# “Despite my littleness, I can hope to be a saint”

## Sermon and Retreat Addresses for Passiontide

## St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Chardon, Ohio

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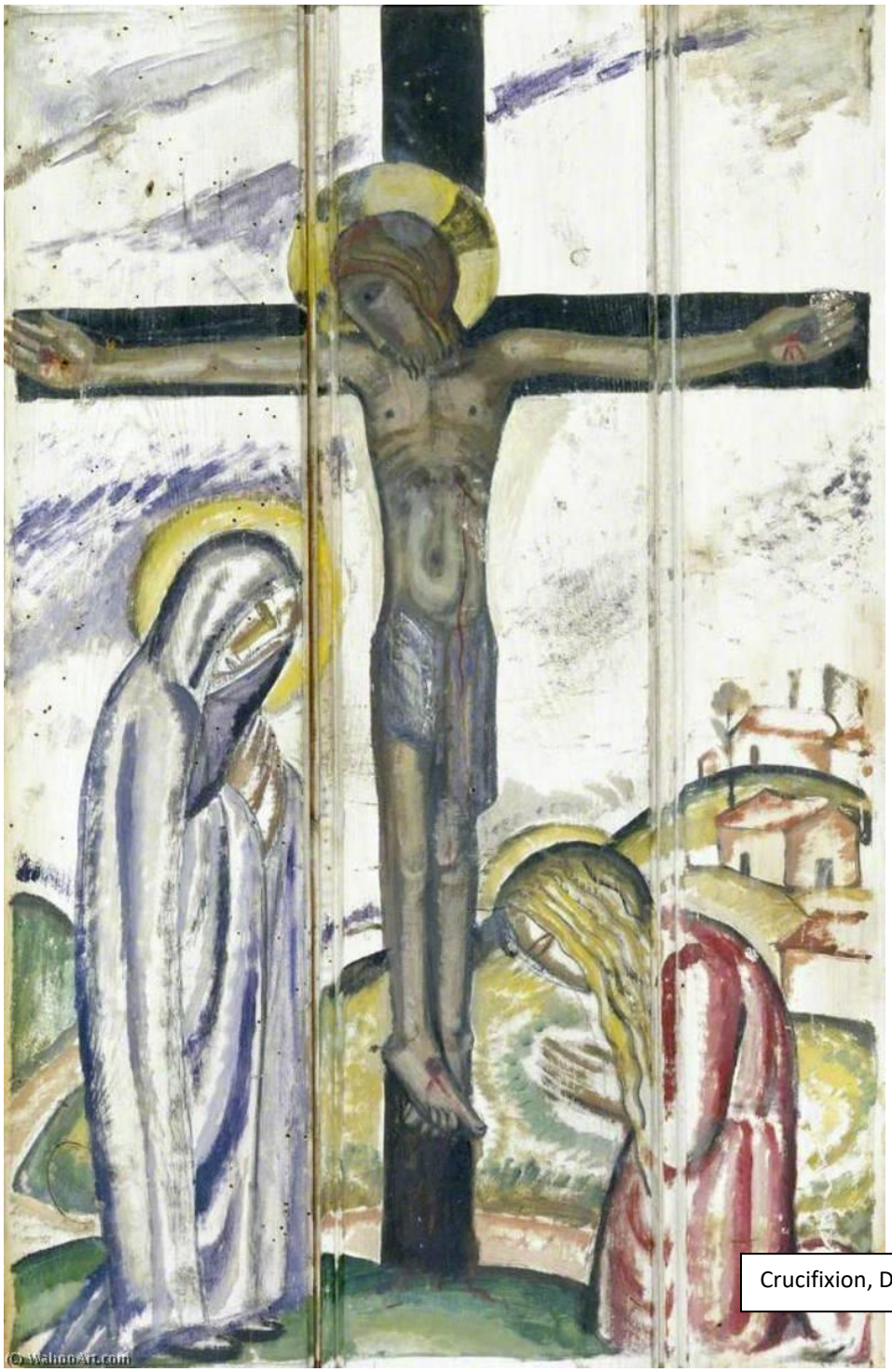

Crucifixion, David Jones, 1923

## Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent (Traditionally called Passion Sunday)

## "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

This morning I am going to impose on you by *not* discussing this week's Gospel lesson (which I know can be a frustration!). There is of course an endless amount that might be said about the raising of Lazarus, but I will just note for our reflections that this lesson is appointed by the Church in part to turn our minds towards the events of Holy Week.

As with Lazarus today, where we encounter loss, and grief, and a raising from the dead, so too in Holy Week we will suffer the loss of our Beloved, grief with the disciples, and a resurrection. But perhaps more importantly, the story of Lazarus ends with a profound, if easily overlooked, suggestion about the meaning of Christ's rising from the dead: unbind him, says Christ of Lazarus. And in Holy Week we shall discover that Christ's rising in in fact an unbinding, a loosening of all that prevents us from love and life. But I will just leave that image for your own prayers.

Rather than focus on the Gospel this morning, I would like to discuss one way in which we might approach and live Holy Week.

This Sunday marks the beginning of what an earlier generation of Christians called *Passiontide*. These final two weeks of Lent invite us to a subtle reorientation of our attention from the active disciplines of the Lenten season – the tilling of the soil of our hearts by prayer and fasting and good works -- to a contemplative meditation on the suffering of Jesus (his "passion").

Passiontide (the season or time of suffering, as we might translate it) invites us to contemplate a twofold reality. On the one hand, in Christ's betrayal by Judas and Peter's denial of the Lord we will be invited to see the entire history of the world's betrayals of love, including the betrayals we have suffered and those we have committed. The desolation wrought by all these betrayals is captured painfully in readings we often hear during Holy Week. So, on Palm Sunday the Lord says: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have longed to gather thee to myself… but you would not…." Or, as is customary in some places during Holy Week, we hear the Lamentations of Jeremiah: "How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become…. "

But on the other hand, during Passiontide we will see the Lord's fidelity to love in the face of betrayal – he will share the first eucharist with Judas, he will gaze without reproach at the same Peter who betrays him. The prophet Isaiah captures this strange doubleness of worldly betrayal and divine fidelity, or wickedness and love, when he writes "by his wounds[(that is, by what is darkness and pain to Christ], we are healed." To put this more simply, what it darkness to Jesus will be light for us.

But how does this *actually* work? How can his suffering be our healing?

