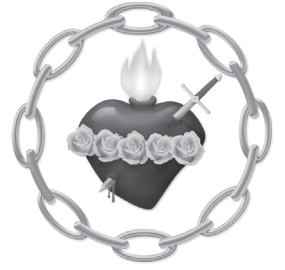


MANCIPIA

THE REPORT OF THE CRUSADE OF SAINT BENEDICT CENTER

November/December 2017





Br. André Marie,
M.I.C.M., Prior

PRIOR'S COLUMN

THIS IS THE END OF THE LAW

Our beloved mentor, Brother Francis, used to remind us often of the importance of purpose. One way he did this was to tell the story, related in various ascetical treatises on the religious life, of the monk who used to look up at the

sky from time to time. When asked by those unfamiliar with his custom what he was doing, the monk would reply, "I'm fixing my aim."

The monk's purpose was to become a saint, to go to Heaven, and in this bodily, sensible way, he recalled to mind this supernatural end. In doing such things, devout souls stir up holy desires and draw closer to their goal.

If I were to say that the purpose of law is identical to that monk's purpose in looking up to the heavens, I would be taken for a fool by a good number of people. Yet, that is exactly the purpose of law according to Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Now the first principle in practical matters, which are the object of the practical reason, is the last end: and the last end of human life is bliss or happiness, as stated above (I-II:2:7; I-II:3:1). Consequently the law must needs regard principally the relationship to happiness (ST, Ia, IIae, Q. 90, A. 2.).

Those familiar with Saint Thomas' notions of happiness know well that the Angelic Doctor identifies it with heavenly beatitude. Mere human law is powerless to effect this end, so we need Divine Law in order to achieve it. But more on that further down. The point here is that law has as its purpose to direct man to his final end, which is Heaven. While human law cannot achieve that end — but, rather it aims at a merely temporal happiness that is not our true finality — *it must not hinder it.* (This is one of the reasons that purely secular societies just do not work. The state inevitably makes *itself* the end of man.)

Modernity has given us various errors concerning law. By way of defect, we may consider the errors of the antinomians, who absolve Christians from following the moral law. By way of excess and misdirection, we have the legal positivists, who elevate all law to the same level, while

equating law with the arbitrary dictates of whatever ruling class is in power — no matter how contrary such "laws" are to one another or to the moral law. The proponents of such errors, who plague the Church as well as civil society, do not much value Saint Thomas' definition of law, with all four of its constituent notes:

[T]he definition of law ... is nothing else than an ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and promulgated. (ST, Ia, IIae, Q. 90, A. 4.)

If it is not for the common good, it is not a law. If it is not an ordinance of reason, it is not a law. *Roe v. Wade*? Not a law. Some ordinance forbidding "discrimination" against sodomites who demand a wedding cake from a Christian baker for their post-abomination bacchanalia? Not a law. A statute decriminalizing usury? Not a law. Examples could be multiplied *ad nauseam*. Should Saint Thomas be given plenipotentiary veto power over our state and federal system of statutes and court cases, the weighty tomes found in law libraries would become suddenly lighter. And many a lawyer would not understand what happened, because the poor fellow is a legal positivist.

Even in the Church, it seems, there are those who would cut Saint Thomas' definition in half and make law into the diktat of the lawmaker. But while such may come from "him who has care of the community," and may be "promulgated," if it is not an ordinance of reason for the common good, it is not a law. At least that is the opinion of Saint Thomas, and I, for what it is worth, have the temerity to agree with him.

Supposed laws, whether civil or ecclesiastical, that form obstacles to man's salvation contradict the very purpose of law and therefore have no authority whatsoever.



Saint Thomas distinguishes the eternal law, the natural law, human law, and Divine law. There is some overlapping here, so to present them in sharper categories we distinguish between the Divine (positive) law, the natural law (which also comes from God) and human law. The Divine positive law and the natural law are included in the

"eternal law," because the eternal law is *God's own governance of the universe*. Human law comes from a human authority, and it is distinguished into ecclesiastical and civil law. Canon

law, while it pertains, in part, to divine things, is not Divine law, although it does, in places, cite the Divine positive law. Canon law, and all ecclesiastical law, is therefore human law.

It remains to explain what the Divine positive law is. Saint Thomas distinguishes two such bodies of law: the Old Law and the New Law, corresponding to the Old and New Testaments of Sacred Scripture. The Old Law is divided by a threefold division: ceremonial precepts, judicial precepts, and the moral law. Of these three, the only part that survives as binding on Christians is the moral law, which is none other than the natural law. The New Law of Christ, on the other hand, consists primarily in the grace of the Holy Ghost and only secondarily in the written law of the Gospel, which is summarized in the Sermon on the Mount.

