

[Readings: Rev. 7:2-4, 9-14; Psalm 24; 1 John 3:1-3; Matt 5:1-12a]

A Time for Heroes is a fitting title for today's feast of All Saints. The title comes from a book by Robert Dilenschneider. In his introduction, he writes that before September 11, 2001, "heroism had become so devalued that the term 'hero' was primarily applied to athletes, to comic book and video-game characters. Instead of real heroes, we had super-heroes and action heroes."

But September 11, 2001 changed all that. He continues, "In the wake of that catastrophe, a few public figures ascended to heroic heights, including hundreds of firefighters, police officers, emergency medical technicians, and ordinary men and women. Since that day, heroism no longer sounds like an old-fashioned idea. On the contrary, it seems fresh."

To prove that there is no shortage of heroes, the author assembles an awesome array of people who qualify as heroes. His list includes Winston Churchill and Harry Truman, Charles Lindberg and Amelia Earhart, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago and little Ruby Nell Bridges, the six-year-old black child who integrated an all-white school in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1960.

Today's celebration of All Saints is an emphatic reminder that our faith heroes are the people we now honor as saints. Our First Reading from Revelation makes two attempts to give us the number of our "holy heroes." John tells us he "heard the number of those who had been marked by the seal, one hundred and forty-four thousand." This is not a literal number. This multiple of a decade, a dozen and a thousand are numbers signifying completeness and is meant to be all-inclusive. Even if it was to be taken literally, the Roman Catholic Church has officially acknowledged only twelve thousand of them. With my luck, if I made it to the Pearly Gates, my ticket number would be 144,012!

We still have a way to go! We are only at the 8.3% mark! That should give us great hope! Then, to make sure that nobody is left out of the count, John writes that he has a "vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people and tongue."

We cannot possibly know all of them. But it is possible and important that we get to know some of them, even those who lived among us and with us in our time and in our place. Who knows, the list might even include you and me one day! Another John reminds us in our Second Reading: “Beloved... we are God’s children NOW; what we shall be has not yet been revealed.” One day, “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

Now, imagine Jesus seated on the hillside in today’s Gospel passage. Several of His disciples, including you and me, are gathered in front of Him. He looks intently into the eyes of each one of us. He recalls our individual stories. He knows our hopes and our fears. He recognizes that we are the ones who will suffer for the sake of His message. Focusing on the face of one of these disciples, a man who was recently betrayed by a good friend, the Teacher says to him: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, the Kingdom of Heaven is yours.”

Turning to another, Jesus sees a disciple who is mourning the recent death of his wife and child, and Jesus assures him: “Blessed are they who mourn; they will be comforted.”

The Greek word *makarioi* which is repeated nine times in this Gospel, is usually translated as “blessed” or “happy.” But imagine Jesus using the word, “Congratulations!” instead. Some scholars support this translation. “Blessed” means you are favored by God. “Happy” means that your joy will be complete one day. “Congratulations” means, “We did it! We made it through life together! We passed the test of life’s unfairness and we have been found faithful!”

What is our prize for living a life of the Beatitudes? “The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to YOU!” “The Kingdom of Heaven and all its blessings are yours!” A heroic ending for ordinary lives lived in extraordinary ways! AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 25:6, 7-9; Psalm 23; Romans 6:3-9; John 6:37-40]

Some fear it. Others hope for it. Some see it as proof of God's mercy; others as testimony to God's wrath. Many don't know anything about it, while many more have forgotten what they once knew.

The "it" is Purgatory, and when it comes to Catholic beliefs about the afterlife, the Church's teachings on Purgatory have long been among its most contested and misunderstood.

Yet, despite all the confusion, the teachings themselves aren't that complicated. At their most basic, they can be boiled down to nine essential truths -- truths that not only illuminate the Church's doctrine, but also reveal the eternal significance of those teachings for us and those we've lost.

So, what are those essentials?

1. Purgatory exists.

That may seem like stating the obvious, but for some Catholics, Purgatory has become what pastor, author and blogger Father Dwight Longenecker called "the forgotten doctrine." He says. "Many modern Catholics don't know what purgatory is anymore. They have bought into the idea that sin has no consequences, that everyone goes to Heaven because God is too nice to send anyone anywhere else." The Church's doctrine on Purgatory, however, proclaims the opposite. It reminds us that sin does have consequences -- eternal ones -- and that while God is Love, God still honors the free choices made by men and women. "That's the terrifying compliment God pays the creature," said Dr. Regis Martin, professor of theology at Franciscan University. "He takes seriously the freedom we exercise, even if it carries us straight into Hell."

