The Desert as Teacher

Hosea 2:16b, 17b, 21-22; II Corinthians 3:1b-6; Mark 2:18-22
February 26, 2006

The survivors, after their passage through the desert, carried in their memories a new vision which they nurtured throughout their lives: Becoming free is a slow process, with no turning back, where God reveals Godself as passionate lover. When Hosea sees, many years afterwards, how the monarchy created a crisis by dividing communities and families— and how that dividedness affected even the love between spouses…, then the prophet rediscovers the spirituality of the desert precisely when he lives the crisis of marriage in his own flesh, through his wife's infidelity, within the decadent atmosphere of the monarchy which drags down the entire Jewish people.

Only the persevering love, faithful and tenacious, of Hosea can reclaim his wife's loving heart. Such fidelity transforms love into an authentic renovating force: a love which mirrors the faithful response of God, passionately concerned for his people!

How to live the love between spouses and within families, in fidelity? How to believe in a God who passionately seeks his people? How to love your own identity and culture when the force of the situation to which you live in bondage compels you to submit everything to change and loss, even those things you holds close as your personal "belongings," such as your family, such as the person you love, such as the faith you have received, such as your cultural identity— when these become things transitory, without firm basis?

The whole of migrant experience is a true desert. (I am not speaking in metaphors.) There is suffering, there is loss of faith, there are infidelities and families torn apart— the nearness of death is evident.

This experience deprives those who live it of nearly everything. They have to nurture a human and spiritual capacity for provisionality. They put their feelings to the test, they shake the very roots of their own faith. It isn't true that those who reach their goal have more faith than those who don't. Or that those who, once having swallowed a bitter draught, necessarily emerge purified. There is a shattering of the personality. You can no longer continue as you were. You have in your hands something that does not fit the way you have experienced life up till now. That's why you are tempted to "sew a piece of unshrunken cloth" on your life or to "pour" the new possibilities into old contexts, living them according to distorted visions and previous errors.

But here also is found open territory for the experience of faith…another stage is begun, a new opportunity, something new can happen. The discovery of a faithful love (of God, of family, of spouse, of community, of cultural inheritance) can provide a steady basis for the whole person… from here can arise a new man and a new woman.

"…I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart…I will espouse you to me forever, I will espouse you in right and justice, I will espouse you in fidelity…." (Hosea)

Dignity

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18; Romans 8:31b-34; Mark 9:2-10
March 12, 2006

Dyed-in-the-wool sociologists usually say that migrants "lose" the dignity given them by their places of origin. Back at home they are known as Mr. Smith and Mrs. Jones… but once they enter the migrant stream, their dignity disappears. First the "coyotes" treat them with no respect, then in the eyes of contractors and farmers they are just cheap hand labor. Service agencies consider them ignorant, because they don't speak English and because they have skin of a different color. The law itself tries to turn them into felons for the crime of being undocumented…

But what is happening here isn't so much the loss of identity as its distortion. Certain social contexts in which people live and act cloud over their true faces.

In Christian tradition we understand that Jesus lived under this bitter contradiction. The populace of his country was awaiting a politically powerful Messiah. Even Jesus' own community of disciples saw and understood him according to that image— for it seems that only by being politically powerful could you receive your "legal documents" as a Messiah! The Gospel of Mark is very clear about this. For in it Jesus constantly insists that no publicity be given to himself or to his actions. He wants no part of the identity that they attribute to him.

In this context, the Transfiguration obliges us to be guided by the suspicion that the majority of us, in questions of faith, might be mistaken in the way we see these matters. And if this is so, then the community has to understand that Christ's true face is not reflected in the Messiah of majesty and political might, but in the Messiah who confronts the cross. "This is my beloved Son, listen to him." The brilliantly white clothing that speaks already of faith in the resurrection speaks also of how believers become so blinded by that light that they wish the path of commitment could be free of contradictions, and even that God could intervene in a more visibly effective way in our lives and societies.

As Bishop Oscar Romero liked to say, in his adaptation of Irenaeus: "La gloria de Dios es que los pobres vivan"— "The poor are those who, being alive, are the glory of God." Every migrant man and woman embraces in him or herself this divinely-given dignity. Yet this "glory" doesn't shine but is distorted constantly. Migrant believers without documents know what it means to live under suspicion…but they discover that contradiction brings you to value your own dignity more intensely and not to give it up for lost. And when there is the possibility of finding a place, a community that allows you to welcome with honesty what is happening in your person… an experience that disposes you to discover the light of the living God who battles to become embodied in you…,— then you regain your spirit and you live a transfiguration.

I have met wayfarers (migrant men and women) with the strength to live and transform this contradictory world and their own deficiencies, amazed by their own dignity and ready to honor their responsibilities, to support their families, and to proclaim their testimony of hope.

Passing beyond

II Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23;Ephesians 2:4-10; John 3:14-21
March 26, 2006

In any limit situation the final step is when you see things in a different way. You believe at such a time that the form in which you see a thing at that moment is the only valid one, the only one possible, maybe because (you say to yourself) you were educated in that manner or because all your experiences have been inducing in you a conviction that there is no other way of thinking about it— although, to be honest, you would have to admit that this new perspective represents a total break with the past.

For example…the people of the Bible tell in the Book of Chronicles how their exile in Babylon changed everything for them, even their own awareness of guilt. This Sunday's psalm expresses the same idea in a poem full of vivid memories recast now in the light of new understanding. The exiles had to assume a different historical perspective on Yahweh's intervention when Cyrus, a foreign military leader and their captor, made possible the return of the Hebrew exiles to their own country. The road to their liberation and rebuilding as a people lay along a route they least expected— a road smoothed by their enemy!

Christian existence develops from a similar necessity to change perspective. The synoptic gospels call it "metanoia" or conversion. An entire people has to re-root itself in order to survive. Families have to re-ground their habits and presuppositions in order to grow. Each person too must break away from the perspective of his or her own personal history. There is no other way to enjoy the liberty and responsibility of an adult human being.

The communities where the Gospel of John was born deepened this understanding. When we read about the nocturnal encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, it is of this slow, difficult process of metanoia that we are speaking, a process with profound consequences. Faith isn't possible unless we go through this un-learning. It's like passing from shadows into light. It's about the event of "grace." The mercy and love of God wrap around our lives as we open ourselves and welcome this life-giving presence in its own unexpected, unpredictable being… and we experience "the incomparable richness of his grace." But in doing so we have battle our fears. How can we know that this grace is ours every day? Will we be able to find it even where events seem to work against us? Do we truly believe that grace is always present in us and that it is saving us?

The early Christians experienced this grace. For many of them, born in the bosom of the Jewish people, the force of their faith consisted at first in their degree of compliance with rules and laws, for this was their sure path not only to God but also to their authentic identity. But then Jesus both announces and makes freely possible new relations among people and a new relation with God, relations based not in the Law but in love and liberty. Yes, he ended up condemned and nailed to a cross as a malefactor because his gospel had radical practical consequences. But then the scandal of the cross, after the experience of the resurrection, led his disciples to cast away their previous perspective. It lit in them all a new light. "Whoever believes in Jesus given to us by the Father will not perish but will have eternal life."

The risen Christ does not bring us a message of accusation and condemnation. He is himself a free offer of life in its fullness. Accepting that offer or rejecting it is what decides everything. Nor is this a matter of our having to perform grand actions. Even a

tiny light is enough to open the way in the densest shadow. Our part is to be attentive to every sign of the times and to recognize there the “free” action of the merciful God who respectfully invites us to transform our perspective and to open ourselves to new attitudes.

