

First Sunday of Lent – February 17-18, 2018
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

“So, what are you giving up for Lent this year?”

When I was a child, Lent was easy. I would give up chocolate, or cookies, or liver...

One year, my mom gently suggested, “Mikey, for Lent, maybe you should give up fighting with your brother.” I laughed and said, “Oh mom, Jesus knows I can’t do that!”

Sometimes we give something up for Lent, but we give up something that really won’t require much change in us, or cause much conversion. I know a man who gave up red wine for Lent. Red wine... not white wine. And that is how he is ‘sharing in the sufferings of Christ!’

But recent headlines tell stories about people who are sharing in Christ’s suffering in a profound way:

+ 9 weeks ago, in Egypt: Coptic Christians were celebrating the Eucharist. They were attacked. 9 dead.

+ 6 weeks ago, in Nigeria: 16 dead when a Christian church was attacked.

+ 10 days ago, in Texas: a man interrupts a church service, stabs the pastor, and kills another with his knife.

These people are sharing the sufferings of Christ. If I give up Oreo cookies or a specific kind of wine for Lent, I am playing a game, thinking that faith will be easy.

The Lord occasionally asks me if **I am just playing at being a Christian**, because I’ve come to think that faith is easy.

I want all the blessings of being a Christian, but many days I want it to be easy. I’m playing at faith, while Christians are dying. And I wonder – what will I do when being a believer becomes demanding?

In Mark’s Gospel, we encounter Jesus just after his baptism by John in the Jordan River. The Spirit drives Jesus in to the desert where he is tempted by Satan. Jesus is being prepared for his public ministry.

And Mark includes one little detail that we dare not overlook – Mark tells us that Jesus begins

his public preaching ministry in Galilee... **“After John had been arrested.”**

Don't underestimate those five words!

John the Baptist appeared in the desert, preaching and teaching. He called everyone to change their ways.

And because of that, John was arrested. Eventually he was beheaded. That's what happened to John when he spoke God's truth.

Out there in the desert, Jesus was getting ready to teach and preach – just like John. Jesus was going to tell God's truth – just like John.

And I have to wonder: as Jesus walked from the desert up to the greener hills of Galilee, did Jesus ever say to himself, “Is this a good time to start preaching? After all, they arrested John for doing it. Will they arrest me?”

But Jesus does not hesitate. He does not play at faith. Jesus understood that the only thing worth doing in life is to know, love and serve the Father, giving whatever is required.

We live in a world where being an authentic Christian is hard, it will cost us something at school, at work, in social circles. If you openly declare that God is real, that Jesus is God's son, that all life matters, even life in the womb or on death row – it will cost you something.

If you openly declare that Jesus meant it when he said that our entrance into heaven depends in part on how we clothed the naked, fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger – it will cost you something.

Being a person of faith has always been hard... if we are taking Christ seriously.

So in addition to some other things, this Lent I have given up the expectation that hard tasks will have an easy solution, and that hard questions will have easy answers.

Being a Christian requires fortitude. Faith requires work.

We've been reminded of that this past week.

In Florida, a shooting at a school. In our anger, grief, pain, we hear the talking heads on cable news. Many suggest that there is an easy answer to this problem. “Ban all guns. Ban everyone with mental health issues from owning weapons. Give a pistol to every teacher. We need to pray

about it. People who pray about it are idiots.”

Easy answers, shouted from the TV screen.

If we’re going to call ourselves Christians, then we must be Christians when we confront hard questions.

So Christians start in prayer, seeking the wisdom we need in Christ and his Gospel.

And we should humbly confess that hard questions don’t have easy answers.

I’ve been trying to pray about what happened in Florida. I don’t have answers, but I can tell you the questions I am wrestling with, in prayer, with God. Questions like:

1. When I was young, almost everyone I went to school with learned how to shoot. We went hunting. Yet we didn’t point guns at each other. What did we learn, that the fellow in Florida didn’t learn? And how did we learn it?
2. If we seek legal ways to keep weapons out of the hands of those with challenges to their mental health, how might that work and what new questions would be raised?
3. How is our nation dealing with mental health treatment?
4. How are we forming the consciences of young people, teaching them what is right and wrong, teaching self-control and self-restraint? What do we need to do to do better?

That is not a complete list. I’m sure you could add many other questions, with great insight, to that list. As I pray about these questions with the Lord, I always end with the hardest question of all: “Lord, how do you want me to be part of the solution?”

