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Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and we shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth. Let us pray. O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit instructs the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever rejoice in his consolations. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Well, Good afternoon. How are you? It is really beautiful outside.

This is the faith talk. We often use the word “faith” in our religion, but we don't often distinguish what it means. It actually means many different things. The first thing it doesn't mean is religion itself. **Religion isn't necessarily faith.** Religion has to do with our contact with the Almighty, with the Transcendent, with the Holy Other, with what is beyond, with the Ground of our Being, however you want to talk about this. The real significant questions and mysteries of life—that's religion. For religion to be worthwhile, for it to work, for it to be effective, it has to be able to put people in touch.

Now Judaism is a very effective religion. Catholicism is a very effective religion. Protestantism—there are various forms of Protestant Religions—these are all distinct. But that's not what we are talking about.

We are talking about faith. **Faith is a gift and faith is a response.** What's it a response to? It's a response **to an invitation.** Now actually if we go back to the Old Testament, we see very clearly that this basic structure, if you want to call it that, between invitation and response is really at the basis of the whole idea of the Bible. The Bible's idea is that **God is addressing his creation.** I say “his” only because we want to make **God personal.** God is no more a he than a she, but God is not an “it,” so we simply personalize it by saying “he.” That's our tradition. It doesn't have anything to do with masculinity.

So God addresses the creation because **God is one who speaks.** Now this is not common belief in all religions. In India, for example, you have Upanishads and Vedas, and so on, that talk about God who is silent—the God who is silent. So we shouldn't take it for granted that everybody has always known that God speaks. No, that is a particular belief that is found among the people who have given us the Bible: the ancient tribes of Israel, who were originally not actually united by blood. The tribes of Israel were tribes who federated themselves voluntarily at a certain point in history. They all go back to the patriarch Abraham and Sarah. We call them the patriarchs, maybe. They are the beginning of this dialogue. So that is very essential to understand what faith is. **Abraham responded favorably to this dialogue.** That shows you **what faith is like.** It's a favorable response. **It's a trusting response to an invitation from God.**

Now we don't see this in everybody. For example, Abraham had a brother, Lot. You remember Lot, if you have heard this story about Abraham and Lot. Well, the problem was that they grew so rich that they had so many livestock; they were so wealthy, they didn't have enough room for all their wealth in the place they were living, and so they decided to separate. Abraham said, "Lot, you can have whatever you want." Lot looked up and he saw this lush garden, this lush valley, and he said, "That's what I want." Abraham said, "Go, take it." Now that didn't remain lush forever, did it? The two cities in that area were called Sodom and Gomorrah. Eventually, an earthquake destroyed that area, and that entire area turned into a salt flat, which it is today—burned out, hasn't supported life for thousands of years. So there is a good lesson there. **What looks good isn't always good, and won't always stay good.** But the point is Abraham's response was a response of generosity, and that's part of faith. **Faith is generosity. Faith is givingness. Faith is not holding on, but faith is letting go.**

Now even before that time Abraham again showed us what faith is like because God said to Abraham, "Abraham, I want you to offer to me your greatest gift, your greatest possession, which is your son, Isaac. Now modern people hear this and think, oh, how awful; what a terrible thing—human sacrifice. Well, of course, the Bible does forbid human sacrifice, but it had been practiced and was practiced by many people in the ancient world. The point that the story is making is this: **Abraham looked at God's request and he saw that it was toughly just.** Why? Because **justice is about rendering to others what they have a right to, and he recognized God had a right to everything because God is God!** Everything that is really depends on God. He recognized that God's request was just, so he decided to go along with this. You know the story: that he prepared an altar, and he prepared the wood for the fire. Then an angel came to him and said, "No, just take that ram in the bushes."

There is a fabulous painting in Italy, in Rome, in a museum there; and it's one of the most moving I have ever seen. This shows Abraham as an older man, and his whole face is full of terrific distress and anxiety. He has this knife in his hand, and his son is lying there very peacefully. Then there is an angel; the angel's wings take up the whole canvas. The angel's one finger touches Abraham on his shoulder; the other finger points to the ram that is caught in the bush on the side of the canvas. It is a very powerful picture. This is a story of Abraham's willingness to give to God what is God's. So it is faith, but it's also justice. St. Paul later will say, "And Abraham's act of faith was an act of justice"—or "rendered him just."

