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40 Hours Retreat on “Living the Mystery Placed in a Priest’s Hands”
Saturday of the 22nd Week in Ordinary Time, Year II
Memorial of St. Teresa of Calcutta
September 5, 2020
1 Cor 4:6-15, Ps 145, Lk 6:1-5

FOOLS FOR THE LORD OF THE SABBATH

- Last Sunday, Jesus told Simon and Peter, and through him all of us, that he was thinking not as God does but as human beings do. All week long, with the help of St. Peter’s First Letter to the Corinthians, we have been pondering the contrast between being wise in the mentality of the world versus truly wise in seeing everything from the perspective of God in faith. These lessons are particularly important when it comes to our living by God’s wisdom in giving us himself in the Holy Eucharist, and becoming “fools for Christ,” truly crazy in love, about the Lord of the Sabbath in the Holy Eucharist.
- We will be talking later this morning about true worship of God and in the Gospel scene today we see the contrast between how God envisions true worship and the way human beings can sometimes form their own religion pretending it’s what God wants. God gave us the gift and the command to keep holy the Sabbath Day so that we would be able to be with God and allow him to refresh us in the “rest” that he gave us as an example by his own rest on the seventh day of creation. To keep the Sabbath holy, according to the Jewish conception of holiness (*quadosh*) was to consecrate it to God, to sever it from profane purposes so that it can be better united with God. After the exile, when the class of scribes arose to study the law and make sure the Jews weren’t violating it — because they recognized it was because of their infidelity that the exile happened in the first place — they began to create all sorts of regulations to keep themselves and their fellow Jews’ from getting anywhere close to breaking the law. So while God said, “Keep Holy the Sabbath Day” so that they wouldn’t return to the slavery of constant work like they experienced in Egypt, the scribes said that they couldn’t do basically any work at all. With regard to today’s Gospel, they said that you couldn’t do any reaping (plucking), threshing (rubbing it in their hands), winnowing (chucking the husks) and preparing (eating), all things that Jesus and his disciples did in today’s Gospel. Their understanding had become that to honor God and grow in holiness, they couldn’t do any work at all to prepare the food that God had given them, as if wanted his sons and daughters to starve on the day especially given to him. But these commands weren’t God’s wisdom, but man’s folly. When those who were spying on Jesus objected that he and his disciples had “violated” all of these restrictions, Jesus tried to take them back to the meaning of the law. Jesus reminded them that David had eaten the “bread of presence” in the temple, the 12 loaves that would remain there as a sign of God’s providence, and were to be eaten after their service only by the priests. Jesus was showing himself to be the new David and showing that his disciples were like David’s soldiers in fighting the battles of the Lord. Jesus was saying it’s not a violation of God’s law, or of consecrating oneself to God, or of the Sabbath rest to eat or to do a little work to obtain and prepare the food. But Jesus went further that this correction. In saying, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath,” he was saying that to find the Sabbath rest, we would need to rest in Him: to take his yoke and learn from him, who is meek and humble of heart, so that we might find the rest for their souls that God wanted. To honor the Sabbath is not to be neurotic about reaping, threshing, winnowing and preparing food but to honor and be united with the Lord in meekness and humility. That’s true worship.
- This leads us to the first reading. St. Paul contrasts the way the proud way the Corinthians were living versus the meek and humble manner of life of the apostles, and by derivation the way all Christians should live. Corinth was a very wealthy city and after the conversion of many to the Christian faith, there was a battle for many of them between their old ways and God’s new ways, between their wisdom and God’s wisdom. Throughout this letter until now, Paul has been contrasting the wisdom of the world versus the wisdom of God, especially as it regards the Cross, which is folly to Greeks, a scandal to Jews, but to those who are called the power and wisdom of God. The Corinthians weren’t really experiencing this power because they weren’t really embracing the Cross. The Corinthians had been vainly boasting about their spiritual gifts, boasting of their favorite apostles, inflated with pride because of their connection to one who they thought