That being said, he continued, "While hopefully few of us are so wicked that we would choose to be wretched forever without God, not many of us are so pure that we can be catapulted straight into the arms of God. Most of us are somewhere in between."

Hence the need for Purgatory — the final purification of those who die in friendship with God but who haven't fully broken their attachment to sin or atoned for wrongs done in this life.

"When we stand before Christ the Judge, all the compromises we've made, all the gray areas into which our choices led us, have to be accounted for," said Martin. "We've got to square accounts with the Judge."

2. Purgatory isn't merely a punishment.

It's a merciful gift and a testimony to God's love. The role of suffering is to undo the damage we've done. It's God the Healer applying the remedy to make us perfect images of Christ."

3. The suffering endured by souls in Purgatory isn't physical pain.

Through the centuries, artists striving to convey the sufferings of Purgatory have depicted men and women tormented by a burning fire. But those illustrations aren't a literal representation of the goings-on in the purgative state. They can't be. In Purgatory, the soul remains separated from its body, so it can only suffer spiritually, not physically. That's not to say, however, that the flames of Purgatory aren't real. They are.

"The fire by which we're purified is an interior burning for the love of God," explained Susan Tassone, author of seven books on Purgatory, "Immediately after their death, the souls in Purgatory saw God in all his glory. They saw His love, His goodness, and the plans He had for us. And they yearn for that. They burn for it, with a yearning that surpasses the heat of any earthly fire."

4. The souls in Purgatory experience joy, as well as pain.

Every soul in Purgatory is bound for glory. Their fate has been sealed, and ultimately it's a blessed fate. Therefore, the time they spend in Purgatory, whether short or long, is a time marked not only by suffering, but also by joy. Mother Angelica was noted for saying, "I'll be happy even if I am in the last seat of the last car of the train to Purgatory, because I know its final destination!

5. Our prayers for the dead matter eternally.

The souls in Purgatory may be bound for glory, but the process of purgation still can be long and painful. That's where we come in.

That's why they need our prayers, especially the Mass. The Masses we have offered for the souls in Purgatory are the best thing we can do for our beloved dead. Because the Mass is the highest form of worship and prayer.

It's also not bound by time. The Church teaches that Purgatory operates outside of space and time as we on earth experience it. Which means we should never stop praying for those we've lost. Even before people used the word 'Purgatory,' they recognized the need to offer up prayers and have Masses said for those who've left this life."

6. The holy souls intercede for us.

The souls in Purgatory can't do anything for themselves, but the Church has long believed that they can do something for us: They can pray for us, helping obtain for us the graces we need to follow Christ more perfectly. I didn't know this when I was researching this homily.

The same is doubly true of the souls now in Heaven, whom our prayers helped. Those souls become like our second guardian angels, taking us under their wing. "That's because the gift we helped give them was the Beatific Vision, which is the greatest gift of all."

7. The Church's teachings on Purgatory are rooted in Scripture.

If you're looking for scriptural evidence for Purgatory, start in the Second Book of Maccabees (12:45), where Judas Maccabee orders prayers and sacrifices for fallen soldiers who committed idolatry shortly before their death. Their beseeching implies there is hope even beyond the grave for those who defiled themselves.

In the New Testament, St. Paul likewise hints at the cleansing fires of Purgatory when he writes, "If any man's work is burned up he will suffer loss though he himself will be saved" (1 Cor 3:12-15). He also seemingly prays for the soul of Onesiphorus in 2 Timothy 1:18.

8. Purgatory wasn't an invention of the medieval Church.

Even before people used the word 'Purgatory,' during the Middle Ages, they recognized the need to offer up prayers and have Masses said for those who've left this life.

That uninterrupted witness includes the writings of Church Fathers and Doctors from the first century onward. It also includes records of Catholics commemorating the anniversaries of departed loved ones with Masses and prayers, the inclusion of burying the dead among the spiritual works of mercy, and centuries of Christians who left money in their wills for Masses to be said for their souls. Since the damned cannot benefit by our prayers and the blessed in Heaven have no need for our prayers, that enduring witness implies another place or state where souls exist who can benefit from them."

