

THE SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY TRINITY

May 18, 2008 Cycle A

Opening prayer: *Father, you sent your Word to bring us truth and your Spirit to make us holy. Through them we come to know the mystery of your life. Help us to worship you, one God in three Persons, by proclaiming and living our faith in you. Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Sharing life: If you could ask God one question, what would it be?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The Easter Season ended with the Feast of Pentecost. Now we return to Ordinary Time. Each year at this time, Ordinary Time begins with two Solemnities: the Most Holy Trinity and the Body and Blood of Christ. On this Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, our readings give us some clues into the mysterious nature of God. In the first reading, God reveals himself to Moses as One who is faithful to his promises and rich in tenderness and compassion. In the second reading, Paul encourages the Corinthians to live in peace and love. The reading also contains a Trinitarian blessing. In the Gospel, John tells us that God has shown his love for us by sending his Son to save us all. All who believe in him will be saved.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Exodus 34:4-6, 8-9

Chapter 34 of Exodus is the story of the second giving of the Law (The Ten Commandments) after the people of Israel broke covenant with God by worshipping the golden calf. Moses is asked by God to bring a second set of blank stone tablets up the mountain. Another backdrop to this reading is that Moses had asked to see God face to face – a request that was denied. But God did allow Moses to experience a “little glimpse” of his nature. God reveals himself to Moses as One who is *merciful and gracious, slow to anger, rich in kindness and fidelity*. It will be very important for the Israelites (and us) to remember that God in his essence is filled with *compassion*. Moses responds by bowing down before such a kind and merciful God. Then Moses says: “*Boy, do we ever need a God like you! This stiff-necked people will need a lot of mercy. Please join us on our journey through the desert.*”

RESPONSORIAL PSALM: Daniel 3:52-56

These verses are a song of praise to God by the three virtuous young Jewish leaders in Babylon whom the King had thrown in a fiery furnace because of their refusal to worship a golden idol at his command. There is a contrast between their faithfulness to God and the infidelity of the Israelites who did worship the golden calf. More importantly the psalm is a good example of a song of praise to a God who saves his people. The three young men are protected by God in the burning furnace and sing his praises.

SECOND READING: 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

This brief reading was chosen for today’s solemnity because of its concluding verse, which contains a Trinitarian greeting. The reading begins with an exhortation to the contentious Corinthians to “mend their ways” and to live in peace and harmony with each other.

GOSPEL: John 3:16-18

These verses are taken from the end of a long discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus about rebirth through water and the Spirit. These well known verses summarize the very essence of the Good News. Commenting on this text, Patricia Sanchez writes, “This text encapsulates the very essence of the Good News. *First*, these words underscore the truth that the *initiative* for our salvation lies with God. “He gave his only Son.” *Second*, these verses bear witness to God’s *motivation* for all his salvific actions, namely, love: “God so loved...” *Third*, John made it clear that the *scope* of God’s loving and saving initiative was *universal*: “God so loved the world...” *Fourth*, the proclamation of the good news outlines the *purpose* of the Son’s mission: “God did not send the Son . . . to *condemn* the world, but that the world might be saved through him and may enjoy *eternal life*.” Our response to this offer of salvation will, however, determine our end – heaven (which begins here when we begin a relationship with God) or eternal condemnation.

In the Trinitarian experience, which is Christian existence, a loving *God* sends forth his *Son* to save sinners. By the power of the abiding *Spirit*, *believing* sinners continue to know both the saving power of the Son and the loving grace of the Father and to share with them, the present joy and future promise of eternal life.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse or image spoke to you and why?
2. Moses speaks about seeing the face of God. Who most reveals to you the face of God?
3. In the second reading, Paul encourages us to live in peace with one another. What helps and hinders people from living this message?
4. The gospel seems to indicate that those who fail to believe in Jesus will be condemned. Do you believe this?
5. How would you go about explaining the Christian belief in a God with a trinity of persons?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestion: This week contemplate the beautiful belief that we are human tabernacles of the Holy Trinity. At baptism, we were baptized into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the Most Holy Trinity.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for the grace to get rid of any destructive images of God that you may still be carrying around with you. ©

Lectionary Resource: For those who need to dig a little deeper into the Sunday readings, I suggest the book *Breaking Open the Lectionary* by Margaret Nutting Ralph, Paulist Press. \$20.

MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

May 25, 2008 A

Opening prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, we worship you living among us in the sacrament of your Body and Blood. May we offer to our Father in heaven a solemn pledge of undivided love. May we offer to our brothers and sisters a life poured out in loving service of that kingdom where you live with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen*

Sharing life: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: Each of today's readings illuminates some aspect of today's feast. Each reading points to the Eucharist as the heavenly bread that feeds us in life's journey.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14-16

This reading is intended as a reminder to the people of Israel of how God fed the people of Israel in the desert with manna – miraculous food, which Christians were later to see as a prefiguration of the Eucharist. In this sermon, Moses is seeking to remind his people that they are not to live on bread alone but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God. The author of this book, writing hundreds of years after the desert event, issues a strong reminder that just as Israel relied on manna for life in the desert, so the people now must continually depend on the Word of God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 147

Most likely, this psalm of praise is chosen for its reference to the wheat with which God fills his people.

SECOND READING: 1 Corinthians 10:16-17

In this epistle, Paul is writing to a community that is experiencing a lot of division. In this passage, he is using the Eucharist, which is the celebration of Christian unity, to appeal to the Corinthians to work for and maintain unity. The Eucharist unites us with Christ and with each other and commits believers to work for unity with Christ and with each other.

GOSPEL: John 6:51-58

These verses contain the climax of Jesus' 'Bread of Life' discourse, which announced a bold promise of eternal life for all who believe in him and partake of his presence in the eucharist. In unmistakable language, Jesus identifies himself with the elements of our eucharistic sacrifice, namely, the bread and wine. We feed on Jesus by believing or "taking in" his Word and acting on it, and by believing in and

"taking in" his divine presence in the bread and wine. Just as we and the substances we eat and drink become one, so Jesus and those who feed on him form an intimate union. The reading also implies that Jesus not merely visits those who feed on him, but he dwells there permanently. The reading concludes with a contrast between Jesus and the manna, which the Israelites received. Jesus, not the manna, is the bread that came, not from the sky but from the very being of God. Those who ate manna died; those who feed on Jesus will live forever.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you and why?
2. In the first reading, Moses exhorts his people to feed on the word of God. What keeps people from acting on this exhortation?
3. In the second reading, Paul tells us that participation in the eucharist implies a commitment to living a Christ-centered life. For you what is the biggest help and obstacle to doing this?
4. How has your understanding of the participation in eucharist changed or developed over the years?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestions: The eucharist calls us to be eucharist for others. Be attentive to how you can give and share life with others.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for the return to Mass of Catholics who rarely attend. Pray that we who do attend may be a good witness to what the Mass proclaims. ©

Special Note: For all who wish to have a step-by-step explanation of the Mass, check the Ascension Catholic Church website: www.ascensioncatholic.net. See *Catholic Beliefs & Practices* then click on Sacraments.

NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

June 1, 2008 A

Opening prayer: *Loving God, we gather in your name to listen to your word. We thank you for the grace that draws us to do this sacred task. May our lives be always informed and formed by your word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen*

Sharing life: How have you experienced God this past week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first reading and gospel reminds us of the respective consequences that will come to those who choose to follow or not follow God's word and will. For the next fifteen weeks, our second reading will be from Paul's letter to the Romans (with the exception of June 29th, Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul). In today's reading, Paul tells us that justification or salvation is a gift from God made possible through Christ's death and resurrection and received through faith and *not* through observance of the law. The theme of internal conversion ties all three readings together.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Deuteronomy 11:18, 26-28, 32

The long years of wandering in the desert are over. The Israelites are about to enter the Promised Land where they will encounter neighbors who believe in other gods. In these verses, Moses exhorts the Israelites to make sure that they remain faithful to their covenant with God by following his word. They must take the commandments into their hearts and souls. As an external expression of their interior conversion the Israelites are 'to wear the law on their wrists and let them be a pendant [something suspended] on their foreheads'. True holiness demands internal conversion. Then Moses sets before the people a "blessing and a curse". Following God's word will bring blessings. Disobeying God's word and following other gods will bring divine retribution.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 31

This psalm gives voice to the prayer of one undergoing trial and distress. Today's verses express the psalmist's unshakable faith in God as his 'rock of safety'.