made them better than others. None of this was coming from God. Paul reminds them first that everything is a grace: “What do you possess that you have not received?” Since they’ve received everything as a gift, they shouldn’t become personally inflated or boast as if any of those gifts of God were their own attributes. Rather they should be praising God who has given them everything. Paul teases them that they’re living with the arrogance and self-sufficiency of kings, who were “satisfied,” who felt like they didn’t need anything from God, the very things for which Jesus condemned the Church of Laodicea in the Book of Revelation (Rev 3:17). In contrast to the way they were “inflated with pride,” St. Paul says that the apostles were rather last of all. He uses an image from the triumphal parades of ancient kings and emperors to contrast the Corinthian’s way of life to that of Paul and the other apostles, from human wisdom to God’s wisdom. This is key for priests and future priests to grasp, because it is chemotherapy for the cancer of clericalism. Whenever kings were returning from victorious battles, they would have a procession with all of their soldiers carrying all of their spoils. At the very end of the procession, bound by chains or ropes, would be the slaves that they had captured, who often would be subject to derision on the part of the cheering crowds and many of whom would later become food for the beasts in gruesome games. St. Paul says that that’s the way the apostles, like him, who are treated in contrast to the vanity of the Corinthians. “God has exhibited us Apostles as the last of all, like people sentenced to death, since we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and men alike.” That’s exactly, of course, what happened to Christ before them and we are called not just to follow Christ but to become “other Christs.”

- The apostles and all true Christian believers, St. Paul says, are “fools on Christ’s account” in contrast to worldly wisdom and he challenges the Corinthians to conversion, by contrasting the way they continue to live according to the flesh accommodating the opinions of their peers with how Christians are to live according to the Holy Spirit conforming themselves to the power and wisdom of the Cross. “We are weak,” Paul says, “but you are strong; you are held in honor, but we in disrepute.” They don’t need anything, he continues, but “to this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clad and roughly treated, we wander about homeless and we toil, working with our own hands.” But the sufferings in union with Christ don’t stop there. According to the wisdom of the Cross, all of these human deprivations are actually blessings by which they can become conformed to Christ in his power and wisdom. If Paul asked earlier, “What do you possess that you have not received?,” the same question pertains to the Cross. And so he and the apostles, he and faithful Christians, receive the Cross as a benediction because it unites them to Christ and all Christ himself experienced and called us to do. “When ridiculed, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we respond gently.” He summed it all up by saying, “We have become like the world’s rubbish, the scum of all, to this very moment.” But he was happy to be considered among the scum of the earth, because as he said in his letter to the Philippians, he considers everything else as a loss, he had accepted the loss of all things and considered them as trash (literally excrement), compared to the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus and gain him (Phil 3:8). That is God’s wisdom, and St. Paul was as a father admonishing the Corinthians to learn how to live by it in imitation of Paul and the apostles.
- This is a truly challenging message to us, who live in a woke American culture that resembles in many ways the culture of ancient Corinth and of Laodicea. We’re tempted to think we’re wise in worldly ways, often smarter than all the generations that have come before us, and superior to most other people alive today. It’s easy for us to become inflated with pride, to think we really don’t need God, and so we evict him from our schools, our courts, our legislative bodies, even our homes. Few of us would sign up to be the scum of the earth, to become spectacles like those sentenced to death, to be weak, held in disrepute, hungry and thirsty, poorly dressed and roughed up, homeless wanders, toilsome workers, ridiculed, persecuted, slandered and thrown away like trash. We think we’re too smart ever to opt for that type of life and if that’s what it requires to be an apostle, we’ll just accept a watered-down version of the Christian life where we can believe in Jesus but not have to experience what Paul did, what Jesus did, what so many saints and martyrs have. We’ll take our velvet-covered Styrofoam Crosses, thank you very much, and thank Jesus for letting his message of self-denial, picking up our Cross and following him on the via Crucis “expire” before we came of age. Today, St. Paul, as a spiritual father summoning us to conversion as “beloved children,” calls us, together with the Corinthians, to convert from living by worldly wisdom to living by God’s, so that we may in humility and meekness “know” and “gain” Christ Jesus in this life and know and gain him forever. For this to happen, however, we need to be wise enough in God and foolish in the eyes of the world to lose

everything else in life to gain Christ. What St. Paul describes, in contrast to the Scylla and Charibdis of Robin Leach, is the path to heaven.