Standing at the Foot of the Cross
Isaiah 50:4-7; Phillipians 2:6-11; Mark 14:1-15:47 (Palm Sunday)
April 9. 2006

During Holy Week and the Pascal Triduum we share many stories, many signs indicating that the Christian tradition took form by uniting itself to the history of concrete believers.

We embody this dynamic in our very reading of the Passion story, where we are brought by the Spirit to become disciples in our own right, learning, keeping silence, and being sent to comfort the broken.

All four Gospel accounts of the Passion echo and give shape to the experience of human suffering. Jesus' disciples discovered in the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah the clues that gave meaning to the passion and death of their Lord. The lives of those first Christians, with all their contradictions, trials, and sufferings— the consequence of their chosen path— likewise found meaning in the figure of the Servant.

In each day's unfolding, human pain is like a teacher who shows her students how to listen to and heal their own wounds.

I have a friend in the migrant community who has not been able to move his body for three years, nor even scarcely to speak… one day he fell from a tree while he was picking apples on a local farm. Without savings, without health insurance, without his being able to work and with a small child in the house, the whole family's life changed.

After listening to the sober account Mark gives of the Passion in this Sunday's Gospel, we feel compelled to find sense in the suffering of the just. There is an eloquent connection between human pain, inexplicable as it may be, and the Passion of Jesus.

Suffering makes itself known in the rhythm of our lives, often surprising us… there is no preparing ourselves. Rather it seems that suffering itself prepares us for something we never suspected.

Henri Nouwen attempts to reveal the meaning of suffering in the believer's mission. In his book *The Wounded Healer*, Nouwen searches for a theological-mystical clue in the fact that the pain of others has a profound impact on the believer's own suffering. The disciple's life is distorted if she ignores the suffering of others, for she is a sufferer herself, if she will admit it. But in order to accept her own wounds, she must pass through her denial and enter a struggle plagued with insecurities. It is a humbling process, frightening at the start. But then she becomes truly able not only to heal herself but also to console and heal her sisters and brothers.

There is coherency in the disciple thus schooled. Normally the believer is confused by suffering and by the contradiction of the Cross, considering them totally outside God's project. This is why Mark, in his Passion account, tells of Judas' betrayal, of Peter's denial, of the flight of the disciples scandalized by the failure of Jesus on the cross. Mark is treating the believer with pedagogical strictness when he warns her that by choosing to follow the Lord—once she makes up her mind to do that—, she must immediately take for granted that she will have setbacks and that she will abandon the one who invites her to follow.

Those disciples are a mirror in which we see ourselves. In the passion of Jesus' followers, what counts isn't our courage, nor our rational calculation, but our hard-won recognition of ourselves as wounded… and our returning to the path.

My friend lies in a nursing home, unable to move, and his young wife clings to love and hope. She does not comprehend, she does not take flight, neither does she resign herself. She appears to bear the full weight of her husband's situation. She is like a member of that faithful group who stayed close to Jesus at the foot of the cross. She is like "Mary Magdalene. Mary the mother of the younger James and of Joses, and Salome." Later these women become the first bearers of the resurrection message.

Perhaps women's perception of suffering and of the cross is truer than men's. They confront suffering— they do not deny it. They dwell in it, and in this way they enable themselves to transform suffering into motivation for living.

The Boldness of Migrants
Acts 10:34a, 37-43; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-9 (Easter Sunday)
April 16, 2006

The phenomenon of undocumented people flowing across well-guarded frontiers obeys a variety of sociological laws. It also brings to light profound differences among countries and political groups. Yet despite the complexity of the matter, I have sensed the even deeper laws that govern the look and bold behavior of every migrant man and woman. These deeper laws underlie an impulse that is born, not of individual initiative, but of a current of human energy struggling to make life prevail. When such an initiative lodges in someone's expectations, no force, no government, no person on earth can stop it.

And when the paths of concrete individuals converge with those of a whole population, you can imagine that this joining of forces produces additional energy that bears the individuals' lives along. Small communities are formed of those who learn to follow Jesus and in whose lives burst into bloom with passion for the Kingdom of God. Each day such people incarnate the values of brotherhood, of mercy, of the preferential option for the poor, of the vocation of service, everything they have heard or seen of Jesus, at the same time as they read scripture and seize on its freshness, in the light of the "suffering servant."

Faith in the Resurrection must have taken time to form if we suppose that the Gospels took their final shape a hundred years after the death of Jesus. The grain of wheat passing through death to give new life is the best metaphor of when this resurrection is about to occur. Faith and the mission of Jesus give no security to his disciples, nor do they offer them the solution to the challenges posed either by their own existence or by their surroundings. Each stage of the journey brings them a series of new challenges. Each stage leads them to "death" (empty tombs). Disciples are obliged to overcome obstacles that they would have considered insuperable in other moments and circumstances. But on arriving at these obstacles new possibilities open up, obstacles become thresholds, the imagination is awakened, and the old gives way to the new. Alternative dimensions keep taking form, as happens in all that is truly living. From the depths we discover, over time, that what formerly made no sense now foretells transformation.

This dynamic can embrace everything. Personal conviction is no longer enough. An "impulse" is required that passes beyond what we are and can be. Jesus' Resurrection welcomes us, according to the vision of Teihard de Chardin, as a process both intimate and global. It has nothing to do with a particular moment, nor with a particular event. It is life itself in its fullness penetrating our own concrete lives. Those who are embraced by this dynamic allow themselves to be carried along by the boldness of confidence in the midst of all that is uncertain. They live with no greater strength than that given by their own weaknesses. They thrust forward in openness to communion, without losing direction in their most personal search for authenticity. This is a force that makes things grow, that weaves relationships, that crosses frontiers. It is an impulse of the future and of life that pierces the shell of staleness, rigidity, sterility.

Faith in the Resurrection of that condemned man on the cross continues to fertilize marginal communities so that they grow in self-esteem and in their capacity for

solidarity and justice. In this way they are able to confront the dehumanizing forces of the dominant system.

Community (*Koinonia*) is Salvation
Acts 4:32-25; I John 5:1-6; John 20:19-31
April 23, 2006

Three migrant children were crossing the border through the desert while their parents were already waiting for them sleeplessly in a small US town on the other side. When migration officials came across the group, their coyote abandoned them to their fate. But then one of the other people embarking on that same desert venture succeeded in hiding the children with him, undoubtedly because he sensed what their parents were feeling. He took care of the children and helped them arrive at their destination.

The reunion of that small family community, after days and hours of hopelessness and uncertainty, was an encounter of communion and life. When there are at least the traces of community…and the individual embraces others, then not all is lost.

Likewise the Christian project can only be lived as a communal venture. The entire Christian experience flourished thanks to a life-in-common or *koinonia* (from the Greek word "koinos," meaning "in common," "shared") that became the lifestyle of the early Christians. The Acts of the Apostles testifies to the importance of koinonia, or community-communion. And even more than that: The resurrection experience itself took form as multiple small actions were interwoven into communal networks.

Of course, times have changed. Modern subjectivity has taught us that no one can escape the distinctly personal rhythms and life-paths of our era without losing direction. Yet the spirit of the group contributes a specific and determining character to the person even under these modern conditions.

Whoever makes it all the way "north" for the first time does so by depending heavily on friends and family connections. By contrast, North Americans value their personal independence so highly that at times they seem to become mere individualists. They are astonished when they see migrant workers living together peaceably even in substandard encampments. They do not realize that the migrants survive such conditions by drawing strength from the communal values of solidarity and spontaneous koinonia.