SECOND READING: Romans 3:21-25, 28

In these verses, Paul stresses that salvation is not gained through good deeds but by placing our trust in God who saved us in and through Jesus' death and resurrection. In stating this, Paul is *not* saying that 'good works' are unimportant. It is just that we do not save ourselves. We do good works in *response* to God's goodness to us. True interior conversion expresses itself in good works.

GOSPEL: Matthew 7:21-27

This reading is the concluding verses of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (chs 5, 6, and 7). The reading begins with a judgment scene. God the Father is the judge and Jesus is an advocate. Those being judged will turn to Jesus to plead their case: "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord did we not prophesy in your name?'" Jesus' response emphasizes the importance of internal conversion. He says that it is not enough to keep company with Jesus and perform charismatic acts in his name. They must *act* with love and justice. Baptism and membership in a church will not be enough to save us. One must be making a sincere effort to follow God's will in all things. Jesus concludes his long Sermon on the Mount by using a theme common in wisdom literature: he offers the disciple two ways, the way of the wise (building one's life on God's word) and the way of the foolish (ignoring God's word).

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most?
2. In the first reading, Moses is giving advice to his spiritual children as they are about to leave the spiritual safety of the desert and enter a world with lots of temptations. What advice have you or would you offer children or young adults in general as they leave the spiritual safety net of their home?
3. On the one hand scripture and our church says that we cannot be saved by good works. On the other hand the scripture and the church states that faith without good works is dead (James 3:17).

Does the faith and good works issue confuse you?
Do you think that most Catholics tend to think that we are saved through our good deeds more than our faith in Christ?

4. What are some examples of how you or others can build their lives on sand?

5. What does the phrase 'internal conversion' mean to you?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one or more ways that you can act or respond to today's readings. Suggestions: Spend some time this week reflecting on what your life is built on.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for the grace of internal conversion

TENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME June 8th, 2008 Cycle A

Opening prayer: *Loving God, in our first reading today you castigate the people for worship that is shallow and insincere. Help us to worship you with sincerity of heart. May our prayers be backed up with good and loving deeds. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: If you had a million dollars to spend, how would you spend it?

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the first reading, *Hosea* tells us that what God wants from his people is not sacrifices, but a genuine and faithful love. In the second reading, *Paul* tells us that Abraham's faith in God should serve as a model for our faith in Christ. In the Gospel, *Jesus* shocks religious leaders by eating and drinking with sinners and calling one of them to be an apostle.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Hosea 6:3-6

The prophet Hosea, often called the 'prophet of God's love', lived and wrote in a time of enormous turmoil in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Today's verses are a part of a larger section in which the prophet castigates Israel for her infidelity to her covenant with God and calls for a sincere repentance and return to the Lord. Because the Assyrian King was threatening to take over the Northern Kingdom, the people cry out to God for help. Then God speaks. He is obviously frustrated with his disloyal people. "What can I do with you...? Your piety is like a morning cloud..." Then God clearly states what he wants of his people: "It is love that I desire, not sacrifice, knowledge and not holocausts." God is not interested in empty rituals or sacrifices. What he wants is a heart totally dedicated to him.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 50

This psalm echoes the theme of the first reading, which stresses the importance of love and praise over sacrifices.

SECOND READING: Romans 4:18-25

In this reading, Paul places before us Abraham as a wonderful example of faith. He prefigures Christian faith. Despite his (and Sarah's) old age, Abraham could still become a father, solely on the basis of God's promise. Because Abraham's faith did not waver, but found expression in gratitude to God, he was reckoned as just.

GOSPEL: Matthew 9:9-13

In *Living Word '05*, Fr. Duggan and Virginia Stillwell offer the following insightful commentary on today's gospel.