- Today the Church rejoices to celebrate the Memorial of someone who really was a fool on Christ's account, who sought always to think as God thinks, to love as Christ loves, and to be his light in the midst of the darkness of so much suffering and indifference. Saint Teresa of Calcutta was truly crazy in the eyes of the world; she was crazy even in the eyes of many in the Church for the radical way in which she let Christ be her light and his thirst become hers. She was serving God faithfully and well as a Sister of Loreto, teaching and administering schools for those in India who could afford an education. But at the call of the Lord, she left it all behind, going outside the high protective walls of the school compound to begin to care for Christ in the distressing disguise of the poorest of the poor, many of whom were dying alone in gutters with no one to love them with the love of God. With her former students and then other women who would join her, she entrusted herself, with Christian craziness, to God's providence in everything. Yesterday we had a day of prayer and fasting for Lebanon and we can recall what Saint Teresa did in 1982 when Beirut was a terrible warzone with Israelis bombing the area. There were 100 disabled and orphaned children abandoned and trapped in a building near the Sabra Palestinian camp. She asked the officer in charge on one side if she could go to rescue the children. He flatly refused, saying it was too dangerous and reminded her that a priest had just been killed. He said the only way it would be possible to cross from East to West would be if there were a ceasefire. It was August 13. Mother Teresa replied that there would be a ceasefire the following day because she had asked Our Lady to obtain one on the vigil of her feast day, the Assumption. U.S. Ambassador Philip Habib said to her that he was very happy to have a woman of prayer there with him, but that she was sure that Israeli Prime Minister Begin wouldn't agree to something, all the more on such short notice. Mother replied that she was certain it would happen and, to humor her, Habib said that if it came, he would personally ensure that she would be able to cross Beirut to get to the kids. Habib nevertheless put in the request. To his shock, at 5 am the following day, it was granted. And Mother, together with representatives of the International Red Cross, immediately went to rescue the frightened and spastic children one-by-one.
- Saint Teresa of Calcutta's craziness had its source and summit, root and center, in Christ's craziness in giving himself to us in the Eucharist. That's where she received her wisdom, her strength and the love that she was able to bring as a missionary across the world. "To make our lives a true sacrifice of love," she said, "we will consciously and actively enter into the spirit of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and offer ourselves with Christ to be broken and given to the poorest of the poor, first and foremost to those in our own religious community so that they may have life and may have it in abundance." She had a faith-filled certainty in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. She told her Sisters, "If you have that one conviction that Jesus is here in the tabernacle, then naturally you will turn to Him, and to no one else." That's where she got her trust to be crazy in service. When the Missionaries of Charity were being established and she was writing back and forth with the Archbishop, she asked for only one thing: Jesus in the Eucharist. "One thing I request of you, Your Grace, is to give us all the spiritual help we need. If we have our Lord in the midst of us, with daily Mass and Holy Communion, I fear nothing for the Sisters nor myself; he will look after us. But without him I cannot be I am helpless." It was before Jesus every day in prayer that she surrendered to him totally with loving trust and cheerfulness. The Eucharist was what drove her charity. "Jesus has made Himself the Bread of Life to give us life," she said. "Night and day, He is there. If you really want to grow in love, come back to the Eucharist, come back to that Adoration." She said in Los Angeles in 1977, "Every Holy Communion fills us with Jesus and we must, with Our Lady, go in haste to give him to others. For her, it was on her first Holy Communion day that Jesus came into her life, and so for all of us also. He made himself the Bread of Life so that we, too, like Mary, become full of Jesus. We too, like her, go in haste to give him to others. We too, like her, serve others." When asked about the joy that so radiated from her and her fellow Missionaries of Charity, she said it came from the one who came into and remains in the world so that his joy might be in us and our joy made complete. "People ask, 'Where do the sisters get the joy and the energy to do what they are doing?' The Eucharist. ... He says come to me." She added, "The time you spend with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is the best time that you will spend on earth. Each moment that you spend with Jesus will deepen your union with Him and make your soul everlastingly more glorious and beautiful in heaven, and will help bring about an everlasting peace on earth." When people would ask her for advice, she would often reply, "If I can give you any advice, I beg you to get closer to the Eucharist, to

Jesus.” And I am confident that today, as she joyfully adores the Lamb around his celestial throne, she is interceding for us, that we will indeed draw closer to Jesus in the Eucharist and love him who thirsts for us with the same love with which she sought to quench that thirst, so that Jesus can make us, like he made her, missionaries of his divine love.

- Today we accompany Jesus not through fields of grain through a seedbed, a seminary, where Jesus will have us eat something far greater than what the twelve received that day, the fulfillment of what the “bread of presence” symbolized, Jesus’ own real presence here among us. This is where we come to rest in him, to yoke ourselves to him in humility and meekness and learn from him. This is where we’re strengthened by him to join the procession of “fools,” like people sentenced not only to death but to resurrection, people who are weak but strong in Him, held in disrepute but to be honored forever, hungry and thirsty for the holiness he alone gives, poorly clad but adorned by his armor, wandering about homeless but grounded in him who had no place to lay his head, like the world’s scum but carrying within the greatest treasure of all. As St. Paul reminds us, we have nothing that we haven’t received — and what we’re about to receive is the greatest gift of all.