

New Year's Sermon, 2021

“The Church exists in order to evangelize.” This was a statement made by Pope Paul VI long ago. What does this mean? What does it mean to be a part of the New Evangelization?

A book we priests are supposed to be reading of late for our deanery meetings explains the New Evangelization: “We are called to mission to others by letting ourselves be formed as intentional disciples of the Lord. And this formation will be realized by personal encounter with Jesus, so that a relationship with Him can be experienced by the transformative culture of the Gospel.”

I don't know what that means. I don't know what it means to say that a parish exists in order to evangelize. The author does not define what he means by a relationship with the Lord by the way. I suppose Joseph Stalin had a relationship with the Lord, but it wasn't a good one.

The Code of Canon Law on the other hand says *Salus animarum lex suprema est*. The salvation of souls is the supreme law. This I can understand. I can say then that this parish exists in order to save souls. Everything you see here, every single thing you experience here as parishioners, is meant to save your souls. Everything. The beauty of the sanctuary or the music or the training of altar boys or coffee and doughnuts in the parish hall or adult education or playing Frisbee in the park is in one way or another meant to save souls.

What is at the core of this effort? To answer this question I turn to the greatest of all teachers and of all philosophers and of all theologians of the 20c, namely, Our Lady of Fatima, in the maternal instruction which she gave through three chosen messengers: Bl. Francisco Marto, Bl. Jacinta Marto, and the Servant of God Lucia dos Santos.

This instruction was prepared by three apparitions of the Angel of Peace, and then conveyed through six apparitions of Our Lady between May and October of 1917. Pope Benedict XVI summarized her instruction by describing Our Lady of Fatima as “The teacher who introduced the little seers to a deep knowledge of the Blessed Trinity and led them to savor God Himself as the most beautiful reality of human existence. Our Lady helped them to open their hearts to universal love, that is, the love of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, Who loves all men and desires only their eternal salvation.”

Well, how do we come to this knowledge of the Three in One and experience their love, since we can't count on receiving any apparitions? I wish to focus on three ways at the beginning of this New Year.

First, we come to the knowledge of the Holy Trinity in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass according to the ancient Roman Rite. Everything is secondary to that sublime adoration. This is our greatest effort as a parish. We try to do it well. Your priests practice hard to get the celebration right – and by right I mean with the utmost human respect possible given to our God. The practice of the altar boys, the work of the Altar and Rosary Society, the practice of the choir, the effort made by the faithful to participate in the sacrifice by prayer, the vestments, the sermon, the chapel veil, the effort to have a culture of silence and majesty to surround the sacrifice – all is for the Mass.

And that effort takes courage. I think of the courage it takes for young married couples to resist the pressure of a world of contraception. I think of the courage it takes for the teenage girls to resist the pressures of a world of immodesty. I think of the courage of the single men and women of the parish whose struggle for fidelity to the will of God in their lives bears much fruit for us all. I think of our neighbors, the Carmelite nuns, and the courage it took to give up everything in order to have that deep knowledge and experience of the Most Holy Trinity, seeing it as the pearl of great price. I think of the courage of the parents and families of nuns who gave their daughters to God by the contemplative vocation. I think of the courage of the elderly who would rather have the Mass and Holy Communion than to live in abject fear of a virus.

The third way to experience the knowledge of the Holy Trinity and the love of God is by personal prayer, for St. Thomas the Apostle said that he would not believe in the resurrection until he put his fingers in the wound in the side of Christ. Well neither will you. And neither will I. When we put our fingers in His side in our imaginative prayer, and look at Him in the eyes, then either we will look away and not do it again, or we will go back to His wounds and put a salve on them to relieve His pain by our trying to help an unbeliever to the Faith.

When we imagine in prayer St. Veronica wiping off the face of Christ, we will either ignore this event or go back many times to it, and be inspired to wipe the stinging sweat and spittle off His eyes by refusing to gossip. When we hear in our imagination the mockery and laughter and blasphemy at the foot of the Cross that rang in the Savior's ears, we will either ignore it or we will make the effort to go to Eucharistic Adoration and make atonement for that blaspheming.

When we hear the sound of the nails being pounded into His hands and feet and the cry of pain He gave in our imaginative prayer, we will either ignore that sound or will try and pull a nail out and dress the wound by not pressing on the computer mouse to see what we should never look at. When we see and hear in our prayer the Savior fall on his bare knees and then flat on His face on the stones of the Via Dolorosa, we will either turn away and ignore this event, or we will help Him up like the Cyrenian by carrying someone else's cross for a time, such as the cross of great old age.

Without putting our fingers in the wounds, without that kind of prayer, there will be no salvation for us. There is a distinction you know, between *dikaiosis* – a Greek word meaning justification, and *soteria* – a word meaning salvation. Justification is given to us gratuitously, solely by the merits of Christ. This is what happens at baptism, where all sin is removed and in its place is poured sanctifying grace and the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. But this is not salvation. St. James said “Can faith save? Without works, no.” (2:14-17)

When Our Lord visited His home town, St. Matthew recorded that “He wrought not many miracles there because of their unbelief.” Why is this? One reason is that the people of Nazareth thought He was just a son of a local carpenter; He didn't go to a rabbinical academy, He had no impressive resume, didn't dress like He was important, had no big social connections, and so on. St. Isaias prophesied this when he said, “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him...and we esteemed him not.

It's like that story of a poor fisherman from the Philippine Islands who found a large, misshapen pearl. It was not pretty, but looked like an amoeba, a blob, with other blobs and folds everywhere. He stuck it under his bed, and when he moved ten years later, he had no use for it, so he gave it to the local tourism office. It was the largest pearl that had ever been found, and was valued at 100 million dollars.

Truly we worship a hidden God. Looking at the Most Holy Eucharist, you will not see very much at all. And going to the Mass you'll see a lot, but after a while what the eyes and ears take in becomes routine. So that personal prayer of sticking our fingers into the wounds is what will make for salvation.

When we make the Stations of the Cross here, we use the stations of St. Alphonsus de Ligouri. With each station he says, Compassionate your Savior! Pray, imagine, think of how to apply the prayer to your life.

Compassionate your Savior. Or as the Angel of Peace of Fatima said, “Console your God.”