These ideas are all connected: faith, justice, righteousness—another word for justice. **Righteousness literally means being in the right relation with God,** but being in right relation with God means **giving God what God is due. This is related to obedience and loyalty and most of all trust,** because how could Abraham have done anything if he didn't trust? All of this is the **beginning of the story of faith.**

What the Bible makes very clear is faith is not what the story that proceeds is really about. **It's really a lot about religion. It's about people wanting to have some relationship with God and creating rules and laws and ways and rituals—none of**

which are bad, necessarily, but which, in the long run, simply **don't deliver what faith delivers.**

The Christian theologian that really accentuates this whole story is St. Paul. St. Paul is going to go on about how he himself was a very religious man. He was a man of extreme, fanatical, devotion to the law. And the law doesn't simply mean the Law in the Old Testament. It means a whole tradition of legal teachings that later on became the Talmud. Now the Talmud itself really wasn't even written down until the second or third century of the Christian era, the so-called "Common Era," now they say. But that idea was at the time of Christ. There was this very **strong tradition, and it had a lot to do with directing people's lives.**

Now the part of it that was about what you were supposed to do is called *Halakhah*. *Halakhah* means walking. *Halak* means "to walk." So it told you how many steps to take on the Sabbath, what you can do—I am exaggerating a little bit now—how many shekels you can carry in your pocket on the Sabbath. Since you are not supposed to work, you are not supposed to conduct business. If you are not supposed to conduct business, well, you can't have money or not much, etc. You get the picture.

Now this became very significant because **Jesus wanted to express the heart of the Father** by touching the sick, the infirmed, the paralytic, the leper. He wanted to cleanse the leper, bring the leper back into the community. He wanted to raise up the crippled, the paralyzed. He wanted to give sight to the blind. If you ever notice—read the New Testament with this in mind—how often does he do this on the Sabbath? Well, the answer is often, if not always! Why? Because he took six days off and then just worked on the Sabbath? Sometimes I think that! But really I think it's a different reason—I never read this in any theology—but I think there is a very good reason for this. I think he is trying to tell his co-religionists that **their idea of the Sabbath was really off a little bit**, because their idea was God worked for six days—that's the story—and he rested on the seventh. That means: I'm done; I'm finished. And it says that in the Bible. "And God said, 'And it is finished.'" And Jesus says, "Oh, no, not quite. It's not finished. As long as people are still suffering, as long as people are sick, as long as people are ignorant, as long as people are in need, I have really not finished." So **Jesus now is going to reveal something new**, but guess who doesn't want to hear about this? People who have religion. So sometimes faith and religion are almost opposites. **Sometimes religion actually stops people from the openness to revelation, which faith is a response to.** So we have to keep that in mind.

Now faith is both communal, and it is also personal. Sometimes these clash in a similar way to faith and religion clashing, because in a true sense we could say there is a Catholic Faith, that is, there is a communal response to God in Christ, which our Church as an historical institution that goes back two thousand years has embodied. So that's true—right? But then faith is also personal. Too often some people think—well, they don't think this way, but it looks like they think this way—"Well, I can ride on the coattails of my church. I don't have to come to personal faith. I don't have to think about

this stuff. **I'll just go along with the Church.**" Well, **this is not really being personally responsible.**

In fact, there are all kinds of awful sayings that have been developed through the years. One is *ecclesia supplet*. It means "the Church supplies." This is thrown around. For example, if people bring a baby to the church for Baptism, and Baptism is the sacrament of faith, and the family doesn't have any faith, where does the child ever get any faith? And people say, "Oh, *ecclesia supplet*"—the Church supplies it. Well, how? How is the Church supposed to supply it? It might supply it if the family were to associate closely with the Church, but that's unlikely if they don't have faith themselves. So we have to be very careful about such phrases because it then reduces sacraments to magic. So faith is communal, but it's also personal. Part of a weekend like this is to help you **enter more deeply, in a personal way, into this gift of faith, into this openness of faith.**