Saint Thomas notes that if man had a mere natural end, then the natural law would be sufficient to guide him to that end, which would consist in natural happiness. However, man has an end that is above nature, and for that end he needs a higher law to guide him. This higher law consists in the twofold, supernaturally revealed word of God. The Old Law is a preparation for the New, while the New Law surpasses its predecessor by far, having the intrinsic power to justify man — that is, to make man holy. It has this power because, as Saint Thomas argues, the New Law is itself primarily the interior grace of the Holy Ghost.

Is it any mystery, then, that the treatise on grace follows immediately after the treatise on law in the *Summa*?

Such a lofty conception of law is no doubt foreign to some readers, but this is the language and accompanying worldview of the Ages of Faith, something that must be brought back if we are to have a restored Christendom.

Let us get back to purpose. The purpose of all this law is to guide man to his end, which is happiness. (And no, this is not selfish.) For this reason, then, we see the Beatitudes at the heart of the written (i.e., secondary) part of the New Law. The Beatitudes each have two parts, the merit and the reward. The merit pertains to this life, and the reward pertains imperfectly to this life, but perfectly to the next. By living according to the grace of the Holy Spirit in this life, and availing ourselves of the supernatural panoply of divine helps dispensed by Christ through His Church, we can, even in this vale of tears, enjoy an anticipation of heavenly beatitude.

Only in this way, by living according to the New Law of Christ, can man achieve his ultimate end, his happiness.

Far from being a burden to human nature and an indignity to a free man, the law of God is profoundly liberating and life giving. It helps us “fix our gaze” on a happiness that is infinitely higher than what we could have in this life, because it is a Divine life.

“The Lord is sweet and righteous: therefore he will give a law to sinners in the way” (Ps. 24:8). ■

Email Brother André Marie at bam@catholicism.org

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Sr. Marie Thérèse, M.I.C.M.,
Prioress

CONVENT CORNER WILL YOU PRAY FOR ME?

Dear Reader, have you ever promised that you would pray for someone? Probably! It is a Work of Mercy to pray for the living and the dead and you are a Catholic, right?

Well, whenever you made that commitment to pray, did you fulfill it? I only ask, because it is a question I have often asked myself in remembering my own prayerful promises.

If I make a specific promise to pray a Hail Mary, a Rosary or offer my Holy Communion for someone, I can be sure I have been true to my word when I accomplish it. If I have a question about having fulfilled my commitment, I just pray another of those prayers. But, when I simply say, “I’ll pray for you,” I can become a little unsure, maybe even scrupulous. I always try to take my promises seriously, even if I don’t use the phrase, “I promise.”

Do you sometimes share this same uncertainty, Dear Reader?

“I’ll pray for you.” If you are conscientious, you feel an obligation when you say this to someone. So, how do we know when we have fulfilled our promise?

Perhaps an anecdote from a saint would help us. Saint Teresa of Avila often had people coming to her with needs and asking for prayers. On one occasion, when someone came back to thank her for her prayers since they had been answered, Saint Teresa was quite disconcerted. Why? Because she had no recollection of even having made a commitment to pray for them. She spoke to Our Lord about this dilemma and, mystic that she was, she received an answer.

Our Lord encouraged Saint Teresa to be at peace in the matter. Why? Was He justifying laziness? Was He encouraging the merely natural wish to make a distressed person feel better by saying something “nice” like, “I’ll pray

for you” — without any serious intention to follow up with prayerful action? The answer is obviously “no” — but how did He actually encourage her in this situation?

Our Lord told Saint Teresa that He had helped those who had petitioned her for help because it was her will. Our Lord did Saint Teresa’s will! Why? Our Lord actually told her, “You do My Will and I will do yours.”

Start with the Morning Offering (in the morning, first thing). We should be striving to unite ourselves to God

“You do My Will and I will do yours.”

and His Holy Will at every waking moment, day and night. Even our sleep should be offered to God: “I sleep and my heart watches.” Don’t waste it (that would be worse than insomnia)! During the day, make your choices in the Presence of God: first of all, no sin; second, the better of any choice in accordance with the duties of our state in life. And, of course, if you really want to get to Our Lord’s Sacred Heart, do whatever you can to please His Mother! Hopefully, you have already made your Total Consecration — now live it. And, your big daily “bouquet” for your Mother is a devout Rosary.



So, Dear Reader, would you like your friends and associates to start seeing answers to your prayers? Think big! Would you like the situation in the Church and world to change for the better? You could try complaining about it — but then, you already know that doesn’t help. Start now, trying to please God and His Holy Mother at every moment. Why wait until your doctor tells you that you have only a few months

to live? Or until some Divine Punishment is at hand? Do God’s Will, and He will do yours.

So, Dear Reader, will you pray for me? ■

Email Sister Marie Thérèse, at convent@catholicism.org



Mr. Brian Kelly

KELLY FORUM THE CHRISTMAS CRIB

With our mind's eye every time we pray the Rosary we visualize the scene at Bethlehem as we recite the Third Joyful Mystery. We do so quickly because the Rosary with our Hail Marys moves

from mystery to mystery and we would never finish the decades if we paused at length.

