

Mary, the Holy Mother of God – 2021B

The text from Galatians suggests that Jesus came at the right time, "when the fullness of time had come" (4:4), in the year traditionally seen as the unexpected, and unprecedented. The year zero. At that time so full of mystery and possibility, "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children" (vv. 4-5). This is, for us, the turning point of history, and it means that we are freed from slavery to the law, and adopted as children of God -- children who are filled with the Spirit of the Son and able to cry to the creator of the cosmos with the longing of a daughter for her daddy, saying, "Abba! Father!"

"So you are no longer a slave but a child," the apostle Paul assures us, "and if a child then also an heir, through God" (v. 7). These are words of great comfort, but a couple of questions remain: How "ought" children of God behave? What are the "oughts" facing Christians, the Christ Body of believers?

These questions can be answered today by a Top Ten list of Scripture-based Christian "oughts." They can also be viewed as excellent New Year's resolutions.

Number 10: THE PRAYER OUGHT. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness," promises Paul; "for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). We are not orphans, cut off from the help of the Father as we face arrows of adversity. No, God is with us in a powerful and permanent way: Through the Spirit of the Son sent straight into our hearts. This supercharging Spirit not only strengthens us in times of weakness, but maintains a communication link with God in every time, place and situation.

Number 9: THE PUTTING-UP-WITH OUGHT. "We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor" (Romans 15:1-2). God calls us to put up with and lift up the weak and needy.

Number 8: THE PAY ATTENTION OUGHT. "Therefore, we [ought to] pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it" (Hebrews 2.1). We need to grab some intellectual Velcro so we can catch and hold on to what God is trying to teach us. If we forget our traditions, we will "drift" and drifting Christians are aimless Christians.

Number 7: THE MARITAL BLISS OUGHT. "So men ought to love their wives as their own bodies," says Paul to the Ephesians (5:28-30). "He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it,

just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body." Enough said.

Number 6: THE GET-RID-OF-THE-SPEECH-IMPEDIMENT OUGHT. "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone" (Colossians 4:6). When it comes to expressing our faith, we suddenly start stammering instead of sharing. What Paul is addressing here is the need for Christian apologetics not to be the science of saying you're sorry. Just because we sometimes do not have answers to questions put to us about our faith, does not mean those answers do not exist. Christians do not have to reinvent the wheel. Even the most tentative Christian has available to him or her thousands of pages of persuasive arguments. The faith can be defended quite vigorously using replies and explanations that have stood the test of many years and many skeptics.

Number 5: THE HUMBLE OUGHT. Do not "think of yourself more highly than you ought to think," Paul writes (Romans 12:3). Here's what he means. The following story illustrates the point: "Put together a few piglets in a muddy corral, then add a dozen farm kids dressed in their raggediest clothes. Turn the panicked pigs loose to run amok and send the kids in to slip and slide after them. Shrieking in glee, each child attempts to be the first to capture and pull a porker across the finish line. Now surround this scene of pandemonium with grandstands full of

parents, grandparents and less-courageous peers who cheer on the participants. After one contest a contestant said, "I was six years old when I participated in my first and only Greased Pig Grab. I came in last. Thirteen pigs, 12 kids--and everyone else caught at least one. That woeful day, I trudged into the bleachers where my grandmother sat watching the event. After a few moments, she looked me in the eyes and said, 'Butchie, you did real well.' What do you mean?' I asked. She patted me on the head. 'Way I see it,' Gramma said, 'you got it half right that time.' But I didn't even catch a pig,' I moaned. You were right to take chasin' the pig seriously--it's about as important as most things people chase after. But you shouldn't take your self so seriously."

This is humility. This is not "thinking more highly" of ourselves than we ought. Chasin' greased porkers, doing what we have to do, getting muddy and messy, and doing it all without taking ourselves too seriously.

Number 4: THE WILL OF GOD OUGHT. So many people make big plans, dreaming of doing business and savoring success in the days to come. "Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring," says the letter of James. "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that'" (4:14-15).

Number 3: THE SACRIFICE OUGHT. We ought to sacrifice for others, as Jesus did. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us -- and we ought to lay down our lives for one

another" (1 John 3:16). Small sacrifices will do for starters. Here are some examples of simple sacrifices: listening respectfully, apologizing when you've blown it, noticing and appreciating people in service positions. People deserve to be treated with respect. The neglect of courtesy leads to the collapse of community.

Number 2: THE SUPPORT OUGHT. We ought to support those in ministry, writes John, "so that we may become co-workers with the truth" (3 John 1:8). We certainly don't want to be like the man in the following story.

One day a local charity representative was looking through his records and realized that the wealthiest man in their town had never given any contributions. So he thought he would pay a visit to the man. "Sir, I was looking through our records and noticed you have never given a contribution. Would you like to give a small donation?"

The man looked at the rep and in disgust said to him, "Did your records also tell you that my brother, a Vietnam veteran, is in a wheelchair? And that my mother is blind and unable to work? ... Did your records also tell you that my sister's husband was killed and left her with a mortgage and three young children?" Not knowing what to say, the rep, in total embarrassment, said, "Sir, I had no idea. I ..."

Cutting in, the man said to the rep, "Now if I won't give them any money, what makes you think I'm going to give some to you?"

Generous support of God's work in the world is an imperative for those want to spread joy and truth, help and harmony.

Number 1: THE LOVE OUGHT. "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. Reflecting the love of our Lord to one another remains the number one ought for Christians of any era, new or old.

So there you have it: The Top Ten Christian Oughts. As we enter this new year, we should be spirit-filled, united, thankful, generous and loving, focused always on what we ought to do as children of God.

Deacon Gerry