The Lord wants me to help be part of the solution. I know that he wants me to respond from a place of love, not hate; from a place of faith, not fear. And if I really let the Lord lead, I know he may ask me to do something hard. But that’s how faith works.

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(Note – at all the masses this weekend, we asked parishioners to make a pledge to a renovation project at the parish. The text of that request follows):

Here at Saint Mary’s, the Lord has asked us to do something important, and yes, it’s a bit of a challenge. But, in faith, we have stepped forward to do what God asked us to do.

As you know, the oldest parts of our complex were built 50 years ago. And they are showing some of the signs of an aging building.

The parts of our building we need to renovate are the ones where children congregate to be formed in the faith.

The classrooms in the oldest part of our buildings have windows that are 50 years old. Back then, no one thought about how windows could be energy efficient, or how they could keep children safe.

There is no central HVAC system in those rooms, to keep fresh air flowing at a comfortable temperature.

There is no sprinkler system in that wing, to suppress a fire.

And 50 years ago, no one thought about how the entrance of a school should be designed, to control who gets into the building.

We have been working with an architect for 18 months to design upgrades to our oldest rooms, so that the young people who gather there can gather with a greater sense of security and comfort. Two months, we picked this weekend for me to you about this project.

We have a plan, approved by the diocese, to put new windows, doors, security cameras, HVAC and other enhancements in the old parts of our complex where our children gather. Our plan will completely redesign the entrance of the school, giving us greater control concerning who enters the building and how. We will install a fire sprinkler system. All of this work will happen this summer.

The children who attend St. Mary's School will benefit from these enhancements. But they are not the only ones. On Sundays after the 11:00 Mass, our public school children attend religious education classes in those same rooms. In the summer, all of our parish children use those spaces for Vacation Bible School. When we provide overnight shelter to the homeless each summer, these spaces are used. When parishioners attend social events in the parish hall, parts of these spaces are used.

Our plan is fiscally responsible. Today, in a very direct way, I am asking you to make it possible for us to do what we need to do, for God's children, and for everyone who comes to Saint Mary's.

This project will cost \$2.6 million. And it is happening this summer.

Knowing that this project was going to happen, key donors made preliminary gifts. We saved,

and we asked the assistance of the PTO and the endowment committee. So we started off with \$1 million on hand.

Considering other potential costs, and perhaps additional security upgrades, we decided to launch the “Go Forth” campaign, with a goal of raising an additional \$2 million, to complete the \$1.6 million in construction costs, to increase endowment and to be ready for unexpected repairs.

We knew this could be hard. When we started, we thought we would have to raise this money while still asking you to pay the monthly mortgage. Then, in December, God inspired an anonymous donor to write us a check for \$500,000, which will enable us to retire our \$7 million building mortgage in April.

In addition, other parishioners have already stepped forward and pledged over \$500,000 to help pay for these enhancements to our education wing.

Today, I come to you with great honesty, and I say to you: we need to raise \$1.5 million dollars to pay for the work which has to happen in our classroom spaces.

I’m not asking you to write a check for \$1.5 million today – although if you want to, please see me during the sign of peace! We are asking you to make a sacrificial gift, payable over a three year pledge, to help us reach our goal. This would be a gift above and beyond what you are already so generously doing to support the parish and its ministries.

In your pews are envelopes, and small pencils that we stole from local golf courses. Please pass those around now, one per family.

First thing: on flap which says: Go Forth – write your name and address.

- + top of inner flap, left – what gifts would look like over three years
- + middle upper flap – total you want to pledge
- + if you are giving a check today, write that amount ‘enclosed’
- + if making a pledge, when would you like it to start? This month, next month?
- + column of blue boxes – one time gift, yearly pledge?
- + far right – frequency
- + signature
- + electronic transfer/billing info
- + stocks, memorial/honorary gift.
- + if enclosing check, make it out to St Mary’s Catholic School.

No one ever comes to church, hoping that we will fill out pledge envelopes at Mass. But there

are occasions in the life of every family, and the life of every family of faith, where we have to speak honestly about the tasks the Lord has set before us, and the resources we need to accomplish those tasks. Thank you for all that you do to support our faith community here at Saint Mary's. Our ushers will assist passing the basket to collect **JUST THESE** envelopes for the renovation project. Please do not put any other envelopes in this basket. Believe me, we have the others ready!

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