

# The Opening

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*Homily on Psalm 145:8-9,13-14, 17-18 – Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Lent*

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As we are now three quarters of the way through the academic year, we have the perspective necessary to look back and reflect. Who am I kidding? Most of the members of the community are looking forward. The deacons, having successfully passed the M.Div. comprehensive exam, feel free to turn their attention to their ordinations, Masses of Thanksgiving and first priestly assignments. The pilgrims are, for the most part, focused on their upcoming ordinations as deacons. The interns, back this week for Midterm workshop, are looking forward (though perhaps with trepidation) to CPE. And the first theologians to language schools and summer placements in their dioceses. Of course, the second-year pre-theologians are looking forward to graduating from philosophy and moving on to theology. And the PT 1's, well, you have all of that to look forward to.

As we reflect on ministry, sometimes the seeming impractical is actually the most practical thing of all. In this, the Pre-Theologians may be in the position to best understand my point this morning. I say this because you have not yet been fully socialized to the world of theology and therefore, have not erased your memory of what it was like to be in a secular environment, either in university or work. A seminary is, to that extent, an unreal place. You are closer to the experience of living in a situation where people lack the vocabulary to speak about the transcendent dimension of life. This is a memory you must keep alive, even as you find yourselves being reshaped by your living in a small Christian community like the seminary. You must do this, because as I have already noted in my litany of what the higher classmen are focused on, before long, you will be sent out. Keeping that memory alive is one reason I see both the study of philosophy and the teaching parish program as values. Both prepare you to be “in the world but not of the world.” Philosophy helps you understand and evaluate your experience *in a disciplined and critical manner*, as Charles Taylor may have shown you. The teaching parish program helps you to understand, *through relationship and reflection*, the experience of the people you will be sent to serve. Of course, what I am saying about PT

1 applies equally to everyone who embraces the call to the new evangelization through dialogue with a world desperately in need of God.

The way we speak about God to that world who needs him is very important. Since God is a mystery, we need a means to describe in human language the heart of the gospel of Jesus. The Lord Jesus used two methods throughout his preaching: story and analogy. Indeed, the analogical imagination is one of the great strengths of Catholic Christianity and flows directly out of the biblical text, where this is a favored form of expression.

I want to begin by reminding the Pilgrims who have recently returned from the Holy Land that Psalm 145 may be the source of two of the few words in Arabic which they recognize. *Bismillāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm* which is customarily translated “With the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful . . .” This phrase forms the opening line of *Sura al Fatia*, the first aya or verse of the Qur’an. It also represents the text which pious Muslims learn by heart from their childhood. This is the prayer text recited throughout the day, much as we recite the Lord’s Prayer, to orient the believer’s mind on the name of God, which is explained through the divine attributes. As the pre-deacons will tell you, though Jews, Christians and

Muslims may disagree about the particulars of their religion, [and certainly about the menu that will be provided tonight by Cam 3 Center], yet all daily proclaim that Abraham's God is gracious and merciful. And, in the Holy Land, as a public service, our Muslim brothers and sisters recite these texts using loud speakers so that everyone in the town can benefit.

Now, while I just said that as a joke, as Father Peter DuBrul has noted, the recitation of the names of God is a practice common to the spirituality of the monotheistic religions. By meditating on the attributes, we can properly understand God's outreach to the world. Catholic theology, reflecting on the Scriptures is trying to say is that we understand the meaning of *what* God *does* by knowing *who* God *is*. Without this move, divine law seems merely volitional. And as the modern atheist will be only so glad to tell you, a religion based on a god "who says so" holds no appeal whatsoever. Catholic theology contends that God is good, true and beautiful. It is the *nature* of God as most merciful and the dispenser of grace that has attractive power.

While we cannot know God's essence, we can know about him through his attributes. And as every mystic will attest, this is a real path to knowledge. The truth this world needs to hear and see from us is revealed

in the inspired poetry of the Psalmist, that God is gracious and merciful,. Listen to the words the Psalmist uses. God is described as gracious, merciful, faithful, just, and near. These attributes ground the actions of God towards humanity, that he is compassionate, that he raises up all who are bowed down, that he is holy, and that all of these things encompass his truth. The attributes reveal God to be good, true and beautiful.

Religion is being projected onto the public square every day. The pilgrims saw this in the unique way it expresses itself in Israel and Palestine, with language, modes of dress, days of rest and yes, even with loud speakers. But we see it every time we turn on the news. While the expressions in the Holy Land all say that religion ought to be visible, what we see on the news frequently denies that claim. Our question as women and men baptized into Christ and called to be his witnesses to the world should be "What impression of religion is received by those to see us?" Are we witnessing to an unappealing "Do as I say" god? Or is the God others perceive us to worship shown to be one who is gracious and merciful, faithful, just and near? Does our witness make God appealing?