9. Purgatory is like spiritual summer school.

How's that? To start with, just as sitting in a classroom during January is easier than sitting in a classroom during July, doing the suffering and sacrificing it takes to grow in holiness is easier on earth than it is in Purgatory.

In part, that's because on earth we still have our physical bodies.

“Our task is to become conformed to Christ,” Father Longenecker says. “That’s a task we’re supposed to do here. It has a physical dimension to it.”

Which is to say, with our bodies we can do good works that break us of attachments to sin and self. Without a body, all those corporal works of mercy -- all those ways of loving and serving others, as well as atoning for sin -- are impossible. Even more fundamentally, purgatory is like summer school because, just like summer school, no one has to go there. Purgatory is not supposed to be the norm. We can do all the work necessary to become holy here. We just need to make use of the graces he gives us now.”

Taken from an article by *Emily Stimpson*, an *Our Sunday Visitor* contributing editor.

Unleash the Gospel Homily #1

[Readings: Deut. 6:2-6; Ps. 18; Heb. 7:23-28; Mark 12:28-34]

This weekend, in Catholic parishes all around the Archdiocese of Detroit, this weekend has been designated as “Unleash the Gospel” weekend. But first, a commentary on today’s readings, courtesy of Fr. Stephen Pulis, Director of Evangelization, Catechetics and Catholic Schools for the Archdiocese of Detroit.

There are many names for Jesus in the New Testament: Lord, Master, Friend, Christ. All of these point to a different aspect of the person and mission of Jesus. Today, Jesus is referred to as “Teacher.” Think about a great teacher you had in your life. What were their inspiring characteristics?

They were good at conveying the message – they helped us learn something new. They were passionate about their subject – not just imparting knowledge but imparting passion. They were challenging – they brought more out of us than we knew we had; they made us grow.

Jesus is called teacher because he *teaches* us something new. He conveys a new message – a new reality – to us. He touches not just our head but our hearts as well. And He calls us to grow; to be challenged in what the deepest meaning of life is. He says to the scribe: “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” What is missing in the scribe? He needs to move from *knowing* the commandments to *doing* the commandments with the love of God, others and self. The hardest journey for him and for all of us is the shortest distance from the head (knowledge) to the heart (decision-making). Until our faith takes root in our heart, we will not yet be at the Kingdom.

To be incorporated into the Kingdom of God is to be transformed by God’s love. This can only happen through baptism; but we must *receive* it. We must take on a new heart. This transformation happens through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus calls us to grow; to be challenged in what the deepest meaning of life is. So what does He teach us? He teaches us what it means to be a disciple; this involves two steps.

Step One is to: *Love God first, with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength.* Jesus reveals to us who God is. God's heart is made known to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus, as we hear in the Second Reading, "offered himself" for us. God loves us to such a degree that He holds nothing back from us. His love for us is radical and intense. And because God's gift to us is limitless – *all of himself* – God can ask for all of us: our heart – the place of our decision-making and our soul – with our eternal destination in mind. Your mind – what you fill your mind with; the study and knowledge of God! And your strength – loving God is a battle against temptation; it requires a fight!

Step Two is to: *Love your neighbor as yourself.* St. John tells us, "Whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen." (1Jn 4:20). Disciples are called to follow Jesus; to love the people He loved. And He loved everyone. Because Jesus willingly gave Himself up for others, we are called to love them in deed, as well.

How do we become better disciples? We have been in the midst of a "missionary conversion" in the Archdiocese of Detroit over the past four years. This means learning from *the teacher* what it means to be a disciple. It means we commit to following Jesus.

We have a road map – a key – to following Jesus in the Archdiocese of Detroit. We are calling it *Unleash the Gospel*. It is the vision for the movement for each of us to become a particular kind of disciple: a band of JOYFUL MISSIONARY DISCIPLES! The Lord is inviting us to return to what it means for us to be disciples of Jesus. This is what *Unleash the Gospel* is about.

