices day in and day out that truly lead me to my ultimate aim in life, which is happiness. Prudence is the ability to order all parts of life (little by little) toward our objective happiness, which is life with the God who is Love and Truth itself. The prudent parent recognizes when and how much to discipline a rebellious child. He or she has learned to discern the proper balance between showing kindness to a controlling relative and setting proper boundaries so as to keep one’s sanity.

We need prudence whenever we can make more than one good choice. Prudence does not ask whether or not I should lie or gossip in this or that situation. If this were the case, then we would fall back into the misconception that prudence means being politically shrewd. Prudence is not a sophisticated way of evading the Ten Commandments when it is convenient. Rather, prudence applies universal moral precepts (e.g. “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) in a situation where the best path is not absolutely obvious. With whom should I eat lunch? Which friendship should I cultivate, since I cannot be everyone’s friend? Which organization should benefit from my tithing? Prudence is so crucial for the development of human character because many decisions in life are messy and complex.

St. Thomas Aquinas points out that there is no virtue without prudence. Why is that? There is no virtue or holiness without truth. Truth is all about the unveiling of reality, or openness to reality (Josef Pieper, *The Cardinal Virtues*, p. 9). Prudence ultimately means being

in tune with the world and the order that God has inscribed in the world. Prudence means being in tune with God himself and his ways. Prudence means that God and his wisdom are the ultimate criteria of morality, not just good intentions, my needs or the expectations of society. Prudence presumes the ability to be still, contemplate and gaze upon reality. Do you want to grow in prudence? Then turn off your television more often and go for walks (I'm not joking). Try reducing the noise and busyness of life and learn to ponder with inner stillness the beauty of creation and human life.

Prudence presumes the most important foundational principle of the moral life: good must be done, and evil must be avoided. Our post-modern culture will respond that good and evil are essentially subjective. But in fact, no one lives according to this post-modern dogma of complete moral relativism. Virtually all post-modernists are convinced that racism is wrong and genocide is wicked. Everyone insists (correctly) that their individual rights must be respected, although we often disagree over exactly what those rights are. In practice, all of us ultimately presume that there is right and wrong. Indeed, the good must be done, and evil must be avoided. Such is the logic that God has inscribed in creation and in the human heart. Goodness is the path that leads to a deeper communion with God, and evil is that which leads away from him.

Prudence therefore presumes the objectivity of truth. That is why it becomes the "pilot of the soul" whereby the whole of our being is ordered to reality, truth and goodness. Prudence is the trained eye of the mind that discerns the path to a more wholesome way of life. Without the mind's trained eye, the other virtues go astray. My heart may be filled with a desire to be just towards the poor, but giving money to the homeless person about whom I know nothing instead of the homeless shelter may simply feed an addiction to alcohol. Without prudence, temperance simply becomes a form of aimless asceticism. Perhaps a feeling of shame for our sins drives us to withdraw from sources of pleasure to discipline our passions, instead of replacing unhealthy sources of pleasure (like internet pornography) with wholesome sources (like going ballroom dancing). Prudence enables a moderated asceticism to bear fruit in a new joy we find in the goodness of God's creation.

Yet we are just scratching the surface of this important virtue. There is a whole set of skills that come together as we acquire practical wisdom. I will discuss some of those skills next week.

The Virtues, Part 4: Some Aspects of Prudence

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

The virtue of prudence or practical wisdom is in some ways the key to the moral life. With prudence, we learn to make good choices that bring greater peace and happiness. By it, we become in tune with the goodness and beauty of God that shines forth in creation. Prudence is a muscle of the soul whereby we learn to approach the complex parts of life that demand more than the simple application of the moral law (e.g. the Ten Commandments). Prudence does not create exceptions to God's law. Rather, it helps us to make daily decisions which bring us closer to God. After all, being a disciple of Christ is not about fulfilling the minimum, but ordering the whole of life according to Jesus' ways as best as we can.

Becoming wise or prudent involves gradually acquiring a set of spiritual skills or muscles. Let's ponder these aspects of prudence one at a time.

First, prudent persons are capable of taking an honest look at the past, at their memory. They do not try to suppress, omit or retouch past events. They can honestly say to themselves: "last time I did this, it really hurt her." We can already tell that some persons who have had a very painful past (e.g. a traumatic childhood) may need to work with a counselor for some time before they can truly acquire an advanced degree of practical wisdom. The virtues go hand-in-hand with emotional and psychological well-being.

Second, prudent persons have a certain docility to truth around them. They are able to take advice from others, though not with naiveté, since some people who want to give us advice have no business doing so. This docility is especially called for in relation to persons who are more experienced than we are, especially our elders (see Proverbs 4:1) or friends who have a knack for making good decisions. Prudence knows when to take counsel, and who can act as a true mentor. Practical wisdom is not closed-minded. It refuses a know-it-all attitude. True prudence is impossible to attain without authentic humility. Humility is the capacity and willingness to recognize my gifts and limitations and those of others as they truly are.

Third, prudent persons can bring a clear-sighted objectivity to a situation. They are able to rise above their emotions, the baggage of the past that may be related to a situation, and can calmly evaluate circumstances. They possess a capacity to step away from a situation. A certain objective calm enables them to ponder all the evident factors involved, without focusing on one

factor while ignoring the others or minimizing their true significance. It becomes evident that prudence is attained when we have also developed the other virtues to some extent. A person who cannot control their anger often cannot evaluate a situation objectively, with reason.

Fourth, prudence includes foresight, the habit of asking: how does this activity fit into the overall aim of my life? Does this decision really lead me into a deeper communion with God? Is this decision good for me as a professional musician *and* as a human being, or not? Prudence also foresees unintended consequences or potential outcomes of an action: “If I speak this truth to her right now, she will be deeply hurt, and our relationship may be broken.”

Fifth, prudence is a means between two extremes. Prudence is opposed to recklessness, the tendency to rush into a decision without pondering the situation adequately. The imprudent parent decides overnight to start home schooling because of an argument with one of their child’s teachers. But the other extreme is indecisiveness, which is also a vice. The prudent person refuses to put off important decisions indefinitely because absolute certitude is not at hand. In the past, Catholics often sought absolute certitude for many complex decisions in life by running to the priest with every moral dilemma (How much should I tithe? How long should I pray each day?), or blindly followed a spiritual director’s advice in discerning a vocation. But virtue ethics teaches us to make the best decisions that we can when the path of God is not always clear, and to live with the absence of 100% certitude. Exercising prudence does not always bring certitude, but it still leads to holiness.

