

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Many years ago a pastor of a small parish heard about a man who hadn't been to mass in a very long time. The priest decided he needed to go make a visit and see why the man stopped going to mass. He thought long and hard about what he should and shouldn't say when he knocked on the man's door. Finally, the priest went to the man's little house out in the country. It was a very cold and dark winter evening. He knocked on the door and after a few minutes the man answered it and invited the pastor inside. They walked over to the fireplace where a big fire was blazing and heating the whole living room. They sat there in silence staring into the hypnotic fire as the flames flickered up around the logs putting out a warmth that seemed to embrace them both. One of the burning logs broke into large pieces and they both just stared into the large glowing embers. Then Without saying a word, the pastor grabbed the fireplace tongs, picked up a red hot ember and sat it off to one side of the hearth all by itself. He replaced the tongs, sat back down, exchanged a simple glance of acknowledgment with the man. Then they watched the burning coal. At first it would radiate and glow like it was its own heat source. But then it started to lose its radiance. Some of the bright orange was turning black and it would send up sighs of smoke as if it was surrendering to the exposure of aloneness. Eventually it began to fade and diminish and started cooling to a dull black and finally to a cold grey ash. The message was clear. It couldn't sustain its fire away from the stack of burning logs. After a few minutes the pastor got up, got his coat and walked out the front door without saying a word. The man got the message. He knew the ember that had gone out was himself and he was the one who had let the flame of his faith go out. The next Sunday the man was at mass. We all need each other. We can't church alone. We need the support and encouragement and sometimes the correction of our faith community to go and grow, closer to Christ.

The senior citizens group in my mother's church called themselves the live embers. They weren't a blaze but they weren't out yet. Still it was it was good to come together. God is always calling us. Sometimes It can be hard and we can be reluctant but God calls each of us in a unique way to trust Him.

Jonah had the same problem. Jonah was the guy who would complain, he would resist, he would run away and hide from God, he even hoped that the 120k people that lived in Nineveh that God had placed in his path would disappear by a natural disaster. It finally caught up with him after he got spit up by the big fish and then sunburned because the shade tree he was sleeping under dropped its leaves. He gave in and said fine I'll do it. I'll tell these people, that I can't stand, that you love them and want them, but that they have to turn their life around and say they're sorry for the way they've been acting. So he did, and the whole city did a life change because Jonah took the risk of engaging the people. Doing what God wants takes risk. Being God's mouthpiece means we have to watch our own mouth, but it also has amazing benefits. Being with others, interacting with others, challenging yourself to be a good example can be hard but also very life-giving.

A Ted talk recently reported some statistics on how to live a long life. The study group of people recorded their diet, exercise, marital status, how often they went to the doctor, whether they smoked, drank etc. They wanted to know what reduced their chances of dying the most. The issue of lean or overweight was at the bottom 3. Exercise was 4, Giving up smoking and drinking were up there but the top two reasons for not dying were: Close relationships. People you can call on in case of crisis or will sit with you and listen to you. The number one thing that helped these people live longer was called social integration. How much you interact with people as you move through your day. How many people you talk to, both the strong bonds and the casual interactions. The janitor, check out person, delivery person, bridge club, book club. Those interactions are one of the strongest predictors according to this study, of how long you'll live. Of course they didn't include religion but religion covers all those same principles of healthy social interaction and living. Which is why God says, that to remember the Sabbath to keep it Holy is of grave importance, not only for our spiritual health but our physical and mental well-being. One of the many reasons we gather on the Lords day is to praise and worship God.

As we come to gather, we come together, to thank and praise God in the mass, which means mission- to go out and engage people. In the mass, some of the actions and responses and postures that we do by habit, without thinking about them, are very ancient and literally thousands of years old. Something else that has been around for a very long time is the flu season. And so, since we have social interaction built into the mass, we are going to modify a couple of things during the flu season. The hospital administrator told me Friday, they

have never been this full. These are common sense ideas but some of us need verbal permission to upload them into our spiritual hard drives.

First, Sign of peace. Exchanging The sign of peace comes from scripture that says, if you have a difference or misunderstanding between your neighbor, to go reconcile with him before approaching the altar. So the sign of peace that is exchanged before we receive communion is actually an act of reconciliation. It really is not a time of welcome or greeting but a time of acknowledging your sisters and brothers in the Lord and to offer them a sign of peace to them. You can do this with a wave or with a bow when you say, peace be with you, but at this time please don't force people to shake your hand. You are not required to shake hands during the sign of peace. You are required to extend an act of reconciliation by either saying, peace be with you, and respond by saying, and with your spirit, but a blessing, wave or a bow is very appropriate. So at least until the flu season has passed, we are asking that you be respectful of others when they choose not to do a handshake during the sign of peace. This also goes for when we return back to our seats after we have just received the Body and Blood of our Savior. Handshaking or greeting our friends and loved ones should be reserved for when we gather after mass and not as we walk back to our pew. This takes the pressure off of someone thinking I'm rude for not acknowledging them as I walk by, but during this time in the mass, it is not between you and them. It is a communal time when we should all be singing together the communion hymn until we return to our seat. That's why you hear people singing in the communion line. Our private prayer time comes after the hymn where we remain in quiet reflection and thanksgiving for what we have just received.

Another thing that we do together as a communal prayer is the Lord's Prayer or the Our Father. Just before the Our Father, the priest has just consecrated the bread and wine and by the mystery of the Holy Spirit it has now become the Body and blood soul and divinity of Christ Himself. During the Eucharistic prayer, the priest or bishop is acting in Persona Christi, in the Person of Christ. He is leading the people in prayer. There are prescribed postures of prayer that are reserved for the priest alone as he leads the people in prayer. "At the savior's command and formed by divine teaching we dare to say," At this time the priest is to raise his hands in the ancient orans position. Ora is Latin for prayer. It is a posture of honoring the one true God. The people on the other hand do not use the same orans position as the priest during this time while leading the people in prayer, but other postures of prayer can be used. You can hold your hands together, fold your hands, lower your hands with palms up. You can cross your arms over your chest like the angels in Eucharistic Adoration, but what is not listed in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal is holding someone else's hand. You do not have to hold hands during the Our Father nor should you grab the person's hand next to you. The Our Father is the one prayer that we pray alone together. It is the communal prayer that unites us together as one. You will not be apprehended by the Liturgy police if you are caught holding the hand of your wife during the Our Father, but just make sure it is your wife's hand.

All of these things may seem simple and they are, but there is a profound meaning behind everything we do during the mass. We are the ones that can let the fire go out of them. The Church tells us that we are to enter into every action of the mass with full, active and conscious participation. Whether it's a word or phrase or a posture or action, we are to "pray it as we say it." "Sing it like we mean it." At baptisms, parents and godparents promise to help keep the flame of faith alive in the heart of the child so that when the Lord comes they may go out to greet Him with hearts on Fire.

So how's my heart? When I kneel or stand or sing or respond am I just reciting the words, and going through the motions? Do I feel like it is ok for me to Sabbath my Sunday alone just because I want to or because I'm on vacation? Fire can go out so slowly that we may not even notice. What is it that I need to keep the flame of faith alive in my heart? Maybe it's not a what but a who.