I myself have witnessed these values at work among migrant workers. And it seems to me that these same values jump out at us in the story the Gospel tells about Doubting Thomas…about a personal search, a series of uneasinesses and questions, all wrapped up in sincere yearning to possess clear signs upon which to anchor belief. In Thomas' case, this yearning is eased and transformed not through an isolated revelation, but in communion with Jesus and the other disciples. Every disciple then and now reorients herself, recovers her personal path in the warmth of that brotherly/sisterly koinonia. It is not that the questions come to an end, nor the search, nor that the uncertainty of faith is ever resolved. Yet each person experiences unconditional welcome when the community mirrors the original features of the Master— of the Servant who embraces and forgives, who refuses to hide his wounds and who repeats the invitation to mission. This is where the sense of faith is revived.

Communal consciousness lies at the cultural roots of our migrant population. This consciousness, like an enchantment, captivates and protects the migrants when they come in contact with the "American way of life" where the ideal seems to be total self-sufficiency. This ideal asserts itself in all situations, whether in the workplace, or whether in making money, even in interpersonal relationships.

Even so, I have met people who incarnate a synthesis of the communal and

individual. They retain a rich communal sense while at the same time displaying the most valuable personal potentialities. But this synthesis proves possible only in communities that permit people to heal not only their own wounds but also each other's.

Meals and Memory
Acts 3:3-15, 17-19; I John 2:1-5a; Luke 24: 35-48
April 30, 2006

Sharing meals became the disciples' signature.

And for the people who come to the US to work in our fields, for them too sharing meals is almost a ritual. At least for the ones I know who grew up working in Mexican fields, for them meals were shared among members of their family and involved much more than taking in food.

It was Jesus who gave meaning to meals shared by a group. His dreams of the Kingdom of God were clarified in and through meals taken among brothers and equals. This is so much the case that for us also the act of sharing a little bread and wine has become the central event of the faith we celebrate every Sunday.

That's why the selection from Luke's Gospel today shows the risen Christ asking for something to eat. And once they sit down together with him, that handful of disciples glimpses the identity of the defeated-resurrected one and finally understands what was written about him in the Old Testament. The shared meal gives new dimension to their vocation and mission.

It's odd, the role North American culture gives to eating. Seldom is it an end in itself. People eat together when they're doing business together— "working lunches," they say. Eating is a pragmatic affair. The meal itself is of little interest. It is "fast food," something you gobble up on your way to something else.

In spite of that it's still true that I have enjoyed the true conviviality of mealtime even in western New York. It happens when a family from the Caribbean invites me to dinner or when I'm in the home of a migrant family or in a migrant camp. At such times eating has no other object than as a reason for gathering and for the enjoyment that comes from gathering. But let it be clear that this happens not only in homes and at leisure. Particularly in the harvest season, when the rhythm of work is exhausting— it is there that I have lived most deeply the experience of mealtime as "recognition," a time of peace and joy, a taste of the kind of moment the disciples experienced when they recognized the risen one in their midst. For me, the moment came while we were sitting under a tree together, sharing some tacos heated up on the spot. There were no other motives, no business to conduct, no other place to get to (as when you find yourself keeping an eye on your watch during a "lunch meeting"). There was only the gathering itself.

A meal like that reconnects you to what is most human in yourself and in the others sharing the meal with you. "It is really I…not a ghost." "You are a person…not a shadow."

Our Eucharists, now so ritualized, aspire to connect us with the experience of conviviality or better yet mealtime-as-recognition that the people of our migrant communities have already tasted. With the experience of Jesus, the rejected one, whose way of life has become a model for us— where Jesus is the fellow diner who gathers and inspires not only us but everyone else.

For me the Eucharists that come closest to this experience are those we've enjoyed in the some of the migrant camps… when the participants lay down their sacks as they return from picking apples. The Celebration unites us as we tell the stories of our comings and goings, our fallings-down and risings. We allow the Lord to speak to us as

we read his word. And almost always it happens that very early, before leaving for work that day, the team has prepared something to eat for sharing after the Eucharist.

At that moment the Spirit of the crucified and resurrected one opens our understanding so that we might comprehend the Word that has become reality in our lives, and then he sends us to be his witnesses.

The Good Shepherd
Acts 4: 8-12; I John 3:1-2; John 10: 11-18
May 7, 2006

Corporate systems and the policies of powerful countries cast aside people and cultures that don't fit into their projects. And yet with the turn of history those same castoffs become a fundamental factor in new social formations. "He is the stone rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone."

In the recent mass demonstrations of immigrants across the whole US, you saw banners bearing the legend: "We are part of the solution." But that wasn't the focus of North American legislators. The decisions of the majority of leaders exercising power in a country or in a community seldom respond to the reality of "minorities" (which in reality aren't minorities at all) and of the excluded. The leaders simply don't get to know those groups, and aren't interested in getting to know them. For only the will to stand in the shoes of the "others" and to empathize with their reality makes such understanding possible.

But if such a will were made concrete in a leader, he or she would be esteemed by those communities suffering repression and martyrdom.

Imagine: To realize that someone has gotten to know you personally and has put his or her life at risk for you… this realization would make you feel secure, and would motivate you to act with a spirit of liberty and maturity…

Such a relation between leader and people has a much deeper meaning than what a one-dimensional scientific assessment would attribute to "knowing." We are speaking of a relation in wholeness, not just that some things are known about the other person. The knowing we are talking about, the inter-personal relation implied by it, is sapiential. From it is born the experience of communion. Our whole life is involved in it.

Likewise to "know," in the meaning given the phrase in today's Gospel, "I know mine and mine know me"— this kind of knowing has three phases: first, "the acknowledgement of complicity in the conditions that have prevented the other person from becoming what God has intended the other person to be"; second, "the personal commitment to widen the conditions of the other's liberty"; and third," taking active steps to realize that mission of liberation"— quoting Jesuit Father Ignacio Ellacuria, martyred in Sal Salvador in 1989. Clearly, far more is meant here than simply meeting the immediate needs of the other. Yes, meeting the other's basic needs is important. But more important still is unconditionally recognizing the other's humanity and acting in solidarity with the possibilities he or she possesses for becoming what he or she is and/or could be.

Every Christian community hopes to have a pastor like that!

In many Protestant and Pentecostal denominations the faithful explicitly call their leaders "pastors." Often there's a warm relationship between the pastor and members of the congregation. In communities of the Catholic tradition, by contrast, the title of pastor has often more to do with the "spiritual" care of the community. But in practice, it turns out to be difficult to include in this "spiritual" care those dimensions that the people are most concerned about. That is because the inner being of the real pastor has less to do with his or her playing an ecclesial role than with his or her embodying a dynamic initiative known as a "pastoral service of solidarity."

The "good shepherd" in this sense refers not just to exceptional individuals like

the El Salvadoran Bishop Romero or Mother Theresa of Calcutta. It refers just as much to all those unsung men and women who commit the totality of their lives to defending the integral dignity of their people. Only those who are not "hired men" can make themselves available to the vulnerable.

Nor is the "good shepherd" a role played by only one person. Inspired by a "pastoral service of solidarity" during raids by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), the members of our local migrant community act as "good shepherds" of each other, keeping each other informed by telephone when they see agents of "la migra" driving around or near their dwellings. A "pastoral" network quickly develops that proves effective in helping each other avoid being arrested.

Each believer in such a network lives in trust that Jesus has taken his or her side. Even though Jesus has not yet fully manifested himself, his presence is already real and alive in each believer's being, thanks to believers' "pastoral service of solidarity" with and for each other.

