

LivingFaith

WHERE FAITH MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN OUR EVERYDAY LIVES

Week Five - Rededicating Ourselves to the Spirit of Encounter

Opening Prayer (Act of Faith)

- O my God, I firmly believe that you are one God in three divine Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I believe that your divine Son became man and died for our sins, and that he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe these and all the truths which the holy Catholic Church teaches, because you have revealed them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived. Amen.
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Introduction

- Themes
 - Prayer - answered and seemingly unanswered
 - Faith
 - Trust
- Quiet Reflection
 - Sometimes we pray with great fervor and hope, yet feel as though God isn't listening. It has been said it is in our darkest hours that God is nearest to us. The challenge for us is having the faith to understand God is ALWAYS with us.
- Brief Discussion
 - Recall a time when you were feeling discouraged and a friend was there for you. What did they do to help you? What can you do to encourage others?
 - Consider a time when your prayer to God was answered in a way you didn't plan or expect. How difficult was it for you to understand it's God's plan, not yours? How can we separate our wants from our needs in prayer?

Gospel Reading - John 11:3-7, 17, 20-27, 33B-45 "The Raising of Lazarus"

The sisters of Lazarus sent word to Jesus, saying,

"Master, the one you love is ill."

When Jesus heard this he said,

"This illness is not to end in death,

but is for the glory of God,

that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

So when he heard that he was ill,

he remained for two days in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to his disciples,

"Let us go back to Judea."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus

had already been in the tomb for four days.

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming,

she went to meet him;

but Mary sat at home.

Martha said to Jesus,

"Lord, if you had been here,

my brother would not have died.

But even now I know that whatever you ask of God,

God will give you."

Jesus said to her,

"Your brother will rise."

Martha said,
"I know he will rise,
in the resurrection on the last day."
Jesus told her,
"I am the resurrection and the life;
whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live,
and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.
Do you believe this?"
She said to him, "Yes, Lord.
I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God,
the one who is coming into the world."

He became perturbed and deeply troubled, and said,
"Where have you laid him?"
They said to him, "Sir, come and see."
And Jesus wept.
So the Jews said, "See how he loved him."
But some of them said,
"Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man
have done something so that this man would not have died?"

So Jesus, perturbed again, came to the tomb.
It was a cave, and a stone lay across it.
Jesus said, "Take away the stone."
Martha, the dead man's sister, said to him,
"Lord, by now there will be a stench;
he has been dead for four days."

Jesus said to her,
"Did I not tell you that if you believe
you will see the glory of God?"
So they took away the stone.
And Jesus raised his eyes and said,
"Father, I thank you for hearing me.
I know that you always hear me;
but because of the crowd here I have said this,
that they may believe that you sent me."
And when he had said this,
He cried out in a loud voice,
"Lazarus, come out!"
The dead man came out,
tied hand and foot with burial bands,
and his face was wrapped in a cloth.
So Jesus said to them,
"Untie him and let him go."

Now many of the Jews who had come to Mary
and seen what he had done began to believe in him.

Fr. Foppiano's Reflection

Video link: <https://youtu.be/bq3Mh2tKS-E>

Introduction and Review

It's hard to believe that we have arrived at the fifth and final week of our Lenten LivingFaith Series, "The Spirit of Encounter." I thank you for taking this journey through the Lenten readings. I hope that your discussions with your group-mates have been life-giving and that these five weeks together might be the beginning

of a lasting friendship in the Lord. Thank you to our group leaders for your faithfulness in leading these discussions. I also have to thank Wayne Hipley, our Pastoral Associate, for his work on each week's study guide and for being the man behind the camera.

During the Season of Lent, the Church gives us incredibly rich scripture readings for our reflection. That is especially true of the Gospels of the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent in this cycle. These three great encounters with our Lord are full of spiritual insights.

We have reflected on the encounter with the woman at the well and our need for reconciliation with God and each other. The man born blind reminds us that God is present to us in our day-to-day affairs and wants us to have active and engaged lives of faith. And, finally, today we reflect on the raising of Lazarus and the faith of his sisters Martha and Mary and the power of prayer.

Prayer

It goes without saying that prayer is an integral component in the Christian life. God himself is a relationship of persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and he has created us to be in relationship with him. Relationships don't grow when people in those relationships don't talk to each other. A husband and wife who don't communicate with each other are doomed to failure. An important component in every program of marriage preparation and marriage renewal is try to get the couple to keep the lines of communication open. Yet communicating with God often sinks to the bottom of our to-do list or it becomes frustrating when God doesn't seem to be answering.