Unleash the Gospel is our movement in the Archdiocese of Detroit, our mission to move into the Kingdom of God. There are three parts: Being outward focused, moving from an attitude of maintenance to an attitude of mission -- our faith moving beyond the physical church. Claiming our identity – we have power over sin in our lives. Leaning in to the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit – being bold witnesses for the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Why now? Why introduce this movement right now?

Current circumstances teach us about sin. Sin is powerful. If we allow it to, sin can/will corrupt our lives. We see how sin has corrupted even high-ranking Church leaders. Sin is prevalent. It is everywhere and all of us must confront it. The Church and her members are not immune from the challenges and the scandal of sin – even grave sin. But Jesus Christ stronger than sin, and His Body, the Church is stronger than sin because we have the Holy Spirit, we have the Seven Sacraments, we have the Word of God, and we have a 2000-year history of kicking some major devil butt!

Ultimately, Jesus Christ is all we have to offer. The Church's only mission is to point to Christ – even if we can only do it poorly at times. Jesus is the answer to every human life. Every person, whether they know it or not, was created to know Jesus Christ. He is *the* one and *the only* one who fulfills us. St. Paul reminds us that where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.

The cross teaches us that even the tremendous tragedy of Good Friday can bring about something great on Easter Sunday. In our time of sin and scandal, Jesus is calling us to know this His grace is even more abundant right now, right here in the Archdiocese of Detroit!

We must seize this opportunity of God's grace so that we can become "Spirit-led and Spirit-fed," totally obedient to Jesus! We must return to the fundamental reality of the Gospel: that Jesus Christ offered Himself "once for all" and gives us the power to live as His disciples, as His friends, and as His brothers and sisters, daughters and sons of the One God and Father

This is the meaning of *Unleash the Gospel* as a movement. We have the opportunity now to be more than "not far" from the Kingdom. I'm going to ask two volunteer Archdiocesan missionaries who are with us this weekend, Tom Francis and Marisa Rosenbaum, to come forward and share an opportunity we have this week to take the first step in this direction...

Unleash the Gospel Homily #2: Unleash the Gospel in Me (by Fr. Charles Fox)
[Readings: 1 Kings 17:10-16; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44]

This week, Fr. Charles Fox, a member of the faculty at Sacred Heart Major Seminary, shares his reflection on how to “Unleash the Gospel in Me.”

Evangelization gets personal. I don’t know about you, but for me the most frightening thing about evangelization is that *I* am called to do it. It all sounds great when we talk about the mission Jesus entrusted to His apostles, how they were empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and how the Church down through the ages has preached the Gospel and led people to Christ. All of that sounds great. I *want* people to love Jesus and the Church. I *want* people to go to Heaven. I *want* them to find fulfillment and joy and peace.

I *want* all of that for people, and I’m *glad* the Church does evangelization. But do I want to be *The One* who takes-up the mission of the apostles? Do I have what it takes to share the Gospel with my family members, my friends, my co-workers, my neighbors?

To be honest, there have been times in my life when I’ve said “no” to those questions. We live in a society that tells us not to talk to other people about religion. Even today, when people post their opinions on social media all the time, it can still seem taboo to talk about religion when we’re face-to-face with someone. And I’m not a confrontational person by nature.

So sometimes it has been easier for me to lean on the old idea that we only need to preach by our *example*. Now, our example *is* essential. But in my heart, I think I always knew that words were *also* necessary. As I consider my own Catholic faith, I know that I owe it not just to the *good example* of my family, friends, parish priests, and teachers, but also to their *words*.

Remembering my upbringing in the faith makes me profoundly grateful for all of the good people God has placed in my life. But it also reassures me that I can do evangelization. Even now that I am a priest, sometimes I need that reassurance. And I’d like to make three points that help to reassure me about the “do-ability” of evangelization. These points are connected to today’s Readings

and I hope they help all of us to see more clearly the answers to the questions, “Why should we evangelize?” and “How should we evangelize?”

First, all evangelization is motivated by *love*. We read in John’s Gospel (3:16), “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” When I think about the people who have shared the Catholic faith with me, I know that they did it because they loved *God* and they loved *me* and wanted me not to *perish*, but to have eternal *life*.