Migrant Spirituality
Acts 9:26-31;I John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8
May 14, 2006

Life is richer and more complex than it seems… This is a commonplace, perhaps, but it is also the experience of those who believe and who, like the branches of a tree with its trunk, seek to maintain a vital unity with the reality that gives meaning to life.

Those of us who live the Christian life don't have a monopoly on the Spirit. Many diverse paths crossing the horizon of the religions are authentic proposals to live what we Christians call "spirituality."

We ourselves try to express with the word "spirituality" those vital elements that allow a human, Christian maturity to grow and flourish in us. These elements depend greatly on ourselves, but even more on that other reality that surpasses and sustains us.

The men and women in the Gospel were certain that the energy driving them bloomed from the mission and person of Jesus. Taking Jesus' path as one's own is what identifies a Christian. To walk in the Spirit is an experience that unfolds from the person's interior— it is not something that comes from outside. Yes, it is clear that we come to faith through trusted witnesses. We all remember friends, dads, moms, grandpas, teachers, etc. who led us, through their own example, to him who is the way, the truth, and the life. Nevertheless, it is not until people exercise their own option for faith that they can live from the deepest part of their vital sap. From this inner experience originates the disciple's life adventure.

Outside influences play a role at this point. For every historical situation demands a concrete and particular expression of that inner "spirituality," an appropriate way of connecting to Jesus' path.

Migrant spirituality has its own special features:

a) Migrant spirituality is **subterranean**: Personal identity and cultural values survive in the roots. Migrants find themselves forced to learn the values and practices of the dominant culture where they seek to live. Their children, growing up immersed in that dominant culture, become strangers to their parents. Over the years, this tension (involved in learning the new language, in responding appropriately to the demands of work and relationships) forces migrants to displace their cultural and personal identities. Their identities aren't lost, they go underground. It just takes a certain gesture, or encounter, or song to awaken them, bring the buried identities to the surface. They should never be given up for lost. They go under the surface for survival's sake.

b) Migrant spirituality is **provisional**: Migrants cultivate an attitude of openness to whatever comes. If you're stopped by "la migra" (="ICE," Immigration and Customs Enforcement) because you don't have "papers," you know you can be deported and so you have to be ready to leave everything behind at a moment's notice. You have to live the present moment as profoundly as you can. If you have work, you take the fullest possible advantage of it. Everything else becomes irrelevant, because you're not certain you'll be working tomorrow. Your own fragility—without bank account, health insurance, credit card—makes you free.

c) Migrant spirituality is **transgressive**: Every formal legality that has to do with the country that receives you—and every moral normativity too—becomes relative. Life itself is your only value. Measured against all legal and cultural benchmarks of the country where you are trying to work and survive, you seem naïve, foolhardy, ignorant,

rootless, without values…but in the fearlessness of your life it is possible to recognize the radical honesty of your behavior and also to surmise that there is a powerful current that drives you. The future would not be possible for you if you did not pass beyond the narrow bounds of the "legality/illegality"mindset imposed upon you..

"Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence in God and receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him."

Knowing We're Loved

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48; I John 4:7-10; John 15:9-17
May 21, 2006

Knowing that we're loved, and loved unconditionally— knowing this about ourselves is essential for affirming our humanity.

Yet our experience shows us how broken this freely-given love becomes by the time it reaches us, this love with which and for which we came into being. So much is this the case that tenacious voices take root in our souls, in our consciences, and in our bodies, insisting that we are not worthy of being loved. Holding out against these voices is hard enough. But when we hear them amplified at higher and higher volume by societal behavior and by a communications media laden with prejudices, racism, and xenophobia, then holding out against them becomes even harder…it becomes even harder to believe that we're loved and even more to live in this belief.

The communities centered around the disciple John saw something unique in Jesus. They saw that the man from Nazareth lived as if he truly were loved. He lived and celebrated *agapé*— the Greek word for self-giving fellowship— every day. He was the bearer of that love which, to the extent that it is freely affirmed in the "other," is fulfilled in ourselves at the same time. Perhaps that's why Jesus says that this love is dynamically interpersonal. "As the Father loves me, so I love you… You must then love each other."

But we, his disciples, discover that our being chosen and loved came before our capacity to love and enabled it … "It is not that we have loved God… it is that he has loved us first." Paraphrasing the Taoist master: "When this love is my sole possession, I am invincible."

The world's movement of migrants, seen from through the eyes of the population that receives them, tends to provoke fear. Arriving migrants are seen not only as strangers but as enemies even before arriving. We can speak of an ethical predisposition against the "other." This works against the fact that opening ourselves to otherness could create new paths that might enrich both parties in the migratory phenomenon. Only those who have experienced unconditional love can break the barriers that block that opening.

Migrant community members instantly recognize within the Anglo population those people who are open, welcoming, and unprejudiced. This is because these Anglo people live the experience of unconditional love right in the midst of the paranoia created by our xenophobic political structures. These people value their migrant neighbors and take the initiative to go to meet them. They are open to learning about their lives. They freely affirm those who are strangers to them. In this way they initiate an enriching cycle of growth in human encounter and mutual collaboration. As the fruit of a similar experience the young Christian community arrived at a beautiful realization: "God is not partial."

We have to commit to **persevering** in this freely-given love which constitutes and sustains us all…

But how is this done? We have to do as the migrants themselves do. We first have to feel deeply, as they do, the evil of every experience of discrimination without internalizing that discrimination. We have to learn not to judge ourselves harshly just because we are judged harshly by others. By persevering in openness we see clearly how we are rejected simply because we are migrants. But at the same time we evoke through this perseverance the creative power of love that God has placed in the deepest part of

ourselves, a power that affirms our worthiness to be loved. And we remember that God, who loved us first, was a stranger himself— a stranger who took the initiative and crossed a mighty frontier in order to share the lives of a varied humanity. Only authentic love can overcome barriers as great as these.

And so we know God says to each one of us, migrant and Anglo alike: "You, my child, are a person sent by the Father to cross frontiers, carrying with you a message of transformation. And so repeat this 'mantra' without ceasing: 'I am a person unconditionally loved, I have been sent on a mission….'"

Camouflage?
Acts 1:15-17, 20a, 20c-26; I John 4:11-16; John 17: 11b-19
May 28, 2006

Contrary to the way mystics lived in the past, by "fleeing the world," this impulse of flight does not lead today's believers to true sanctification. Nowadays it's our insertion into all the world's dimensions that permits us to live our Christian faith most authentically.

Yet we see a motive of insertion even within the early church itself. In its confrontation with the most systematic expressions of Greek culture, the early church discovered that the best way to develop and live its faith was to welcome critically the thought structures and social organization which the pagan world offered it. The early Greek apologists for the Christian religion— or "the Fathers," as they are called— were, in their own manner of thinking, creating a faith vision using the philosophical materials of a culture in whose eyes their new faith was practically irrelevant.

Believers today live even more deeply within the "world" and from that greater depth of immersion must also develop their faith. The Second Vatican Council was aware that this trend was happening, but was neither able nor willing to draw the necessary conclusions. And so it is that not all church structures help or form the faithful for this labor.

Our history as a people of faith has followed a path of syncretization— not a path of ghetto-dwelling, of living in isolated bubbles of ideological purity. Today's human cultures have been generated by surprising syncretizations. Unique, self-contained paradigms cannot be sustained in the search for truth and human fulfillment.