So, let's ask: What is prayer? St. Thérèse of Lisieux said: "For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy." For St. John Damascene prayer is, "the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God." The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines prayer as: "a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ. It is the action of God and of man, springing forth from both the Holy Spirit and ourselves, wholly directed to the Father, in union with the human will of the Son of God made man."¹

While somewhat technical, the Catechism's definition provides us with an important word: covenant. God and man enter into a covenant relationship in prayer. God entered many covenants with man in the Old Testament. There was

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church 2564

one with Noah. Another with Moses. But the final covenant between God and man was inaugurated in the blood of God-made-man, Jesus Christ. This is the final covenant which will never be revoked. So we can say that every time we lift our minds and hearts in prayer to God it is like a renewal of the covenant sealed in the blood of Jesus. Each prayer is an expression of confidence in God's closeness in our lives and in his desire to make us humans a part of his divine life.

Prayer in the Gospel

The story of the raising of Lazarus is one of my favorites. We have some really raw human emotion going on here: Martha and Mary are mourning the death of their brother, Jesus weeps over the whole situation, and people are amazed when the dead man walks out of the tomb. And sown throughout the narrative is a reliance on prayer.

There are four main types of prayer: adoration (praising God), petition (asking God for the things that we need), intercession (asking God for the things that other people need), and thanksgiving (thanking God for what he has done in our lives and for what he is doing). We see all four at work in the narrative. Martha and her sister have a firm faith in Jesus. Jesus calls on the Father to demonstrate his glory. And the thanksgiving arises for the miracle which Jesus performs.

The encounter here is one which should play out in each of our lives in many different ways and in an on-going basis. Our faith is built on a relationship and that relationship has to be fostered through regular contact. Prayer is our regular contact with God which strengthens our relationship with him. There are many events which occasion the turning of our hearts and minds to God but it should also be a part of the everyday rhythm of our lives.

Prayer in Our Lives

As Catholics when we think of prayer the first thing we probably think of is formal prayer. Most Catholics have at least one prayer book full of formal prayers. Maybe they received it at their First Holy Communion. These types of prayers include the rosary and various chaplets. There is nothing wrong with this kind of prayer. It has fed many generations of people and fostered their relationship with God and it should be a part of our prayers as well.

Then there is liturgical prayer. The official liturgy of the Church is the public prayer of the Body of Christ. This is also very familiar to us as Catholics. Liturgical prayer includes the Mass but it also includes Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, the Liturgy of the Hours, and a whole host of other rites and rituals.

And last, but not least, there is a large category which covers all sorts of other types and methods of prayer. Almost every religious order has a method of prayer based on the charism of their founder. There is prayer based on the Scriptures like Lectio Divina. A whole host of other methods could fill a whole semester's course on prayer.

For our purposes, we want to focus simply on quiet time which we dedicate to the Lord each day. Matthew Kelly in his book ***The Fours Signs of a Dynamic Catholic*** lists this type of prayer as the first of four signs. It is prayer which is dedicated to God at a set time of the day and surrounded by some level of silence each day.

Let's take a look at his method. He encourages us to set aside at least 10 minutes to start. We should have a place in which to pray: perhaps our favorite chair or out on the deck in the nice weather, wherever we are most comfortable. And he offers this method:

1. Gratitude: thank him for whatever you are most grateful for that day.
2. Awareness: revisit the times in the last 24 hours when you were not your best. Talk to God about those situations and make a resolution to change.
3. Significant Moments: something you experienced in your day and what God might be trying to tell you through that experience or a person who was involved in it.
4. Peace: forgive any wrong that you have done against yourself, against another person, or maybe against God and ask him to fill you with the spirit of abiding peace.
5. Freedom: speak with God about how he is inviting you to change your life, so that you can live as he created you to be.
6. Others: Lift up to God anyone for whom you feel called to pray, offer your prayer for others..
7. Conclude your prayer with a prayer like the Our Father to Hail Mary.

This method is easily adaptable to include Scripture or other formal prayers which could recite at the beginning or end of our prayer time.

The point here is to have real, dedicated time with God, to sit with him, to speak with him and to let him touch your heart and mind. If we can get our Catholic people praying in this way, I think we will experience a true transformation in our relationship with God.

Prayer in the Life of our Community

Prayer is important in growing our relationship with God and it is an important component in the life of our St. Agnes and St. William of York community. As Catholic-Christians we are not “lone-rangers,” we are part of the Body of Christ. And that Body expression in its local form in the parish.

Our community’s prayer life is made up of formal times of liturgical prayer, especially the offering of Holy Mass. The Eucharist is the source and summit of all that we are and all that we do as a parish. The tabernacles in our churches are in the centers of the buildings like the beating heart of our community.

