

# Cherishing the Precious Gift of Faith

## Biblical Reflection for 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

*As ZENIT will suspend service Aug. 1-15, we are publishing the Gospel reflection for Aug. 8 in advance of the break.*

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JULY 29, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Named after the wisest of all the Israelite kings, Solomon, the book of Wisdom was used as a manual or textbook for young Jews living in a Greek culture from 300 B.C. to 200 A.D. The Jews were awed by the brilliant culture around them, and perhaps feared that their traditional values might be inferior to those of Egyptian society. Wisdom consisted of a series of wise sayings, philosophical and moral discussions, religious apologetics, science, and rhetoric. The authors strove to educate and build up the Jewish faith in a foreign environment.

The final section of the book of Wisdom, from which today's first reading is drawn (Wisdom 18:6-9), praises God as the liberator of his people. One of the high points of the text glorified God for his great power that destroyed the first born of the Egyptians, yet at the same time freed his people. Israel was saved because it had "awaited the salvation of the just" (7). The Egyptians had been destroyed because they did not listen to God; Israel was saved because they listened to God's word.

### Portrait of religious faith

Whenever I have moments of frustration, discouragement or sadness about the state of things in the Church today, I go back and read Chapter 11 of the Letter to the Hebrews. This chapter draws upon the people and events of the Old Testament to paint an inspiring portrait of religious faith, firm and unyielding in the face of any obstacles that confront it.

Today's second reading (Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19) is drawn from a chronologically developed chapter: verses 3-7 draw upon the first nine chapters of Genesis; verses 8-22 upon the period of the patriarchs; verses 11:23-31 upon the time of Moses; verses 11:32-38 upon the history of the judges, the prophets, and the Maccabean martyrs.

The author gives the most extensive description of faith provided in the New Testament, though his interest does not lie in a technical, theological definition. In view of the needs of his audience he describes what authentic faith does, not what it is in itself. Through faith God guarantees the blessings to be hoped for from him, providing evidence in the gift of faith that what he promises will eventually come to pass (11:1). Because they accepted in faith God's guarantee of the future, the biblical personages discussed in Hebrews 11:3-38 were themselves commended by God (11:2). Christians have even greater reason to remain firm in faith since they, unlike the Old Testament men and women of faith, have perceived the beginning of God's fulfillment of his messianic promises (11:39-40).

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It is important to recall the words of Cardinal John Henry Newman in one of his homilies on this text from Hebrews: "It is one thing, then, to have faith, another thing to receive the promise through faith. Faith does not involve in itself the receipt of the promise."

### Jesus' return in glory

The collection of sayings in today's Gospel (Luke 12:32-48) relates to Luke's understanding of the end time and the return of Jesus. Luke emphasizes for his readers the importance of being faithful to the instructions of Jesus in the period before the parousia (final coming).

Today's Gospel passage reflects questions that arose from the early Christian belief that Jesus would soon return in his glory and the delay that had already occurred. Written more than half a century after Jesus' death, this Gospel needed to address concerns regarding laxity on the part of the members of the community who had already been waiting for Jesus' coming and were discouraged at his delay.

Luke's parable of the faithful servants raises the question: What should characterize a steward in light of the certainty of coming accountability? The picture presented in the Gospel is of a master who is returning from a trip. What is the tendency of workers when the boss is away? To slack off! Those that slack off invariably get caught sleeping when the boss shows up. There is a need for faith and faithfulness in light of the coming judgment and rewards to be given when Christ returns.

Even if there is a delay, the message is clear: Be ready! Faithfulness will be proportionately rewarded. Lack of faithfulness may indicate lack of faith, making one susceptible to judgment. The Gospel passage clearly identifies the Kingdom of God as our ultimate concern. The Kingdom does not result from human ingenuity; it is a pure gift of God. Jesus states the classic measure of priorities, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:34).

Jesus also speaks of priorities in the lives of Church leaders. The world focuses priorities and values around power, success, popularity, and pleasure. People in roles of leadership sometime choose power over justice as their ultimate concern. Today's Scripture readings help us to measure these priorities and values against the ultimate concerns of the kingdom. The leader is first of all a humble servant. Jesus states the leader's responsibility in this way, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded" (Luke 12:48). The greater one's position, the greater the expectations, and the greater one's accountability.

