

## **Homily for December 5, 2021**

At the November Pastoral Council Meeting, we reflected on last Sunday's Second Reading; which was from the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians. In this letter Paul is praising them for everything he has heard about how well they are living their Christian lives, "to please God." Toward the end of that passage, he urges them to do so even more.

Of course our first reaction can easily focus on that last bit, "You are doing a lot of good things, don't just keep it up, do more." (As the saying goes, no good deed goes unpunished.)

But the first part of the passage gives a context which begins to seem more familiar. Before Paul encourages them to "do more," he prays. And his prayer is, "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all..."

The flow of his message is the basic flow of our faith. It is not that God loves us because we are loving. God loved us first, and so we are able to love in return. In Paul's case to the Thessalonians, his prayer was that God would increase to overflowing their love for each other. And it is only then that Paul encourages them to use that greater gift of love so that they can love each other better and conduct themselves even more in a way that is pleasing to God.

And now this week. Our Second Reading is from the beginning of Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Though written a half-dozen years after his letter to the Thessalonians, it has that same message and pattern. From God, to us. "I pray always...for all of you..." "I am confident...that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus." "And this is my prayer, that your love may increase ever more and more..."

He prays for God to increase His work in them, that they may increase their faithfulness in love and deed.

This is the flow of our lives as Christians. God so loves us that we overflow in love for each other and all people, and in wanting to do good and live lives that are upright good.

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It is this outpouring of grace from On High that is continually witnessed to throughout Salvation History. Within the created order God prepared His people for the coming of our salvation in Christ Jesus. Our other readings today are examples of this.

Baruch declaring that the world is being prepared for God's coming – and this preparation is the activity of God. By God's command the created order is sorting itself for the Lord's coming. It is only for Jerusalem to stand and bear witness to God's work. The Responsorial today had us repeating that great phrase, "The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy." And our Gospel today finds Luke explain John the Baptist by echoing Baruch's image in the Quotation from Isaiah that it is the people who prepare the way of the Lord (meaning in their hearts and lives).

Again, that rhythm is being expressed: God pours forth preparation, and we then prepare our hearts and minds and lives because of what God has already done.

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We are regularly reminded in different resources that there are two great figures walking with us in Advent. They are John the Baptist and Our Blessed Mother, Mary. This year our gospels for this Sunday and next present the Baptist to us. But I am going to spend a few minutes on that other great figure – Mary, the Mother of God. At the risk of anticipating her feast days, it is worth even today recalling her presence in our liturgies this coming week.

Next weekend, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe [December 12] lands on a Sunday. In the Church calendar, nothing can take the place of the Sundays of Advent. But we will have an extra Mass late Saturday evening, followed by Mañanitas (serenading her).

And before that we have one of the few Holy Days of Obligation in the United States. A Holy Day of Obligation means we are to treat that day as a Sunday. So we are obligated to get to Mass that day.

And the Holy Day this week is the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. There are a lot of Feast Days for Mary. Two others are Holy Days as well. The reason, in the United States, Mary's Immaculate Conception is raised to the level of a Holy Day is that it is under this title that she is the patroness of our nation, the United States of America. In Washington D.C. we have the National Shrine to her as the Immaculate Conception. And in addition to that, this is a special day for Saint Lawrence. When our parish was first started in Nineteen Forty-Nine, our first Mass was Celebrated on

December the Eighth. Our Blessed Mother was in our hearts and minds from the beginning.

And the Immaculate Conception is a truth of the Faith that shows forth the flow of God's grace and our response.

Mary was given the gift of freedom from Original Sin from the very start of her existence – the Immaculate Conception. We are given this gift through our Baptism into Christ's death and resurrection. She was given this gift in anticipation of her being the Mother of God. God loved first. God poured out Love upon her from her creation.

And Mary responded by always saying "yes" to this gift. She always remained receptive to this outpouring of grace. Mary responded to this outpouring by giving back a greater love to God, and a greater love for everyone. Well, since we only know her as one always full of grace, we may wonder if we can say she "increased" in her love. But compared to us, we can see the difference. In her humility, she exemplifies that saying of John the Baptist regarding Jesus, "I must decrease, and He must increase." God gives us an increase of love, and we in return increase in our Godly love.

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Our Blessed Mother continues to pour out the Love - which God pours into her - by praying for us.

And her example of how to persist in saying "yes" to God's gift and giving that gift to others will always help us to grow to be like her. For she is the best example of discipleship. And we can always take her example.

May we reflect on all the ways God pours out His grace upon us. And may we respond as Our Blessed Mother does.

And may we celebrate the Immaculate Conception with full vigor this week.