

First Sunday of Lent Part 2

Introduction

It's a joy for me to install Msgr. Hilgartner as your new pastor this afternoon. He will build on the wonderful ministry of Msgr. Cook while bringing to his new ministry unique talents and energy. I thank you for welcoming Monsignor Hilgartner so warmly and I look forward to his ministry among you now and in the years ahead.

Just as Lent is a time for new beginnings, so too the appointment and installation of a new pastor is also when a parish considers its fundamental mission to spread the Gospel. Indeed, Pope Francis often discusses the Church's essential mission, in ways that apply to this parish and indeed to the whole Archdiocese. So, following his teaching, I'd like to offer a few reflections on the mission of this parish now and in the years ahead.

Encountering Christ

First and foremost the parish must be a place where the attractiveness of the Gospel shines forth. It is a place of encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ, a place where the Lord comes to meet us and where we come to meet the Lord. This happens when the Gospel is proclaimed in its truth and beauty, not an abstract philosophy that seems unconnected with our daily lives but rather as the proclamation of a person, the Person of Christ, 'who loves us, who gave his life to save us, and who is living at our side ever day to enlighten, strengthen & free us' (EG, 164). This happens when those who proclaim the Gospel are not merely teachers but indeed witnesses to the Lord's truth and love in their own lives.

Christ comes to be with us both in Word and in the sacraments of the Church. Msgr. Hilgartner brings special expertise in the area of liturgy and sacrament and knows the importance of celebrating the Church's liturgy in such a way that as individuals and as a family of faith, we can be touched in the depth of our hearts by the redeeming presence of Jesus, whether it is the joy we feel when a baby is baptized, or the amazement we should feel each time we receive the Lord in the Eucharist, or that gratitude we should experience when our sins are forgiven.

Yes, the parish is a place where the Lord comes to meet us but it is also a place

where parishioners come to meet the Lord. For that reason, Pope Francis urges the Church's pastors and their coworkers, to listen to their people, to understand their needs and challenges, to come to know and love those that are in church every Sunday but also those who feel that practicing their faith no longer matters. Many times life-long Catholics tell me they are unsure whether or not they can have a personal relationship with Christ; they feel as if God were a kind of impersonal force "out there somewhere" – Deep down all of us, in the midst of daily joys, sorrows, and worries want to know that God truly knows us and loves us. Without his love in our lives, life itself does not make much sense.

Accompaniment

In that vein, Pope Francis urges the Church's ministers to accompany, to walk with those searching for meaning and joy in their lives. Indeed, that's what the Lord has done for us. He became one of us; he shared our humanity; and he walked on the earth. As we see in today's Gospel from St. Mark, Jesus experienced temptation just as we experience temptation. Perhaps the greatest temptation that people experience today is the decision to abandon the faith, to stop thinking about the place of God in their lives, to live their lives as if God did not exist. Jesus was tempted to do that very thing – to make a clean break with His Father – to go it alone – but instead he emerged victorious from the wilderness, and embraced the mission his Father gave him to be our Savior.

With a knack for turning phrases, Pope Francis tells priests in particular that we should acquire "the smell of the sheep." That doesn't mean the People of God don't smell good; it means that those who serve in the name and person of the Good Shepherd must walk with their people through all the joys and sorrows of life, when there is loneliness, doubt & despair; when there are questions about the faith; when there is illness or marital discord, financial distress; when parents are seeking the best way to educate and form their children; when young people are looking for Jesus and for their vocation in life; when the elderly are coping with the challenges of advancing years; when people are coming to the end of life's journey. And all of this must shape how we your priests pray, how we preach, what our priorities are, what we and our co-workers give our time and energy to.

Missionary Disciples

It is true the parish is a place of encounter with the Lord. It is also true that the parish is place where we experience support as we make our journey through life. Yet it doesn't end there. Pope Francis makes it clear that a parish is not meant to be merely a place where we come to have our needs fulfilled. To put this in everyday language, "customer service", meeting people's needs, important as it is, is not the endgame for a parish. Rather, we are out to recruit parishioners to join the sales force, that is to say, to become what Pope Francis calls "missionary disciples", followers of Christ who actively take part in the Church's mission to proclaim the Gospel, to win new followers for Christ, to win back those who have departed, and so to build up the Church, the Body of Christ.

Following the lead of his predecessors, Pope Francis makes it abundantly clear that the mission of the Church to spread the Gospel depends in large measure on the laity, on you, who carry Christ into the world each day, on you, whose families are the backbone of Church and society. I know it is not an easy mission. If you are known to be a serious Catholic who knows and loves the Lord & His Church, when a question about the Catholic faith arises, all eyes will be on you. You have my sympathy and my support; you are on the front lines. And one of the Pastor's roles is to form a community of faith into a community of missionary disciples who support each other in the work of bringing the faith beyond the walls of the church into the larger society to be a leaven in a society that is more and more forgetful of God.

Conclusion

All in all, Msgr. Hilgartner, I'd say that Pope Francis has given you and me quite a "job description" - It's not the kind of a responsibility that any of us can embrace without relying utterly on the Lord's grace, on the attractiveness of the Gospel, and on the prayers and active participation of the people we serve.

As we look forward with hope, let us seek the intercession of St. Joseph, the patron of this parish. Just as he watched over the house of the Holy Family in Nazareth, may he watch over our new pastor and this parish family now and for years to come! God bless you and keep you always in His love.