It seems to me that the answer to this question has everything to do with Christ's cry from the Cross on Good Friday: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Though we rightly associate these words most profoundly with the end of Holy Week they often appear in other readings during Passiontide. And if Passiontide teaches us anything, it teaches us that that these words – "why have you forsaken me?" -- are only the most extreme

expression of a forsakenness that appears in the life of Jesus from the moment he is born and must flee Israel for Egypt. But this theme in his life grows in intensity, of course, as he approaches the Cross. In Holy Week alone, for example, the disciples will grumble against the woman who anoints Jesus with costly oil and so he will be in some sense forsaken by them, on Maundy Thursday Jesus will wash the feet of his disciples all of whom will subsequently abandon him in his hour of need (he will be forsaken), the disciples whom Christ invites to watch with him in Gethsemane will fall asleep, forsaking him, and even Peter, who promises the Lord he will remain faithful unto death, will deny Jesus three times. Forsakenness is in large part the shape of Christ's entire life.

But why?

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus describes his Kingdom and his work in any number of ways. He is like a Shepherd searching for lost sheep; like a woman searching for a precious coin; he is a physician come to heal the sick or a well of water for the thirsty. Over and over again Jesus describes his ministry in the Gospel precisely as that of a God who comes for a people who are lost, or hurting, or sinning, or forsaken.

And in order to find those people he must go and be where they are in their moment of betrayal, or in their moment of isolation, or even in their death. All of this means that Christ's betrayal and his isolation, which look for all the world like moments of inactivity, are actually best understood as times of his most intense *activity* where Jesus comes seeking each and everyone of us that has been alone, that has betrayed or suffered betrayal, that has or will die. And though we see in Christ's passion all the ruins of the world and its compromises of love, yet I wish to suggest that if we listen carefully, we also hear in Passiontide the melody of another song mixed with the desolation of Christ's cry from the Cross, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” That other song is a song of love.

The word “forsaken” has a very peculiar history in the Scriptures. It appears only twice – when Jesus is on the Cross, of course, but also in Christ's discussion of marriage: “For this cause, Jesus says in the Gospels quoting the Book of Genesis, “a man shall *forsake* his family and cleave to his wife.” Taken together, the word implies not only darkness or alienation and exile. But rather, more hopefully and more urgently for us, the word also indicates a moment of betrothal and nuptial union in which Jesus weds himself to the world precisely in its greatest distance from Love. And so Jesus forsaken on the Cross is not actually Jesus far from us (as it certainly seemed to the disciples), but is in fact Jesus finding us. The Cross is an instrument of torture, but it is also, strangely, a marriage bed.

JRR Tolkien, the author of the great modern epic *The Lord of the Rings* calls this a *eucatastrophe*. He coined this word by cobbling together some bits and bobs of Greek and it means, simply, a happy ending that emerges shockingly and surprisingly at precisely the moment all seems lost: "this is indeed," wrote Tolkien, "how things really do work in the Great World for which our nature was made." And so the moment in which Christ is the farthest from all consolation is in fact the moment, the eucatastrophe, the good disaster, of his being wedded to us where we are so that we may be brought to where he is.

There are still two weeks to go before we discover precisely what this wedding looks like and we cannot rush Easter. We must be where we are -- on the way to a death whose meaning

and purpose are obscure to us as they are to the disciples – this is the rationale for our veiling of crosses at this time of year. Its logic is a mystery.

And yet I'd like to conclude with this final observation:

Passiontide must be kept under what I'd like to call the "sign of the Bridegroom." The ost common title for Jesus in the Scriptures is, surprisingly, not Son of Man or Son of God, but "Bridegroom."

It is as our Bridegroom, for example, that Jesus appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, most especially in that remarkable work of erotic mysticism, the Song of Songs. What this means, I think, is that in some very real and profound sense in every moment that Jesus is forsaken in the coming days we are to hear him responding to his betrayers with the words of the Bridegroom to the bride in the Song of Songs: "Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away, for behold, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come." I think we are to hear these words when Jesus is betrayed by Judas and when he is denied by Peter. Whenever Jesus is betrayed, this is his song; when he is abandoned, this is his song; when hanging on the cross and he forgives those who have pounded in the nails, these are the words he sings: Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away.

This of course is all that a priest says when pronouncing the absolution; these are the words spoken by a priest when we make our private confessions. In some sense, these words are hidden in the priest's words when we receive Holy Communion: "Arise my love."

Most importantly, this is what Jesus sings to us in our betrayals of love (those committed by us and against us) and it is even what we might sing to one another when we offer the gift of forgiveness: "Arise, my love, my beautiful one and come away…" These words are the luminous mystery hidden in the cry from the Cross, "My God, My God, why hast thou foresaken me?" *Arise, and come away.*

# RETREAT ADDRESSES
## The Feast of the Annunciation 2023

### The First Address
### "The evening and the morning were the first day": On telling the time

Before beginning our reflections I would like to note what, oddly, I will not be discussing this weekend in our reflections on normative or traditional disciplines of the Christian life: the reading of Scripture. This is a strange discipline to bracket when we will be discussing things like keeping time, prayer, fasting, and love for one another.

But I had thought to leave this particular discipline along for two reasons. In the first instance, I know that it has been a significant aspect of Fr Chris's own teaching in the parish, including the Adult Study forum. But perhaps more importantly, I assume that a regular, meditative reading of Scripture is in fact the precondition or foundation upon which the other practices of the Christian life are built. The ancient theologian, Origen (d.254) explains why this is so: he notes (and I paraphrase) that just as we eat the Body of the Lord in the eucharist, so too we eat or chew the Lord in the reading of Holy Scripture. And we do so, he might have continued, so that in a world full of words, and with minds often busy with words, the primary words shaping our imaginations and our habits of response to the "unpredictabilities" of the world, will be words of hope and not despair. So I will assume during our retreat that an encounter with Scripture is understood by us all to be a fundamental dimension of the Christian life.

So, let's begin.

When I shared with Fr Chris the titles for this weekend's addresses, all of which are meant to compliment the larger theme of the Christian Way or what we might call the practices/disciplines of the Christian life, the only one he seemed unsure about was this evening's: on telling the time. The uncertainty was entirely reasonable -- by comparison with tomorrow's themes of prayer, fasting, and love for one another, time-telling hardly seems an obvious or even an urgent Christian discipline. We spend our time, or waste our time, or save our time; time crawls or it flies. But whatever the case, our Faith doesn't seem overly concerned with telling the time as a discipline of Christian living.