Perhaps my last statement sounds contradictory. Isn't "truth" by its very nature a reality utterly separate from the corruption of ordinary reality? After all, Jesus asks the Father that his disciples be "consecrated in the truth," not in falsehood or compromise. Yet the word "truth," highly valued by the community of John, seeks to connect the evangelical mission of Jesus with the practice of discipleship. That is why the word refers, not to a theoretical effort to reach the truth, but to a way of living. The best, most vital synthesis of this approach to the truth arose from syncretic experiences. The New Testament scriptures are the clearest expression of this synthesis.

The French rationalist philosopher Gaston Bachelard thought that the quickest way for people to open themselves to the truth was to subject themselves to the evidence of their own erroneous ideas. Not in order to cling to those false ideas, but to enable the truth to emerge in the only way it can, through dialogue and synthesis. For since the effort to construct reality epistemologically inevitably brings along with it the history of one's own prejudices, then the truth about reality can be built up only through engaging with those prejudices and working both with and beyond them. Similarly, the believers' approach to the truth passes through their insertion in all dimensions of the "world," even though believers might not be in agreement with its structures. Believers have to accept those structures, while taking into account the prejudices against the world inherited from their experience of the Church.

This is why the real is called the "path to humanization"…in order to consecrate the disciple in the truth. This is not a strategy for camouflaging believers in the world's costume. It is an unavoidable choice for opening oneself *to* the world with all its contradictions without becoming *of* the world.

In this sense those of us formed for evangelical service need to relearn the Gospel's message by observing its practice in the lives of many simple believers. They are the ones who are living in their own flesh the mission cast only in theoretical form at Vatican II— the mission of uniting faith and life, of overcoming the divorce of a faith which distances itself from everyday reality. Believers do this in order to embrace the "world" as the terrain where the Kingdom is being prepared. This mission is being carried out right now by men and women of faith who are making mature ethical decisions in disagreement with the Church's moral teaching (we are thinking of the vitality of their matrimonial sexuality)… by men and women of faith who have aligned themselves, in their political commitments and ideological struggles, in solidarity with communities that have been impoverished and excluded.

The "world"— that anti-Kingdom force that hates the disciple— is also where Christ's fidelity to the Father is to be proclaimed.

Following the Spirit's Footprints
Acts 2:1-11; I Cor 12:3b-7,12-13; John 15:26-27; 16:12-15 (Pentecost)
June 4, 2006

We have met believers who through their own lives tell the story of the Spirit's tirelessly creative activity.

Cultures are arriving by diverse paths at border areas, and, embedded within those cultures, we human persons live intimately the experience of being on the march in unfamiliar territory. There is bewilderment, there is a search for solid ground, there is a diversity of plans and initiatives.

Just in those places where human life used to be organized in some simple, predictable way, the Spirit is busy creating unexpected outlets, perhaps heterodox ones, yet outlets not only born from life but bearing life along.

Believers in the New Testament ventured forth to follow the Spirit's footsteps in stirrings that bore them along to transformation. That's why the Acts of the Apostles characterizes the Spirit's activity as a "strong driving wind" letting loose a new world that doesn't at all look like the supposed "real" one. (People outside the community of the disciples are "amazed" at them, as if they think the disciples are inebriated!)

The ecclesiology of Acts seems to describe the social and public aspect of the Spirit's activity in gathering and forming the community that must become the new world's sacrament.

People with eyes and ears open are capable of discerning where the Spirit is blowing. But to do that they have to allow the Spirit to bear them away; they have to learn to intuit the Spirit's activity and to become witnesses of her presence.

There was concern in the communities rallying around the Beloved Disciple about how to adapt to new situations while remaining loyal to origins. We recognize in the stories told in John's gospel a creative tension: the tension involved in welcoming the creativity of the Spirit as she sallies forth towards new horizons— to do so without renouncing connection to the historical Jesus. That's how the earliest community describes receiving the Spirit from Jesus himself. The community believed it had received her, not as their own invention, but as the consequence of its fidelity to the historical person.

Surrounded by so many situations that hem them in, migrant communities have to become capable of following the Spirit's footprints. Not every novelty is the Spirit's work. Not every form of reacting to challenge is inspired by her. What's certain is that amid this people forced to explore new forms of living, the Spirit makes a privileged and recognizable intervention. Yet often the intervention occurs where the people themselves least expect it. A handful of migrants are slowly discovering that their very way of living is a work fostered by the Spirit so that the Kingdom may become possible. Their discovery begins as they reflect on the decisions that brought them to the US in the first place… Each migrant takes years to decide whether he (or she) should leave his country. He has to decide whether it's worth the pain to break with family and begin again at zero. It's an agonizing process that takes many stages of discernment. Yet in a sense there is no decision to be made, there are no options to choose among. What's involved is taking that last chance to escape the bonds of misery. The decision once made, the person must follow the Spirit's path, if he or she really wants to move forward.

In our stories, personal a well as ecclesial, there must be real and effective footprints of salvation for us to follow. If we can't recognize them, we might conclude that the Spirit isn't at work, or that she is incapable of working. Yet such a conclusion contradicts the experience of the first Christian communities and the subsequent history of the Church. It's rather that we ourselves have lost the capacity to discover the Spirit. In that case, we will have to get to work following the Spirit's footprints in those places where the Spirit dwells and in those activities where the Spirit is the protagonist.

An Image of the Trinity
Deut 4:32-34, 39-40; Rom 8:14-17; Matt 28:16-20 (Trinity Sunday)
June 11, 2006

The greatest apostles are those who create networks of communion wherever they go. The power to create such networks doesn't have much to do with "professional" preparation. The power to do so has more to do with letting yourself by borne along by the Spirit.

The Fathers of the Church taught that the Tri-unity of the living God maintained within God's oneness a relation of *perichoresis*. Perichoresis, from a Greek word meaning "dancing around," refers to the co-indwelling, co-inhering, and mutual interpenetration of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As a result of their perichoresis, each person of the Trinity freely affirms the others in their identity and difference. And to the extent that each affirms the identity and difference of the others, each affirms itself in its own richness. Or to put the point in negative form: There is no negation of the other persons in any of the three persons' self –affirmation. Each person's self-affirmation is actually a loving of the others as the fullness of its own being. It is this mutual relation of love among the Trinitarian persons which creates unity in plurality. (And clearly the word "person" as used in Trinitarian theology is not at all what we ordinarily mean by the word: the individual separated from others by body, psychology, history, etc.)

Jesus and his disciples believed that this way of living and relating could be replicated among human beings. That's why believers considered themselves sent to create networks of disciples. So when they talk about teaching, they're not referring to the verbal transmission of doctrine, but to learning to enter into that form of relations lived by the God of the Trinity. "Go and make disciples of all nations…baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

The writer of the Book of Deuteronomy believed that the Israelites passed through historical experiences that allowed them to "discover" the presence of God in those very experiences. The God of the Bible is a God who reveals himself in the journey of his people, in the interpersonal relations of his followers, and in the actions and steps of growth taken and realized at every stage in the life of individuals and communities.

Today's migratorial comings and goings force people caught in such currents to sharpen their capacities for creating new relationships. In the midst of this social phenomenon it's not difficult to find men and women who continue to weave fraternal networks. These are people who follow the steps of the God of Jesus in their own lives, in the doings of their communities, and in the trials of the poor.

To be on the move, in migration's social dynamic, isn't an optional experience. Rather, circumstances themselves move people along. At any given moment, the migrant's life is displaced in a movement critical for his (or her) identity in diversity. To himself he is at the same time one and various. Something remains of his own self, but at the same time he feels the necessity of welcoming and integrating something which is not his own. In this way the migrant person becomes the image of the God of the Trinity, the God who is One in three persons.