We can see that at a certain point, prudence reaches its limits. Life can become frustratingly complex. It is then that we need to turn to the experience of the saints and make them our mentors.

In the film, *A Man for All Seasons*, St. Thomas More encounters his overly zealous son-in-law, who is on a passionate quest for justice. He can see evil in the land, and he is determined to defeat it for the triumph of the good. He is willing to ignore the laws of the land when it comes to his pursuit of justice. Those who willingly cooperate with evil must not have any place to hide. Thomas More responds with passion himself: “And when you have cut down every law in the land in your pursuit of the devil, and he turns on you, what will you have left to hide behind? What will protect you from him?” Prudence refuses to take matters into our own hands. It ultimately trusts that God’s providence will triumph over evil. The saints manifest perfect prudence, and teach us that evil means can never lead to a lasting good.

The Virtues Part 5: An Intro to Temperance

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

The word temperance has fallen on hard times. Today, it often seems to refer to limiting one's consumption of alcohol, or exercising a certain restraint in one's sexual activity. The classical virtue of temperance is much richer. Instead of self-control, temperance is better described as the proper ordering of sensual desire. Temperance is not so much about the suppression of feeling as a matter of properly directing our emotions and basic physical drives.

Temperance concerns our natural drives for the sensible goods that maintain life: food, drink, sleep, sex and physical companionship. We have a natural drive to seek these goods and enjoy them. But we can misuse these goods and grant them too much importance in life. Furthermore, one of the major effects of original sin is that we are not as disposed towards permanent goods like wisdom and friendship as we ought to be. Instead, we are more inclined to fulfill our desires for physical pleasure in ways that are not always good for us.

Contrary to what we might expect, true temperance actually intensifies our ability to enjoy the beauty of creation. It allows pleasure to overflow into joy. Pleasure is a physical sensation, but joy involves body and soul. The intemperate person transforms the beautiful things of the world into mere objects of pleasure, which is a distortion of reality. For nothing was created simply to bring the sensation of pleasure to this or that human being. The temperate person can find an appropriate physical delight in a beautiful object while also entering into the spiritual sensation of joy, of one's soul resting in the good. The temperate man can find more joy in looking at a beautiful woman than the intemperate man whose drive for pleasure deadens his openness to delight in beauty for its own sake. For the intemperate man simply seeks beauty because of the way that it makes him feel.

Intemperance manifests an excessive attachment to one's own opinion, since it clouds the judgment of reason, diminishing prudence. It gradually excludes the goods of the spirit. The intemperate person becomes so immersed in physical pleasure that he or she becomes blind to spiritual realities and their priority in life. This vice can eventually destroy the ability to contemplate reality as it is, replacing it with an illusory worldview. Intemperate persons are so driven by the need for physical pleasure that they can become incapable of practicing detachment, that is, to forego certain pleasures for a greater good. Sacrificial love becomes

almost impossible. They no longer encounter other persons and things as they are, but rather see them as means to sense stimulation. Self-interest has come to dominate, which brings about a life closed in on itself, one no longer open to the wonder of creation and the wisdom of others.

One of the most widespread roots of intemperance today is found in the tendency to over-consume certain types of entertainment, such television and the Internet. For what is often sought in these forms of media is a constant stimulation of the senses. Such excess weakens our capacity for true beauty. It breaks down our ability to be still and receptive, to be contemplative and open to reality. Thus, with each generation, the attention span continues to shrink.

Today's hyper-sensualized culture makes the virtue of temperance especially difficult to attain. More often than in past generations, we are faced with moments of intense temptations towards pleasures that have been taken out of their proper context. Or we are faced with pleasures that are proposed as ends in themselves, instead of as means to the enjoyment of God's beauty. When we are faced with great temptation, what are we to do?

The more intense the temptation, the wiser becomes the saying "flight, not fight." Sometimes, we simply need to turn away from a thought or an image and redirect our mind and imagination to what is wholesome. Yet flight is not always the answer. On a day-to-day basis, most temptations to intemperance tend to be not so intense. In fact, one sign that a person is growing in temperance is that they can gradually face more and more of their temptations. They can remain in a situation and "fight," that is, to redirect their focus so as to approach a potential source of vicious pleasure in a wholesome way. As a person grows in virtue, instead of turning away from the stunningly beautiful human body for fear of lust, he or she gradually learns to appreciate that beauty as a gift of God, while the heart refuses to give in to any lingering inclinations towards lust. But let us not fool ourselves. So much of what the mass media offers today can be so disordered and even demonic that often the only wise approach is to switch the television channel or Internet page.

It turns out that temperance is often bad for business, which is one reason that our capitalistic culture hardly fosters it. Temperance avoids excessive self-indulgence *and* Puritanism in the fulfillment of bodily desires. It makes us desire a certain balance. Next week, I'll discuss some other elements of that balance which reorders desire.

The Virtues Part 6: Further Aspects of Temperance

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Last week, I noted that the virtue of temperance reorders our desire for physical pleasure and actually increases our ability to enjoy the beauty of creation. There are some further elements that dispose us towards that enjoyment of beauty, namely, our capacity to endure suffering, the attainment of humility, and the practice of fasting.

Our greatest pleasure comes through the sense of touch. We think of the pleasure that we gain through sexual intercourse, food or drink. Thus, in a way, temperance is above all the capacity of the soul to regulate the drive for pleasurable touch. Yet that same sense is also the primary path whereby we experience pain. So we see that our capacity to endure will greatly depend on temperance. The Christian disciple who at certain times in life is called the way of the Cross in a very literal way (through physical suffering) may only be able to do so with perseverance if he or she has developed the virtue of temperance to some extent. Temperance is the readiness to make very concrete sacrifices.

But sacrifice is almost impossible if we do not have hope in the future. Thus, temperance is closely connected to hope. Among other things, hope is a desire for and a firm expectation of the future enjoyment of spiritual goods. It enables us to practice delayed gratification. Hope is the opposite of despair. It is precisely despair which so easily leads a man or woman down the road of total intemperance. For if nothing better awaits us after this life, and if the best goods that we can reasonably expect to attain here and now are not spiritual (like wisdom and love), then unrestrained pleasure seeking becomes an artificial man-made heaven.