And yet, even a cursory review of the Scriptures reveals a remarkable preoccupation with time. Just to cite a few examples we might note, for instance, the words of the Psalmist from the Old Testament. In Psalm 90 we read: "So teach us to *number our days*, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." Elsewhere in the same book the Psalmist writes: "My *times* are in thy hand" (31:15). Still further, as no doubt may have occurred to some already, there is the famous passage on time from the Book of Ecclesiastes: "To everything there is a season, and a *time* for every purpose under heaven." And the references do not stop there! In the New Testament we are told that Christ appeared "in the fullness of *time*" (Galatians 4:4). St Paul exhorts us "now it is high *time* to awake out sleep". And Jesus begins his public ministry with these words: "The *time* is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

There is a tremendous amount that might be said about each of these passages, but the point of piling them up is simply to frame the argument I would like to make this evening. And the argument is simply this: that knowing *how* the Church keep's time is a precondition for all the disciplines and practices of Christian living. (Repeat) So I'd like to explore together how the Church keeps time by thinking about two experiences that we all have in common: we all live day by day (so I'd like to think about the structure of a day) and we have all (even if for the first time this evening) walked into a Church. And the structure of a day as well as the structure of a Church tells us something important about time.

**THE DAY**

Let's begin, then, by thinking together about the day and perhaps the most immediate way to do so is to ask a very simple question: what will be celebrating exactly nine months from this evening? Right, Christmas Eve (today is the eve of the Feast of the Annunciation which celebrates the conception of Jesus through the assent of Mary to God's will for her life – Be it unto me according to your word. And so beneath all our celebrations over the next nine months there will be this subterranean theme of Christ's gestation in Mary's womb much as the spiritual life gestates or grows in us). Christmas Eve, I think, introduces right away the strangeness of Christian time. On what grounds does the Church begin its celebration of Christmas on December 24? We will gather to sing the songs of Christmas and receive the first communion of the season, for those of us with manger scenes in Church or at home, the infant Christ will be placed among the animals and shepherds, some of us may even have traditions of gift opening before or after worship. What is the rationale for all of this before the clock has even rung-in December 25th?

The answer, it seems to me, is found at the very beginning of the Bible in the story of creation. There we read, counterintuitively, I think, and certainly counter to the way I generally imagine my days, that at the foundation of the world "the *evening and the morning* were the first day."

This simple Scriptural insight inaugurated the Jewish practice, subsequently adopted wholesale by Christianity, that the day begins not with sunrise (as we commonly assume) but with sunset and the world's daily descent into darkness. The day begins at night. There are, I think, at least three urgent things to note about this strange mode of spiritual time-keeping.

In the first instance, when the Scriptures' place the beginning of the day *at night* they suggest the rhythm or pattern that belongs fundamentally to the story of our redemption. You may recall, for example, that Adam and Eve are exiled from Paradise in the cool of the evening – that is, at night. In that moment of evening exile we might read the metaphorical darkness of every exile in the history of the world – alienation from God, from ourselves, from one another. That image of night-time exile is picked up again and again in the Bible, perhaps most potently in the events that we will recall during Holy Week. When Judas leaves Jesus to betray him, for example, we read in the gospel of John that agonizingly brief commentary: Judas went out. And it was night. Christ will find himself alone in the garden of Gethsemane *while it is night*. And the authorities will come to arrest Jesus in the dark.

But of course the counterpoint in the story of salvation to the moment of evening exile at the start of the Bible is the account of Easter morning at the end of the Gospels. Jesus rises early

in the *morning* just as night is turning to day. This rising with the Sun recalls all of the occasions during which Jesus refers to himself as the light of the world. It recalls the great Old Testament prophecies of light shining on a people who walk in darkness. But perhaps most powerfully in anticipates the Revelation of St John the Divine at the very end of the Bible, where we read this description of heaven: "And the *city* had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there." (Rev 21:23-25)

So in the first instance, we remember the movement of the day from darkness to light (we keep "old time") in order to recall the larger story of salvation history. This movement is summed up, as is so much, in the Psalms: "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning."

But in the second instance, I'd like to suggest that it matters immensely that we begin the Biblical day for the most part by *going to sleep*. For many of us, I suspect, the day seems to start with our more or less energetic embrace of a new morning, with its lists of things to do, or undo, its anticipated peaks and valleys. In Lent these lists may well include our commitments to this kind of good deed or that kind of sacrifice. But whatever the activities of your day or mine, I think it is safe to say that the day *appears* to be the space for *our* activity – our well-spent or misspent time.

But the Scriptures place the day's beginning when we are *least* active and, indeed, most vulnerable. The day begins and we sleep. The spiritual intention and wisdom seems clear: the day begins not with our plans (I will accomplish such and such today) but with an act of surrender. As we read in the Psalms: "I will lay me down in peace and take my rest, for it is thou Lord only that makest me dwell in safety." This act fulfills the most ancient of philosophical disciplines: to sleep is to practice dying, which is in the end a final moment of surrender predicated on the habit of daily surrender cultivated over a lifetime.

But finally, I'd like to suggest one more reason why the day begins in the dark. I've suggested already that it does so to remind us that the movement of history is, ultimately, from darkness to light (this is a cosmic movement, of course). And we've just heard that the beginning of the day with rest is also intended to insist for us that the fundamental discipline of the Christian life is surrender – a relinquishing of our lives and our loves into the hands of God. Indeed, it seems to me that all of the practices of Christian living in one way or another may be described as forms of surrender (or faith).

But we also begin the day in the dark to train ourselves in an orientation of soul that I suspect for some of us may be remarkably natural, though for those of you like me, may be profoundly difficult. We begin in the night to remind us that to be a Christian is also to keep vigil – that is, it is literally to *watch* – for the light. The world's more traditional monastic communities have incorporated this practice of watching for light in the midst of darkness into their daily cycle of prayers, rising in the wee hours to love, as Mother Teresa might say, to love Jesus in the night. And though vigil-keeping of the monastic kind is in fact an ancient Christian discipline extending back to the poorly kept vigil of the disciples in Gethsemane, to St Paul's account of his own vigil keeping, to the longer vigils on holy days that were part and parcel of

early Christian culture, for many of us the call to vigil comes unbidden and unexpectedly. It is an anxious night at the bedside of a loved one. It is being startled awake by fire or flood. It is the sleeplessness that accompanies worry or fear or despair.

And so the Church bids us consciously begin our day in the dark in order to recall, even when the circumstances of our lives are *not* jolting us awake in desperation or anxiety, to recall the promise of the Lord's appearing in the midst of darkness and to pray the Lord's appearing if not for us, then for others. All of this is clear in the Scriptures themselves, of course: Jesus tells us to keep our lamps lit (that is, who stay alert) for the coming of Christ the Bridegroom; Jesus tells us he will come like a thief in the night; it is angels singing in the dark that alert the Shepherds to the birth of their Saviour; and of course Jesus proclaims most powerfully: "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."