One of the ways we like to think about revelation is the word "disclosure." Disclosure—it's self-disclosure. **When God reveals God, it's self-disclosure.** Now we understand that God was revealing himself to Abraham, and Abraham was responding. We also understand that God revealed himself to Moses in a very particular way and in a verbal way—in a verbal way—when he said, "**I AM WHO AM.**" Now I don't want to go into that at this very moment: I AM WHO AM. But if you look in the fourth gospel, Jesus is always saying, "I am. I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life." Well, who is speaking? God—the one who said, "I AM WHO AM"; that's who is speaking. It isn't Jesus, the human form. Technically see, Jesus is not a human person; he is God in human flesh in a complete embodiment. Now that's a technical, theological point of view. I don't want to get into it, but the point is throughout the three gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when Jesus is speaking, his human will is speaking. But **in the fourth gospel very often it isn't his human will; it's God speaking: "I am the way. I am the truth."**

So **Jesus' very presence on earth is a disclosure of God.** As the theology of the Church developed, what we have really come to is this view that what we call the Word of God, what we call the Son of God, what we call the divine Logos—maybe you heard that word; it really means word; it's a Greek word for "word"—what that is, is God's own knowledge of God. **God's knowledge of God is what became flesh in the incarnation of Jesus Christ,** and that's why he is the disclosure of God, the revelation of God. **The only way to respond to Jesus is with faith.** If we reject faith, we are rejecting God's disclosure.

Now people do that sometimes unknowingly. For example, Jesus says, "Those who blaspheme the Son of Man will be forgiven, but those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit will not be." What this means is very simply this: people might in their own communal, religious faith, so to speak, or belief system might believe Jesus is a fraud, and so say, "That man is a fraud." That's blaspheming the Son of Man. But if they really believe it, that's forgivable. But **the Holy Spirit is the one who really reveals to us.** He is the teacher. Jesus says, "Call no man rabbi. You have only one teacher." The Holy Spirit is our teacher. When we really understand something, then we must accept it. **When we**

really know God is speaking to us, that we must accept. You understand? That's faith in the most intimate sense.

Now Jesus says about faith in him: **"Fear is useless; what is needed is trust."** This is one of the many ways in which he is going to differ from his coreligionists, who are after all very capable of belief, but not faith in his sense—not faith in responding to him, but belief, yes. Everyone has beliefs. Their beliefs had to do with the fear of God. Fear—fear was very important. Why do we keep the Law? Well, we better because if we don't, we will be in big trouble with God. God will punish us. That's the whole idea of Law. Law is sanctioned by punishment. The punishment could be in all kinds of ways; it could come in many forms. Jesus says, "Fear is useless—fear is useless—what is needed is trust." Now you can understand why **if men really believed in the Law, and really believed in everything they had been taught, and Jesus says these things, they would have to be very upset!** In their own way their beliefs clash with his. Their beliefs clash with his teaching. So we have to keep in mind that his opponents were well-meaning and sincere. They were well-meaning and sincere, for the most part.

St. Paul himself was a terrible persecutor of Christ until God intervened in a very powerful way on the road to Damascus. But even St. Paul later wonders, well, how come God didn't give this same light to everybody? But he didn't, and he doesn't. And why? I don't know, and you don't know—and nobody does, and don't try to figure it out because it's impossible. God's ways are not our ways! **Some people are called to walk in a deep faith with Christ, and some people apparently aren't.** If you look at the end of Mark's gospel, it says to announce the gospel to everybody. Everyone needs to accept it. Well, in some way or another, but there are lots of different ways. **Some people will accept the gospel in an anonymous way.** Jesus says, "Well, I was hungry, and you gave me food." And they say, "But when did we see you hungry?" "Well, you see, you didn't know it was me, but it was." That's about as close as a lot of people ever get to God, to be honest. **Others are called to a much deeper walk, to know God in daily life, to recognize him in the breaking of the bread, to witness to him.** There are many ways of witnessing. Don't think of only dying, shedding your blood. That's one kind of witness—that's good, but there are many kinds of witness. Pope John Paul was a great witness. Of course, his office enabled him to become very well-known. There are many ways in which people can witness. Witness is an expression of faith. It's saying yes to God.