Nevertheless, pause we must, from time to time, if we are to savor the moment of our Savior's Birth and dwell in that stable with the Divine Babe, Mary, and Joseph their guardian.

One of the most endearing memories of childhood and family is surely the celebration of Our Savior's Nativity. Everything about the holy season gave us joy. Yes, the tree, the decorations, the colored lights, and the anticipation of gifts to be opened after our parents returned from Midnight Mass and woke us up are unforgettable memories. And the red stockings tacked on the hall frame molding was itself suspenseful in that there was always the fear that we might find a lump of coal inside instead of candy. Of course that never happened.

In our home the Holy Crib was the main attraction. It was set up by Mom after the last Advent candle was lit at dinner time. Our manger scene was always the same; perhaps my mother inherited the figures and stable from her parents. I do not know. But this simple manger was always there from the final week of Advent until after Epiphany. I now have it. The figures are a little large for the stable, but that is just fine. After Midnight Mass, my mother and my oldest sister would put the Baby Jesus in the manger while we sang Silent Night.

I wish I had been a parishioner of Our Lady of Mount Carmel parish, in Orange, NJ, next to the town in which I grew up. It was a Capuchin parish back then in the 1960s. And very Italian. God bless the Franciscans and the Italians. They knew how to celebrate the Nativity. There was, shall we say, *action* at Mount Carmel. At the Gloria of Midnight Mass the Baby Jesus was sent down on a reel and wire from the choir balcony and the priest would catch the Infant and place Him in His manger in the sanctuary while the women waved white handkerchiefs in welcome. Our parish was more subdued. Too bad.

I recently came across a little book on the Christmas Crib, written by Nesta de Robeck. It is a wonderful history of the devotion to the Christmas Crib, both liturgically and culturally.

The book begins by providing a brief background of the actual manger itself, which cradled the Baby Jesus, along with some testimonies of early saints who wrote about the grotto in Bethlehem where Christ was born. Saint Justin the Martyr, Saint Epiphanius, Origen, and Saint Jerome, each give their personal account. Origen of Alexandria, who lived from 185 to 254, testified that he "saw the grotto and in it the manger where Christ was swaddled." Even before Origen, however, the cave of Bethlehem was a place of pilgrimage for the early Christians of the East. So popular was it that the Emperor Hadrian, who reigned in the early second century, in an effort to crush Christianity, planted woods over the holy place with a temple of Adonis covering it. It was not until the year 326, in the time of Saint Helena, the mother of Constantine, that this profanation was destroyed and work on a basilica was commenced. Nearly a century later, Saint Jerome, who lived in Bethlehem, lamented "if only I might have seen the Crib of clay in which the Savior lay! Under pretext of honor we have substituted one of silver."

Meanwhile, in Rome, a certain wealthy patrician and his wife had a vision (or a dream) in which Our Lady asked them for a church to be built on the Esquiline hill. The exact spot was indicated by a snow fall in August. We have the feast day even still, August 5th, Our Lady of the Snows. (It is my father's birthday, I might add, and he had snow-white hair, a full head of it, until the day he died at seventy-eight. His name was Austin, for Augustine, and the saint was named after that month which was named in honor of Augustus Cæsar by his pagan father.) Well, it so happened that Pope Liberius was given the same vision as the Roman patrician. And these two revelations, occurring at the same time in the year 352, is what prompted the pope to start building Saint Mary Major, one of the seven major basilicas of Rome. Originally called *The House of the Mother of God*, it shortly thereafter became known as the *Praesepeo della Mater Dei* in honor of the relics of the holy manger that were placed in this basilica's Nativity sanctuary. The relics had been sent to Rome by Saint Sophronius of Jerusalem during the Persian occupation of Palestine in the seventh century. *Praesepe* is the Latin word for manger. In addition to the relics of wood from the Baby Jesus' crib, there gradually appeared sculptured figures of Jesus, Mary, Joseph and flute-playing shepherds.

In this sanctuary was the beginning of the manger scenes that have graced every nation of Christendom in every church ever since.

Before artists devoted their talents to painting and sculpturing the rustic venue and figures of Bethlehem there was the drama of the Christmas homilies. Devout poets,

such as the Syrian Saint Romanus of Edessa (6th century), wrote beautiful canticles depicting the episodes of the Nativity story, and these were sung in choirs that enhanced the sermons. Dialogues were invented that embellished the simple accounts in the Gospels. And the faithful participated with a certain gusto that was more conducive to theatre than liturgy. In fact, the deacon was directed by rubric to shout *Silentio Habete* at certain points. There was action and drama (a prelude to the mystery plays of the Middle Ages perhaps?) with the priest echoing his part to rouse the audience. It was all well-planned pedagogy.

