

From the PA's Desk

**Sacramental Preparation:**

The past few months, Mary Moomey has been busy with sacramental prep for those families preparing for the sacraments of Reconciliation (before Christmas), and Confirmation and First Eucharist after Easter. I thought it would be a good idea for the adult community to reflect on the Catholic theology about the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Our understanding of Reconciliation starts with God and how God created us in his image and likeness to be good and holy, and we have a sacrament of reconciliation not because we are bad, but because we are basically good. When we selfishly do things that often become habitual in our lives, we alienate ourselves from God who created us in goodness, and we alienate ourselves from each other, and our truest selves. The Church offers us a sacrament of Reconciliation because as ritual sign and symbol creatures, we express our brokenness and healing within a community context. It is God who forgives sins, and the priest represents not only the others who we alienate ourselves from (the community dynamic) but also voices God's words of forgiveness which often we fail to hear and believe. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we are invited to move beyond our feelings of brokenness, and seek healing. We are invited to hear how God commands us to start over again and again. A great theologian once said that "Wholeness can only be attained by being open to one's brokenness," and "God comes to us through the wounds." The sacrament of Reconciliation is one way Catholics celebrate and receive God's mercy and forgiveness, and our invitation to pick up the broken pieces of life, put them back together again as best as possible, and get on with life and living.

**Advent Reconciliation:** Everyone is invited to an Advent Reconciliation Service on Sunday December 11 at 1 pm. There will be a few other priests here to help Fr. Fred celebrate the sacrament, and our families who have been preparing for the Sacrament of Reconciliation will have the opportunity to celebrate the sacrament of penance as a family. Let us keep them in our prayers as the children especially have another opportunity to encounter the healing and loving presence of Jesus in our midst. There will be other opportunities for Advent Reconciliation throughout our Vicariate in Alma, St. Louis, Mount Pleasant and Beal City.

**ALPHA:**

This past week the Evangelization Committee met to discuss the widely acclaimed Alpha Program. I wrote about Alpha a few weeks ago, and primarily Alpha is a tool for outreach that is being used by thousands of Catholic parishes in over 70 countries around the world. Alpha is also run by churches of many other denominations to introduce people to the life-changing message of Jesus Christ. This has led to more than 24 million people around the world experiencing Alpha. In particular, it is attracting many young people who are asking the question, 'Is there more to life than this?'

Alpha is a ten plus week program which involves a retreat experience and meals at every session. I was hoping to begin the program this Advent, but it was decided by the evangelization team that we would hold off on running Alpha until possibly after the New Year. Since there is so much involved in the weekly operation of Alpha, including the meals and full participation of parish leadership, it was suggested that we spend some time praying for its success, and take the time needed to prepare the community for its start. So stay tuned for more information.

**Pastoral Council:**

Last week at the Parish Pastoral Council meeting, we began talking about a Five-year vision for the future. We as a parish need to move from a maintenance parish (doing what we've always done) to a church on a mission parish. Becoming strategic means making a plan. We need to be proactive rather than reactive. This is how we move from a maintenance parish to a church on a mission parish.

I began by asking the Council a series of questions: Based on where we currently are, are you happy with where things are currently going in our parish? If we do nothing else in the next 6 months, we must do what one thing? The single most important thing we must do in the next month is what?

We then began to brainstorm and dream on five areas that are essential to a parish that is alive and vibrant: **Worship, Evangelization, Discipleship, Fellowship, and Ministry.** **Worship** must always be at the center of our planning because for us Catholics, Sunday Eucharist is the summit and source of everything we are and do. **Evangelization** is important because although many Catholics associate the word with evangelical groups, evangelization simply means the spreading of the Good News of God's love offered through Jesus. The goal is always "**discipleship**" which is different than "being" Christian. Many Christians know about Jesus, but they may not have a personal, direct experience of Jesus alive and living in their life. **Discipleship** is a **lifelong process** of growing, maturing and learning, from one faith development level to another. One never "graduates" from faith formation, and this is why in the past 40 years, the Church keeps encouraging and promoting adult faith formation. What one learned about God, Jesus, or the Church back when they were in middle school, might not be relevant for their faith life today. **Fellowship** leads to community where people are known and loved. In the early church it was a socialization process of becoming Catholic. I recently read that for the first time in history, belonging needs to precede belief. In other words, "**Faith is Caught, Faith is not Taught.**" **Ministry** – Ministry is service to others, and it is the activity of going out and connecting with those who do not belong. The true measure of the life of ministry in a parish is not how many lectors we have, but the proportion of ministry that is going out to the "**existential peripheries.**"

After the Pastoral Council brainstormed their visions and dreams, we moved on to a PowerPoint presentation called **Reaching Out as Christ Would.** Specifically we looked at strategy for dealing with the care of our brothers and sisters in the community, and how we can begin to reach out with both compassion and welcome to those who don't belong to us, or who feel alienated

I've asked the Pastoral Council and the Commissions to take seriously their role as leaders within the body of Christ known as St. Vincent de Paul Parish. Their ministry is not one of attending meetings and listening to the report of the pastoral leader or a few key chairpersons, but one of creative dreaming, visioning, and planning for our future. The bottom line reality in any organization is that parishes that are alive continue to grow, and parishes that are not die.

After naming our visions and dreams for **Worship, Evangelization, Discipleship, Fellowship, and Ministry,** we began to take each of them individually and look at their current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for success or failure. This work will continue for the next few months, so please keep all of our parish leadership in your prayers. We concluded by reflecting on Pope Francis' insight: "**I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.**"