

Homily for Twenty-Fifth Sunday of the Year
September 20, 2020
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This is weekend, the Diocese celebrates Catechetical Sunday. Under normal circumstances we would bless all our catechists, I would give you the run down on the plan for the year, and I would be asking for you to volunteer. It's that time of year when most people run when they see me coming because they know they will hear those words, "I was hoping I'd see you—I really could use your help...you'd be perfect for..." But these are not normal circumstances. Our gatherings as a faith community are so different. They are either safe distanced in cars at the parking lot or videotaped for You Tube. We have not been able to hold hands for the Our Father, share Eucharist without envelopes and gloves, have conversations over coffee in the back of the church. Many do not feel comfortable gathering inside. Our children (and their parents) are just beginning the new school year with a whole new way of learning that requires focus, independence, and above all patience and a secure, loving environment. Many are feeling the economic stress of being furloughed or losing their employment; many have suffered the physical harm of having COVID – or have lost someone they love to COVID. So, how do we continue as a community during this "new normal?" How do we find God – how do we reach out to one another? How do we pray?

Our readings today give us some direction. In our first reading we hear God speak to the Israelites through Isaiah. They were coming out of decades of exile – years of suffering. They felt punished, abandoned by God. So YHWH speaks, "Seek me YHWH while I may be found. Call to me while I am near." After so much struggle, they were insecure, confused. Call to YHWH while YHWH is near? Where was YHWH during the long hard lonely years? But YHWH was there all along – they were blind to that presence when things were so hard. Without proof of God's presence – without prayer answered in the way they wanted, their faith was challenged and weak. The reading ends with "My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways." What we learn from these words is that in times of struggle we must turn our thoughts toward YHWH – believing/knowing that God IS near – always near– though we may not feel that comfort and strength. It reminds me of the poem "Footprints" – where a man looks back at the footprints of his life – the poem ends with these words--

He noticed that many times along the path of
his life there was only one set of footprints.

He also noticed that it happened at the very
lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he
questioned the LORD about it:

"LORD, you said that once I decided to follow
you, you'd walk with me all the way.
But I have noticed that during the most
troublesome times in my life,
there is only one set of footprints.
I don't understand why when

I needed you most you would leave me."

The LORD replied

"My son, my precious child,
I love you and I would never leave you.
During your times of trial and suffering,
when you see only one set of footprints,
it was then that I carried you."

The second reading of Paul to the Philippians addresses another issue close to our experience today – what are WE supposed to do when those who are to lead us cannot be physically present for us. St. Paul was imprisoned in Rome – the church in Philippi was new and felt somewhat insecure without Paul’s presence. Here today, many of us feel that same insecurity as the persons we rely on to deepen our faith and lead our prayer (priests, the parish staff, catechists) are “at a safe distance.” Just as Paul communicated from the distant prison by letter, Fr. Fred, the parish staff, and taskforce and ministry leaders have reached out through You Tube liturgies, Zoom meetings, emails, phone calls, parish letters, and parking lot Masses. But like the Philippians we still feel an insecurity – how do we keep faith and worship when we cannot gather at Mass with the priest leading us. Paul replies to them and us–“But you must always behave in a way that is worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that whether I come to you and see for myself or whether I only hear all about you from a distance, I shall find that you are standing firm and united in spirit...” We are doing the best we can to pray as community – but it’s hard – it feels different.

I believe we are being called to a deeper reality as church. Sixty years ago, Pope John XXIII assembled the Second Vatican Council. The church then was called to change. After hundreds of years, where we listened to the Mass in Latin with the priest’s back to us, we were called not just to be spectators at the Mass but participants. We were encouraged to read the Scriptures and pray with them – without the fear that we would misinterpret them. The role of the laity was identified and stressed. I believe with all my heart that in this time of “new normal” we – the church- are entering another time of growth. We are called to be the domestic church – the church at home. What a golden opportunity to take our faith one more step – the step to make being a participant in Eucharist not only a sacred event that takes place in church but a sacrament that extends into our home.

This concept of the church at home applies to all of us and especially for families. Many families have expressed to me that they are not comfortable taking on the Faith Formation of their children– they are pressed for time and many feel inadequate to teach our Catholic faith to their children. Just like general education, we have for decades delegated that task to trained teachers and catechists. For some, not being able to gather at Mass on Sunday means we are absolved from all but individual private prayer. But sixty years ago in the Vatican II document, *Lumen Gentium*, the leaders of the church stated, “The family is so to speak, the domestic church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children...” We are to be the domestic church by sharing our faith by word and example wherever we are. So how do we transition from this church where our prayer, our living of the Gospel, our teaching of our faith to our children is centered in a church building and led by the priest, parish staff, and parish ministers? How, when we cannot gather, do we become the church at home? How do we nourish our faith at home?

Being the church at home, the domestic church is not a daunting task – it builds on what we already do. I would like to share some of the words of Pope Francis about family and being the church at home. And again, this can apply to all ages and stages of family...Pope Francis says,

1. **“Keep dreaming.** I am very fond of dreams in families. For nine months every mother and father dreams about their baby. Am I right? They dream about what kind of child he or she will be. . . . You can’t have a family without dreams. Once a family loses the ability to dream, children do not grow, love does not grow, life shrivels up and dies”.
2. **“Make Time to Play.** When a young mom or dad comes, I ask: “How many children do you have?” and they tell me. And I ask another question, always: “Tell me: do you play with your children?” Most of them answer: “What are you asking, Father?” “Yes, yes: do you play? Do you spend time with your children?” We are losing this capacity, this wisdom of playing with our children. The economic situation pushes us to this, to lose this. Please, spend time with our children!”
3. **“Pray Together.** It is in the family that we first learn how to pray. There we come to know God, to grow into men and women of faith, and to see ourselves as members of God’s greater family—the Church. In the family we learn how to love, to forgive, to be generous and open, not closed and selfish. We learn to move beyond our own needs, to encounter others and share our lives with them. We need simplicity to pray as a family: simplicity is necessary! Praying the Our Father together, around the table, is not something extraordinary: it’s easy. And also praying for one another! The husband for his wife, the wife for her husband, both together for their children, the children for their grandparents....praying for each other. This is what it means to pray in the family and it is what makes the family strong:”
4. **Accept Your Imperfections.** More than anywhere else, the family is where we daily experience our own limits and those of others, the problems great and small entailed in living peacefully with others. A perfect family does not exist. We should not be fearful of imperfections, weakness, or even conflict, but rather learn how to deal with them constructively. The family, where we keep loving one another despite our limits and sins, thus becomes a school of forgiveness.

So rather than try to pray and teach the faith only with structured words, books, and lessons – we are called to teach the faith by living it in everyday experiences – dream a little, have a sense of play -- pray – simple prayer everywhere and at all times --don’t be afraid to talk to or about God in everyday experiences – and above all accept your imperfections – and those of others.

Our Faith Formation program over these next months will be focused on providing resources and activities to help families transition to being the source of faith at home – simple prayer and engaging activities. There will be some Zoom sessions for parents along with easy to do (but faith filled) activities which can be shared with the whole parish via the wonders of modern media.

The Faith Enrichment team will focus on providing resources and materials for adults who want to build on their faith at home. Again, these resources will not be time consuming or complicated. They will help all of us find and share God in everyday moments.

Some of us can do much, some may only be able to say a simple prayer of thanks at a meal or bedtime. We will all do what we can – much or little – knowing that God is near – and that God believes in us. Like the laborers in the field in today’s Gospel – whether we can give many hours or few, we are given the totality of God’s grace and love.
Amen!