Today's Gospel captures as well as any section in Matthew the heart of Jesus' mission and ministry. It is well known that pious Jews felt revulsion toward fellow Jews who collaborated with the Romans in the collecting of taxes and who were themselves frequently little more than extortionists. Matthew the tax collector would have been an outcast among those with whom he lived, a figure of shame and reproach. Yet Jesus clearly saw more in him, and at what seems like their first encounter calls him to discipleship with the brief invitation, "Follow me." We miss in English the play on words in Greek, in which the name "Matthew" sounds quite similar to the word for "disciple." We are meant, in fact, to see in the story of Matthew's call an image of how all disciples of Jesus have been rescued from the alienation of sin and self-absorption.

What follows Matthew's positive response to Jesus' call ("He got up and followed him." [Matthew 9:9] is a Eucharistic scene: The Master sits at table for a fellowship meal, surrounded by tax collectors and sinners. It was this behavior as much as anything that Jesus preached, that earned for him the fierce anger of his opponents. In the culture of his time, Jesus' willingness to share a meal with unclean sinners would have been shocking and provocative. His defiant response to his critics, "I did not come to call the righteous but sinners." [Matthew 9:13] constituted a refutation of a "holiness code" that seemed to the Pharisees to have divine authority. Jesus counters that narrow

view by quoting from the prophet Hosea [today's first reading], reminding his opponents that God's priority is love and forgiveness, not mere ritual purity. Jesus reveals in this passage the compassionate face of God, a deity who prefers to reach out to sinners with healing mercy rather than with judgment and condemnation.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you and why?

? If so, how did you resolve the situation?

3. Jesus invites public and known sinners to dine with him. If Jesus did this in our day, would you be scandalized and outraged? After all, we live in a time when many Catholics want certain 'public

sinners' e.g. pro-choice politicians to be banned from receiving the eucharist.

2. Have you ever been torn between obedience to the law and what you considered "the loving thing to do"? If so, how did you resolve the situation?

3. Jesus invites public and known sinners to dine with him. If Jesus did this in our day, would you be scandalized and outraged? After all, we live in a time when many Catholics want certain 'public

4. Whom would you feel uncomfortable inviting to your table?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestion: Name an individual or group that you do not want to associate with. Begin a conversation with Jesus about these folks and see where it takes you.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for a more sincere commitment to the Lord. Pray for the conversion of hardened sinners. ©

ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME June 15, 2008 Cycle A

Opening prayer: *God of the Covenant, you call us to walk in your ways. Shepherd us as the people of your flock. Bless us as we gather to share your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: God's initiative on our regard is one theme running through all three readings. In the first reading, God takes the initiative in electing to enter into a covenant relationship with Israel. In the second reading, God through Jesus reaches out to sinners while they are still in their sin. In the Gospel, Jesus the Good Shepherd reaches out to his lost sheep.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Exodus 19:2-6

Israel has arrived at the foot of Mt. Sinai, the place where they will enter into a solemn covenant with God. God speaks to the people through Moses, reminding them of how special they are to him and how he has cared for them thus far – carrying them as an eagle carries her little ones. Of all the nations in the world, they will become his “special possession”, bonded to him by a special covenant. They will be a priestly people and their priestliness will be manifested in *fidelity to the law* and in *worship*.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 100

This joyous psalm echoes the gospel emphasis on Jesus as the Shepherd of his flock.

SECOND READING: Romans 5:1-6

In this letter, Paul's central teaching is that salvation comes to us as a *gift* and not because of our efforts. It is our faith in Jesus and not our observance of the rules that puts us in touch with God's mercy. God's love for us is proven in the sacrifice of Jesus. We did nothing to deserve such an act of love. Our response is to graciously receive God's gift of love and to live loving lives.

GOSPEL: Matthew 9:36 – 10:8

The first verses of this Gospel speak of Jesus' compassion for a leaderless flock. Then Jesus calls his twelve Apostles and sends them on a mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Commenting on these verses, Patricia Sanchez writes:

“By naming the Apostles and sending them off to extend his mission of shepherding, healing and

proclaiming the Good News of God's reign, Jesus makes clear that the authority of leading God's people has been transferred. Whereas formerly the scribes, chief priests and Pharisees were the recognized leaders, charged with the responsibility of shepherding the people, these had failed as did so many of Israel's rulers before them.”