### Six new faithful servants for the Church

On Sunday, Oct. 17, 2010, Benedict XVI will canonize six new saints in St. Peter's Square. They include the Polish Blessed Stanislaw Soltys, who died in 1489; Spanish Blessed Candida Maria of Jesus, who died in 1912; Italian Blesseds Camilla Battista da Varano, who died in 1524 and Giulia Salzano, who died in 1929; Canadian Blessed André Bessette, who died in 1937; and the Australian Blessed Mary of the Cross MacKillop who died in 1909. Today's Gospel story of the faithful servant certainly summarizes each of these remarkable individuals. I would like to speak in particular about the life of Blessed Mary MacKillop, soon to be Australia's first saint.

### Blessed Mary of the Cross MacKillop

Born in 1842 of poor, Scottish parents who emigrated to Australia, Blessed Mary MacKillop left a great legacy. Australia owes its Catholic Education system to her and the work of the Congregation she founded in South Australia in 1866 at the age of 24. Mary founded the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart as a religious order of women dedicated to the service of the poor especially in isolated country districts. The

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sisters followed farmers, miners, railway workers to isolated outback regions. Whatever hardships the people suffered, the sisters shared in their sufferings. The Josephite sisters invested their energies into social welfare activities, building orphanages for children and homes of refuge for immigrants and women.

Mother Mary stood up for what she believed, which brought her into conflict with religious leaders. The tension escalated into conflict over educational matters and as a result, she was excommunicated by the local bishop for insubordination in 1871. The Bishop accused of her of encouraging disobedience and defiance in her schools. The excommunication imposed upon on her was lifted 6 months later, and on his deathbed, the bishop admitted he had done the wrong thing.

In 1883, Mary came into conflict once again with the Church establishment. Another bishop told her to leave his diocese and Mary transferred the headquarters of the Josephite Sisters to Sydney, where she died on August 8, 1909. Before she died at age 67, people of all backgrounds already regarded her as a Saint.

### Striving to see Christ

One striking quality about Blessed Mary MacKillop is that she never became bitter against the Church leaders who opposed her so vigorously. Her forgiving attitude was complemented by the outstanding work of her religious congregation. In his homily for her Beatification in 1995 in Australia, Pope John Paul II said of her: "With gentleness, courage and compassion, she was a herald of the Good News among the isolated 'battlers' and the urban slum-dwellers. Mother Mary of the Cross knew that behind the ignorance, misery and suffering which she encountered there were people, men and women, young and old, yearning for God and his righteousness. She knew, because she was a true child of her time and place: the daughter of immigrants who had to struggle at all times to build a life for themselves in their new surroundings. Her story reminds us of the need to welcome people, to reach out to the lonely, the bereft, the disadvantaged. To strive for the kingdom of God and his righteousness means to strive to see Christ in the stranger, to meet him in them and to help them to meet him in each one of us!"

### Freedom in desolation

Today's first reading from the Book of Wisdom raises this question for us: Is it not true that in some of the bleakest, most challenging moments of life, we find tremendous freedom? Does this not describe the journey of Blessed Mary MacKillop? How many times has a painful period led us to joy and consolation far beneath the turbulence of the surface?

When I read the other two passages from today's Scriptures: "They did not receive what had been promised but saw it and greeted it from afar and acknowledged themselves to be strangers and aliens on earth, for those who speak thus show that they are seeking a homeland" (Hebrews 11:13-14), and "Who, then, is the faithful and prudent steward whom the master will put in charge of his servants to distribute the food allowance at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master on arrival finds doing so" (Luke 12:42-43), I remember Blessed Mary MacKillop, a living exegesis of today's biblical texts. That is the message we have presented in the special Salt and Light Television documentary on Australia's first saint.

[The readings for the 19th Sunday of Ordinary Time are Wisdom 18:6-9; Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19 or 11:1-2, 8-12; Luke 12:32-48 or 12:35-40]

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