This is already a great deal to say, and I began by promising (and even imagining) that we might illustrate the way that this larger theme of darkness to light is captured in the normative architectural style of Christian churches. I had even thought we might wander through St Luke's in order to see the ways in which this Church includes those older and normative patters.

But in order not to tax your patience I will perhaps conclude by just saying this:

The movement from darkness to light that shapes the Christian understanding of daily time and universal history is captured in the architectural shape of our houses of worship. During the Romanesque period of church architecture, for example, which emerges around the year 800, we see the basic and perennial elements of Church design – main doors at the West end, sanctuary and altar at the east, with the nave in the middle. The point of this orientation and structure was, of course, highly symbolic. We enter the Church from the place of darkness (the West, where the sun sets), customarily walking (at that time) under a portal image of the Last Judgement. To enter the Church at all, then, was to have passed through the judgement of the Lord, symbolically laying bear the contents of our hearts. And the point of entering was not that the content of this or that heart was found worthy and others not so; but that having been laid bear, one entered trusting that the mercy of God infinitely exceeded the mixed up content of a human life. That confidence, which we call faith, is what allows the passage from the West into the Church, oriented towards the East. The ritual meaning of the eastward orientation is no doubt obvious – it orients the worshipping body towards the sunrise as a way of orienting the worshipping soul towards the light of Christ, the light, as St Paul experienced, that is "above the brightness of the sun." But for the earliest Christians, to look East was also to look towards Paradise (which the bible tells us is *east* in Eden) and it was to look for the return of Jesus (who will come like lightening, we are told in the Scriptures, like light flashing *from the East*).

This orientation of Church buildings, which persuade the body to teach the heart to look "east," was ubiquitous in the early Church, not only in corporate worship, but even private prayer:

And so Clement of Alexandra (d.215) writes: "In correspondence with the manner of the sun's rising, prayers are made looking towards the sunrise in the east." Origin of Alexandra (d.253) observes: "the east is the only direction we turn to when we pour out prayer." More recently, Pope Benedict XVI observed: "one thing has remained clear for the whole of Christendom: praying toward the east is a tradition that goes back to the beginning. Moreover, it

is a fundamental expression of the Christian synthesis of cosmos and history, of being rooted in the once-for-all events again."

In all this the daily pattern of darkness to light is reimagined as a profoundly cosmic spiritual vision – our churches orient us to the end of all time, and the consummation, healing, and restoration of all things in Jesus, what some call, very beautifully, the final mending of the world.

To tell time, then, as a Christian, is to tell it from west to east, from darkness to light, from exile to our home with the saints in Christ. And this, I think, is the context in which we can begin to think about the disciplines or practices of Christian living. They do not produce the light, or even earn the love of Christ the light, but all work to orient us more deeply to the light and love that are already the fundamental reality of the world.

## The Second Address

## "The Lord will fight for you; you need only be still" (Exodus 14:14):

## On prayer and fasting

Last night we began our reflections on the Christian Way by considering the telling of time at the very same moment that we began our annual commemoration of the Feast of the Annunciation. The Annunciation is a remarkably multilayered Feast, at once concerned with the uniquely historical conception of Christ in the womb of the Mother of God *in the fullness of time* ***and*** with the spiritual conception of Christ in us; at once it is about the angel Gabriel who summons Mary by name – Hail/Greetings Mary– and about the diverse ways in which *we* are summoned by the Lord day by day – our own annunciations; and at once about Mary's carrying of Christ in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit along the dusty roads of ancient Palestine *and* an anticipation of the Church's carrying of the Lord into the farthest corners of the world by the same Spirit beginning on the Feast of Pentecost 2000 years ago. Indeed, we might have noted last night that more or less for as long as we have records of the Church's practices of daily prayer, it is in fact the song of Mary in light of the conception of Christ that is the Church's evening song, both concluding the old day, in which we hope the Lord has been manifest in us, and anticipating the new day, in which we are called to carry the Lord of the poor into the world.

In one way or another, it seems to me, these diverse meanings of the Feast of the Annunciation are captured in one of the central images in the Byzantine, or Eastern, Christian tradition. And I'd like to contemplate this image together because it has, I think, two primary features that are key to our consideration of prayer this morning. After this brief consideration, we will turn to consider the more obviously Lenten discipline of fasting.

If we enter an Orthodox or Byzantine Catholic Church (which, fortunately, are ubiquitous in Cleveland and so we might in fact each make a pilgrimage) we will customarily find in the Eastern apse, over the altar, an image of Mary with the Christchild enthroned in her midst. The image is called Mary *Platytera Ton Ouranon*; that is, Mary "wider or more spacious than the heavens." This title – more spacious than the heavens – is a curious one. In the first instance, it refers to the central mystery or paradox of the Incarnation: that the child Mary carries is both her son and her Maker, both human (and so limited) yet also divine and uncontainable. These two natures, as the Council of Chalcedon (451) teaches us, are united in one person – the one Christ. And so of necessity, Mary, who carries the one Christ, mysteriously contains the uncontainable, And so the Byzantine Church sings in her honour: "You were made more spacious than the heavens, O Most Pure Mother, For God cannot be contained by the whole universe, and yet He chose to be contained in your womb for the sake of our salvation."* This remarkable image always portrays Mary in the ancient posture of priestly prayer – the *orans* position. The symbolism is clear, I think. Mary represents the entire Church at prayer and each of us which, to paraphrase the prophet Malachi, offers a pure sacrifice of praise from the rising of the sun until it's going down.

I'd like us to hold this image of Mary in our minds – the spaciousness and the open hands. We'll return to it momentarily.

I am mindful that to speak of prayer at all is to step into very deep waters. This is in part because it is to touch on what is most intimate in our lives, what St Teresa of Avila calls a

"sharing between friends." This language of friendship becomes far more intense in her mystical writings. There, the Scripture's own images of the Bride and Bridegroom, its language of a wedding banquet, is used to characterize the prayerful union of the soul with God as a union of lovers.

So, prayer is hard to talk about because it is deeply intimate. And yet to speak of prayer is also "deep" and even difficult because it touches on what for many of us is hard – a stable and consistent life of prayer or, in the midst of a stable life of prayer, those inevitable periods of dryness, difficulty, and even sterility. Famously, Mother Teresa recounted in the journals published after her death fifty years of such darkness during which, she wrote, she "loved Jesus in the night."