Now St. Paul says in Romans, Chapter 8: "All things work out for the good for those who trust in God." So that's something we have to keep in mind. And that's what we are trusting. **We are trusting that no matter what happens, things will all work out.** It's not a deal. It's not like "I have such a deal for you. If you do this, then this is what is going to happen." In fact, that's the very nature of law. That is not faith. There is no this and that. It's not if-then. No if-then, and whenever you hear people say that, "Oh, the Blessed Mother said, 'If you do this, then'"—forget it! That has nothing to do with faith in Christ. That is something someone made up. That someone could be the devil, for all I know, but it isn't from Christ! **If-then is not from Christ.** Christ is this: you trust in me, everything will work out. I'm not saying you are not going to get cancer. I'm not promising you a rose garden. I'm not saying your husband isn't going to leave you. I'm

not saying your child isn't going to die very early. All these things could and do happen to faithful people, but it will all work out—it will all work out! That's what trust means. That's faith in Christ—in Jesus' sense of the word.

God unites us to himself in spite of our own human nature. Our human nature is just full of potential, but actually it isn't that great. I mean, if you look at the history of the world, oh, yes, there are some great paragons of virtue. However, proportionately speaking, percentagewise they are not too many. Is that not true? But God doesn't love the creation because of its virtue. God's whole movement toward creation is not one of approval or reward for life well lived. No, **God's interest and concern is for what he has started.** What he has started, of course, he has imbued with free-will, and so **he is not going to force it.** God is not a god of force. "A bruised reed he will not break; a smoldering wick he does not quench." That's a description in Isaiah of the coming Messiah, but it describes God's nature. God doesn't push. God doesn't shove. God is extremely polite. But God is very concerned and, in fact, anxious for this creation that he has begun and is **going so astray because it doesn't recognize what the offer is.** What did Jesus say to the Samaritan woman? "If you only knew who is asking you for a drink of water, you would have asked him and he would give you living water." Well, what's living water? It means a living experience of God. But she didn't know. People don't know. People don't know what is being offered, **so they don't accept it.**

So St. Paul asks this question; this is a rhetorical question: "Who will separate us from the love of God?" The answer is no one can—**no one and nothing can separate us from the love of God, because the love of God is more powerful than anything else, which is what is demonstrated on the cross.** The cross demonstrates the power of divine love. Now people say, "If he were the Son of God, he could come down from the cross right now." That's the wrong kind of power. That's not God's power. God's power is love, the power of love. The power of love sustains Jesus on the cross.

In the Book of Genesis, of course, which is about the beginning of everything, you have the story of Adam and Eve. Those are very powerful metaphorical stories. One of the points is when the serpent tells Eve, "Oh, you can't trust God. He knows that if you disobey him and eat from that tree," which is not a tree of apples; it's a tree of knowledge, knowledge of good and evil, "if you eat that fruit, you will be equal to God. You will know good and evil." Another way of saying, if you just decide for yourself what is good and evil, you will be equal to God. And Eve thinks, oh, yeah, hey, now. So that's a **misunderstanding of what it means to be equal.**

Actually God's plan is for us to be equal. But in order to be equal to God, we have to be able to love as God loves. **Equality in love is God's plan. The whole idea of salvation is divinizing the creation, making the creation divine. We are the only part that can actually receive this divine grace and receive this elevation. But through us actually the entire creation becomes redeemed.** I don't know if that has ever made sense to you, but a lot of the condition of the world has everything to do with, really, how we are. **We decide the condition of the world.** The world isn't the same for any two people. You should be able to tell this even in the sense that you have different moods.