We have a natural desire for recognition and approval from others. It is a type of “sensual pleasure,” if we understand the term “sensual” broadly enough. Humility is the capacity to regulate that desire, to allow it its proper place while keeping it in check. Humility is part of temperance.

But how does humility perform this task? It does so primarily by leading us an accurate estimation of others and ourselves. Humility is essentially the ability to see myself as I truly am. It is the capacity to recognize my gifts and weakness accurately. Humility recognizes that all which is good in me comes from God. Humility also makes a fair estimation of others’ gifts and weaknesses. It is a type of honesty. Thus, true humility can accept honors and recognition from

others precisely when they match my gifts and talents, as long as I acknowledge their transcendent source in the Creator. Humility also seeks to bestow appropriate recognition to others for their actual accomplishments. Humility is not the desire to be invisible or a tendency to look down on myself.

Now we can also understand the essence of pride. It is a refusal to acknowledge my status as a creature, even if I profess to believe in a Creator God. It claims a personal strength to be simply my own, when in fact comes from another. It also denies my need for salvation, for a healing and divine friendship that goes beyond our natural capacities. Pride makes myself the central focus, instead of allowing others to recognize the gifts of God in me precisely as gifts. Thus, the same recognition can be bestowed on two equally gifted persons. One can receive them virtuously, by acknowledging their true source, while the other commits a vice in accepting the honor, when he or she denies the true origin of their accomplishments.

The Christian tradition proposes particular spiritual exercises for the development of certain virtues. For example, we train ourselves to endure pain and grow in humility when we practice fasting, one of the pillars of the Lenten season that we just completed. Fasting reorders our inner desires. It is not intended as a form of self-punishment, but as a path to heal our emotions that can at times behave as if anarchy reigned in the body.

All Christians who are physically able are called to fast at certain times of the year, especially (but not just) during Lent. This is because fasting has an immense power to detach us from our disordered desires for sensible goods, preparing heart and mind for contemplation, including the study of God's Word and prayer. These are spiritual exercises that call for a certain stillness of the soul, which is precisely what fasting helps to attain, a truth that virtually all non-Christian religions will also teach us.

Yet here, too, we must seek moderation. In a surprising passage, St. Thomas Aquinas notes that those who abstain from wine to the point of depressing their spirits commit a sin. We might want to respond that such a philosophy is typically Italian (Aquinas was from the region of Naples). But in fact Thomas reminds us of the deeper Christian conviction of the goodness of creation. For those who are not alcoholics and enjoy the taste of wine, abstaining too much from such licit delights as the fruit of the grape would lead us to offend the goodness of God's creation! How far true temperance takes us from Puritanism.

The Virtues, Part 7: Understanding Sexual Addictions

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Sex addicts, you say? You mean pedophiles, right? No, I also mean men (and women) who cannot help but look at those lewd pictures on the Internet. Sexual addictions are rampant in our hyper-technological culture. Many pious Christians have become consumers. They need help, but probably don't realize it. Maybe one of your loved ones is in trouble. Or maybe you need help. The first step in dealing with the problem is to gain some knowledge of sexual addictions. For this purpose, I will draw especially on the wisdom of Dr. Mark Laaser and his book *Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addictions*. I trust your better judgment in deciding which of your children may be ready to read this article.

The behavior of sex addicts has three main building blocks. The first is fantasy. When fantasy is exciting enough, the brain produces adrenaline, which elevates one's mood. Fantasies can also produce chemicals in the brain's pleasure center called catecholamines, which allow one to escape unwanted emotions and reduce stress. Fantasizing becomes the equivalent of injecting a drug needle into your arm.

The second building block for sex addicts is pornography. Pornography is the display of nudity or sexual activity for the purpose of raising the viewer's sexual feelings. Where do people view Internet pornography? Priests and religious who are addicts tend to view it in their cells. For adult laymen (and women), the workplace is quite common. Many also view it at home when they're alone. Children can often easily access pornography on school and public library computers. The average child sees Internet pornography before the age of 10! These images viewed at such a young age become deeply imbedded in their memories.

Pornography does great harm by creating a false set of expectations in its viewers. The bodies viewed on the Internet are just so beautiful. Often only the slender make the cut for this homemade video. And if a performer's natural beauty is still inadequate, computer technology will come to the rescue. Unlike that hesitant wife, the Internet performer willingly puts on that enticing piece of clothing. It's her job! Her other behavior also responds to the viewer's expectations. That's what she's paid to do (or perhaps forced to do). The action can go on for hours.

Then the addict has to exit the virtual fantasy world and return to real life. Almost always, his wife does not look nearly as good as *them*. Furthermore, the adrenaline rush of forbidden sex is so great, precisely because it is forbidden. But sex with one's spouse is actually expected. The brain hardly gets the same stimulation from something so licit. The addict has trained his brain to demand its kicks. Refusing the urge becomes ever more difficult. Also, the addict's image of the other gender often becomes warped.

The third building block of sex addicts is masturbation, which is the virtually inevitable outcome of fantasies and pornography. It also causes the brain to release catecholamines, to which the brain can become addicted. Acting out this way usually leads to deep feelings of shame.

Besides, the lonesome sexual act takes sex out of its proper context. God made us with sexual organs and feelings in such a way that the pleasure of the sexual act is to be accompanied by emotional and spiritual intimacy. The body and soul are literally wired so that physical and spiritual union go together. But when the physical act is completely severed from an act of full interpersonal communion, the result is growing loneliness. In a solitary sexual act, my body is behaving in a way that my soul and emotions now expect real intimacy. But in fact, there is no intimacy whatsoever. All one gets is pleasure. After the act, the sex addict is left with more guilt and loneliness. But his brain is being trained to demand relief from these emotions in a particular way. Hence the cycle of fantasy, pornography and masturbation begins all over again. The shame will probably get worse. Depression often follows.

Sexual addictions leave deep wounds in the souls and bodies of their victims. Sex addicts become emotionally handicapped. They have learned to engage in sex without intimacy, perhaps starting with frequent solitary acts. Soon, they turn their spouses into sex objects. Precisely because the man no longer approaches his wife as a person with dignity, the emotional exchange diminishes radically. Whereas their marital act may have been deeply satisfying before and strengthened the marriage bond, it now primarily becomes a pleasure event. Even if the wife does not know that her husband is a sex addict, she will often begin to sense that something is wrong. More and more, sex will feel dirty to her. Divorce may be around the corner.

