

From the PA's Desk

**Parish Pastoral & Finance Council:**

At our last Parish Pastoral and Finance Council meetings, I talked to parish leadership about the need for us to be intentional in how we create new ways for people to join our parish. For a small parish such as ours, it's not enough to just do what Catholic parishes have always done in the way we provide for the faith formation and sacramental preparation of children, doing Sunday Masses, marrying, baptizing, and doing funerals, outreach to the needy, and an occasional adult faith formation class. 50 years ago that is pretty much all we needed to be concerned about, and it worked because Catholic parishes were full and growing. Today however, as believers become more and more secularized, and as Catholics choose to live their belief in God in a wide variety of non-traditional ways, the Catholic population in this country continues to grow smaller and smaller.

There is an estimated twenty-five million alienated and inactive Catholics in the United States alone, and that number doesn't even include those who belong to no former religious group. The twenty-five million alienated and inactive Catholics roughly breaks down to about 600 alienated and inactive Catholics per parish. As a result of the growing numbers of unbelief and inactivity in our country, and in many Catholic parishes, we as parishioners of St. Vincent de Paul have to create and sustain new ways of attracting and inviting both former Catholics, inactive Catholics, and unchurched believers to our parish family.

Alpha which will begin in Lent is one way we begin to train ourselves in the methods and language needed to evangelize and create new energy for this important work. **St. John Paul II once said: "For the disciples of Christ to evangelize is an obligation of love."** I urge you to participate in our Alpha program, which aims at deepening our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. None of us can talk, preach, or teach about Jesus if in fact all our knowledge of him is only up in our heads. None of us can invite others into the living and breathing body of Christ, the church and our parish, without first knowing intimately this Jesus whom we speak about. Alpha's very simply goal is to create circles of friendship within the parish, and ignite our own personal relationships with Jesus.

It is my hope that after we take this first step in possibly getting to know Jesus Christ a little more deeply and personally (for those of us not there already), that we in future years will be able to find ways and create programs to reach out to the alienated, inactive, and unchurched in our area. Please take time to read the testimony of our seminarian Stephen Blaxton who experienced Alpha at Christ the Good Council Parish in Plymouth Michigan. They have been doing Alpha for many years now and currently they are reaching 1000 people each week... **YES, one thousand people each week.** Their demographics is different than in rural Mid-Michigan, and yet, if we can create even a small microcosm of what they are doing, we will continue to grow our parish and sustain our mission for many years to come.

## Paul's Conversion:

Last Wednesday the Church celebrated the "Conversion of St. Paul." I have never really liked that title because St. Paul was not really converted in the way we normally think of conversion; he always believed in God, but what happened to him was that he came to know Jesus in a new way that day on the road to Damascus. Prior to the experience on the road to Damascus, St. Paul (Saul) only knew of the man Jesus. He was aware of what Jesus taught and the miracles that were reported about him. Paul's methods may seem a bit cruel to our modern way of viewing things, but St. Paul simply sought to keep his religion pure from what he saw as false teaching. Remember that the followers of Jesus were not a separate religion at this point, but still members of the Jewish faith. Christians did not get dismissed from the Jewish faith until after the destruction of the temple in the year 69 of the Common Era, and St. Paul died around the year 67. Paul's "conversion" experienced happened sometime around the year 36 or 37 CE, and a few years after Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

What happens in the life of St. Paul is what needs to happen in the lives of many of us today. Many people believe in God and they know things **about** Jesus, but they fail to encounter Jesus in a real and personal way. Like St. Paul, we sometimes need to be knocked down (metaphorically) and hear the voice of Jesus saying to us, "why do you keep denying me," or, "why do you refuse to admit who I am?" It was not the bright light that caused St. Paul to change his way of thinking, nor having the "scales (blindness) fall from his eyes." What Paul's did is what all of us need to do at some point or another. In our inability to walk or journey forward; in our inability to see the road ahead of us, we ask the preverbal life questions of "who are you sir," and "what does this all mean?" This simple question opened St. Paul's heart to hearing the response and accepting what he heard.

Something that not many people know about Paul's conversion is that after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul disappears for about 13 years before he shows up in Jerusalem in the year 50 CE to meet with the other Apostles. What was he doing all those years, people often ask!? I think he was trying to figure out what his calling and his encounter with Jesus actually meant. Conversion doesn't happen overnight, and although it often takes one event to begin the long process of conversion, it often takes many months or years to understand what it all means. If we want to encounter Jesus, we must be willing to go on a journey of faith. We must be open to hearing the voice of the Lord and be open to seeing him in new ways. We must be open to learning new things and be ready for change in our lives. If we are not open to those things, then we are not really on a journey of conversion, which honestly lasts a whole lifetime.

Recall that those travelling with St. Paul did not understand the voice and so were not changed because they were not really open to it. If we are simply comfortable being the way we are, why would we expect to change. If I really decide to go on a diet to lose weight, I need to be serious about changing my eating habits, and start to do things differently. I can't realistically expect to keep eating the same things and not exercise and still expect to lose weight!

As in all things, I must be open, willing and committed to the change that needs to take place if I am to be different. St. Paul, after experiencing Jesus and being baptized, realizes that he must also learn more about who Jesus is and what he taught, and he goes about changing his habits and his thinking in the manner in which he lived. So instead of calling his experience a conversion, I like to refer to it as an awakening. If you want to have an awakening in your life, then that is going to require your own Damascus event, but first be prepared and open for the change of your life. May St. Paul pray for us and guide us on our way to Jesus.