And we see in today’s Gospel something else about the kind of love we need to have. It needs to be *self-sacrificing* love. The love that puts God first. Love that puts the needs of others ahead of my own needs, my own comfort. The widow in today’s Gospel, as Jesus says, “contributed all she had, her whole livelihood.” You and I may find evangelization difficult, inconvenient, or intimidating at times. But should any of that stop us? Can’t we love like God loves? Don’t we want to make sure that other people “might not perish but might have eternal life”? Can’t we give of ourselves, sacrificing for the sake of others?

Each of us needs to recognize the *stakes* involved in evangelization, that it really is a life-and-death matter. And we need to think about how much we love and want the best for our families, friends, fellow parishioners, and even strangers. Then it becomes clear that the *benefit* of sharing the Gospel *far outweighs* the cost.

Here we’re already coming to the second point, which is that *evangelization is rooted in one radiant, penetrating truth*: Jesus Christ has died for us; He has saved us from sin and death; He has conquered our enemy the Devil; He is Risen and is in Heaven right now interceding for us with his Father.

That is the message of today’s Second Reading. Jesus is alive right now. He wants us to live. Not just to exist, but to live. Forever. And the gift He offers us demands our response. We have to say “yes” if we want the life he’s offering. And that “yes” has to change and shape our lives. One day, He will come again and we will be judged on our response to the gift Christ offers us.

None of this is a matter of opinion. It is the truth. For everyone. Whether it is accepted or rejected, it is true. And the truth needs to be told, just as I would share the truth if I knew there was a medicine that could cure cancer. I would never let some awkward feeling stop me from sharing *that* truth. And the truth of Christ is infinitely more important for me to speak and for people to hear.

The third and last point is that what we're about in the Catholic Church is a whole *way of life*, passed down to us from our parents and grandparents, from our pastors and teachers going all the way back to the Apostles and to Jesus Christ himself. The earliest name for Christianity was simply, "The Way."

Our Catholic faith is about Jesus, who is "The Way." It's also about a way of seeing things, a way of relating to other people, a way of spending our time, a way of worshipping God. When I was a boy, I loved Jesus and the Blessed Mother, but I also loved being part of a family and a neighborhood. I loved going to our parish church for Sunday Mass.

I loved my friends and my Catholic school. I loved reading the *Lives of the Saints*. I loved May Crownings and the Stations of the Cross and saying grace before meals and seeing crucifixes and images of Mary and the saints in my own home and in the homes of family members and friends. All of these things were evangelizing me, and I'm sure the same is true for many of you.

We have a treasure that is actually *easy* to share with others, if we just appreciate how *great* it is in the first place. What we're called to do is not rocket science. We just need to have faith, hope, and love enough to pass on the gift that has been given to us. We have to pray, as individuals and as families. We need to think about what has made a difference in helping us grow in faith. And we need to look for opportunities to share the gift of faith and then to go ahead and *do it*, without worrying about whether we're doing it perfectly or not.

When we look around at the world, and see how broken it is, and how broken so many people are, *how can we not want* to share something so good with them? Something that would give them real healing? That would give their lives real meaning? That would give them hope because they would know the destiny to which God is calling them?

On this Veteran's Day weekend, think of our country's military men and women currently in service and giving all that THEY have. Think of our veterans who gave all that they had, their very livelihood, in the service our country. My thoughts and heart go out especially to those who return from battle with suffering in mind, body or spirit -- casualties not easily seen by you and me. God bless them and be with them all. How can we bring Good News to them?

In the Eucharist we're celebrating today, all of these threads are woven together. Jesus Christ is truly present to us. Real love, self-sacrificing love is given to us as Heavenly Food and Drink. The promise of Heaven is given to us. And we are equipped, empowered to share this promise with those we love, and with those we are called to love.

The truth is that the only thing we should fear is *failing* to share Jesus Christ with others. We have *nothing* to fear when we do our best to "Unleash the Gospel." In Jesus Christ, we have everything to give, and everything to gain!
AMEN!

Unleash the Gospel Homily #3: Unleash the Gospel in Our Parish

(by Fr. Jeffrey Day, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Detroit)

[Readings: Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:11-14, 18; Mark 13:24-32]

For the past couple of weeks, we have been exploring how things have changed for us in the Archdiocese of Detroit in light of the movement we call “Unleash the Gospel.” Recall that the movement to unleash the Gospel is an invitation from Jesus to encounter Him anew, to grow in our Catholic faith and to witness to Christ’s mercy in the world. Last weekend, we talked about how this movement is inspiring individuals and families to bring the life-changing relationship and mission of Jesus to everyone we meet and to everything we do. The movement encourages individuals and families to be “all in” for Jesus, and to become the joyful, missionary disciples he is calling us to be.