The emotional handicap produced by addiction can become a serious and long-lasting wound for the addict. His own inescapable feeling of shame hinders him from being emotionally honest with himself, which in turn makes emotional honesty with others very difficult. Not only

can good marriages go south. An addiction to sex and Internet pornography can radically diminish a single young person's chances for a happy, long-lasting marriage, unless they get help.

Sexual addictions are real and very destructive. So if someone may be addicted, what can be done? I'll discuss the healing process in next week's newsletter.

The Virtues, Part 8: Healing Sexual Addictions

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Last week, I discussed the nature of sexual addictions. The cycle of sexual fantasies, indulgence in pornography and acting out leaves deep wounds in the souls and brains of men and women. But there is hope for everyone. Competent counselors tell us that even the most addicted can be healed. I'll again be drawing on the wisdom of Dr. Mark Laaser's work *Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addictions*.

Like alcoholics, sex addicts can "stay dry" for many months. Through sheer will power or other means, they learn to avoid fantasies, pornography and acting out. But like alcoholics who stay dry, the addiction is still there. It may diminish over those months, but the emotional handicap remains. The brain is still addicted to the psychological high. Symptoms often include depression, excessive anger and deep shame. These wounds will remain to a great extent unless the addict seeks healing. The first step toward healing is diagnosis.

Clearly, a lack of frequent unhealthy sexual behavior is just one criterion for diagnosis. Other adequate criteria would include answers to the following questions. Have you tried limiting what you know is wrong in your sexual behavior? Do you resort to sex to escape or relieve anxiety? Do you feel that the "right relationship" would help you to stop lusting, masturbating or being so promiscuous? An affirmative answer to one of these questions may indicate concern.

The second step involves cutting off all Internet Pornography. An alcoholic cannot become sober in a bar, and neither can you or your loved one if porn is just two clicks away. There are a number of Internet filters that can block all such traffic. It is crucial that such images be blocked completely. Three software programs that may be worth considering are *Net Nanny*, *Safe Eyes* and *Cyber Patrol*, though I am in no position to fully endorse any one Internet filter. The key to making such programs effective is to ask a loved one who can keep confidence and be non-judgmental to act as the administrator for the software. Otherwise, the addict can simply turn off the filter.

Here, I also want to appeal to parents with children ages 6 and older in their homes. If your children have access to the Internet in your home and you do not have a filter that blocks all pornography, then you are unknowingly storing a bottle of spiritual poison in the kitchen cabinet.

Many young people's sexual addictions begin by viewing such material on the family computer. For responsible parents, an Internet filter at home is a must. Why risk having your child discover this material on accident?

The third step toward healing is getting educated. There are numerous excellent educational websites, including Sexaholics Anonymous (www.sa.org), Dr. Laaser's www.faithfulandtrueministries.com, and, for loved ones of addicts, S-Anon (www.sanon.org). There are also a growing number of excellent books on sexual addictions, such as "the white book" by SA.

The fourth step toward healing is getting help from others. Almost no sex addict has been known to heal him or herself. Sooner or later, attending meetings of Sexaholics Anonymous (SA) will probably be a necessary step. To my knowledge, SA is the only 12-step group for sex addicts whose guiding principles are completely in harmony with our Catholic faith. SA assures each member's anonymity and has 36 different meetings in the Seattle area. For some people, a group setting is too embarrassing at first. Perhaps they need to begin by seeing a counselor. In fact, at least some work with a counselor is often a crucial part of the healing process. Counseling references can be attained from the priests at Blessed Sacrament, from participants at local SA groups, or from the local SA hotline: (206) 548-9538. Finally, it is important to find a counselor who shares our Christian moral values or can work within them.

It is often crucial for spouses of addicts to have some involvement in the healing process. One way may be by joining S-Anon, which is specifically for the loved ones of sex addicts. Some participation in the counseling session that the addicted spouse attends may also be very helpful.

As Christians, we also seek healing from the wounds of sin through prayer. The gift of God's grace enables the natural means of healing discussed above to take root more quickly and fruitfully. As Catholics, we are blessed with two powerful spiritual means of healing in the Eucharist and Confession. Regular prayer before the Eucharist has been known to help bring gradual yet real healing for sexual wounds. The flesh of Jesus heals our flesh. Finally, regular confession of sexual sins is a powerful instrument that gives many people new strength to fight temptation. In this sacrament, the crucified Jesus takes the burden of shame and guilt from our shoulders and embraces us with his love. For our Lord loves everyone, especially the sex addict who wants to be healed.

The Virtues, Part 9: Some Facts About Sex & Marriage

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

In the eyes of many people today, the Catholic Church's teaching on sex is simply outdated. The idea that sex only belongs within marriage sounds so medieval. Furthermore, it seems to contradict common sense.

The first objection that many would offer to the Church's traditional understanding of sex is that a religious institution has no business telling two responsible adults who are in love how they should express that love for one another. Why can't the Church be respectful of the personal decisions that adult men and women make?

A second objection to the Church's traditional position is that living together before marriage seems to be a very effective way of deciding whether two people should marry. Many members of Generations X and Y grew up with divorced parents. One of the greatest fears that young people have today is of a bad future marriage ending in divorce. We also don't want our children to experience the pain that many of us have gone through. So living together and seeing whether someone is emotionally and sexually compatible with a potential fiancé seems very logical. After all, we don't buy a new car before taking it for a test drive. Why not do the same with sex and life under the same roof?

How could the Catholic Church possibly respond to these weighty objections? Before simply dismissing the Church's teaching, perhaps we can calmly consider a few facts.

1. Couples who sleep together before they are married have a divorce rate three times as high as couples who saved that gift for the wedding night.⁹
2. Co-habiting couples that marry are about twice as likely to divorce as couples who do not live together before marriage.¹⁰ In fact, the divorce rate of cohabiting couples is about eighty percent.¹¹

⁹ J.D. Teachman, J. Thomas, and K. Paasch, "Legal Status and the Stability of Coresidential Unions," *Demography*, November 1991, 571-83.

