

## From the PA's Desk

### Alpha:

We had a very successful Alpha gathering last Monday, and the people I talked to thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Unfortunately we had around 20 people who signed up but didn't attend without letting me know, which means we paid for 20 dinners which we didn't need to. I completely understand that unforeseen events arise, but if you know in advance that you can't attend on a particular Alpha evening, please let the office know so we can adjust the dinner count. Anybody is welcome to join us at any time, just let us know in advance.

### Why Alpha?

**"Alpha is for meeting Jesus" (Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna Austria)**  
Alpha builds a new or stronger Relationship with Jesus. What's in a relationship? Imagine a couple on a first date, where the young man lays down rules of dating—don't date anyone else, don't drive after dark and please wear your hair down. Hmm...wonder if there would be a second date! Yet perhaps several months and maybe a proposal later, the young man makes the same requests, and this time they are met with a much different response. The young lady is happy to comply because now there is an intimate love relationship. The same is true of our relationship with Jesus and the Church. Some might come into the Church and only see ritual and rules. But when we have come to know Jesus, the things we used to view as rules are now things to do out of love. The love of a Person makes us think differently. Alpha is a wonderful way to introduce folks to that relationship with Jesus so we no longer see the rituals and rules but we see Jesus.

### Today's Gospel:

The transfiguration of Jesus can be looked at on multiple levels, and since Matthews Gospel is written for a primarily Jewish-Christian community, it's meant to conjure up ideas about Moses descending from Mount Sinai with his face "shinning like the sun" from just having encountered God. So in this Gospel we can surmise that Jesus is filled with the radiance of God within him. On another level, is Jesus coming to sense a newer awareness of God within him, or perhaps the disciples are being transformed also in their awareness of who Jesus is, and what is being asked of them also? The first response of the disciples is fear, because the transcendence of God always creates fear in us creatures. One of the most constant phrases in the whole Bible is the words: "Do not be afraid." We all have had those mountain top experiences in which we are on the top of the world with insight, emotion, and joy, but like Jesus and the disciples, we can't stay in that experience forever as Peter seems to want to do, but must journey onward to the events that await us and them in Jerusalem. Going to the mountain in communication with God is always followed by sharing that experience on the earth. In fact, the real meaning of that experience is not the transfiguration itself, but in the upcoming events of the death and resurrection in Jerusalem. It is through these events that the full revelation of God and the truth of Jesus will be most clearly seen. Not in the joy of the transfiguration, but in the struggle and suffering of life as it awaits them.

One of the most popular books in our resent culture is Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled*, and the opening three words say it best: "Life is Difficult." This is how life often hits us. It does not mean we do not laugh or celebrate or rest or play. Life is not impossible or joyless or meaningless. But it is one thing after another, each one demanding that we get off the couch or favorite chair and do something in the nitty-gritty of life. We all know the joy of being on the mountain, and the pain and struggle of coming down from it. Back in 1983 I studied in Israel for a semester, and one day we took a trip to the top of Mt. Sinai. It was difficult getting up there, but it was more difficult getting down. On the way down we took the back side of the mountain which has a series of 5000 plus stairs. This will be a lot easier, I thought, and I couldn't have been more wrong! About halfway down I could feel my knees giving out, and by the time I reached the bottom, my legs were like rubber. Isn't life like that for us? What is awaiting us at the bottom of the mountain? Whatever it may be, we can be assured that God in Jesus has gone there before us, and is ready to help us along the way. A former student of mine from college course I taught in early 2000 sent me an email shortly after one of our classes, and I've kept it all these years. She writes:

*"Lent invites us to embark on a journey that removes us from the multiple distractions and involvements of our life. Beginning with Ash Wednesday, we willingly sign our consent to keep company with Jesus and to be transformed. Lent begins as a calendar place. Like the early disciples, we show up. Like those who companioned Jesus on the roads of Palestine, we are often clueless as to the curriculum, the transformation, the path we are on. Still, our remaining with him matters. And that is Lent. We choose to come and to remain as we are. Wonders can then occur beyond our reckoning and our recognizing.*