Nonetheless, though hard and intimate, we must say something about prayer today so I'd like to point to two aspects of the image of Mary more spacious than the heavens that I think rightly orient us to the practice of prayer. These comments will largely bypass issues of method or structure (like the daily offices, for example, and the contemplative reading of Scripture).

Rather than all of that, I'd like to think about the praying which is beneath our verbal prayer and corporate worship. It is the kind of praying famously described by a peasant in the parish of St John Vianney in 19th century France. When asked what he did each day in the Church, the man responded: "Nothing. I look at Him and He looks at Me." So, I would like to think about this praying that is actually a kind of gazing or looking in love.

The apse image with which we began may not in the first instance seem to speak to this mode of prayer, and yet it seems to me that it relates to this quiet and contemplative reflection in two ways. In the first instance, the image reminds us that the orientation ofsilent prayer, contrary to our habitual ways of speaking, is not up and out, but in.

A quick reflection on the words of Jesus himself makes this abundantly clear: the Kingdom of heaven, he says, is within you. Elsewhere he tells us that he and his Father will make their home *in* the faithful. In still other places we learn that Jesus stands at the door of our heart and knocks, that we are temples of the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless we regularly conceive of prayer as the spiritual version of a Hail Mary pass – our petitions, our hopes, our dreams, all of them are lobbed into the universe with some dim hope, or sometimes no hope at all, that the football of our prayer will return.

So, firstly then, the image of Mary reminds us that prayer is a movement towards the heart, where the Lord dwells. St Teresa of Avila described this dwelling as a luminous presence that may be obscured by us, but can never be extinguished. St John describes this as the light that enlightens every person born into the world. St Augustine poignantly writes: "Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there… You were with me, and I was not with you." St Isaac the Syrian puts it this way: *Be at peace with your own soul,* / *then heaven and earth will be at peace with you.* / *Enter eagerly into the treasure* / *house that is within you.* / *And so, you will see the things that are in heaven,* / *for there is but one single entry to them both.* / *The ladder that leads to the Kingdom* / *is hidden within your own soul.* / *Free from sin; dive into yourself* / *and in your soul you will discover the stairs* / *by which to ascend.* (This may be something to practice in our time for quiet prayer.)

The logical consequence of this inner space of prayer, where the Kingdom dwells, is that our interiority, which I think easily seems small, or even cramped, is in fact "more spacious than the heavens." This spaciousness, described by various saints as a large cavern full of treasures, or as an interior castle populated by mansions that shine brighter as they approach the centre where Christ dwells. Our interiority is capacious, and in some sense the life of Christian virtue is about the discovery or the expansion of our awareness relative to our inner expansiveness. As a function of this expansiveness, we can in fact do the hard work of prayer and stand before God with the world and its needs on our hearts, or kneel before God interceding for our enemies, or cultivate, in the words of the great monastic Elder in Fyodor Dostoeksy's great novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, love for the entire world:

> Love all of God's creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light! Love the animals. Love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will soon perceive the divine mystery in things. … "Truly all is beautiful and a source of wonder, for all is truth, and Christ is with His creatures. How can it be otherwise, for the Word is truly for all things, the whole creation and every creature, every leaflet yearns toward the Word, praises God, mourns before Christ, and achieves this unconsciously through the mystery of its blameless life…. We alone are the godless and the stupid, and do not understand that life is a Paradise, for we need only try to understand, and immediately it is revealed to us in its full beauty.

So, then, from the image of Mary and the Christchild we learn that the direction of our praying is inward, to the Kingdom of the Heart. And we learn that this Kingdom, as we grow in prayer and virtue, reveals itself as expansive, spacious, wider than the heavens – a place in which we can offer the entire world, in its brokenness and its beauty, to the Lord. It is there that we may stand before God with the world on our heart in what will often be an offering touched by the sorrowful joy that characterizes the Christian – the joy of a world relentlessly loved, the sorrow of a world often inattentive to its loveliness.

But before moving on to think together very briefly about fasting, there is one final feature of this Marian image that, it seems to me, captures a fundamental aspect of our praying lives. So much of our praying is an offering – of ourselves, our loved ones, our world. But the more fundamental posture of prayer is a receiving. Mary receives the Word of God when Gabriel approaches her, we receive in empty hands the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, the disciples receive the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. This attitude of receptivity (which may, in fact, be a slightly better way of describing the surrender of the spiritual life we considered last night), is modelled for us in the *orans* position of Mary, a posture that you will have seen Fr Chris adopt liturgy by liturgy by liturgy. What is the point of this posture? It is, of course, one of offering. But note that the hands are empty. As the liturgy says, all we have to offer God is what God Himself gives us. Far more importantly, the orans position is one of receptivity. Austin Farrer, the great Anglican priest and theologian, commenting on this posture as adopted by the clergy writes:

> THE minister at the altar still uses the ancient attitude of prayer; he holds out the palms of his hands, like a child waiting for you to throw him a ball, or like a man going out to feel the falling rain after a great drought. The bread of God falls like the manna from heaven; bring out your baskets, hold out your arms. God will fill your empty vessels if you will uncover them. … Open the gulf of your desire, that God may fill it. Who desires holiness, who

desires to care more for others than for himself, who hungers and thirsts for the Spirit of Jesus Christ? Ask, he says, and you shall receive, but ask.

What the hands so, Farrer is telling us, is what the heart does.

So, the direction of prayer is not outwards but in, the interior Kingdom is wider than the heavens, and the fundamental quality of our praying is one of receptivity.

This is so much to have shared already that it hardly seems fare of reasonable to add a word about fasting, but I will do so if only because I promised and because, I think, we can intuit in both last night's address and in this last reflection on the *orans* position in prayer something fundamental, it seems to me, to the practice of Christian fasting – that as composites of soul and body, our final destiny is not the dissolution of the body for the sake of a disembodied and identity-less incorporation into the absolute, but rather the final transformation of our bodies so that soul and body alike inherit eternity. Given this reality, the body, mysteriously, is often needed to serve as tutor or guide to the soul.

This is, I will argue, is in part what fasting is about – it is about the body counseling and instructing the soul. But we've already seen this in our time together. To raise the hands in prayer is to remind the heart to raise itself to the Lord in hopeful expectation and to wait. To turn the body towards the East in prayer is to orient the heart towards the Light of Christ. To kneel is to humble the soul; to stand in prayer is be attentive in the presence of the Lord.