¹⁰ Larry A. Bumpass and James A. Sweet, *Cohabitation, Marriage and Union Stability*, Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Madison – Wisconsin, 1995.

¹¹ Elizabeth Thompson and Ugo Colella, 1992, "Cohabitation and Marital Stability: Quality or Commitment?" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54, 1992, p. 266.

3. Women who cohabited before marriage are about three times as likely to cheat on their husbands within marriage than women who did not cohabit.¹²
4. The U.S. Justice Department found that women who cohabit are three times as likely to be assaulted by a live-in boyfriend than by a husband.¹³
5. Co-habiting couples are less sexually satisfied in marriage than those who waited for marriage.¹⁴
6. Non-virgin brides are sixty percent more likely to end up divorced than women who enter marriage as virgins.¹⁵

In other words, sociology tells us that if you want to radically *increase* the chance that your future marriage will end in divorce, that your future spouse will cheat on you and that sex in marriage will be worse ... then be sure to live together before marriage!

Also, new scientific studies suggest that if a woman has multiple sexual partners in her lifetime, her levels of oxytocin will decline, which in turn can damage her ability to bond. Oxytocin seems to act as a human “superglue,” helping a mother to bond with her infant. It is also released during sexual arousal, where it also works as a “superglue.”¹⁶ For married couples that have saved themselves for one another, oxytocin helps to maintain the “high” of sex.

Both science and sociology tell us that saving sex for marriage causes the chances for divorce, abuse and infidelity to plummet and leads to more satisfying sex. The facts strongly suggest that keeping sex inside of marriage leads to greater happiness, but taking sex outside of marriage brings about all kinds of problems. And while science and sociology cannot prove the Catholic Church’s moral teaching to be true, both suggest that the Church might be on to something. We’ll look at what that something is in next week’s newsletter.

¹² Koray Tanfer and Renata Forste, "Sexual Exclusivity Among Dating, Cohabiting, and Married Women," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, February 1996, 33-47.

¹³ Chuck Colson, "The Truth About Cohabiting Before Marriage," Prison Fellowship Ministries, 1995.

¹⁴ Edward O. Laumann and Robert T. Michaels, *Sex, Love and Health in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 239-269, 364.

¹⁵ Joan R. Kahn and Kathryn A. London, "Premarital Sex and the Risk of Divorce," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (November 1991).

¹⁶ *Neural Oxytocinergic systems as Genomic Targets for Hormones and as Modulators of Hormone-Dependant Behaviors*, Rockefeller University NY, 1999.

The Virtues, Part 10: Anthropology & Sexuality

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

In last week's newsletter, I mentioned the surprising fact that sex before marriage radically increases the chances of a bad future marriage. It turns out that the Catholic understanding of sex and marriage is not as out-of-touch as many voices in our culture claim. Perhaps one reason that the Catholic teaching on human sexuality is profoundly misunderstood today is that a particular anthropology or vision of the human being underlies the Catholic view. This anthropology is far different from those which dominate today's culture. I think that ultimately our approach to human sexuality will inevitably reflect one of four types of anthropology.

I would call the first two types of anthropology "dualist." Dualism proposes that I am essentially a soul that lives in a body. Dualism can lead to two radically different approaches to sexuality. In ancient times, under the influence of Platonic philosophers, dualism often meant a certain disregard for the body. The flesh was thought to weigh down the soul, preventing it from reaching contemplative heights. The soul naturally soars to the heavens to contemplate truth, but the body and its passions distract us time and again, inclining us to indulge in the pleasures of the physical universe. Sexual behavior and desires were basically to be avoided, since they distract the soul from its purely spiritual destiny. Unfortunately, this attitude sometimes influenced certain Christian thinkers and spiritualities. Let's call this first type of anthropology "Platonic Dualism."

A second dualistic approach to the human being and sexuality is probably more common today. It says that the body exists precisely as a tool for me (the soul) to gain satisfaction and pleasure. Since the body isn't really me, since what really counts is what I do with my soul (i.e. having good intentions), then what I do with the body is not morally significant. Therefore, if my soul's intention is to find love and happiness, then I am basically doing a good thing, and I can employ the body however I want to pursue that overall good intention. If I (the soul) mean well, then I can act in pursuit of that intention in any variety of ways. For example, I can keep changing sex partners until I find happiness, as long as I (the soul) intend to treat those partners with love. This philosophy is closely intertwined with the Cartesian and Baconian approach to the physical universe as a realm to be mastered and dominated by the human being. Nature is

here to be conquered by us through technology. Descartes and other philosophers like Kant introduced a radical division between the soul and the body, between the person and the flesh. Many of us are children of this anthropology, though we probably do not realize it. Perhaps we can call this second type of anthropology “Modern Dualism.”

We can call the third type of anthropology “materialist.” It holds that the human being is nothing but the body and the brain. This vision of the human being may often be connected to the assumption that we are merely the random result of unguided evolution. If I am a body with a brain, then a reasonable goal in society would seem to be for as many people as possible to find as much physical pleasure and comfort as possible. When it comes to sex, more is better, and the identity of the sex partner should simply be a matter of choice. A materialist anthropology essentially denies the Judeo-Christian understanding that human beings are persons with God-given dignity. That means sex is all about pleasure and reproduction (when desired), but has nothing to do with the value of the person. From a materialist perspective, personhood is philosophical fiction anyway, since science can never prove personhood.

The fourth type of anthropology holds that the human being is essentially a soul-body composite. We can call this anthropology “holistic” or “sacramental.” It tells us that I am not a soul, but rather body and soul together. The body is an essential part of the person. The body is not a tool to be used, nor a collection of matter to be mastered by technology. Because the body is part of me, what I do with the body always has meaning and value, regardless of whether my soul has good or bad intentions. Furthermore, the body is the revelation of the person, a manifestation of my inmost being. The body and the body alone makes visible the contents of the invisible human heart. The human person was created for friendship and love, and the only way we can express love for others is through the body. If the human person truly is soul and body, then the good intentions of my soul are not enough to make a sexual act morally good. Rather, one must always also ask, “What does my body express to the other person in this act?”

Clearly, the one anthropology that is in harmony with faith in the Incarnate Word is the fourth type. In next week’s newsletter, we will see the consequences of this holistic anthropology for our understanding of healthy human sexuality.