*God brings us along on this yearly journey so that we can recover our first enthusiasms and our joy as disciples and loved ones. God invites us so that we can remember what is core, and release our desperate grasping at what was never ours to hold onto to begin with. God wakes us to our sisters and brothers – on the verge of war, on the streets we pass, in the house next door, sitting at our tables and workplaces – with needs we can and must attend to, if we truly believe we are all God's beloved ones.*

*As our Lent journey continues, we are reminded that in our world where we face so many wounds that hurt us and could lead to a hardness of heart, we are called to dive into the sea of prayer (which is the sea of the boundless love of God) in order to experience his tenderness. It is God's tenderness which surrounds us and which is transformative. Our job is to show up and to stay put in God's presence, and to imitate the love and tenderness we meet there in our interactions with each other, most especially with those in need. Our remaining matters. We can trust the process we enter and the path we are on, and we can trust the One who works our transformation – whether or not we understand, and perhaps even better when we do not. Let us come to Lent and stay put for a while, as we encounter the faithfulness of our God, and as we learn to love and be shaped further in the ways our Lord knows best.*

*Maybe you've seen these words of Catherine of Siena: 'We've been deceived by the thought that we would be more pleasing to God in our own way than in the way God has given us.' Trust your transformation and your path to our good God. God guides all paths, and will guide you these 40 days. Celebrate the work of grace – the Spirit's creativity – in you and in the world . . . and pray, fast, give."*

**From the PA's Desk****Sacrament of Reconciliation: Five Good Reasons:**

Last week I spoke about the reality that we are sinners, or to paraphrase the words of St. Paul, "I know this because I'm the greatest of these." The Sacrament of Reconciliation/Penance/Confession attempts to move us beyond feeling guilty about our sins, to a greater sense of God's unconditional love and forgiveness when we need a new beginning.

I have isolated five reasons why the Sacrament of Reconciliation is so important to us Catholics, and as I mentioned in church last weekend, these five reasons are as much about psychological and emotional health as they are about spiritual and religious ones.

**1) To 'get it all out' to another human being and to take ownership.** From a purely human and Catholic perspective, we all have an interior need to open our souls to another. We are social creatures, and everything about joy and love and hope and faith needs to be shared. Anger and sadness, guilt and despair have to be shared also; otherwise, they germinate within us like a spiritual cancer which eats away at our spiritual life. We need another person to understand what we are feeling, especially from the perspective of compassion, understanding, and forgiveness.

The Sacrament of Penance isn't the only way we can do this, of course, but it is a safe place to unburden our souls. The priest is a perfect person to do this with. For those of us who make the sacrament a regular part of our religious practices, we have "confessors," or one priest we go to for reconciliation every time. My confessor knows my entire story. He knows if I'm making progress or sliding back into old habits. He can say to me with love and compassion: "Gee Jerry, I remember you sharing that same problem last time, and the time before that, so whatever you're doing isn't working well, and maybe it's time to try something different?" Wholeness can only be obtained by being open to one's brokenness, and as Fr. Richard Rohr likes to say: "If we do not transform our pain, we will only transmit it onto somebody else."

When I unburden my soul to a priest or my confessor, I'm not bringing up a laundry list of sins, but one or two things that are becoming habitual in my life. By focusing on one or two things, I'm trying to find causes rather than symptoms. I bet that the friends who know me well can tell me immediately what I talk about in Confession. When I have to verbalize something to another, I really have to take ownership for it. When I 'get it out there' in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I can't run or make excuses for my sins.

**2) To 'come back' to the community in a big way.** Remember we Catholics are an incarnational religion, and we put flesh on God through the sacraments, each other, and the priest. We need to see, hear, and touch God in a real physical way, and our sacramental life helps us do that. Since we are a community of faith, and the body of Christ in the world together, whenever I sin, my sin doesn't just affect my relationship with God and the person I've sinned against, but others as well. My sin affects the holiness of the entire body of Christ, the church, and each of you. Sin is never just between God and me. My sins affect the quality of my relationships around me, and that affects the entire church too. If my sins affect you, as indirectly as it may be, the priest represents all of you, and he symbolizes my forgiveness and reconciliation with all of you and the entire body of Christ. Penance reminds me that I can't do it alone, and that I need God and I need you.