On a day when your moods are very high, things look much better; the world looks better; life looks better. On days when your moods are very low and your energy is very low, life looks much more difficult. What are you looking at? It's the same life; it's the same world. You are different. **So as we become open to the grace of God and as we become divinized, then the entire creation becomes divinized and conscious of itself through us.** So Paul goes on: "Neither death nor life, not the heights or depths"—those are astrological terms—"can separate us from God."

Now it's very important to realize that the unity that we speak of is fundamental. Whether we like it or not, there is only one Being, and that's God. That's the meaning of the Prologue of the fourth gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, the Word was God. Nothing came into being apart from the Word." Nothing came into being apart from the Word! There is nothing. **Nothing can exist apart from the Word. So there is only one Being: God.** Everything else is God's: created by God, sustained by God at every second. All time and space is a creation of God. God doesn't live in time or space, except through his Son. **Time and space itself are the dimension of creation. That's the way God creates. So this unity is fundamental.**

Now that means that, in fact, all of creation is like a vine, and all of us are individual branches. Now the point of the Church is to become a branch consciously. We are anyway. That's the only way anything can exist. But as members of the Church, as believers, members of the body of Christ, **we consciously become branches, so that our identity then is not centered on ourselves. Our identity starts being centered on God. This is where transformation comes in,** and this is a little bit beyond this talk, so I am not going to go more into that area.

But it all begins with faith. **Faith is the door to this sort of transformation, whereby we become a new person and, therefore, think differently about who we are** and feel differently about who we are because we are different. But our difference is a matter of our awareness. We are aware that we are different. We have always been nothing but dependent upon God, and we cannot be independent. It's only because we have eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that we imagine that we can be independent of God. We have made ourselves rivals of God, which is what sin is. We made ourselves rivals, but **we are not created to be rivals. We are created to be branches** on this vine. Or as St. Paul says, "**members of a body.**" Members being articles: fingers, toes, parts.

In this way **faith brings about a new vision.** So that's another. Faith involves trust and faith involves vision. To have faith you have to have a new vision of who you are, what the world is, who God is—all that. It's all included in faith. Faith, because it is a result of saving grace, effects changes in our relation with God. The first of which is, it makes us just. **It puts us in a new relationship with God: it makes us just,** as Abraham was just because he was willing to give to God what God deserved.

Now this happens for us, in a sense. It is **Christ** who has become human to reconcile all things in himself. So he **in his humanity reconciles all of humanity to the Father,**

and we come to him and through him we become just—because of him, not because of what we do! So the justification is really a gift that we receive in faith because we cling to him and believe in him and trust in him and see through his eyes, accept his vision for ourselves.

This is not the result of Law. St. Paul goes on and on about this. Read Romans. Sometime this weekend maybe read all of Romans. It's in no way a result of Law. Law is what we do. It's not that the Law wasn't good. St. Paul says it was very fine, but it never produced these effects. Incidentally, the difference between reconciliation and forgiveness is forgiveness is a one-way street: I can forgive you, and you can care less. But reconciliation is a two-way street. **When humanity was reconciled to God in Christ it means there was a mutuality of acceptance.** God was always forgiving. God's nature doesn't change. God always forgives. But there was no mutuality and no ability to receive this until Christ. **He has made it possible to receive this reconciliation.** He has made God's communication a two-way street; he returns to God; he responds to God.

Now in our life of faith we really do need to pray. It is very important that we don't imagine everything is now taken for granted. Oddly, I get this feeling from certain Evangelical preachers. It's like: okay, I'm saved! Well, that's really, I think, premature. Why? **Salvation in the Bible is the end result. So faith leads to hope; hope leads to love; in love we share in God's saving grace, and we hope for the fulfillment of divine promises.** But can we say, "We are saved"? I wouldn't. I would avoid that expression. Look at the First Eucharistic Prayer, which is a very ancient prayer. It says, "And count us among those you have chosen." So we pray for being counted among the chosen; we don't assume we are! Faith is not a matter of assumption. Faith is a matter of trust—confidence, but not assumption. So we have to be careful that we don't have a phony faith. Jesus says, "Ask, and you shall receive; seek, and you shall find; knock, the door shall be opened." So **we pray with faith and confidence that we will receive, but we keep asking. We don't presume that we have received everything** and now it's all past-perfect, or present-perfect, or whatever the proper word is.