The Virtues, Part 11: Sex & The Gift Of Self

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

A Christian understanding of sex and marriage needs to be grounded in the teachings of Jesus. Jesus in turn rooted his teaching in Genesis, when Adam and Eve became “one flesh” (Matthew 19). They recognized in the other’s naked body the full manifestation of a person. A person is one who is made to give himself away in love. That’s what it means to be made in God’s image, for God is self-giving love. When they gave themselves completely to each other without shame, Adam and Eve became “one flesh.”

God has “wired” us in such a way that the gift of complete physical intimacy should be accompanied by emotional and spiritual intimacy. The naked body is a sign of the naked spirit. For the naked body given to another says: “Here I am, all of me, just for you.” But the body is not a tool of my spirit. Rather, I am spirit and body together. Therefore, the gift of my body to another is only true when it is a gift of the whole person. For the body is an essential part of me, the person. The gift of the body demands the gift of the spirit, of heart, mind and feelings. If the body says, “Here I am, all of me,” then my heart needs to say the same: “I unite my will to yours, to seek your good and mine together.” The mind need also say, “I think of you as my greatest treasure in this world, and of no one else.” And unless there is some emotional intimacy among the couple, sex will eventually become very unsatisfying. We know that a lack of emotional intimacy among married couples is a major cause of divorce. When sex is not a true communion of persons, a sharing of thoughts, feelings and the body, then the holistic union of man and woman begins to break down.

So in what context do we find the complete gift of self to the other, the gift of heart, mind and body? It is nowhere else but marriage. Think about it. Only in marriage do mind and heart say, “Only you are my greatest treasure in this world for the rest of our lives.” To give oneself in complete physical intimacy while withholding the union of heart and mind is to tell a lie with the body. My heart and mind say, “I am yours for a while, for as long as we’re in love.” But in sexual union, my flesh says, “I am utterly joined to you,” while my heart and mind say something different. This is why pre-marital and extra-marital sex are sinful: they are lies of the body. They impede the communion of persons, the communion of spirit and body. If I try to justify physical sexual union without the complete gift of the spirit that is only found in

marriage, I inevitably fall back into dualism, into treating the body as a tool of my spirit. I inevitably say, “I can give my whole body to another without giving my whole heart and mind.” I divide body and soul, splitting the person in two. Such a lie cannot lead to lasting happiness.

Adam and Eve were naked and had no shame. They were ready to give themselves completely to the other, holding nothing back. They realized what it means to be an image of God: total, self-giving love. This is what the body expresses in sex. Therefore, if the gift of self is complete, then it includes the gift of fertility. In sex, the body says: “I give you all of myself, including the gift of my fruitfulness, whatever fertility God has given me to give to you.” The gift of oneself to the spouse includes openness to the gift of God that comes in procreation, the gift of children. When we intentionally impede the gift of fertility, we stop giving ourselves completely. Then, sex no longer “speaks” the complete gift of self. I no longer live as God’s image.

You may wonder, “Are you saying I have to have ten children?” No, I’m not. God made the female body to be fertile only a few days of the month. I can give myself away with the fruitfulness that God has given me this day. That is why the Church encourages *Natural Family Planning* (NFP), working within God’s plan of creation for the gift of oneself. You can learn about NFP in our parish.

Now we also see why the Church sees marriage between man and woman as the one proper context for sexual intercourse. Homosexual partners cannot give themselves completely to each other. Neither can receive the other’s fruitfulness. The same holds true for masturbation, which is inherently sterile. Also, masturbation is completely cut off from any intimacy. Such an act is a bodily lie, which is why it brings such shame.

The Church calls every person who is not married to respect the meaning of the sexual act as an expression of complete self-gift. All of us single persons, whether heterosexual or homosexual, are called to love others and ourselves with celibate chastity. Sex is for man and woman in marriage, the one place where two persons give themselves to each other completely. Sex is too good to be practiced anywhere else.

For more information, see Christopher West’s “Good News About Sex & Marriage”

The Virtues, Part 12: The Foundation of Justice

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

When we think of the word justice, most of us think of social justice, a phrase that conjures up images of feeding the hungry. This image is not false, but it demonstrates that our conception of justice has become too narrow. In the classical Christian tradition, justice concerns much more than helping the poor.

Justice is the virtue of relationships. It is the communal virtue par excellence. It is essentially ordered to another. Justice takes us beyond our egos, beyond ourselves, and pushes us to consider the dignity and needs of others. The other virtues only perfect a person in those things that belong to him or her (e.g. temperance orders my desires for pleasure, etc.). But the virtue of justice perfects the human being in relation to others. This means that justice, along with charity, will encompass everything about our relations with others.

Justice is the virtue that enables a person to give to each one his or her “due.” But what is this due? It is “what belongs to someone,” which translates the Latin word *ius*. It is most often rendered as “right,” though even this term can be misleading. You and I have this right simply because of the kinds of beings that we are. We are human beings, and we received this right from our source of being, God himself. Creation is the foundation of human rights. This right or *ius* is hard to define. We can mostly describe it. It ultimately refers to our human dignity that demands the respect of others. Someone’s right is the dignity of personhood. Justice is the developed tendency to respect another as a person, as a being with dignity. Notice that the other’s right does not depend on society bestowing it to them. Rather, we are called to acknowledge the right or due that already exists.

To act justly is to render someone his or her due. That is, justice is acting according to the reality of things. The virtue of justice presumes the virtue of prudence whereby I recognize things as they are. Justice presumes the human ability to recognize an objective reality. If truth were merely subjective, then nothing would ever be due to another unless I wanted it to be so. Relativism leads to the destruction of all justice. But in fact, no one lives according to this post-modern dogma of complete relativism. Virtually all post-modernists are convinced that racism is wrong and genocide is wicked. Everyone insists (correctly) that their individual rights must be respected, although we often disagree over exactly what those rights are. In practice, all of us

ultimately presume that objective right and wrong do exist and that we can come to know it. Otherwise, only cultural prejudice would prevent the racist from acting according to his or her beliefs. This is important. Only a society that has the confidence to discover some truth about the human being, including the innate dignity or “due” of every human being, can ultimately be a just society.