Nesta de Robeck describes it all well: “The scenes were roughly as follows: the Prophets, which included passages from the Old Testament; a dialogue between God the Father and the Archangel Gabriel, in which the latter is told not to alarm the Virgin; a soliloquy of the Archangel before the house of Mary; the Annunciation followed by a dialogue between Gabriel and Joseph ... the journey of our Lady and St. Joseph to Bethlehem, followed by the Nativity in the grotto ... the hymn of the angels; the adoration first of the shepherds, then of the Magi, it concludes with a scene representing the fury of the devils. The final ‘act’ has the Magi’s visit to Herod ... the massacre of the Innocents, the vision of St. Joseph and the flight into Egypt.” One of the fathers of the Church, Saint Gregory Thaumaturgus (+270), seemed to see the Nativity before him as he offered Mass: “My eye,” he said “rests on the carpenter and cradle, on the young Child and His Mother. I see the Child lying on the manger while Mary the Virgin stands by serving with Joseph.”

The Nativity scenes, depicted in stone, were quite original, with the shepherds always playing their flutes for the Baby Jesus, and with their watchdogs in tow. Interestingly enough, the Magi were usually shown wearing Phrygian caps. Phrygia was in Biblical times in Anatolia, which is today Turkey. Others think the Magi were from Persia. By the twelfth century they were given the names of Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

In any event, the Christmas dramas that were acted out were by the twelfth century performed during Matins. The directors of these plays began abusing their creativity, often



including rather rowdy scenes, such as that at the inn that had no room for Mary and Joseph. The purpose of this latter liberality was intended to contrast the inn with the stable and to move the faithful to thank God Jesus was not born in the inn. There were other scenes, such as Herod bursting in at some point during Matins and his henchmen beating the fathers of the Holy Innocents, while the faithful jeered.

Well, things tended to get so out of hand that Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) outlawed the spectacles, only allowing the enactment of the actual events as recorded in the Gospels. This prohibition was so strictly enforced that Saint Francis had to solicit this pope’s permission to reenact the Bethlehem drama in Greccio for his renewal of the simple Christmas pageantry. Both Saint

Bonaventure and Saint Thomas of Celano his biographers, provide an account from eye witnesses of Saint Francis’ drama of Bethlehem. Thomas of Celano writes:

“Saint Francis [who was a deacon] read the Gospel and preached ‘saying all manner of tender things on the birth of the Poor King in Little Bethlehem. Repeatedly whenever he wished to name Jesus Christ, inflamed with immense love he called Him Babe of Bethlehem pronouncing the words almost like the bleating of a sheep.’”

Returning for a moment to Saint Mary Major in Rome. In the late thirteenth century there was a great celebration there when the relics of Saint Jerome were deposited in the basilica. A renowned artist, Arnolfo de Cambio, created a beautiful addition of statuary for the Chapel of the Praesepe. What is notable in this is that from this time onwards the figures of the Holy Family, especially of Our Lady, take on a more human look. So, too, did the Baby Jesus. Artists began imaging Him as an Infant, rather than a weaned Baby. All that was missing was His crying, but now it could be more easily pictured in the mind, for the Infant was cold even while wrapped in swaddling clothes. There is less of the older influence, which always stressed His Divinity. This more human element can be seen in the photos of crèches provided by Nesta de Robeck in her book. Landscapes began to be added in the manger scenes of churches throughout Europe. Trees, rabbits, birds, and animals other than sheep, the ox and



name Praesepe] “became Crib in England, Crèche in France, Krippe in Germany, Presepio in Italy, Belem in Portugal, and Nascimento in Spain.”

And the plays returned, somewhat more sober, but they were back. The vernacular replaced the Latin and the dramas were held elsewhere than in church. There were Lullabies sung while rocking the Child to sleep, carols were composed, and in these the Germans excelled. Yes, the producers were allowed their innovations, such as local customs encouraged; shepherds brought cheese and wool for Mary, and they were given names and lines, even dialoguing with the Magi whom they met on their way to Jerusalem. This was Catholic culture at its best — as were the Medieval and later Mystery plays. Sometimes whole towns were employed in acting, in pageantry, and in sculpting figurines.

Here at Saint Benedict Center our brothers set up a modest outdoor crèche, rustic, as it truly was in December in Bethlehem. Of course, they do add Christmas lights for night viewing. And the Magi are placed at a distance, advancing slowly but surely, until Twelfth Night.

In conclusion, let us remember to recite every day, fifteen times a day in fact, this traditional prayer, from the Feast of Saint Andrew until Christmas:

Hail and blessed be the hour and moment
In which the Son of God was born
Of the most pure Virgin Mary,
at midnight,
in Bethlehem,
in the piercing cold.
In that hour vouchsafe, O my God,
to hear my prayer and grant my desires,
[here mention your request]
through the merits of Our Saviour Jesus Christ,
and of His blessed Mother. Amen. ■

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the ass, embellished the grottoes. Isaias saw it in vision : “The ox knoweth his owner and the ass his master’s crib.” (1:3)

I can attest to the Italian genius for manufacturing innovative waterfalls in the Roman churches that I visited forty years ago. It was spectacular. I believe that the artists wished to demonstrate that all creation, every age, every people (yes, there were people from all nations at these Roman crib scenes) will always be there to welcome the Advent of the Savior of the World.

