At the Easter Vigil, we start a new liturgical season, the Easter season, sometimes called the Fifty Days of Easter. During these Fifty Days, our Church family celebrates the resurrection of Christ, his victory over evil, sin and death and the promise it offers us—new life here and eternal life in the world to come.

If repentance was the focus of Lent, new life is the focus of the Easter season. In the sacrament of baptism, each of us received the new life of Christ into our beings. It penetrates every fiber of our being, whether we think about it or not. Our lifelong challenge is to become what we are, namely, a new creation in Christ.

How do we allow the new life of Christ to grow in us? Mainly, by honest and open prayer as opposed to rote prayer that probably has little or no impact on our lives. Those of you who are married or have a deep friendship with someone knows that honest and open communication is the key to growth in your relationship. If your communication is not honest and open, the relationship will diminish or be superficial, at best. So, it is in our relationship with God. Being open and honest with God involves sharing with him our true feelings and thoughts, our fears, anxieties, doubts, disappointments (with him, ourselves or others), lusts, jealousies, our joys and sorrows, hopes and dreams, etc. If we are not used to sharing our thoughts and feelings with anyone, it is probably not going to be easy or very natural for us to do it with God.

The new life of Christ also grows in us by trying to fulfill his Great Commandment to love God, others and self.

**Faith and Doubt**

A big challenge for the followers of Jesus was to come to believe that he was truly risen from the dead. Can you imagine how hard that must have been? Thomas was not the only one who doubted. All of them were slow to believe. Mark 16:14 says that Jesus "upbraided them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen."

What is so refreshing and good about Thomas' reaction to the news that Jesus was risen is that he was open and honest about his doubts. He didn't hide his doubt and lack of belief. Very often such honesty about our doubt and disbelief is the stepping stone to a deeper faith.

When it comes to belief, it seems some people are very blessed, while others are plagued with doubts. People may sometimes have doubts about the existence of God, doubt about the goodness of God, doubt about the divinity of Jesus, doubt about the existence of the next life, doubt about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, doubt that God has truly forgiven them their sins, doubt that they will be saved, even if they place their trust in Christ and try to live a good life. It may be consoling to know that some, if not many, saints were plagued with doubts about some of the above issues. St. Therese of Lisieux experienced serious doubts about God before she died at 23 years of age.

How should we handle such doubts? Three suggestions: Continue to make acts of faith in God, even if you feel nothing spiritual. Talk to a priest or an experienced spiritual guide. Surround yourself with people of faith who can pray for and with you. You should not be ashamed about having doubts, especially when you realize that some saints had them. Doubts do not make us less of a believer.

Doubt may also be a part of a maturing process of a Catholic Christian. Questioning beliefs have led many a person, including myself, to a deeper understanding of Catholic beliefs. As with sin, the devil wants to use doubt to diminish our faith in a good God. God wants to use it to lead us closer to him. Our task is to work with God and not with the devil.

**Four things that can weaken our faith**

There are several things that can weaken our faith, especially if it is fragile and without deep roots in Christ. Here I
will name four things that can weaken our faith. First, the poor example of other Catholics, especially the clergy and other leaders in our parish. Poor example by Church leaders can make people of fragile faith cynical and cause them to quit church. The poor example of other supposedly good Catholics (neighbors, parents, co-workers) can also scandalize Catholics with a fragile faith.

Unfortunately, any of us at some time in our lives could be a poor example to others. In 1 Corinthians 10:12, Paul writes: "Therefore whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall." It even happened to the Apostles. Judas betrayed Jesus, Peter denied him, all of them fled. Paul had a big fight with Barnabas. If our faith is deeply rooted in Christ, then the poor example of clergy, lay leaders and other Catholics may sadden us, surprise us, even shake us up a bit, but it will not cause us to quit church because our faith is not in people, but in Christ.

Second, if we or family members get hit with a lot of bad stuff, our faith in a good and loving God may also be rattled. Some, if not many, Catholics and other believers quit church and prayer when bad stuff happens to them. They feel God has abandoned them and let them down. I think we can all identify with people who seem to get more than their share of bad stuff happening to them. It has to be a most difficult challenge to keep believing in a God of love when there is a lot of pain in our lives. But, praise God, every parish has outstanding examples of people who have an unwavering faith, even when they are handed all kinds of bad stuff. We should be most grateful for the wonderful example of these people and perhaps ask them how they acquired such a deep faith.

Third, if we do not have a solid understanding of our Catholic faith, we may lose it when others question us and use scriptures to show us how "wrong" we are in our beliefs. This can happen a lot to young people after they leave home. But, it also happens to other Catholics, especially in a time of crisis and questioning, and to Catholics who are not well versed in their Catholic beliefs. If they meet up with a non-Catholic who is well versed in the Bible, the Catholic may well end up thinking his Catholic beliefs are "mere human tradition." Such Catholics would be well-advised to talk to a priest and/or read the book called *Surprised by Truth*, the story of about twelve fundamentalist Protestant ministers who believed that God called them to lead Catholics out of their 'wayward' church. But as they explored Catholicism, each of them was very surprised by the truth of Catholicism and ended up joining the Catholic Church.

Fourth, if we practice our faith in a rote, mechanical way, we may also lose it just as couples who go through the motions of communication often end up losing their marriage. Faith, like marriage, is work. If we do not work at deepening our faith in Christ and his Church, we may end up losing both.

**Caring and nurturing our faith**

A fire that is not "fed" with wood, gradually dies. A marriage relationship that is not nurtured gradually goes cold and dies. In a similar manner, a faith that is not nurtured also fades. If we do not care for our faith, we will wake up one morning with little or no faith. This happens all the time. We see it especially with regard to the Eucharist. People at one stage of their lives have a strong faith and love for the Eucharist. "Stuff happens" and they stop going to church. It could be because bad things happen or because they become so busy with other things that their spiritual life is neglected. As with a marriage relationship, a crisis can lead to a stronger faith life or to a break with God and church. On any given weekend in church, some people are returning to God and church and some are consciously or unconsciously distancing themselves. The following are some concrete things that help us nurture our faith.

Have a regular quite time with God in prayer. But, we must be open and honest with him about what is going on in our lives. Rote prayer allows faith to gradually die, just as rote conversation does nothing to nurture a relationship.

Be around people of strong faith. Faith and belief is contagious. Having a relationship with people of strong faith will help to nurture our faith. Such company will bolster our faith when our faith is weak and faltering.

Read good spiritual books and become informed about our catholic faith.

Go to Mass regularly. In saying that, I am sure I am preaching to the choir.