Until now, Jesus had been God's sole missionary, now he calls twelve men and grants them a share in his mission – to heal as he has healed. Later this healing mission will be complemented by a teaching element. “Teach” and “Heal” are two big mandates of Matthew's Gospel. In these verses, Matthew emphasizes Jesus' power over demons and sickness. At this point, the Apostles receive no teaching mission since their instruction is still incomplete. Also, at this point during Jesus' earthly life, their mission is just to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. After the resurrection, the mission to the Gentiles will be inaugurated. Finally, they are told to give freely what they have freely received.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you and why?
2. The first reading speaks beautifully of God's affection for Israel. What helps you to believe that you too are the special object of God's affection?
3. How easy or hard is it for you to believe that God's unconditional love for us is in no way diminished by our sins, even terrible sins?
4. What is the best way for the church to go about getting more laborers into the harvest?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on or respond to today's readings. Suggestion: By baptism you are a missionary of Jesus' message and love in your home and marketplace. Seek to be more faithful to that call this week.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESION.

Especially pray for the grace to not allow the worries and preoccupations of the world to distract you from your primary mission and work – to be an evangelizer of Christ's values in your environments. Pray that all whom Jesus is calling to the priesthood and religious life will hear and answer his call. ©

TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

June 22, 2008 Cycle A

Opening prayer: *Loving God, thank you for gathering us together to share your Word and our lives. When fear, betrayal and threats of any kind enter across our path, help us to turn to you and believe that with your help we can fight any battle. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: What is your greatest fear at this time in your life?

Facilitator reads focus statement: *Trust God in times of fear* is a thread that ties all three readings together. In the first reading, people are trying to intimidate Jeremiah. He is able to withstand their threats because of his trust in God. *“God is with me as my mighty champion.”* In the Gospel, Jesus is preparing his disciples for the hostile reactions for preaching his message. In the second reading, Paul celebrates salvation in Christ as a gift which empowers us to deal with fear and free us from the only things that truly should make us fearful, namely, sin, death, separation from God.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Jeremiah 20:10-13

Jeremiah has been often called a “reluctant” prophet because he didn’t want the ministry of being God’s prophet. When God called Jeremiah, he said he wasn’t much of a talker. But once he said “yes” to God’s call, he spoke what he felt God wanted him to say, even if his message enraged religious and civil leaders and his own peers. Frequently, he had to call the leaders and people to repentance of infidelity to their covenant with God.

Today’s reading is an excerpt from what is called “the confessions of Jeremiah.” (Jeremiah’s “confessions” concerned the personal anguish he experienced in his soul e.g. “Why is God allowing all this bad stuff to happen to me?”) Jeremiah is being persecuted for his unwelcome words. The people are saying: “Denounce, let us denounce him.” We can almost feel Jeremiah’s sense of rejection. But his trust is in God, his mighty champion. In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples not to let fear intimidate them and to place their trust in God. Jeremiah is a wonderful example of someone who acts on this word of Jesus. Also, notice how Jeremiah has no problem asking God to avenge his persecutors, “Let me witness the vengeance you take on them.”

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 69

This is a psalm of lament used during a worship service by an individual undergoing a time of personal suffering. It clearly echoes Jeremiah’s experience of rejection.

SECOND READING: Romans 5:12-15

The opening verse of this reading. “Through one man sin entered the world. . .” is the basis of the Catholic Church’s doctrine on original sin as taught by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century.

In this part of Romans, Paul contrasts Adam, the cause of sin to Christ, the cause of grace. The universality of sin springs from the disobedience of Adam. Paul compares this to the superabundance of grace that flows from Christ.