God's offer really is God's own Being and life, eternal life, eternal destiny, divinity, becoming God! **Baptism is our entrance into Christ,** and Baptism presupposes faith. Baptism also is **dying to the "old self."** That means to whatever was before. What is the old self primarily but a life preoccupied with the preservation of earthly, physical reality? That's basically what the old self is. That's what the flesh is. The flesh means physical life, the preoccupation with what is material and what is definitely passing away, which will definitely die. Preoccupation with that, centeredness on that, is living in the flesh or the "old self" as sometimes it's called.

Now St. Paul used the expression also of grafting. In the old days, what mean armies did was march into a country and cut down all the olive trees. Olive trees take forever to grow. So you cut them down, you ruin the economy. Well, they discovered that if you took an olive branch and you put it into the root or trunk or stump, it would grow into a tree very quickly. St. Paul says that we are like that. **We are grafted into Christ who**

was cut down on the cross, and we are grafted into his being, and now we can grow into other Christs, really.

However, **there will be continuing conflicts with our old nature. So in Baptism we die to self; that doesn't mean it's dead!** That self keeps coming back with all the capital sins: led by pride, and then envy and greed and lust and gluttony and sloth and anger—any others? Vanity, another kind of pride. So St. Paul himself said, “What I want to do, I do not do. I do what I do not want to do. What a mess I am!” That’s actually what he says, “What a mess I am!” So this is not a matter of instantaneous change, but it’s a matter of growth over a period of time—and with discipline.

But the point is that **in Christ there is no condemnation.** God doesn't condemn. Christ doesn't condemn. Where does condemnation come from? It comes from Satan. The funny thing is Satan wants to be our friend, but then he becomes our accuser and, eventually, the one who condemns us. So it's a rather poor friend to have.

So faith now involves trust, obedience, submission, surrender, and even sacrifice. Faith is a guarantee of help, but it is not a guarantee of salvation. Again, we have to be careful of some of our separated brethren whose expressions smack of a guarantee of salvation. That would be, of course, a prideful thing that could start to move us away from God. Grace makes us truly free. That means even in grace, and especially in grace, we can oppose God freely. Before grace, without grace, St. Augustine says that we can't really sin freely; we can only sin compulsively. But once we are graced with Baptism, we can actually sin freely. So we can deny God—there is no doubt about it.

We grow in holiness, in virtue, in the fruits of the Spirit—none of which I can go over right now. **Pride and self-love and self-will are the opposite of holiness and humility and faith and obedience.** So faith and obedience, humility and holiness—openness to God, confidence in God—that's one thing. That's the Spirit leading. Then the opposite is pride, self-love, self-will, moving in on oneself—that's the opposite. Again, I remind you God is gentle. “A smoldering wick he shall not quench.” **Through faith we become socially and personally responsible for our own lives and the world around us in different degrees.** We can't solve all our problems right this very minute, but we can work on them. Surely we do have dominion over the earth, and no one else is going to solve our problems except us. That's another thing that some Christians don't seem to realize.

Nothing takes away our need for prayer. The greatest liturgical prayer of all is Holy Eucharist. It is the prayer of the whole Church, and it is the source and summit of our worship. The whole idea of the Holy Eucharist is that as Jesus goes to the Father he doesn't want us to be lonely for him. He doesn't want us to miss him. He wants us to recognize that he abides with us, and so he gives us his own being. The body, blood, soul, and divinity is his being. He nurtures us, so he gives us this being in the form of bread and wine because it's his form of nurturing. So focus on the Eucharist and continue to come to the Eucharist because, unavoidably, as we receive the Eucharist faithfully, we

become transformed and we start to share in the joy of Christ. We are taught even beyond words how to be in Christ. So we have to keep that in mind.