There was a flourishing of the Christmas grotto that began to be manifested in the later Medieval centuries throughout Christendom. De Robeck writes: [The Medieval

Ad Rem

Once every two weeks (about), Br. André Marie, M.I.C.M. sends out an email called *Ad Rem*. (This Latin phrase means, roughly, “to the point.”) The main contents of those mailings are published on our site, catholicism.org, but some other messages and offers come in the email version that are not on the site.

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Br. John Marie Vianney,
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PREFECT'S COLUMN DO YOU HAVE A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR?

The Catholic Encyclopedia states, "In the technical sense of the term, spiritual direction is that function of the sacred ministry by which the Church guides the faithful to the attainment of eternal happiness." Recall Our Lord's words, "Going, therefore,

teach ye all nations ... Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20) This function appears in her public teaching, verbally, or in writing, and also in, "the private guidance of souls according to their individual needs; but it is the private guidance that is generally understood by the term 'spiritual direction'."

The priest is not only part judge in order to "release or retain" the sins of all confessing, but also a director of consciences. In the, "latter capacity he must instruct his penitents if ignorant of their duties, point out the wrong or the danger in their conduct, and suggest the proper means to be employed for amendment or improvement. The penitent, on his part, must submit to this guidance. He must also, in cases of serious doubt regarding the lawfulness of his action, ask the advice of his director.

For a person who acts in a practical doubt, not knowing whether he is offending God or not, and yet consenting to do what he thinks to be morally wrong, thereby offends his Creator. Such consultation is the more necessary as no one is a good judge in his own cause: a business man is sometimes blind to the injustice of a tempting bargain, and passion often invents motives for unlawful indulgence." (ibid)

But, more frequently, spiritual direction is required for those who aim at the attainment of perfection. In fact, all religious are obligated to do so via their profession. Many of the faithful, who desire perfection and yet must live in the world, are strongly advised to seek spiritual

direction. By this perfection is meant, "the cultivation of certain virtues and watchfulness against faults and spiritual dangers. The knowledge of this constitutes the science of asceticism. A spiritual director must be well versed in this difficult science as his advice is very necessary for such souls. For, as Cassian writes, 'by no vice does the devil draw a monk headlong and bring him to death sooner than by persuading him to neglect the counsel of the Elders and trust to his own judgment and determination.'" (Conf. of Abbot Moses)

It should go without saying that while advising on the Faith, the work of the private spiritual director must never be at variance with the teaching of the Faith, as the Holy Ghost speaks through the sovereign pontiffs and the bishops of the Church in union with them in the general councils, i.e., the *ex cathedra* pronouncements of the One True Faith.

Each director will find that the chief means of progress towards perfection lies in the exercise of prayer and mortification. But, even the experienced spiritual guides adjust the direction under different situations. "Different is the type for the solitary in the desert, the cenobite in the community, for a St. Louis or a Blanche of Castile in a palace, St. Francis of Rome in her family, or a St. Zita in her kitchen, for contemplative and for active religious orders and congregations." Other differences occur when directing souls,

"from the presence or absence of the mystical element in the life of the person to be directed. Mysticism involves peculiar modes of action by which the Holy Ghost illumines a soul in ways which transcend the normal use of the reasoning powers. The spiritual director who has such persons in charge needs the soundest learning and consummate prudence. Here especially sad mistakes have been made by presumption and imprudent zeal for men of distinction in the Church have gone astray in this matter." (*Catholic Encyclopedia*)

History has taught that, even in cases that do not involve mysticism, errors can occur and must be guarded against, e.g., the false principles of the Jansenists, the principles of Quietism, etc.



Pope Leo XIII wrote the decree, *Quemadmodum*, an important document that bears on the direction of religious souls. It forbids all religious superiors who are not priests, “the practice of thoroughly inquiring into the state of their subjects’ consciences, which is a thing reserved to the Sacrament of Penance. It also forbids them to refuse to their subjects an extraordinary confessor, especially in cases where the conscience of the persons so refused stands greatly in need of this privilege; as also ‘to take it on themselves to permit at their pleasure their subjects to approach the Holy Table, or even sometimes to forbid them Holy communion altogether.’”

A spiritual director, a good traditional priest, told me that most lay people do not need spiritual directors. He pointed to the fact that many who seek such spiritual direction do not do the normal, usual, and, to many of us, obvious, things they should be doing on a daily basis. He recommended the following exercises: the daily Rosary, regular Confession, daily good spiritual reading and to use common sense. He added that penitents who are confessing to good traditional priests may never need a spiritual advisor as the regular confessor will give them what they need. He went on to say, “If you are not saying your Rosary, going to Confession regularly, spending time daily with good spiritual reading, then a spiritual director is not going to help you. Do all those things first, i.e., the basics.”