Adam’s sin unleashed as it were a ‘sin force’ into the world which all of us picked up at our origin. Because of Adam’s sin and because of the sin present in our world and in our family tree all of us are born flawed and with a tendency towards sin. This belief is concretized for us as we watch children develop the imperfections of their parents and society and as we observe the basic selfishness in children and adults

GOSPEL: Matthew 10:26-33

Jesus was well aware of the many challenges that would face all who choose to follow him in faith and preach in his name. A little earlier he said: “I am sending you like sheep among wolves.” (Matt. 10:16) In this gospel, Jesus shares an exhortation that would be recalled in the future when the church faced persecution. *“Fear no one. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.”*

In order to underline his message to “not be afraid”, Jesus uses two images to speak of God’s care for

each of us. He says: "If God cares for sparrows (regarded as the least of all animals) and if God numbers even the hairs of our head, how much more will he care for us who are more than many sparrows?" Then he adds a solemn warning: "... *whoever denies him before others will be denied by his heavenly Father.*" Finally, the verse: "*Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known.*" The thing hidden is probably a reference to the teaching of Jesus. In time, his disciples would proclaim from the housetops what was previously whispered.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you and why?
2. Can you recall a time or experience when God was with you like a 'mighty champion'?
3. Have you ever thought of your enemies as God's enemies? Do you still think that way?
4. How much do you explain the doctrine of original sin to someone not familiar with the belief?
5. IN the Gospel, Jesus is seeking to help the disciples deal with the fear that might hinder them from being fearless like Jeremiah. What fear(s) hinder you from being a better Christian?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's reading. Suggestion: Be aware of where fear rules in your life and seek to combat it with courage and trust in God.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for the grace to be strong in the face of the fears that seek to intimidate you and steal your joy. ©

THE SOLEMNITY OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL

June 29, 2008 A

Opening prayer: Loving God, we gather today to prepare ourselves to celebrate the solemn feast of Sts. Peter and Paul. Both of these pillars of our church proclaimed the gospel of Jesus with deep faith and without fear. Strengthen us with this same faith that we may fearlessly witness to your gospel values by word and deed. This we pray through Christ, our Lord, Amen.

Sharing Life: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul honors two great saints who, between them, represent the Church's mission to both Jews (Peter's leadership was exercised from the Jerusalem church) and Gentiles (Paul is known as the "apostle to the Gentiles"). Saint Peter, who is called by Jesus "rock," and who is revered by Catholics as the first Pope, enjoys first place among the apostles and has a profound significance for the Church. St. Paul is likewise a towering figure, whose theological genius, evangelical fervor, and tireless pastoral ministry were so instrumental in the founding of the Christian religion. When we honor Peter and Paul, in truth we honor the Church as well, for their contributions have forever marked the faith and life of God's people.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Acts 12:1-11

This reading tells the story of Peter's dramatic escape from prison. The way Luke describes Peter's security was intended to accentuate the divine element in his release. He was guarded by, "four squads of four soldiers". He was made to sleep between two soldiers and fastened with double chains. Suddenly, through the intervention of an angel, Peter effortlessly walks free. Notice also, how Luke mentions the community's 'fervent prayer to God' on behalf of Peter.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 34

This psalm celebrates a faith response suitable to the crisis narrated in the first reading.

SECOND READING: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18

In this letter, Paul is writing to his friend and protégé Timothy, while imprisoned in Rome. He is not sure he will win his case and this causes him to reflect on his life. Paul uses three colorful metaphors to speak about his life and the rigors of his discipleship. *First*, Paul, the great Apostle, compares the total gift of himself in God's service to a libation poured out in honor of the one true God. *Second*, Paul speaks of his possible imminent death as a time of 'departure'. The Greek word *analysis* for departure was a word used to speak about the unyoking of an animal from a plow. For Paul, death would unyoke him from the burdens of this life and free him to enjoy his eternal rest. *Third*, Paul uses athletic terms to speak of his life and death. Like a good athlete, Paul has "fought the good fight and finished the race". Satisfied that he has

played the "game of good discipleship" well, Paul feels confidence that the eternal rest awaits him and all those who are faithful to their covenant with Christ. Paul's epitaph might read: "*Paul, faithful servant of the Lord Jesus.*"