Bodies Delivered Over
Exodus 24:3-8; Hebrew 9:11-15; Mark 14:12-16, 22-26 (Corpus Christi)
June 18, 2006

Farm products, in the United States, are cheap because they are harvested and processed by "illegal" hands. Fruits and vegetables can't be harvested by machinery; they need skilled human hands to gather them. The care of animals, cattle and chickens for meat, cows for milk, horses for riding— these too demand "illegal" hand labor. And one has to say, in fidelity to truth, that no North American worker is interested in laboring in these ways.

But this is why the population of North America has access to such foods at low cost. Agribusiness gets juicy federal subsidies to make up part of the difference between the profits they demand and the actual costs of the food. (Small county farms do not reap those benefits, however.) Migrants themselves make up the rest of the difference. They are a cheap labor force, without legal protection, without organizing experience, and without support structure— it is this "subsidy" which is **the key to keeping product costs down**.

Shoppers who go to supermarkets to buy farm products never think about the bodily energy and physical wear-and-tear on the people who harvest the goods they buy. Migrants' stories are neither told nor heard inside the supermarkets. Yet those stories refocus for us the theological elements developed by the Feast of Corpus Christi to capture the salvific dimension of that Body delivered over and of that Blood poured out….

A person laboring on farms and fields in this country has a very short work life. If we assume that the farm worker population is very young to begin with, they cannot work productively beyond ten years. You meet people with premature health problems provoked by the rhythm and type of the work they do. Those twenty-year-old workers who deliver themselves over to agricultural work are convinced that by working hard they can save up a good sum of money. That's why you meet young migrants working ten to fifteen hours per day, without proper time for rest and recuperation. They are forced to endure exposure to the various chemical compounds used in the fields— not to mention the stress that overwhelms them because of their legal status and because of culture shock. There isn't time or energy for personal development in other areas. No time for study, no time for participation in the community. Time perhaps just for distractions, often not healthy ones.

Put simply, we're talking about hand laborers now unemployable in poor countries, we're talking about prisoners of globalization, about people forced north across the borders by the destructive effects of NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) on farmers in Mexico, Guatemala, and even farther south. These men and women understand fieldwork. They have an ingrained feel for the earth and for the care of animals, and they do this labor with a will. But they haven't the least idea of how their labor— within a cycle of injustice and exploitation— is providing nourishment to millions of people. Their daily physical effort isn't expended just so their own families might live and survive. Their bodies, delivered over daily to hard labor, make possible the life of a "First World" country— a country that has practically forgotten how field produce is harvested and yet could not survive without the migrants' labor.

One migrant, Antonio, puts it this way: “We work from sun up to sun down, we do the heaviest and riskiest jobs. We have to work seven days a week…just to survive. We are the most vulnerable…living constantly with the fear of being arrested by the police or by ‘la migra.’”

In a parallel situation, Jesus took a bit of bread and some wine and transformed them into a symbol of his self-giving.

When I think about the twelve million “illegal” people in the US doing such exhausting physical labor, I recall the prayer usually said in silence that Bishop Oscar Romero used to say aloud after the Eucharistic consecration of the bread and wine: “May this body delivered over and this wine poured out inspire us to hand over our own lives in order that the Kingdom of brothers and sisters be realized.”

In the Squall's Midst
Job 38:1, 8-11; 2 Corinthians 5:14-17; Mark 4:35-41
June 25, 2006

It's possible that the story of Jesus' calming of the sea reflects the experience of the early Christian communities, who lived their faith in the middle of persecution, uncertainty, and vulnerability. Yet the story also reflects the turbulent conditions in which many of our present-day Christian communities live.

Our Gospel passage is found within a larger section where Mark describes the character of discipleship. The question Mark asks is, Who is Jesus' true disciple?

A force in testing the disciple's formation is the spirit of evil. It seems that turbulence of all kinds is an effect of this spirit's presence. Beyond that, the spirit of evil consists of elements that cross the disciple's path and that are not completely under his control. But note the paradox: When I, the would-be disciple, try to eliminate this spirit completely, when I put all my efforts into establishing and maintaining "security," I find that fear and anxiety seize me. And then if I bring this spirit into my faith community, I find that the fear and anxiety intensify within the group and paralyze it.

Jesus is all alone, sleeping, in the midst of the storm. He is free of the group contagion.

Yet true disciples, both as individuals and as members of communities, learn to live in turbulence. The members of the migrant community have learned to live and celebrate in the midst of fear. They know how poorly it pays to try to prevent unpleasant, even disastrous things from happening. They have learned to calculate the risks they have to take in order to assure the survival of their families.

The person who knows that his or her stay in a place is considered illegal develops the wisdom of the old saying: "If you can't change it, learn to live with it."

The migrant community is like the "faithful remnant" the prophets speak of. It lives in the midst of a "squall." Moments come when it sees that everything is lost, that there's no way out. But it's precisely here that the community finds and retains attitudes of patience and confidence.

I think that the Book of Job's profound understanding of the suffering of the just— where it is argued that that suffering is not the consequence of sin— I think this discussion connects very well with the drama of migrant families. The God whom the suffering Job hopes to encounter has other standards of justice and right than those that are measured by material security or its absence. Migrant believers preserve this same paradigm of faith. They discover an image of God that passes the usual limits. They welcome a God who does not punish the innocent, and they hope that this God will keep accompanying them in every storm at sea, perhaps sleeping in that same boat apparently on the point of shipwreck.

Paul assures us in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, "Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come." The person of faith bears in him or herself the presence of Lord. This is the same presence discovered by Job and recognized in the squall's midst by the disciples. His comforting presence arrives with astonishing lucidity when the spirit of evil and its heavy waves harass us.

A Prophet Never Has Power

Ezekiel 2:2-5; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Mark 6:1-6

July 9, 2006

In his Mexican hometown, a humble farmworker never has to present himself at the police station, much less in a courtroom. Here in the US, however, he has to stand before the immigration judge. He doesn't speak a word of English, just his hometown Spanish. He stands all alone to hear the verdict.

Given their background, it's understandable that the majority of such farmworkers prefer to avoid the courts altogether by moving from State to State to escape the authorities.

But the farmworker about whom I now speak stood his ground and showed up for his hearing. He stood with dignity, and without fear, He knew he had not committed a crime. Yes, he had crossed the border illegally, but he had done so only because he could not support his family in his own country. Without more argument than his own hopes and dreams he challenged the North American judge in silence.

Every migrant man and woman is a living expression of a prophetic cry. His or her very life is prophecy. Prophecy which goes unheard, a cry without echo.…but not without effect. And yet…where is its force?

During recent months the migrant population has been pursued and persecuted by the officials of ICE (=Immigration and Customs Enforcement). No day goes by without a group of workers calling us migrant ministers to say they have been arrested. We get on the move without delay, but the only thing we accomplish is to stand with them before the migration authorities. And every evening we take stock of our powerlessness and frustration. We could not do anything to help…

But at the same time in everyone who passes through this process (of arrest, incarceration, sentencing, and deportation) there seems to be activated that sharp realization expressed by Ezequiel, that most authentic of prophets: "And those, whether they heed or resist…will know that a prophet has been among them."

The lives of migrants stand scandalously as the weakest element in this technically sophisticated society, with its pretensions to an invincibly authentic democratic identity. Migrant men and women again make clear what the disciples learned: "Power is made perfect in weakness." There is no better description of the prophetic figure than what is offered in our Biblical texts for today, for the texts speak of people who are free, without fetters. People who know that something is not working as God wants it to. People almost always called from the village and whose life is the field. They defend no power-interest, nor do they try to grab fame. They know or suspect that authority represents the interests of those who already have power and that this entire system is based on injustice.

