

From the PA's Desk

"Alpha is for meeting Jesus" (Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna Austria)

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.

Alpha begins this Monday, and we have over 100 registered to attend. We start right at 6 pm, but the first few weeks you should get there a little early, grab a name tag and sign up for a small group lead by myself or one of our Evangelization Team members. Let us pray that what happens during the next 11 weeks, as we experience Jesus personally alive and living among us, will transform us as individuals and as a community. May the Lord inspire us to look for newer ways to bring his message of discipleship to people everywhere.

Scripture Today: Jesus' Temptations and Ours.

The Gospel story for today talks about Jesus' temptations in the desert. What has always struck me about the temptation story is that it tells us that the "Spirit" led him into that experience. Isn't the Spirit supposed to shield us from those desert events, or perhaps they are a part of the human experience, and the Spirit helps us work through them? In other words, the temptations that Jesus experienced are actually temptations that all of us believers experience as faith-filled people on this earth.

Jesus has this experience right after he realizes he is the "Beloved of God." Soon after that awareness, he encounters moments and experiences, just as we all have, that challenge that insight. We are repeated told over and over again that God loves us more than we can imagine, and like Jesus, that makes us the Beloved Ones of God. But like Jesus too, we experience moments of hunger, danger, and powerlessness, and we begin to question if God really loves and cares for us like we thought.

The first temptation is about the basic need to be fed and to be full or satisfied. What are the things we hunger for in life? Are we starving for physical food, or do we also starve for love, compassion, understanding, acceptance, and the list is endless. And when we find ourselves hungry for something, whatever it may be, do we question God's love for us?

How about the temptation for safety (the second temptation), and shouldn't "God's Beloved" always be safe from harm? And when we like Jesus experience moments when we are in danger or crisis, and we are not safe from others or the world, do we begin to question, like Jesus, if we too are "God's Beloved?"

How about the temptation to have unlimited power (third temptation) to do whatever we want in life; to control people, places, circumstances, events, and outcomes. And when we face those moments of powerlessness, do we question if God really cares and loves us as his "Beloved?" Jesus' temptations are our temptations, and perhaps the more we struggle with the reality of God loving us despite our hungers, dangers, and powerlessness, the more we will come to know as Jesus did, that yes, we really are the Beloved of God.

Luke's temptation story has an interesting last line added: "When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him *for a time.*" In other words, our temptations of not believing in God's love and goodness to us continue throughout our lives.

Lent and the Sacrament of Reconciliation:

Nobody sins anymore, notice that? Whoever says to himself or herself, "I have sinned: God forgive me"? We also hesitate to say somebody else sinned lest we be judgmental, and we hesitate to admit we've sinned lest we sound too religious or old-fashioned. Except in some religious circles, the concept of sin has disappeared from our thinking as a society, and instead we make excuses for ourselves and simply refer to them as weaknesses or blame our dysfunctional homes or childhood for our sins, and thus flee from all responsibility to take ownership. Perhaps we think that sin is gone because we don't know how to consider the concept of sin in a contemporary way, or we can't bear to see us as utterly responsible for our actions. So how should we look at sin today? For many centuries, sin was looked upon primarily in legalistic ways—as breaking one of God's laws. And these laws of God were considered similar to human laws. They were arbitrarily made, changeable, and written on a list somewhere. They were external or unrelated to ourselves and God. Breaking one of these laws had to do only with behavior, not the heart.

Today we should strive for a deeper understanding. Sin is not just like breaking a human or societal law on some list. Sin involves a disruption or straining of a relationship, a relationship between oneself and God. Relationships are not stagnant; relationships are living—they grow or die, get stronger or weaker. Sin affects us within and slowly changes our relationships around us negatively. You cannot really sin alone because real sin affects the quality of our relationship with others.

Sin not only alienates us from God, it also alienates us from ourselves. It brings about a loss of integrity, a frustration of our growth, and a disturbance of our rapport with others. Sin reaches down into the inner being of the sinner and, in the Greek vocabulary of Saint Paul, becomes *SARX*, which can be understood as *selfishness incarnate*. By my sin I don't just "break a law," but I say, "to heck with my relationship with God and others, I'm all that counts."

The point of seeing and admitting our sins is not to beat ourselves down or damage our self-esteem, but to humbly search for truth and wholeness. Wholeness can only be obtained by being open to one's brokenness. When we admit and often verbalize our sins against God and others, it's for the purpose of forgiveness and moving on to an even deeper relationship with God and others. Admitting sin when it is there is like being our own moral jury. Instead of acquitting ourselves, we look within and say, "I'm guilty!" Then we rely on the forgiveness and grace of the One who loves us so much, to move us beyond it in ways we can't begin to imagine.

Lent 2017:

Last Advent Fr. Fred challenged us to be people of Joy as we celebrated the presence of Christ among us. I think the theme of joyful parishioners is a key in inviting others into our vibrant community of faith. Pope Francis recently made a comment about how some Catholics have "sour-lemon faces," and how nobody would be attracted to the church if they repeatedly noticed that look on our faces. In fact, Francis's first Apostolic Exhortation to the Church was titled *The Joy of the Gospel*. Within it, Pope Francis beautifully talks about the need to be joyful and enthusiastic in how we live out our discipleship. In keeping with that theme started last Advent, I've ordered for all parishioners, Matthew Kelly's new book *Resisting Happiness*. Matthew Kelly offers a deeply personal approach to how we can live as happy and inspired disciples of Jesus, and how this approach to living is contagious for all we meet. It was specifically written to re-engage disengaged Catholics and inspire them to grow in their spiritual lives. This weekend Kelly's book is available at the back of church for free. The only cost involved for you is to spread the joy and enthusiasm of our Catholic faith to others. It all begins with a smile to everyone we meet.

Best Lent Ever: Don't Give Up Chocolate For Lent This Year

In addition, for a great online Lenten Resource offering short daily readings and resources, visit DynamicCatholic.com/BestLentEver Best Lent ever is a free, daily email program that will help you have a truly life-changing Lent. This year's program is based on the book, *Resisting Happiness*. After you sign-up online, you will start receiving emails beginning on Ash Wednesday, and you will discover how to we can open our hearts to God and do more than just give up chocolate for Lent. See the posters at the back of church for more information.