Today we are examining how this movement impacts parishes. Let me begin by asking us to reflect upon our image of what a parish is: What comes to mind? I propose that a useful image for the times we are living in is that of a boat, and more specifically, the image of a lifeboat. It’s not too far-fetched. The idea of the Universal Church as a boat at sea is actually an ancient image used by our ancestors in faith. We hear about the Universal Church as the “Barque of Peter.” Seeing individual parishes as lifeboats is a good symbol for the task of parishes.

Let’s connect this to the Readings for today. Think back to a line we heard in Scripture during the First Reading from the Book of the Prophet Daniel: “it shall be a time unsurpassed in distress.” We can see around us that many families and individuals are struggling, in distress in their daily lives. They feel like they are drowning in a culture that is devoid of true meaning. Even many of those who might be blessed with material wealth face a poverty of spirit. People are turning to unhealthy relationships, substances and other dead-end outlets to fill up what is lacking in their spirits. But there is only one thing that will truly satisfy them: a relationship with God.

At a certain level, people understand that what the world is offering does not bring satisfaction and fulfillment. Until people know where they can find that deeper meaning, they are lost: lost at sea, so to speak.

Many of the people living on the boundaries of our parishes they feel like they are lost at sea, on the verge of drowning.

What do people need when they are in this condition? They need a lifeboat. They need to escape the perils of the thrashing sea. The reading today from Daniel continues with these words: "At that time your people shall escape." This is where our parishes come in. They are like the lifeboats spread across our Archdiocese offering hope and salvation.

But for too long, our parishes have not responded with urgency to the task at hand. We have seen pews empty, parishes closed and people walking away from any kind of organized religion. Yet we must prepare for what is coming. We know from the words in today's Gospel that we must all face Christ. He will come again at the end of time to collectively judge the world, but each person will also face Christ at the end of his or her life. Preparing for this eventual meeting with the Lord is our urgent task. This movement to unleash the Gospel means that our parishes need to rise to the occasion. We must become speedy lifeboats, ready to save souls from drowning.

How can we turn our parishes into the speedy lifeboats up for the task at hand? First of all, by prioritizing our time and energy to the most important tasks, and by spending a lot less time – or even stopping – the unimportant tasks.

Our priests need to reflect upon these words from the Letter to the Hebrews: "Every priest stands daily at his ministry, offering frequently those same sacrifices that can never take away sins." Priest and parishes calendars are filled with many activities during the week, but, are all of these activities really things related to freeing people from their sins?

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus has offered "one sacrifice for sins, and took his seat forever at the right hand of God."

Entering more fully into the movement called "Unleash the Gospel" means that parishes are called to renew their efforts to make clear that the most

important events that are celebrated each week are the Sunday celebrations of the Holy Eucharist. That is because the Mass is the one sacrifice that does take away sins. This means that parishes should make their top priority the Sunday experience, when most of the people come out of the raging waters of the world and step into the lifeboat.

Fr. Jeff Day continues: When I was the pastor of St. Fabian Parish in Farmington Hills, we took to heart this call to place our emphasis and focus on the Sunday experience.

The Amazing Parish Conference held three years ago taught to work very diligently to improve three very important areas for each Sunday: hospitality, hymns and the homily.

First of all, hospitality. We added a greeter ministry in addition to that of usher. We reminded our parishioners that they are all ministers of hospitality. Every member has the task of welcoming others in the name of Christ. Each weekend we had food and fellowship after all of the Masses. Right at the beginning of each Mass, I would give greetings to those who had been away from church for a while. At the end of Mass, visitors were encouraged to stay for fellowship and learn more about the parish at the welcome desk.

Once a month, we had “name tag” Sunday, and parishioners were encouraged to make name tags for themselves on the way into Mass. All of these efforts at improved hospitality helped us make great strides toward improving the experience of the weekend Masses. People enjoyed being at church, and wanted to stay afterwards.

