

Father's Notes for June 8, 2010

One of the tasks of the parish priest is to communicate the message of the gospel in such a fashion that the hearts of believers are moved to hear it and respond in faith to Jesus Christ. The priest is challenged to make that message known in a manner that is relevant, compelling, and inspiring. At stake is the earthly and eternal happiness of the listener, as well as the priest: "Woe to me if I do not preach [the gospel]," St. Paul remarked (1 Cor. 9.16). A priest does not want to fail in this task area.

If we were to describe discipleship among our parishioners at St. Cecilia parish as the level of conformity to the teaching of Christ and the commitment of individual members to live life in Christ (that is, to sustain oneself in the state of sanctifying grace and share in the life and mission of the Church), the results would show the membership of our parish across a continuum. A cadre of people in the parish are deeply committed to discipleship in Christ. They frequent the sacraments, participate in the spiritual activities of the parish, volunteer in the life of the community through various volunteer channels and support the parish financially with their contributions. The other side of the continuum also exists, with at least the same number of people who are registered in the parish but likely attend Mass only at Easter or Christmas. They number at least 250 families (approximately 25% of our parish population). Between these two poles of the continuum are the remainder of the parish whose attendance at Mass is more or less frequent, whose financial support is more or less regular, and who participate in some or even many in the activities of the parish. We are a heterogeneous group of disciples.

How ought a priest preach the message of the gospel? What attracts, compels, motivates, inspires the Catholic disciples of the Lord? Early in my priesthood, I was counseled by a pastor that a teaspoon of honey attracts more attention than a barrel of vinegar. Pastoral training for priests has often included the counsel of St. Alphonsus Ligouri, to be a lion in the pulpit and a lamb in the confessional. A few members of our parish have exhorted me to let loose some weekend with a "fire and brimstone" homily. What strategy is best?

Experience confirms that the best homily is the witness of life. I was reminded of that truth again last week during my annual priest retreat. St. John Marie Vianney, the patron saint of parish priests preached this homily. Though he did not hesitate to challenge his parishioners, the argument could be made that as he grew in holiness he grew in hope and kindness for his people. It was the holiness of his life and the hopefulness which flowed from this that brought his people to conversion. This was his homily and he communicated it with power and fruitfulness. I am committed to the same.