On the other hand, this priest also said that the Church recognizes those with some spiritual affliction. It is they, and others, that should have a spiritual director. My good priest said, “a spiritual director cannot substitute for a confessor.” Each has its own function, although there are similarities, my priest added, that the spiritual director should know much about his charge, whereas the confessor needs to hear every mortal sin in order to give absolution. He also wisely added, “One goes to a general practitioner before one goes to a specialist.”

He also shed some light on what we should be doing, even though the Church in its human element may not be going in the right direction, “If the Church does not get better, *you* still have to get better.”

I have had many ask me about this subject. They have had trouble finding a good spiritual director. I am reminded that Saint Thérèse had the same difficulty. After she found an excellent spiritual director, he moved away from her. She then chose Jesus for her spiritual director. ■

Email Brother John Marie Vianney, at toprefect@catholicism.org

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Father Leonard Feeney, M.I.C.M.

FOUNDERS' COLUMN

THE ANNUNCIATION

Keeping in mind that there would not be a Christmas without Our Lady's Fiat at the Annunciation, we anticipate the Birth of Christ with Father Leonard's beautiful meditation for the Feast of the Incarnation.

When the Blessed Virgin Mary, the spouse of the angelic Joseph, the royal son of David, was fourteen years, six months and seventeen days old, there occurred to her, and for her and through her, the greatest event that ever took place since creation was effected by God and time began. We should describe it slowly and with every reverence and awe and majesty that can be felt, as we think of it.

The event to which we now refer is called The Annunciation, and it means that it was announced to Mary by God that He wished to become man and wanted to take her for His Mother, provided she would consent. The Annunciation is not God's edict or command or order to the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is rather His petition. It is something He asks of her, and must wait for her consent until it is fulfilled.

The moment when God's request to Mary will, by her consent, be fulfilled, is called the fullness of time. This means that time and eternity have touched in a single moment of embrace and will never separate again, either for all time or for all eternity.

Let us first consider the great messenger whom God chose, out of His three hierarchies, His nine choirs of angels, to bring this message to Mary, who is about to become the Mother of God. The great messenger's name is Gabriel, and he is one of the seven angels who stand before the throne of God. Three of these seven angels who stand before the throne of God we know the names of. They are: Michael, whose name is a question and means, Who is like to God?; Raphael, whose name means, Medicine, or, Healing of God; and Gabriel, whose name means, Man, or rather, Great Man of God, Great Hero of God, or, as the Latin puts it, *Fortitudo*, or *Virtus Dei*.

Every angel is a messenger, because that is what the word angel means. But Gabriel is the messenger of all messengers, the mouthpiece, the megaphone of God. So completely is this great angel and pure spirit dedicated to the work of being messenger that, when his task is assigned to him, he outfits himself for the purpose, and if his message is one from God to man, he outfits himself as a man, when he arrives to

bring his divine greeting or divine news.

In the Old Testament, we encounter this great angel Gabriel very especially in the Book of Daniel the prophet, when he comes to tell Daniel how long it will be from his day to the coming of Jesus — and of Jesus' rejection by the Jews. He tells Daniel of the punishment of the Jews which will follow upon their rejection of their King, then the Temple of Jerusalem will be destroyed, never to be rebuilt again unless just before the ultimate consummation of things, at the end of the world.

Daniel the prophet speaks of Gabriel as the Man of God. This does not mean that Gabriel is a man, but that he, in the perfect guise of a man, comes to bring his vivid messages straight from the thought of God to the human ears that listen, and the human eyes that see.

It was Gabriel, this messenger-of-all-messengers, with the greatest news God ever had to tell, who entered the little side chamber of Mary the Virgin in her house at Nazareth, on the twenty-fifth of March, found her at prayer, and, with the appearance of a man, dropped on his knees before her and gave her a message only God and himself knew. Gabriel's words to the little spouse of Joseph of Nazareth were these: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women."

Mary, the Queen of all angels, was troubled at what Gabriel said because of the manner of the greeting. Why should she, who had forfeited the love of all men by taking a virginal spouse in her husband, Joseph, now find an angel in the form of a most compellingly radiant man, kneeling in the room before her, and offering her praise?

And then Gabriel said to her, "Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace with God. Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb and shalt bring forth a son; and thou shalt call His name, JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of David, His father; and He shall reign in the house of Jacob forever. And of His kingdom there shall be no end."

And Mary, still eyeing him, said, "How shall this be done, because I know not man?" And Gabriel answered and said to her, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee. And therefore also the Holy which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God."

And Mary said to Gabriel, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done to me according to thy word."

Mary was in the protection, as we see, of two great persons: Joseph, who for her sake became, as it were, an angel,

and Gabriel, who for her sake became, as it were, a man.

The fruit of the Annunciation was the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Eternal Son of the Father, Who became in time the Child of Mary the Virgin. In Him there is one Person and two natures, the nature of God and the nature of man.

