

From the Deacon's Desk

Alpha & Divine Renovation:

I just watched a video conference with **Fr. James Mallon** who has written a widely respected book on Catholic Evangelization called **Divine Renovation: Bringing your parish from maintenance to mission**, and who has been running Alpha in his parish for 16 years now, and I wanted to share some thoughts from the webinar.

- Alpha can help Catholics answer the basic question of evangelization, which is: What is the Good News? If you have a hard time answering that question for yourself, Alpha can give you the words and language needed to share that answer with non-church-goers and alienated and inactive Catholics.
- Alpha over time has the potential to change and transform our parish culture, and it is a pipeline for getting people involved in other forms of ministry. In Fr. Mallon's parish, 65% of his parishioners are involved in some form of active and public parish ministry. In most parishes only 7% of parishioners are involved in ministry.
- The mission and commission to grow the Church come to each of us from the sacrament of baptism. Evangelization (bringing non-believers into the Church) is not the sole responsibility of the ordained or those in religious life. Holy Orders directs ("orders") some of the baptized toward a particular form of ministry within the Church, but the role to grow the church belongs to every baptized member of the Church. In the early Christian church, baptism meant primarily one thing . . . "Go and make disciples."
- Fr. Mallon likes to remind people that selfish churches (those that care only about themselves internally) are like selfish people, and they both die alone.
- We as a believing people are not just called to get ourselves to heaven, but we are called to labor to bring heaven to earth, and that means spreading the Good News to everyone we meet, especially the non-churched.
- In Fr. Mallon's parish, Alpha is done every year, and every new Alpha program has 50% of the former Alpha participants as team leaders. If you experienced Alpha last year, is God calling you to be an Alpha leader this year?
- Every person who goes through Alpha should become active in some form of parish ministry on behalf of others. If you are having a hard time figuring out what ministry is right for you, please talk to Deacon Jerry. I have always liked the idea that the pastor or pastoral administrator's main role in his/her faith community is to be "the coordinator of charisms," or helping people figure out what form of ministry is right for them.

One new form of ministry that we will start this year at St. Vincent de Paul is praying with people intentionally after each Mass. Often people need to be prayed for and with, but they don't know how to do it or with whom. Beginning in September we will have someone designated and available to pray with whomever needs prayers after each Mass. The Holy Spirit is present within each baptized Christian, and the early Christians often prayed with, for, and over each other. We are good in recognizing God above us, and Jesus Christ with us, but we Catholics need to do a better job at calling upon the Holy Spirit within us to guide and change us.

- Alpha can awaken faith in Catholics (as we discovered last year with our 100 participants), but it's primarily intended for non-church-goers, so we need to start inviting outsiders to the Alpha experience.
- **Fr. Mallon mentioned a last statistic which made me breathe a little easier . . . Most churches really begin to do Alpha correctly after 4 years! So we have some growing room ahead of us.**

Scripture Today:

God's chosen people in Israel and Judah believed that anyone who was not Jewish was a lesser human being and could not be saved. Associating with Gentiles was forbidden. You were not to do business with them or even pass through their towns. Jesus' frequent association with Gentiles was one of many strikes against him by the time he was led out to the cross, but it was also a fulfillment of prophecy.

Nearly eight centuries before Jesus was born, Isaiah prophesied that the coming of the Messiah would bring about the hope of salvation for all, even for *foreigners who join themselves to the Lord*. Whereas the Temple at Jerusalem was a house of worship only for the Jewish people, the Church to be founded on Peter would be a *house of prayer for all peoples*, especially and including the Gentiles and all those who previously did not know the one God or his son, Jesus Christ.

Saul of Tarsus was an unlikely choice to become an Apostle, let alone one who would pursue the conversion primarily of Gentiles. As a Pharisee, Saul would have considered Gentiles to be unclean, and would have condemned them. Now as an Apostle, Paul seeks their conversion. Israel's rejection of Jesus opened the door of the Gospel to the Gentiles, and Paul is anxious for their inclusion in the newly formed Church.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus rewards the Canaanite woman for her great faith by healing her daughter. For a moment, it seems as if Jesus is agreeing with the Pharisees with whom he had been debating earlier in this same chapter of the Gospel. He refers to the Gentiles as "dogs," a common reference used for them by the Pharisees. Jesus does this only to test her faith, and she shows that she believes that even she — a non-Jew, a Canaanite, a Gentile — is intended to share in the *scraps that fall from the table of their masters*, meaning she believes she, too, can be saved by the King of the Jews.

The people in Jesus' day spent too much time highlighting differences among people and emphasizing the things that divide them. We do the same today. Looking through the new eyes of faith, we are called to see that all are called to faith — to be children of God. Even though we may all be sinners, we can all be saved. Let us try to see one another with the eyes of faith — with the eyes of Jesus.

Homes as domestic churches:

Around the year AD 350, a popular and powerful bishop named John Chrysostom preached a series of sermons on the Sacrament of Marriage. John had been inspired by St. Paul's letters to describe for his congregation the beauty of marriage and family life. He called it a wonderful path to holiness. He spoke about the way each spouse is called to be like Jesus—selflessly giving all that they have to their spouse and family and to love their family with the same dedication that Jesus has for his Church (Ephesians 5:25).

Chrysostom told his congregation that God wants every family to see themselves as a "little church," a sacred place where Christ is honored and where each family member is drawn to deeper holiness. He urged his people to keep their marriages pure and to guard their children's faith against the corrupting influences of the world. So moving were his sermons that more than 1,500 years later, the Fathers of Vatican II called Catholics to see their families as "domestic churches."

God wants all of us to see our homes as miniature versions of the Church. Every home is meant to be a place of peace and love, a place of humility and service. It's meant to be a house of prayer, a place where Jesus is welcomed and revered.

May we all stand firm against any philosophy that reduces our homes to marketplaces or to merely functional living situations. May we all find creative ways to incorporate prayer in our homes—whether that means praying one decade of a Rosary each evening or reading a psalm together every morning. May we make it a point to express our love and appreciation to each other with our words and with warm embraces.

It doesn't take much to make our homes into houses of prayer. It just takes a willing heart and an openness to God's blessing. Even if we make mistakes along the way, we can be sure that we will make progress.