But fasting is no doubt for many of us a more difficult and even less obvious expression of the body's role in the larger story of our conversion. Indeed, many in the Church in y own experience are deeply unsure about the practice of fasting – is it essential or optional? Is it a vestige of medievalism? This uncertainty of many among the faithful is in part the result, at least for the Western Church, of an institutional shift in recent decades away from proscribed bodily fasts in seasons like Lent to "spiritual fasts" or very modest dietary sacrifices. So we give up gossip *or* give up chocolate. I might stop drinking beer and try not to notice my consumption of whiskey tick up as the season progresses. Indeed, the Western Church's confusions about fasting caused the Patriarch of the Coptic Church to conclude a visit with the late Pope Benedict by observing that, though the Churches clearly agreed with one another at the level of doctrine, he was compelled to note that where there was no fasting (that is, in Rome), there was no Church. Bold words!

It is not my intention, of course, to advocate a wholesale reappropriation of older fasting disciplines. There has been something profoundly positive in modifying fasting practices for individuals in consultation with their clergy (and I'd strongly encourage everyone at St Luke's to frame their Lent in dialogue with Fr Chris), but I would like to make three observations about the significance of bodily fasting as a discipline simply to suggest how it might be of benefit to us in whatever ways it may be possible.

The grounds for fasting in the Church are, of course, Christ's own example and words. In the season of Lent we recapitulate in our lives the self-denial of Jesus and his forty day fast in the desert. This in its turn re-produced the forty day fast of Moses and the forty years of Israel wandering in the desert. John the Baptist came fasting, the Scriptures tells us, and the early Church ordained its clergy only after fasting and prayer. As of course Christ himself says to his followers "*When* you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites…" (Note the emphasis of

Christ's on "when" rather than "if") He also observes that certain kinds of spiritual illusions require both prayer ad fasting to heal them.

So what are we to make of what is a ubiquitous and normative practice for the entire history of the Church, now largely kept alive primarily in monastic communities and in the Byzantine and Coptic Churches (Churches, interestingly enough, largely centred in far less affluent parts of the world).

Let's note three things:

In the first instance, we must think of fasting as it appears in the life of the Lord in order to make sense of its place in our lives. Jesus enters into his prolonged fast after his baptism in the river Jordan. You will all, I suspect, recall the story. Jesus submits to baptism by John and emerging from the waters the Spirit decends like a dove and the voice of the Father is heard: This is my Beloved Son. Immediately, Jesus goes into the desert to fast and pray.

Many of the early commentators on the baptism of Jesus saw his bodily submersion in the waters of the Jordan a kind literary or symbolic commentary on the nature of Christ's entire ministry – it is a submersion or entrance into the murky, half-light of human existence itself, including its temptations which, as with Jesus, are almost always temptations to a kind of personal aggrandizement – a moving up – when the way of love is a determined descent. But Christ's fundamental comment on the nature of bodily fasting, that is I think the starting point of all Christian fasting, are his famous words in the desert: Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. To fast, then, is to relearn our primary hunger for the Absolute. As Bishop Kallistos Ware notes, in what may be the most helpful recent commentary on the purpose of fasting: "The primary aim of fasting is to make us *conscious of our dependence upon God*…to bring us, that is, to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ's statement, 'Without Me you can do nothing' (John 15: 5). If we always take our fill of food and drink, we easily grow over-confident in our own abilities, acquiring a false sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency." This all sounds fine and pious, but note what really matters: fasting prepares us for those times in our life when food actually becomes a matter of indifference or even repulsion – it is a training in illness and preparation for death, when the word we need most will be the word attended to in the poverty of our dependence of God.

Secondly, bodily fasting shows physically and externally the internal fast of Lent. This partnership is summed up on the Lenten services of the Orthodox Church:

While fasting with the body, brethren, let us also fast in spirit.

Let us loose every bond of iniquity;
Let us undo the knots of every contract made by violence;
Let us tear up all unjust agreements;
Let us give bread to the hungry
And welcome to our house the poor who have no roof to cover them,
That we may receive great mercy from Christ our God.

To fast with the body, then, finds its counterpart in an interior fasting from judgment of our neighbour, from slander, from anger.

Finally, it is important to note that fasting is not a rejection of God's good creation. Rather, the work of fasting – of limiting our intake of foods or reducing the types of food we eat from the more to the less indulgent – is to correct the mindlessness or carelessness that easily creeps into our relationship with the created world. The Lenten fast, then, is intended to be a strangely joyful recovery of a right relation to the world as God's creation and gift, undoing the way it my at times appears to us – consciously or unconsciously – as simply an object for consumption. As we are with food we may be with people or even with our various distractions.

This is heaps to say so early in the morning! But perhaps I can summarize it all in these few words: prayer takes place in the heart, where the Lord promises to dwell. It is an intimate conversation, one that often lapses into silence as we are gazed upon in love and, in turn, gaze in penitential adoration at our Lord. This intimacy is nurtured in the Lenten season by fasting, which teaches us our essential poverty, our essential dependence on the one who loves us. But this dependence is our joy, for it means we are never alone.

## The Third Address: "He loved them to the end": On love of neighbor

The first words of Jesus in John's Gospel are as unexpected as they are poignant. *Does anyone know them?* His first words are: What are you looking for? We might think about this question a long time. No doubt, I suspect, we might all answer it in diverse ways, starting with the particular things for which we are searching – healing, satisfying work, reconciliation with a loved one – and then, perhaps, moving to the deeper desires that often percolate beneath our more obvious hopes: the desire for security, the yearning to know that it will all be ok, the hope that we are loved.

These deeper desires are captured in a poetic or symbolic sense in the exchange that Jesus has with the disciples at the beginning of John's Gospel. What are you looking for? He asks. And the disciples respond: Where do you live?

Again, we might pause here if we had time and try to feel our way into that question – Where do you live -- but for now let's just note that Jesus responds with a remarkably simple invitation, Come and see.

In this brief exchange, it seems to me, the entire human condition is somehow captured. The meaning of our life-long Christian adventure is to come to the place where Jesus lives. It is to be at home with him. And yet if you recall the Gospels, you will remember, perhaps, that where Jesus lives is precisely the question! Not only is he an itinerant preacher, wandering from town to town in ancient Palestine, but he makes very strange claims that seem to indicate that he in fact has *no* home: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head."

A prolonged reading of the Gospels makes clear that whatever else it may mean to come and see where Jesus dwells, it means at least this: not to come to any geographical location, as if the Lord lived in Jerusalem or Rome or Damascus. Rather, to be where Christ lives is in the first instance to be in relationship with him, or, to use a slightly different word, it is to enter into *communion*. He lives *in relationship*.