I love the Prodigal Son story because it's my story in big and in small ways, but Confession gives me a sacramental and real way to come back home and be welcomed again into the family, and most importantly, to the Eucharistic Table of the Lord. Selfish decisions will always tear the fabric that binds us to God and each other. In the context of selfish decisions, we also become alienated from our truest selves, made in God's image and likeness.

**3) To 'believe' in sin.** As I mentioned in my article last week, in many ways we have lost our sense of sin. If you turn on the evening news tonight, sin is everywhere. Sin isn't so much a mistake we make, but an

intentional action which causes harm to another person, either physical, psychological, emotional, or spiritual harm.

According to the Catholic Church, we need “full knowledge” and “full consent of will” for serious or mortal sinfulness to occur. That involves a full awareness, understanding, and consciousness of the meaning behind something I do, and our complete and free decision to do it anyway. So for many good people of faith, this may not happen often, and yet, I’m guilty of less serious sins every day. We don’t want to promote “false guilt” as in ages past, but we also don’t want to pretend we have become all God wants us to be.

St. Mother Teresa once said: “*Because of the incarnation (God becoming human in Jesus), every human person is traced with a dignity beyond compare. Therefore whatever disfigures or damages a human person is an insult to God, and must be resisted.*” For me personally that means even when I look at you and have a negative thought about you in my head, that too is inappropriate, and according to St. Mother Teresa, is an insult to the God who made you.

4) **To see and hear forgiveness; to be reminded God forgives us.** Jesus often reminded people in the Gospels that their sins were forgiven, and then he encouraged his disciples to do the same for one another. It is never enough to simply know that others love or support us, and as people of five senses, we need to hear, see, and be reminded physically. Your spouse may have told you on your wedding day that he/she loved you, but that isn’t enough. You need to know by experiencing constant physical reminders of their ongoing love for you, whether it is a touch, kiss, words, or actions.

Regarding the Sacrament of Reconciliation, it isn’t enough to know in our minds that God forgives us. We are body-spirits, and our normal way of communicating is by body language. I wasn’t there to see and hear Jesus when he forgave people for their sins, but the faith community is a living sign of Jesus’ Word and Presence with us now. Therefore when we celebrate the sacraments, we see, hear, feel, smell, taste, and touch the human Jesus. That is how sacramental signs work.

Jesus was the great Sacrament of God at work in the world, and now his Church is the Sacrament of his continued presence among us, so all three signs—sacrament, community, and priest—are the ways we encounter the living Christ today. When the priest says: “*I absolve you from your sins,*” those are the words and actions of a forgiving God, and the priest is simply reminding us of what God does. Hopefully most of us have gotten away from the magic mentality of years past, but as a person of flesh and bone, I need to hear someone forgive me in God’s name.

5) **To recognize that our sin is linked with society’s.** The fact of sin in our world is quite obvious. We know all too well of the inhumanity of the human race, not only against other people, but also against animals and the environment itself. As members of the human race, we cannot evade responsibility.

There is personal sin within us, but also social sin in which we participate in the sin of a culture simply by how we live within that culture. When I waste or throw out food from my fridge, am I indirectly participating and contributing to the poor and hungry of the world? When my yearly taxes go for military weapons which in the course of a year pay for drones which not only kill combatants, but also innocent children, am I somehow responsible for that? When a fellow student or co-worker is being discriminated against, or gossiped about and I don’t walk away or express my disdain of those actions, am I responsible in a larger global way?

Social sin has been around as long as civilization, but it is a relatively new concept for Catholics. We have not paid sufficient attention to social structures and customs which hold such sinful practices in place, but either directly or indirectly, we are part of society’s sins. If that is the case, then when we gather for any communal reconciliation service and have the opportunity to confess our private sins but in the context of the large community, we are symbolizing the larger world in which we seek to be forgiven and reconciled with.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation offers us the chance of healing and transforming our own individual hearts, as well as cooperating in Jesus’ mission of healing and transforming the sinful and unfinished condition of the world.