Secondly, in terms of hymns, we attempted to choose pieces that really allowed people to pray. Hymn choice inherently depends on the culture of an individual parish. But in our case, it made a big difference to use the types of hymns that really allowed our people to pray.

Some parishes are already using technology to allow this to happen, usually in the form of screens and projectors. Whatever means a parish uses, bringing a revival to the music at Mass, which allows people to really pray while singing, helps them to better connect with our Lord.

Finally, the priests and the deacons renewed efforts in our preaching and in the crafting and delivery of our homilies. Homilies were given a priority in terms of preparation time. Instead of spending wasted time on low-impact “office work” each week, this time was transferred to presenting the faith in meaningful ways. This often meant looking ahead at the liturgical calendar and planning out the preaching as a series of homilies over several weeks.

For example, we spent five weeks in a row talking about different ways to pray. In Advent, each Sunday involved a homily on the theme of hope. Preaching from week to week in a series on a particular theme meant a few positive things: It was easier to prepare, and we could tell people ahead of time what was coming next. This empowered the people in the pews to invite friends and family to the preaching series. People like series, and they get hooked in them, which we see in the popularity of Netflix. Our parishes should be places that get people “hooked on” the Word of God. Our homilies should invite them back week after week, and a preaching series can help make that happen.

As we made these changes at St. Fabian to improve the Sunday experience through better hospitality, hymns and homilies, the parish staff and volunteers began to shift their energies to activities that really promoted evangelization. We began running Alpha courses throughout the year, and got many people to participate. Many parishes have also been running a course called Christ Life. In these and other ways, parishes are waking up to the fact that parishes need to help the people already in the pews become better disciples of Jesus, while simultaneously reaching out to people who do not yet know Jesus.

It has been said that the definition of insanity is doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results. Our culture has changed dramatically over the last several decades. Many people are feeling lost at sea and drowning. Our parishes need to adapt to and respond to that change. The movement called “Unleash the Gospel” is something new. It invites parishes to be bold and to be innovative – but also to get back to the fundamentals. Our

parishes are on a life-saving mission. Our parishes exist to save souls for Jesus Christ.

I'd like to end my preaching by telling you this true story. When our parish was doing all of the things I've shared with you, at times I wondered if it was really making an impact. Yes, there were more people coming to church, and that was a good feeling. But was it really impacting people's spiritual lives? One day, as the congregation was leaving Mass, two different people came up to me, independent of one another, and said to me, in effect: "Father, I feel the Holy Spirit is alive here!" That was confirmation to me that what was happening to our parish was the work of the Holy Spirit. Isn't that what we want for all of our parishes? Not just to be lifeboats rescuing the lost, but places where the people of God experience the living presence of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!

[Readings: Sirach 50:22-24, Psalm 138, 1 Cor. 1:3-9, Luke 17:11-19]

The first Thanksgiving: A walk through the history of the holiday of gratitude uncovers its Catholic roots by [Michael R. Heinlein](#) *OSV Newsweekly*

The very heart of Christian worship takes its name from the Greek word expressing gratitude. “Eucharist” means “thanksgiving.” It goes without saying, then, that thanksgiving is a rather significant aspect of what the Mass is all about. And there is no real separation of church and state where the celebration of Thanksgiving is considered. Citizens of the United States have celebrated Thanksgiving, at least informally, since before the country’s inception. Both the Mass and the celebration of Thanksgiving Day call to mind the very necessary reality that, as human beings, we are made to give thanks.

What is the reason for our thanksgiving? The late Archbishop of Chicago Cardinal Francis E. George, OMI, put it best: “Recognizing that none of us is self-made and unwilling to declare ourselves a cosmic accident, we turn to the Author of all that is and say thanks. In the face of a gift that cannot be matched in return, all one can do is be grateful.”

And our last words at Mass is our response: “Thanks be to God.” Cardinal George explained their significance, saying that “Gratitude to God shapes our lives, at their beginning and their end. Each moment is a gift; each event unfolds under God’s loving providence.” The challenge for Christians is to live each day in recognition that all is gift — chief among which is our salvation. As St. Paul exhorts us, “in all circumstances give thanks” (1 Thes. 5:18).