The Incarnation took place in the country of Palestine, in the province of Galilee, in the town of Nazareth, in the house of Joseph, in the womb of Mary, on the twenty-fifth of March, nine months before the birth of Christ. The twenty-fifth of March is a day well to remember. It was on the twenty-fifth of March, at three o'clock in the afternoon, that Adam, the first man, was created in the first week of creation. The day was a Friday.

It was on the twenty-fifth of March, we repeat again, at three o'clock in the afternoon, that Mary the Virgin said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done to me according to thy word" — at which moment, "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." The time was three o'clock. The day was a Friday.

No one can ever forget these days, or dates, or hours, or events, who truly loves God in eternity, the Word made flesh in time, and Mary, the Mother of God.

The Angel Gabriel's greetings to the Blessed Virgin Mary were three, and Our Lady's replies were, of course, three. Her first reply was a gesture of perplexity indicating, "What manner of greeting is this?" Her second reply was a question, "How shall this be done, since I know not man?" And her third reply was a consent, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done to me according to thy word."

Gabriel also informed Mary that, by a special providence of God, her cousin Elizabeth, a woman both sterile and too old to bear a child, was already six months with one, because no work was impossible with God.

Our Lady was fourteen years, six months and seventeen days when the Incarnation took place. It was, as we have said,



three o'clock on Friday afternoon, on March 25. It was in the first month of Mary's potential motherhood. It was in the very first month in which she moved from the state of girlhood into the cycle of womanhood and fertility. She became maternal and fruitful by the power of the Holy Ghost, and her Child was the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, taking to Himself a human nature from the one little mother of His choice.

It is very important for us to remember all these details with most reverential and respectful attention, if we truly love Mary, the Mother of God. "Blessed is the fruit of thy womb," Elizabeth was to say to her, and we continue to say to her in every Hail Mary of our life. And this greeting means, "Blessed is the first and only fruit of thy womb," which is Jesus.

It will be well for us once more to stop and pay loving honor in remembrance and in respect to the house in which God became man. It was the beautiful little house in the town of Nazareth, where Mary herself was conceived. It was the cottage of the Immaculate Conception, and of the Incarnation. No other house in the whole history of the world has ever been so honored, so sanctified, by what has occurred within its shelter — the conception of Mary and the Incarnation of God. In the year 1291, at the end of the last Crusade — when Jews and Turks were invading the town of Nazareth for the purpose of destroying this holy little house — it was miraculously taken off its foundation and carried through the air, to the country of Dalmatia, hundreds of miles away. As one enters this holy house, one sees inscribed on the walls, by way of warning and welcome: "Christian pilgrim, you have before your eyes the Holy House of Loreto, venerable throughout the world on account of the divine mysteries accomplished in it and the glorious miracles herein wrought. It was here the most holy Mary, Mother of God, was born, here that she was saluted by the Angel, here that the Eternal Word of God was made flesh." It was given a special feast day all for itself, on the tenth of December. ■



Carlton V. Phillips, Jr.

GUEST COLUMN UNLIKELY CONVERT, UNLIKELY EVANGELIST

a man of sorrows, and acquainted with infirmity...” (Isaias 53:3) , expressing His abject aloneness, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” His apostles, the men He chose personally to carry on His mission, have either betrayed Him, denied Him, or fled in terror. His suffering mother, along with Saint John the Evangelist and a handful of women, stand at the foot of the cross, suffering their own anguish. Yet Scripture records none of their words.

Suddenly, amidst the din of the jeering and the moans of the dying, a voice is heard, from a man also on a cross, the only words recorded in Scripture during our Lord’s passion that are spoken on His behalf, as recorded by St. Luke, “Neither dost thou fear God, seeing thou art under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the reward of our deeds: but this man has done no evil. And he said to Jesus: Lord, remember me, when thou shalt come into thy kingdom” (23:42).

Who was this evangelist? Who was this man, alone among the many thousands present, who recognized in the awful ugliness of the situation the beaten and bruised face of God Himself, and carried the message to his heedless colleague, also hanging on a cross?

We are told in Scripture that he was a thief; yet the writings of extra-biblical sources and the Church Fathers tell us that he was not merely a thief but a brigand, a highway robber, who, according to many sources was guilty, not just of petty thievery, but also of murder; a man who had spent his life preying on others. But what happened? Why the change? How and why did it dawn on him that the man crucified next to him was the Savior of the world? And what caused him to repent, speak out on Our Lord’s behalf, and enable him to request, despite his sinfulness, that he, a wretched robber being crucified after a life of crime, be permitted to enter heaven?

To begin with, the active cause of his conversion, as in every conversion, was that of divine grace. Jesus surely could have

prefaced His words to Dismas (similarly as He did with Peter) with the explanatory, “Blessed art thou, Dismas, for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father in heaven...” yet He did not.