And yet it is not the case that either the immigration judge or the ICE officials have evil intentions. Their job is to uphold the law. The problem is that they do not question the law, and they do not do so because they are part of the power that created them. That is why the migrant farmworker experiences freedom, because he is not tied into migratory law as its creator or beneficiary. What moves the farmworker is the life imperative. That is why his very presence becomes a prophetic cry that challenges the law.

Those who deny Jesus' mission in his hometown represent in various ways the interests of the domination system. "This well-known fellow can't be allowed to put in doubt the synagogue's legality!"— and therefore Jesus is not truly known at all. His prophetic effectiveness is seen more clearly in what he cannot do than in what he can.

Nor will the prophetic presence of the migrant community among us pass away unperceived…it too will cause an impact on North American society. But how it will do so, when it will do so…

Take the farmworker, the prophet I spoke of above: He does not know the answer to these questions. He senses, though, that it is God who will bring about the justice he believes in, that it is God who will sustain him in the strength of his patience and waiting…

Both Settlers and Strangers
Amos 7:12-15; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:7-13
July 16, 2006

The Good News spread abroad whenever the members of the early communities found themselves forced by diverse circumstances to leave their places of origin and take the risk of looking for other places to live.

What we know of Amos' calling reflects the beginning of a prophetic mission impelled by circumstances of crisis in the countryside. The mission originates in a peasant— "I was a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores," Amos declares— about to lose his livelihood and his land. So he rises up as a prophet convinced that the social and religious situation that produced this crisis must be transformed.

But it was perhaps in even more difficult circumstances, under the heavy hand of the Roman Empire, where the Christian community associated with Mark developed its own mission. The members lived without power and without resources. Even so, by forming a network of volunteers obliged to flee persecution, they ceaselessly wove together the communities that incarnated Jesus' newfound church.

Disciples, male and female, became an alternative group to the dominant society. It was a marginal group, composed both of men and women, sinners, and the sick.

Many of these early communities evinced a distinct way of living: an independent way, without property, without security, without attachments, and in critique both of wealth and possessions. Their living in this way was not the result of mere contrariness or adventurism, but rather of bold choice, the only choice that could offer hope to people without dignity and excluded from Roman society.

Bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, inspirer of pastoral service to migrants in the Catholic church, writes: "The children of poverty and labor, who in human and sociological terms appear to be a mass of failed and exploited people, are in fact the builders of a new society and the special site and instrument for the Kingdom of God and the union of peoples…." (see Scalabrini's *A Living Voice*. Missionaries of St. Charles Publications, 1987.)

Among today's migrants are disciples like those from Mark's Gospel, who announce and already live the advent of a "universal citizenship." Their lives and their challenges are new symbols of a humanity in transition and of the force of a humanizing global ethic that promises to fill and make fruitful the ethical barrenness of the global marketplace. They are the incarnation of those believers described in the letter of Diognetus: "Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers."

Mark's text describing the sending of the disciples is not an isolated anecdote. Rather, it evokes every true believer's style or mystical disposition— his or her way of living within the structures of the world, as one sent, on mission, without attachments, free of every security unless it be the conviction of having found the treasure of the Kingdom.

In Search of a Pedagogy "From Below"
Jeremiah 23:1-6; Ephesians 2:13-18; Mark 6:30-34
July 23, 2006

"And he began to teach them many things." In this brief statement Mark the evangelist presents Jesus as educator of the people.

It's certain that Jesus traveled the routes of his community's wisdom. He knew well the vital methods which simple people follow to learn and to educate others.

His pedagogy didn't depend on pre-set programs. That's why he adhered to the occasions and rhythms of the people he was talking with. Jesus did not impose the "right" moment on them. The right moment arose as people came forward to dialogue with him.

Migrant life-rhythms determine the entire existence of real people and communities. In defining pastoral work with such people, there are those who say, on the basis of realities that obtain in other situations, "What's necessary in migrant ministry is forming leaders from the migrant community." True enough, leadership formation never stops being a challenge, but only as the outcome of a pedagogical path inspired by the Gospel. We pastoral ministers cannot be the ones who determine either the occasions or the conditions of that path.

Jesus is supremely creative, but his creativity honors the dynamic of people's lives.

The migrant mothers and fathers I know yearn for a good education for their children. They make every effort to achieve that end, but they are realistic, knowing that they cannot count on their children ever having the time necessary. Those same adults will themselves have wanted a "better education…so as not to have to work so much." They see their children deprived of opportunity in the same way they were.

It seems to me that Mark the evangelist, by describing Jesus' way of teaching, sketches the features of an educating community. It is an itinerant pedagogical model with a long-range view yet one which arises out of encounter with people's concrete life situations. Jesus approaches people openly, on their level, independently of structures or expectations external to them. People for him are far more important than the socio-cultural prejudices that levy their own forms of taxation. An attitude like Jesus' encourages people to identify alternatives according to their own understandings.

Theologian Fr. Jon Sobrino, SJ, uses the phrase "mercy principle" to describe that constant attitude in Jesus' life: A profound sensitivity for "listening" to the other person, instead of merely assuming ahead of time how he or she thinks or feels. It is an attitude, a habit of looking at life "from below," from the situation of the one who has been excluded and then of meeting the person right there, where he or she is.

Jesus teaches this way because he knows there is already a rich dynamism in action within each person and community. He enters into this dynamism fully, yet transforms it through his own complicity with the action of the Spirit.

The Brasilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freier, author of *The Pedadogy of the Oppressed*, was right when he said, "Christ must be for me the great example of the pedagogue. What fascinates me about the Gospel is the indivisibility between its content and the method with which Jesus communicated it…"

The migrant community, like many other sectors of the church, still awaits a pedagogical initiative for enriching its faith life that responds to the community's real expectations and that enables the community to discover the road to its own liberation.

A Boy's Initiative
II Kings 4:42-44; Ephesians 4:1-6; John :1-15
July 30, 2006

In the Gospel story of the multiplication of the loaves, the "Eucharistic" event occurs thanks to one boy's generous offer. With innocent sincerity the boy presents his loaves and fishes, and with those same humble elements Jesus brings the entire group of people assembled there to experience the extraordinariness of communion/community.

The story's Eucharistic background is one thing. There is also a critical analysis to be made about the mistaken way in which the people in the Gospel account interpret Jesus' leadership. They act as if they want to say: "We seek a leader who solves every problem and who doesn't burden us with personal responsibility."

We can follow both lines of interpretation, the Eucharistic and the ideological reading of Jesus' style of leadership, when we look at the children of the migrant population.

For various reasons, sociological and cultural, the children of migrants tend to conserve their own language and culture of origin. I say this despite all the problems that in our time surround the use of the word "conserve/conservative." In any case, an element that seems to me significant in the context of our Catholic faith is that these migrant children (born in the US) eventually succeed in inheriting their ancestors' faith values and religious practices. These inherited elements extend their roots far beyond the confines of the institutional Church— and yet at the same time are genuinely "catholic."

Perhaps someone who likes to see things more pragmatically could assert: "These children are speaking English, they are growing up in the culture of this country, and if their faith is Catholic, they will have to assimilate the US's own Church dynamic and norms."

But it's as going against this vision of cultural dominance that I interpret today's Gospel. For notice that Jesus himself does not overwhelm the boy's initiative. He accepts it, he transforms it. He takes the boy's loaves and the fishes and uses those same elements to realize, to make concrete the sign of multiplication.