GOSPEL: Matthew 16:13-19

This gospel is frequently called Peter's confession of faith the true identity of Jesus. When asked the question concerning: "Who do *you* say that I am"?' Peter answers: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." In answering thus, Peter is reminded that his response was sheer grace or divinely prompted. In response to Peter's confession, Jesus confers on him a new title "Rock" on which Jesus will build his church. And the "gates of the netherworld" (i.e., the arena of sin, evil and death) will not prevail or destroy the new community Jesus is founding to continue his work. Jesus also gives to Peter a special teaching role and authority: "whatever he binds on earth will be held bound and whatever he loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." This means in the context of today's celebration, the central importance of Peter's ability to proclaim the true identity of Jesus stands out as the key element of the passage. Peter is the one who names Jesus the Messiah, and is thus named by him "the rock" on which he will build his Church.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, idea or image spoke to you most in the readings? Why?
2. What are your thoughts/feelings about St. Peter?

3. What are your thoughts/feelings about St. Paul?

4. Who are the pillars of our church today?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's scriptures.
Suggestion: Pray for the Pope, bishops and missionaries.

**CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION
AND INTERCESSION ©**

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 6, 2008 A

Opening prayer: *Jesus, meek and humble of heart, you invite us to come to you when we are weary and find life burdensome. You do not promise to remove our burdens, but you do promise to help us carry them and to give us refreshment when we are tired. Be with us today as we share your Word. Fill us with your wisdom so that we may know the message you have for us. Amen.*

Sharing of life: As we approach the Fourth of July, what do you best love about our country?

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the first reading, Zechariah paints a picture of a gentle, meek and peaceful Messiah. This image is fulfilled in the portrayal of Jesus in the Gospel, where Jesus describes himself as meek and humble of heart. In the second reading, Paul calls the Romans to live in the spirit of Jesus.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Zechariah 9:9-10

These verses are chosen for this Sunday because they describe a meek and humble Messiah. Jesus is meek and humble like the figure described in this reading – no pomp and majesty. The meek donkey is contrasted to the warrior horse, which is a symbol of war. The reason why Zion is to shout for joy is because a King is arriving in the city, not as a mighty conquering warrior but as a just savior who will banish war and institute peace.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 145

This psalm extols God's kindness and compassion as well as his outreach to the lowly and forgotten.

SECOND READING: Romans 8:9, 11-13

Paul continues his discussion on baptism. Living out one's baptism means that one will live in the spirit of Jesus as opposed to "living in the flesh". To live "life in the flesh" is to live life independent of God. One leads a self-sufficient, self-reliant life without any reference to God. "Life in the spirit" describes a person who uses personal freedom to tune into and respond to the leadings of the Holy Spirit. One's life is centered on God and his values. Life in the flesh leads to death, and life in the spirit leads to eternal life.

GOSPEL: Matthew 11:25-30

This gospel begins with a shout of joy. Jesus is *not* rejoicing that the so called 'wise and learned' are not recognizing his true identity. He is filled with joy that the 'little one', those with humble and open hearts are "getting it". A 'know-it-all' attitude is a huge block to hinder us from receiving God's self revelation.

Then Jesus speaks about the special and unique relationship that exists between him and his Father.

It is really a statement about the divinity of Christ. In Jesus we find the Wisdom of God. He reveals the mind and heart of God to us.

The passage ends with Jesus' beautiful invitation for the 'heavy burdened' to come to him. The Pharisees and Scribes had made the Law of Moses a heavy burden by adding to it a multitude of legalisms. On another level, faith in Christ helps all of us to deal with the burdens of life.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you and why?
2. What makes you 'shout for joy'?
3. What helps you to live life in the spirit of Jesus?
4. It might appear from the Gospel, that God does not reveal himself to everyone. What do you believe about this?
5. How can we lighten each others burdens?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestions: Tackle with prayer and effort one "flesh attitude" that hinders your spiritual growth. Give your burdens to Christ. Reach out to someone who is carrying a heavy burden.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

If someone in the group is carrying a heavy burden at this time, perhaps the group can gather around that person and pray over them. Pray for the grace to be meek and humble of heart and do what you can to lighten the burden of someone who is carrying a heavy load. ©