We can define justice as the constant and perpetual will to render to each his or her right or due. The “realm” of virtue includes everything that pertains to relations with others. The whole field of external action pertains to the virtue of justice. All external actions are either just or unjust, though of course, some acts can go well beyond being just (an act of charity). Giving my employer a full eight-hour day, driving my car responsibly and speaking to others with respect are all acts of justice.

But justice does not simply pertain to my relation with other individuals. It also pertains to my relation with society. In fact, every due owed to another individual also pertains to society. When an individual’s debt is withheld, for example, by tearing down another’s reputation through gossip, society is also wounded. The harmonious order between a society’s members that is necessary for the community’s well-being is harmed. This means that the social or common good is always connected to the individual good. This notion of the common good is extremely difficult to grasp in our hyper-individualistic culture. Basically, the common good is the collection of social conditions that allow human beings to flourish and find their true fulfillment as creatures made in God’s image. For example, when I keep informed about politics and participate in it by voting, I am contributing to the common good, by seeking to shape a political community rooted in truth and love. Voting is an act of justice.

The Ten Commandments provide a crucial part of the content of justice. They teach us how to relate to God and to our neighbors. The worship of God is a form of justice, since it is part of the way I relate to another, in this case, the divine other. The Commandments concretize and point to the virtuous act. To be just towards God and neighbor means to observe the Ten Commandments. However, they are not a complete summary of the content of justice, as we will see. That is why we need the teachings of Christ and his saints. By reflecting on the life of Jesus and the saints, we discover justice lived out in the concrete.

The Virtues, Part 13: Justice & Human Rights

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

In last week's newsletter, I mentioned that justice is founded upon the recognition of the other's "right." This brings us to the question of human rights. Our culture is saturated with rights talk. Often, rights discourse includes a set of assumptions that can be in tension if not outright contradiction with a Christian understanding of the human being. Therefore, before we explore particular rights, we need an understanding of the fundamental principles upon which a Christian vision of human rights rests.

In his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII refers to some of these basic principles: "Any human society ... must lay down as a foundation this principle, that every human being is a person, that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because he is a person he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature. And as these rights are universal and inviolable so they cannot in any way be surrendered." First, personhood is foundational. Personhood is defined by our inherent rationality and freedom. We are different from all the other creatures of the world. Secondly, we have not just rights, but also obligations. Rights are a two-way street. Finally, certain rights are absolute: they always apply, everywhere and in every circumstance.

Why do we have rights and duties? Because the human being is born for relationships. Our humanity is both the source of our rights and the source of our being "social animals." That is why rights and duties are intertwined in the Catholic tradition. Both of them have their foundation in the natural law, in the order that God has inscribed within each human being. This means that the foundation of rights is not ideology or majority opinion. That is why each human being has the duty to recognize the rights of others.

Rights are both negative (protective) and positive (calling forth an action, a response). The individual owes something to society. Rights are rights to participate in the life of a community. Society does not simply owe the individual the right to be left alone. Participation in a community is essential for human dignity. We should therefore see rights not so much as claims that we make against other individuals and society, but rather as guiding principles that manifest our proper place and dignity within the communities to which we belong. Rights are

ordered to the common good, to the flourishing of every person, not me constructing a private sphere of action where everyone leaves me alone.

In the classical liberal tradition of the West, rights are rooted in the liberty of the individual person (John Locke). This vision of man sees us as essentially complete, isolated creatures that first exist by ourselves and then decide to join this or that community. It reduces the person to a being with unique wants and desires but ignores the purpose and goal of human life. It sees duties in society as threats to individual autonomy. Duties of communal participation and action become a burden to be endured so that each of us can have our individual rights upheld. Such an anthropology eventually erodes friendship, family and the many forms of community that are indispensable for human flourishing.

The Catholic human rights tradition is distinct from this approach. The classical liberal human rights tradition replaces the fundamental order inscribed by the Creator within our human nature with the demands of the individual. It places the human being at the center, in abstraction from God and the cosmos. One could argue that this philosophy which makes the individual human being the center and foundation of politics and human rights in abstraction from the Creator and the cosmos has helped lead us to the ecological crisis we are experiencing today.

We live at a time when rights keep proliferating. Many of these new rights claims are rooted in an atomistic understanding of the human being, a vision of the person who inhabits his or her private world of self-constructed truth in abstraction from history, community, tradition and nature. Ironically, many of these new rights claims undermine the permanence of rights. Instead of rights being an objective reality that we recognize to be present in each human being because they are persons, rights become subject to our personal desires and tastes. The trouble is that desires and tastes change. Human rights are too important to give them such a weak foundation.

Instead, our Judeo-Christian tradition invites us to understand human rights in the context of community, the cosmos and the Creator. Our rights can never be isolated from the community without which we cannot live. Our rights must be contextualized in the cosmos, otherwise, we would have the right to use up and destroy the cosmos. The right to pursue the truth is the opportunity to seek objective truth, not to construct any truth for ourselves. Rights proceed *from* our identity as persons made in God's image and likeness. Rights are *for* our well-being attained through life in relationship, enjoyment of and care for the cosmos, and the discovery of the truth

of God. Without this web of relationships, human rights become impoverished and ultimately lose their foundation.

The Virtues, Part 14: Some Basic Human Rights

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

The modern era has in many ways been the age of human rights. It is an accomplishment that we Christians should be proud of. For the doctrine of human rights is ultimately rooted in the Judeo-Christian understanding of the human being as a person made in God's image, a free, intelligent creature with inherent dignity. Belief in human rights took many centuries to come to fruition, yet its roots are found in the ancient Judeo-Christian heritage.

But what are our rights anyway? In 1963, Pope John XXIII offered a summary answer to that question in his beautiful encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. First, every human being has a right to live. Here is the most fundamental right, the right of the innocent not to be harmed or killed. Of course, society has the right to defend itself, so a human being can lose his or her right to live when they directly threaten the life of another, as in times of war. But the innocent have an inalienable right to live. All other rights depend on this one, since a right to education is meaningless if I do not have the right to live.

Second, every person has the right to freedom in investigating the truth. We can also call this the right to one's conscience, the right to follow what one perceives to be good and true to the best of one's ability. The human being was created for truth and love, but truth discovered in a fully human way, meaning, freely and not by force.