We saw this morning that the place of communion is the heart. But this afternoon I'd like to suggest that it is not only in us that we find the Lord waiting and loving and watching. Rather, to be with Jesus where he lives is not only to be in the heart in prayer, neither is it only to encounter him in the Scriptures and in the Sacramental mysteries of the Church. To be with Jesus – to discover where he lives – is in fact to discover the home he also makes in each and every one of our *neighbours*. As Jesus himself says, he is in the prisoner, in the homeless, in the sick and the hungry. If we can see this, however obscurely, we actually see and experience a different world than someone who does not. The world becomes ornamented, we might say, inhabited by sacred images of Christ himself as if the statuary, stained glass, and icon of a Church have walked out into the world.

More importantly, perhaps, if we can internalize this reality we have a place to look every time it seems to us that Jesus has disappeared. As the great American saint, Dorothy Day writes: "it is with the voice of our contemporaries that [Christ] speaks, with the eyes of store clerks, factory workers, and children that he gazes; with the hands of office workers, slum dwellers, and suburban housewives that he gives. It is with the feet of soldiers and tramps that he walks, and

with the heart of anyone in need that he longs for shelter. And giving shelter or food to anyone who asks for it, or needs it, is giving to Christ. We can do now what those who knew him in the days of his flesh did."

Over the next two weeks, the Church will present to us Christ's loving of the world "to the end" – end here meaning both to the death (for it is only in death that he can find those who die) but also meaning, I think, loving it to its fulfillment, to its restoration and renewal – that is, its *purpose* or end.

But to think about what it means to love as Jesus loves – always to the end, always without exception -- I hope it may be helpful to reflect on the life and example of someone who made this way of life her own. There are, of course, countless examples of people known and unknown who have loved with the love of Jesus, but for our purposes today I'd like to think about Dorothy Day, currently in the process for canonization in the Roman Catholic Church and so formally bearing the title "Servant of God." Partly I'd like to consider her life because she is a personal hero, partly because she is an American (and so offers us some hope that the life of the saints is a life for us), but mostly because she reminds us that the life of active love is part and parcel of making our home with Jesus. And there are just two things in her way of loving that I'd like to highlight: firstly, personal sacrifice and secondly, "voluntary poverty."

But first let's remind ourselves of Day's life. Dorothy Day was born in 1897 in Brooklyn, New York, though she spent her early teenage years in Chicago, where her father worked for a local newspaper. This no doubt planted the seeds of Day's own vocation as a writer. It was in Chicago, walking her baby brother through the expansive working-class tenements of the city's south east, that Day began to sense that her life was somehow inextricably connected with the lives of the poor. These early experiences found expression in aggressively leftist politics of her youth, whose general commitments she never abandoned – anarchism and socialism.

In her late teenage years, Day moved to New York, where she worked as a journalist for a number of politically radical papers while slowly finding a home with the city's literary and political avant garde. An early love affair led to an unexpected pregnancy followed by a complicated abortion which Day translated into a largely autobiographical novel, eventually selling the book rights to a film company. Arguably, the novel's title – the eleventh virgin -- alluded to an already developing religious sensibility.

In 1925, Day fell in love again, this time with a British socialist. They made their home together in a beachside house in Long Island and Dorothy eventually found herself pregnant again. As one biographer notes, for Day this second pregnancy "filled her with an overwhelming sense of God's mercy that was to remain with her for the rest of her life." Having assumed that the medical complications attendant on her earlier abortion had rendered her incapable of having children, Day looked upon the birth of her daughter as nothing less than a miracle. As the young child grew, she found herself praying constantly in gratitude and thanksgiving. Day decided eventually to have the child baptized in the Roman Catholic Church and was herself baptized the following year. Her reception into the Church effectively ended her romantic relationship – the socialist impulses of her partner could not tolerate the idea that one might cast off the yoke of middle class values only to assume the yoke of Jesus.

A next decisive moment for Day was December 8, 1932. Dorothy spent much of the day at prayer in the shrine to the Immaculate Conception in Washington, where she asked God to provide her a means of using her gifts to care for the poor. The next day she met Peter Maurin, a largely self-educated son of peasants from France, whose vision of Catholic Social Teaching as a radical "dynamite" dovetailed with Day's intense desire to serve the poor. Together they would found the Catholic Workers Movement the following year, a movement which still continues, including a community in Cleveland.

There were numerous pillars in the Catholic Worker plan. Among the first was the Catholic Worker newspaper which became the primary vehicle for the spread of the movement's ideas. Through Maurin's influence, Day discovered that her radical political and social commitments had a home within the life and teaching tradition of the Church, which on the one hand obliged Christians to seek the transformation of unjust social structures, but on the other hand called them to not just denounce structures, but to an intense and personal love for people.

In addition to the founding of the paper, the Worker's movement called for the establishment of farms as well as urban houses of hospitality for the poor. Day described these homes to a visiting social worker who asked how long people were permitted to stay: "we let them stay forever," she told the shocked worker. "They live with us, they die with us, and we give them a Christian burial. We pray for them after they are dead. Once they are taken in, they become members of the family. Or rather, they always were members of the family. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ." These homes were not only places of food, fellowship, and respite, but were also animated by study and prayer. As Maurin had discovered in his study of Catholic social teaching, houses for the poor were meant to be a normative part of every Diocese in the Church, and so Maurin traveled the country exhorting Bishops to be obedient to their own spiritual tradition. He also went further, arguing that what the Church did on a large scale, Christian families should do on a small scale by sanctifying a room in their houses or apartments for Christ – that is, a Christ room to welcome anyone in need of housing, food, or spiritual respite.

Though, as with saints like Mother Teresa, Day's life might be read as a series of extraordinary charitable works, she herself noted that this would be to miss entirely the character and meaning of her life. "We feed the hungry, yes," she writes, "We try to shelter the homeless and give them clothes, but there is a strong faith at work; we pray. If an outsider who comes to visit us doesn't pay attention to our praying and what that means, then he'll miss the whole point." As one acquaintance observed: "I have never known anyone, not even in monasteries, who was more praying than Dorothy Day. When I think of her, I think of her first of all on her knees praying before the Blessed Sacrament. I think of those long lists of names she kept of people, living and dead, to pray for. I think of her at Mass, I think of her praying the rosary, I think of her going off for confession each Saturday evening." Prayer was fundamental for Day because the work of her life was not the eradication of worldly poverty, but what she called a revolution of the heart: "It is the living from day to day," she observed, "taking no thought for the morrow, seeing Christ in all who come to us, and trying literally to follow the Gospel that resulted in this work." The daily adoration of Christ in prayer was the means by which she could adore him present in her neighbour and allow her neighbour to serve the same Christ in herself.