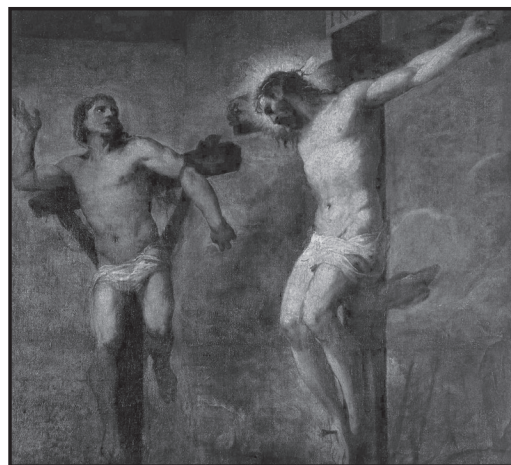
A lesson in theology was not necessary for this blunt spoken, uneducated man merely asking Jesus humbly to be remembered in His kingdom. Jesus simply grants his request with the words, “Amen I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

But why Dismas, and not the other thief; why, indeed, one person and not the other? Was there some instrumental or outward cause motivating him that was not at work in the other thief? What, besides grace, were other factors at work in this unlikeliest of converts? Why did this man, who had not, to our knowledge, witnessed any miracles, nor received an audible word from heaven as did Saul on the road to Damascus, nor spent years learning from Our Lord, as did the apostles, respond to the grace offered him as he did?

There are numerous differing opinions on this. One of these traditions, stemming from extra-biblical writings dating back to at least the third century and accepted as true by many of the Church Fathers, has it that, at the time of the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt, they were set upon by robbers, a common occurrence in the desert at that time. As the account goes, the Holy Family, attempting to cross the desert at night, came across a band of robbers. One of the robbers implored the other to let the travelers pass, and Our Lady, touched by this, never forgot how their lives were spared. In the words of a celebrated 18th century author, John of Cartagena, at the

time of the crucifixion, “Jesus and Mary, remembering the kindness with which Dismas had treated them at the time of their flight into Egypt, now determined to repay him, by leading him from the broad way of hell into the narrow path of salvation. Mary begged for him the grace of forgiveness, and Jesus bestowed it with a generosity worthy of Him who does not let even a glass of cold water go without its reward.” (Abbé Jean-Joseph Gaume, *Life of the Good Thief*, p 90)

The truth of this story is uncertain, but something did happen that caused this man to respond to the grace that was offered him. Both Saint Vincent Ferrer and Cornelius a Lapidate attribute his conversion to the shadow of Jesus falling upon him. Surely this is plausible, given the healing power of



Saint Peter's shadow as set forth in Acts Chapter 5; how much more powerful the shadow of Our Lord!

Another tradition has it that Jesus, on the Cross, turned to the west (where Dismas was) to cleanse and purify Rome so that He could transform that city into the center of His kingdom on earth. This is also said to be the reason the early Christians west of there would turn to the east for prayer, and that churches were designed so that the Mass would be celebrated facing to the east.

Whether any of the above theories, in and of itself, was the actual cause of Dismas' cooperation with the grace he received, is open to debate. What is not, however, is the fact that he did, indeed, change from a hard-bitten, ruthless, career criminal into the only man in history to be personally canonized by God Himself. He was the one man recorded in Scripture who actually sought to evangelize others during the passion of Our Lord. Further, he did so under the worst of circumstances, when it would seem that his own agony would be the only thing on his mind.

And yet, in another sense, Saint Dismas is more, far more than that, for Saint Dismas is all of us. He is every sinner who comes to the Cross with nothing to offer that Our Lord needs, but everything that He wants. In the words of the great Saint Athanasius, "O blessed Thief, who didst triumphantly show to all the sinners of the world the power of faith and the efficacy of a well made confession, and sincere repentance." And what faith! Saint Dismas called Jesus "Lord," not after seeing a miracle, but upon seeing Him in His ignominy, dying, and while in agony, forgiving His murderers. Yes, that was what cut Dismas to the heart: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

This unlikeliest of men should give hope to all, and should encourage us all to speak out in all humility, acknowledging our own sinfulness and confessing Christ to others in a way that will touch their heart and cause them to do the same. ■

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V. Let us pray for our pontiff, Pope Francis.

R. The Lord preserve him, and give him life, and make him to be blessed upon the earth, and deliver him not up to the will of his enemies (Roman Breviary).

Our Father. Hail Mary.

V. Let us pray.

R. Almighty and everlasting God, have mercy upon Thy servant, Francis, our Supreme Pontiff, and direct him, according to Thy loving kindness, in the way of eternal salvation; that, of thy gift, he may ever desire that which is pleasing unto Thee and may accomplish it with all his might. Through Christ our Lord. Amen (Roman Ritual).

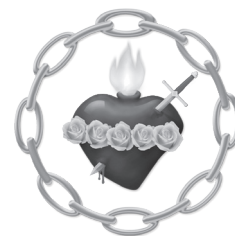
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Notes:

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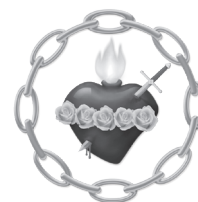
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