John XXIII and Vatican II (in *Dignitatis Humanae*) link the right to search for the truth with the right to religious freedom. For religious freedom is the right to worship God in accordance with the right dictates of one's conscience, to profess one's religion both in private and in public. Here we see the theoretical foundation of Pope John Paul II's support for the construction of Rome's first mosque. Sadly, many well-meaning Catholics object to the construction of mosques in Western lands, thus denying Muslims their God-given right to worship.

Notice that this right includes the freedom to speak of one's religion in public. It is important that Catholics advocate for the recognition of this right, especially in a culture that can often seek to eliminate any discussion of religious convictions from the work place or other public realms in the name of forbidding "proselytism" (a word that can easily be abused) or the

separation of church and state (which is often misunderstood). A culture that practices such exclusion is in fact imposing a secular, agnostic philosophy by default.

Now the right to live is not just the right to survive. It implies a right to one's bodily and psychological well-being. John XXIII mentions the right to food, clothing, shelter, medical care and rest. He adds the right to share in the benefits of culture and the right to a living wage that enables a family to live with the dignity befitting persons. In other words, rights are not just about "freedom from" coercion, but a "freedom for" living with dignity. That means our duty towards others is not just the obligation to leave them alone, but also a duty to help bring about a just society where the fullness of human rights are upheld.

Vatican II (in *Gaudium et Spes*) and John XXIII also speak of the right to education, one closely intertwined with the right to seek the truth. This right enables human beings to discover and fulfill their natural God-given potential. It offers them the necessary tools to find the truth about the world and the human person. The education of children is a right that falls primarily to parents. They have the right to expect schoolteachers not to indoctrinate their children in religious and ethical views that contradict their own beliefs. The parents' right to oversee their children's education precedes the right of the state.

There are many other rights we could mention: the right to free speech, to private property, to equal treatment, and so on. Clearly, there is a hierarchy among human rights. For example, the right to rest is not as important as the right to life. In their political activism, Catholic laypersons are called to use prudence to discern which of the most important rights are threatened the most, and which of these threats can be diminished most effectively in the near future through political action.

Clearly, if the state is to judge the validity of various rights claims, it needs an ethical standard of judgment independent of any particular religion or secular ideology. Certain religious practices are simply not acceptable. Otherwise, we would have no basis to expect the polygamists at the Texas compound to give up their teenage wives. But for human rights to have meaning, the state must use a standard that does not simply reflect the will of the majority or the ideology of a cultural elite. The state must use a standard that is trans-cultural and accessible to reason. Another name for this standard is "the natural law." That is what I will discuss next time.

The Virtues, Part 15: The Natural Law

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

In the last two newsletter articles, I discussed human rights and our responsibility to recognize these rights. For every human being is accountable to a moral standard that is higher than the will of the majority. This higher standard is called the natural law. Because of this law, societies cannot invent or delete basic human rights. Rather, they must recognize and honor the rights which pre-exist every culture.

But what is the natural law anyway? Many contemporary thinkers reject the idea outright, probably because they misunderstand it. It is not a purely Christian invention. Natural law philosophy emerged from ancient Greco-Roman philosophers like Aristotle and Cicero, the Bible and the Christian tradition. Virtually every major culture in history has assumed its basic principles.

The first building block of the natural law is the affirmation that the human being is capable of understanding the universe and himself. Reality is intelligible and accessible to us. We do not construct it. Some relativists may protest that this is our opinion, that everyone constructs their own reality. This objection is nonsensical. None of us could communicate with each other if we did not share a common reality accessible to us.

Secondly, in encountering the real world, all of us can understand that the good must be done and evil avoided. We often disagree about what constitutes particular goods and evils, but that we should do the good, whatever it is, cannot be disputed. For every human being naturally seeks their good, their happiness or fulfillment.

Thirdly, every human being is naturally inclined to seek certain goods. All of us seek to be, to live, to find truth and love. Even here, some would want to disagree. Do not some people seek death? Indeed, we can think of suicidal persons. Yet our society takes it for granted that we need to offer them help. We need to provide them counseling or anti-depressant drugs. Without thinking about it, we assume that it is good to live. Of course, this is different from the dying person who is no longer physically capable of life, who accepts death as the natural course of things. Finally, we all seek truth and love, even if we disagree over exactly what these are. No one is looking for hate or a false vision of the universe. In fact, the fulfillment that every human being naturally seeks is to live in the presence or possession of truth, love and peace.

Now we understand more deeply what the natural law is founded upon. Its basis is our natural inclinations to certain goods like life and truth. These inclinations are expressions of God's wisdom. Yet even agnostics can recognize their presence in themselves. They too naturally seek life, truth and love.

The natural law also moves us to live according to more specific standards of ethics. The natural inclination to live calls us to respect all human life, unless another human being (or nation) threatens my life (or my nation's safety). I may not kill, except in self-defense. The same holds true for any government. Thus, for many centuries, the Church accepted the death penalty in societies where it was the one sure way to keep citizens safe from a convicted murderer. In a society like our own, this condition no longer exists, so John Paul II has called for an end to the death penalty.

The natural desire for life and peace calls me to respect the well-being of my neighbors. I may not harm them, except in self-defense. I may not injure their person nor take their property, unless they have committed an injustice against me. The same holds true for the state. It can only imprison a person after convicting them of a crime through a fair trial. When individuals or states do otherwise, we are outraged, precisely because this truth is deeply ingrained within our very being: do no harm, except in self-defense. However, private property is a good subordinate to the good of life, so the starving person may take another's property to survive!

Since we are naturally ordered to seek truth, the natural law also leads us to truth-telling. No matter how inconvenient, lies are unethical, contradicting the legitimate desire of every person for truth. Yet not everyone has the right to any truth. The Nazis had no right to know that Anne Frank was hiding in a Dutch family's basement, so that family had no obligation to reveal this truth when the Nazis asked.

There are other parts of the natural law, such as marriage being between one man and one woman (not two men, or polygamy, etc.) based on fundamental inclinations to pro-creation and healthy family life. But that is a topic for another day.

As Christian disciples, each of us is called to deepen our awareness of this natural law that the Creator has inscribed in the heart of every human being (Romans 2:15). God calls us to hold our society accountable. When a nation takes life unjustly (through a war that is not in self-defense) or allows its citizens to take innocent life (i.e. the unborn, euthanasia), then the most basic principles of ethics are undermined. Then the very survival of a just society is threatened.