We also have opportunities for other liturgical prayers that are not the Mass and formal prayers such as the recitation of the rosary. But what we don’t do well is foster time for both private and group prayer. We don’t spend a lot of time interceding with the Lord for the prayer intentions which we hold and the intentions that our community has.

As we embarked on moving our community from maintenance to mission it became clear that we were going to need a lot more of this intercessory prayer. Over time we have introduced it to our staff meetings and our Pastoral Council meetings. The prayer at these meetings is no longer the perfunctory Our Father or Hail Mary to kick things off. Yes, we can continue to improve on this, but it is a start. Prayer and the sacraments are essential to transforming our community from maintenance to mission.

The next step will be to bring this type of prayer to the larger community – to ask for a wholesale intercessory prayer on behalf of a particular intention and for our community. This is a necessary component of making our vision a reality and living according to our purpose.

To that end, we are going to dedicate the nine days before Pentecost to an extensive prayer campaign on behalf of our community. We are going to pray fervently for a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The nine day novena will run from Ascension Thursday to the Vigil of Pentecost on June 3. It is my hope that this united effort of prayer will foster a sense of belonging in the Parish and produce an abundance of spiritual fruit for the community.

Conclusion

Our relationship with God depends on prayer. Healthy things grow and produce fruit. We want our prayer life to be healthy, to always be growing, and to produce the fruit of God’s grace which is his gift to us in prayer.

Our community will be transformed only by the working of the Holy Spirit and the power of prayer.

Once again, I thank you for being a part of a LivingFaith group this Lent. I pray that God will bless you as we celebrate Holy Week and Easter. May the Holy Spirit pour out his abundant blessings on us and make us wherever we are disciples of Our Lord Jesus.

May God bless you today and in the week to come.

Group Discussion

- We heard three different definitions of prayer from St. Thérèse of Lisieux, St. John Damascene, and ***The Catechism of the Catholic Church***. How would you define prayer? How would you explain prayer to a non-Christian?
- Matthew Kelly's method of prayer begins with an expression of gratitude. How often have we begun our conversation with God by thanking Him? Why is it difficult to express gratitude when we are in times of trouble or despair?
- For many, intercessory prayer is an "easy" way to pray - we can respond to someone else's request for a prayer intention, or feel free to ask others to pray for ours. What are some ways we can better integrate intercessory prayer into our parish community? Our interactions with family and friends?

Reflection - Pope Francis, General Audience, January 18 2017

- The instinctive dread of dying reveals the necessity of hope in the God of life. "Perhaps God will give a thought to us, that we do not perish" are the words of hope which become prayer, that supplication filled with anguish which rises to the lips of mankind in the face of an imminent danger of death.
- We too easily disdain the turning to God in need as if it were only a prayer of self-interest, and therefore imperfect. But God knows our weakness. He knows that we remember him in order to ask for help, and with the indulging smile of a father, God responds benevolently.
- Thus under divine mercy, and even more in the light of the Paschal Mystery, death can become, as it was for Saint Francis of Assisi, "our sister death" and represent, for every person and for each one of us, the surprising occasion to know hope

and encounter the Lord. May the Lord help us to understand this link between prayer and hope. Prayer leads you forward in hope, and when things become dark, more prayer is needed! And there will be more hope.

Group Discussion

- Pope Francis characterizes death as our "sister" and a "surprising occasion to know hope and encounter the Lord." What do we need to set aside in order to encounter the Lord in our times of greatest despair? To embrace hope?
 - What is your "takeaway" today? What stood out to you? What challenged you?
 - In the week ahead, how can you apply what you heard today to your life and your interactions with others? What can/should I do differently this week?
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Closing

- Sometimes even people of great faith and trust in God can have their world turned upside down by the unexpected. And even when we do expect the worst of a situation, we can never be fully prepared for the result. Until we're fully immersed in those moments of challenge - sadness, fear, anger, desolation - we cannot know how we will see our way through it. In those times we can hold on to the knowledge that Jesus also experienced challenge much as we do. And like Jesus, our ongoing encounter and conversation with God nurtures hope and brings light to our darkness.
- Scripture verse (John 11:25-26a)
Jesus told her,
"I am the resurrection and the life;
whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live,
and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.
- Closing Prayer - (St. Ignatius of Loyola)
O Christ Jesus,
when all is darkness

and we feel our weakness and helplessness,
give us the sense of Your presence,
Your love, and Your strength.
Help us to have perfect trust
in Your protecting love
and strengthening power,
so that nothing may frighten or worry us,
for, living close to You,
we shall see Your hand,
Your purpose, Your will through all things.

Amen.