For Dorothy Day, this communion with Jesus in our neighbour is nurtured and deepened by two disciplines, or habits, of soul, as indicated earlier.

Firstly, Day's friend Peter Maurin insisted that love *demands* personal sacrifice. "We cannot see our brother in need without stripping ourselves. It is the only way we have of showing our love." For many of us, I suspect, habits of loving self-sacrifice with respect to immediate friends and family are both normal and almost invisible to us. We make tea for a partner, or take a friend a meal, or welcome someone into our home. Still more, as a culture we enable the state to care for the poor through programs funded by our taxes. In both cases, there is a sacrifice but one that is either so habitual as to be normal life or largely involuntary (like taxes).

But Day knows that to love the neighbour as a Christian is not only a call to love those close at hand or even those with whom we get along. The call of Christ is to love both where we are least comfortable – in, for example, places of desperation or illness or despair – and, more profoundly, to love even our enemies. As we will be reminded in Holy Week, the model of Christ's love includes among his disciples those who will betray him and he prays for the forgiveness of the very same people who nail him to a cross.

Interestingly, I think for all of her left wing tendencies, Day was in fact deeply anxious about the establishment of the welfare state in America. For all of the good it accomplishes, Day was convinced that in many respects it was a failure and even a temptation. This was manifest in part by the sheer number of people who came to the Catholic Worker shelters after having fallen through the cracks of the various institutions established to tend to those in need. But more importantly, Day was convinced that government legislation could not provide community, solidarity, works of mercy and love but that Christian might be tempted to "offload" their charitable obligations nonetheless. And so she writes: "…we in our generation have more and more come to consider the state as bountiful Uncle Sam. "Uncle Sam will take care of it all. The race question, the labor question, the unemployment question." We will all be registered and tabulated and employed or put on a dole…" To spend any time in the urban inner city is to see precisely the capacity of the poor to endure the daily humiliations of being in one way or another institutionalized, dealt with often by very caring people, but in a context that pressures us to see the weak and powerless as essentially problems to be solved.

For Day and Maurin, the State simply cannot be expected to understand the mystical principal that animates social love – that we are members of one another. And so she feared that Christian might lose their commitment to real and hard love if they too easily default to the government, forgetting that personal encounter and the long-term commitment to involve one's life with others – not as objects to be served, but as Christ to be adored – that this is how the deepest causes of alienation are overcome. It is love, to the end, without exception, a surrender of the impulse to personal comfort in order to comfort one another.

The second habit that Maurin and Day insisted upon as an extension of personal sacrifice is voluntary poverty. This, indeed, is the key to Maurin's thought and fundamental to the Catholic Worker Movement's early houses of hospitality, farms and newspaper. It is also, I think, the most difficult and challenging aspect of Day's legacy and in some ways I hesitate even to discuss it if I only because I fail miserably to follow it!

Voluntary poverty is the practical expression of authentic personal sacrifice. Such sacrifice requires not that we give to others simply what is left over of our abundance, but that

we give first and foremost from the abundance itself – endlessly eating, to use an economic example, into the principle of our love and not feeding others simply on the interest. The early days of the Catholic Worker movement were radical in their embrace of this vision. As Day notes, they were convinced that God would supply their needs provided they were generous and sacrificial. As quickly as they gave away food, and furniture and clothing – even from their own backs – just as quickly these things materialized again. Voluntary poverty loosens the soul's grip on the things of the world, and for this reason Day and Maurin would argue that it is key to freedom. It begins for many by giving away a crust of bread, a piece of clothing, a cup of water, but it becomes deeper as we learn to give away time and privacy, as we surrender our indignity when we are interrupted or when unexpected demands arise. This, for Day, was a constant battle: "We hold on to our books," Day writes, "our tools, such as typewriters, our clothes, and instead of rejoicing when they are taken from us we lament. We protest at people taking time or privacy. We are holding on to these goods."

The repetition in our lives of Christ's own self-emptying; the repetition in our lives of the manger and its poverty; the repetition in our lives of the hidden life of Christ in Nazareth (those years when he lived in complete anonymity) – this constitutes a poverty that is the essence of freedom. "We must keep on talking about voluntary poverty," writes Day, "and holy poverty, because it is only if we can consent to strip ourselves that we can put on Christ. It is only if we love poverty that we are going to have the means to help others. It we love poverty we will be free to give up a job, to speak when we feel it would be wrong to be silent. We can only talk about voluntary poverty because we believe Christians must be fools for Christ. We can only embrace voluntary poverty in the light of faith." What Day is saying, it seems to me, is simply that we learn to hold lightly what is inessential.

For this poverty to be authentic and not simply romantic, it presupposes a willingness to live with the fundamental reality of all poverty – an intense and anxiety-inducing precarity, the sense that things may crumble. As one priest notes in an article by Day, the desire to build and grow and get bigger which often animates parish and community life is fine as far as it goes, but the first casualty of this yearning is as often as not the poor. To be in solidarity is to live together on the edge that induces, compels, faith. (To get a sense of this, think about the evangelization method the Romanesque church and think about modern efforts to evangelize…!)

But let me conclude: Dorothy Day's autobiography is titled, *The Long Loneliness*. The title is the secret at the heart of her life of personal sacrifice and voluntary poverty. As she writes, "We have all known the long loneliness…" That is, we all know the agony of isolation, of being misunderstood, of seeming a riddle even to ourselves. "…we have learned", she writes, "that the only solution [to the long loneliness] is love and that love comes with community." She goes on to write: "To love with understanding and without understanding. To love blindly, and to folly. To see only what is loveable. To think only on these things. To see the best in everyone around, their virtues rather than their faults. To see Christ in them." To come to this place of love, even to wish to come to this place, is already to be on the way home, to be repatriated to the place where Christ dwells with the Holy Spirit in perfect communion with the Father.

What are you seeking? These are the first words of Jesus in the Gospel of John. The answer, surely, is that we are seeking to come home, seeking a way through the long loneliness. It may be in part that the secret of our return is learning to seek the way home not simply for

ourselves, but for one another. To put this another way, to arrive at the home we seek, we must consent to be carried in our poverty, and to carry each other. It is this being carried that we will witness in Holy Week. And is it the carrying of others that we will be empowered to undertake on the Feast of Pentecost.