How has the Church itself dealt with the initiatives of its youngest members? In fact the Church has postponed the challenge of attending to all her children and youth. But this postponement, this delay, can be seen even more concretely in the case of the population of Latino children and youth. And most concretely of all among the migrant boys and girls I'm familiar with.

Yet it is these same children who possess in their very lives valuable "signs" inherited from Latin American faith traditions. Those signs are the loaves and fishes offered to us. These children's lives hold the potentiality for the formation of a multicultural church. But if local churches neglect or overlook this potentiality, and proceed with their usual faith formation programs, migrant children are going to believe that what their mothers and families have been teaching them about faith— that these inherited treasures have no value. If that happens, then the church, as a truly catholic (universal) church, will be diminished.

Our challenge is to value who these children are. And to welcome what they offer us. They are young people experiencing within themselves two cultural realities. They already possess, at their own level, a multicultural "synthesis." Their loaves and fishes— their religious, their bi-cultural experience—could contribute significant energy to the

way of being church in this country. They could do so provided, of course, that their contributions are welcomed and nurtured.

But it will take creativity and boldness on our part for this multicultural miracle, this multiplication of loaves and fishes, to happen among us.

Beyond Mere Pairing
Genesis 2:18-24; Hebrews 2:9-11; Mark 10:2-16
October 8, 2006

All human beings, male and/or female, are called to a paired relationship in communion with each other, one that suppresses neither their identity as a couple nor their individual differences.

The moralizing concern of church tradition has seen in matrimonial commitment the entire richness of the Biblical story of the origins of this relationship. Yet marriage is not possible for all people. Still, no human being, whatever his or her life choices might actually be, can avoid this aspiration towards the unity of male-female duality. (Our readings today do not address the question whether two people of the same sex can aspire towards a similar unity.)

One interpretation of this human structure has been marked by the patriarchal effort to suppress the deeper challenge of the male-female relationship in two contrasting ways: either (the "higher" way) by constructing legally exclusive frameworks attributed to the divinity or (the "lower" one) by trivializing the duality, formalizing it as a merely conventional or arbitrary arrangement.

Yet it seems that what inspired the Biblical story of the male-female couple's origins is the amazed awareness that neither the masculine nor the feminine possesses an absolute dimension. The idea dawns on us that their duality converges from a common divine source and that therefore this duality tends to find its fulfillment in communion.

Jesus, that wise interpreter of the "Old" or First Testament, understood that this story of the human couple had much more to do with the original form of the human being designed by the Creator than it did with legal distinctions fashioned by men. That's why, when confronted with the question of legal divorce, he clarifies the relationship of the human couple in terms of the original project of humankind's fulfillment. The male is realized— becomes real, becomes himself— in relation to the female, and the female becomes herself in relation to the male. Yes, but this fact does not necessarily imply that marriage is the only experience in which this fullness can be lived. Marriage includes it, of course, as a concrete option for man and woman.

In our personal histories, all of us human beings, whether male or female, are invited to embark on the venture of taking on and integrating certain dualities— but also of casting off others either not fully assumed or else experienced as contradictions. We travel a path which, as it goes along, requires us both to drink from our origins and at the same time to be made new in the spirit of Jesus, the New Man. It is in this dyamically unfolding way that within each person, male or female, the fully-realized figure of the human being is sketched. To realize ourselves in duality of relationship is to realize our own individual being.

Does the day ever come when this process of integration is finished? The process is ongoing, directed towards integration. The male and female pair journey as pilgrims towards this goal. The vocation of human communion is fully realized only in the couple's sacramental commitment. But the sacrament itself is always being more and more fully realized, as the pair walk with Jesus throughout their lifetimes— and beyond.

At the same time the limits, as well as the experiences of human fullness, will have multiple and diverse manifestations. Among those manifestations would be marriage, of course— but also maternity or paternity without a partner; celibacy; and the

experience of other sexual orientations. But all are directed towards the search for communion.

It is the creative and creating relationship with the other person and particularly with the person whose sexual identity is different from my own— it is this which causes me to grow and develop. It is in the complexity and richness of this relationship where the interior dualities assume their proper dimensions and express themselves in the most human form. Without this relationship my own individual being is not fully realized.

The important thing is not to deny this relationship to or disfigure it into a yoking of unequals… to do so would be to lose origin and direction. “God made them male and female…and the two shall become one flesh,” says Jesus.

Wealth and Pilgrimage
Wisdom 7:7-11; Hebrews 4: 12-13; Mark 10:17-30
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Every believer's life displays the sign of pilgrimage. Pilgrims have no permanent home. Wealth cannot be hoarded, but must be used for the common good, for pilgrims are only passing through.

We easily forget or deny our sign of pilgrimage, however. The Hebrew Wisdom tradition is sharp in noting how money usually acts like a trap.

Those who consider themselves Jesus' disciples know that in their very persons a form of life is at stake when they begin to follow him as pilgrims towards the Kingdom and that this form of life defines their being as his disciples.

The evangelist Mark sets the framework for the discipleship of wealth. His entire Gospel is a rich catechetical itinerary that pulls together the practices of many actual disciples. These practices are for us a challenge and a criticism, because the socio-economic system in which we live doesn't let us adopt a critical attitude towards money.

We move along unconcernedly and often unaware that we are enveloped in a form of life that is sustained by sophisticated mechanisms of injustice, much like the rich young man in today's gospel.

The rich young man considers himself an honest seeker of authentic life. Yet when he approaches Jesus, he feels himself judged, and though at the end of his conversation with Jesus he may understand why he feels this way, he cannot fully face the truth. For the truth is that his wealth confesses its source, in the dispossessing of others. That's the meaning of what Jesus urges him to do, "Go, sell what you own, and give it to the poor." Give it *back* to the poor, Jesus could have added.

Upon that suggestion of Jesus' the best of Catholic social teaching finds its support. In a nutshell: No wealth is innocent.

Always and in various ways wealth presupposes a process of possession that entails at the same time the dispossession of others. Jesus' disciples bear personal responsibility in the way they perceive the benefits of wealth and in their way of using them, but above all they must confront their complicity in the dynamic of a system which the Church's social teaching calls a "structure of sin," since these accumulated goods have been despoiled from others.

The community where the Gospel of Mark was written knows by experience that there cannot be coherence between the seeking of a full life and the grasping of wealth for oneself.

We know the outcome of today's gospel. We know it by the choice of many men and women of faith who have decided to break with that grasping form of life and who have assumed instead the "preferential option for the poor."

At a personal level, grasping, hoarding the benefits of wealth constitutes idolatry (Mammon) and closes off all possibility of joining God's project for humanity.

At a social level, accumulated wealth takes form within a sinful economic order. The rich person tends to live piously consecrated to the religion of the market, where the rich person's wealth comes from. Day by day the market is the route for the despoiling of the majority of the populations of poor counties.

Oddly enough, migrant workers arrive among us seeking work in order to earn money, but the great majority of them can neither accumulate nor possess wealth. When

you see the amazing volume of the remittances that the migrants send back to their countries of origin, you can't do anything but admire them. Their earnings are no longer money that produces money, as in financial markets, but money from labor that generates resources and sustains life in a multitude of small country towns, where it's really the only income that keeps families and communities alive. In Mexico's case, migrant workers' remittances constitute the second-highest source of state revenue after income from oil.

Mark proposes today a sign that authenticates the disciples. To follow Jesus demands a choice, in the form of putting oneself in the right relation to money. This right relation consists of getting rid of money's idolatrous character and of freely redirecting it towards a genuine project of solidarity with the world of those who are poor.