In 1789, George Washington declared a day of thanksgiving to acknowledge “the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor.” Washington set the day aside for Americans to give thanks for their newly established government, but most of all, to render unto God “sincere and humble thanks — for His kind care and protection.” In his thanksgiving declaration, Washington rightfully acknowledged God as “the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be.”

Abraham Lincoln, America's 16th president, said similar things in proclaiming Thanksgiving Day a national holiday. It came at a time when brother fought brother in the Civil War. In many ways, Lincoln's 1863 Thanksgiving Proclamation reads like a prayer.

Recounting the benefits of a major victory the Union received, Lincoln recognized God alone as the object of a nation's gratitude. He wrote the victories "were the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy." And so Lincoln decided to invite all Americans to celebrate Thanksgiving Day on the fourth Thursday of each November — a day set aside to offer "Thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens."

It is popular opinion to regard the celebration of Thanksgiving as tracing its roots back to the pioneering Puritan pilgrims of Plymouth Rock who gathered to give thanks for a good harvest in their new North American home. The celebration has religious connotations because these pilgrims sought political asylum to practice their freedom of religion.

But that was 1621. Since history is told by the winners, the English myth prevailed despite a detailed account of a thanksgiving feast celebrated over half a century earlier. The [Thanksgiving of 1565](#) was celebrated in what is now St. Augustine, Florida. Of course, the Spanish colonizers who hosted it were Catholic, and they gave thanks to God, as Catholics do, for their safe passage and arrival in the New World. Not only did they celebrate with a meal of gratitude that day, but they also celebrated what is regarded as the first Mass in America.

And so as your family celebrates Thanksgiving this year, don't forget that most historians agree that it really [started in America as a Catholic celebration](#). But, most importantly, remember the holiday's origins. No matter if you believe it was started by Washington, Lincoln or Spanish colonialists, it has always been clear that God is the reason we give thanks.

Marcus C. Grodi, a convert to Catholicism and host of EWTN's "The Journey Home," adds this. The best of recipes minus a single key ingredient falls far short on the palate. And the same is true in our walk with God.

So you say your spiritual life seems lacking. You try to maintain a healthy spiritual diet, following all the directions as best you can. It's not easy, but you're sure your mind and heart are in it!

Even so, something's wrong. You put on your best face, yet the anxieties, stresses and strains of everyday life always seem to get the upper hand.

Jesus said, "Do not worry about your life!" (Mt 6:25). But you just can't seem to break the hold that worry has on your heart -- for long periods or maybe even for a brief moment. You can't seem to experience the inner peace Jesus promised to all who would follow Him (see Jn 14:27).

In essence, your life with Christ just doesn't taste right, at least not in the way He seemed to promise. Is it possible that some essential ingredient, some necessary "spice," is missing from your spiritual life?

The apostle Paul once passed on a short, foolproof recipe for receiving this inner peace of God. To Christian friends whose spiritual progress was being impeded by concerns about the present and future, he wrote:

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, WITH THANKSGIVING, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:4-7).

St. Paul says "with thanksgiving." The only way our hearts can fully turn away from ourselves, to receive the gift of God's peace -- is through the "spice" of thanksgiving. "In all circumstances," St. Paul urged, "give thanks" (1 Thes 5:18). Blessed Fr. Solanus Casey, who was beatified one year ago last weekend, urges us to "Thank God ahead of time," and to "Praise God in all His works." Thanksgiving is much more than an annual holiday. It's a whole way of life. AMEN!

[Readings: Daniel 7:13-14; Ps. 93; Rev. 1:5-8; John 18:33b-37]

On the last Sunday of the liturgical year, Catholics celebrate the Solemnity of Christ the King. A relative newcomer to the Church calendar -- established in the 20th century -- this feast is designed to give special recognition to the dominion Christ our Lord has over all aspects of our lives. But why and how did it come about? And why is it so important today?

When Cardinal Ambrogio Achille Ratti was elected pope and took the name Pope Pius XI, much of the world was in shambles. The year was 1922, and while the bloodletting of World War I (1914-1918) had ended, widespread peace and tranquility were not evident.

The "War to End All Wars" had been especially devastating to England and the countries of continental Europe. Additionally, the overthrow of the Romanov tsars by the Russian Revolution had created great upheaval in Russia and brought immense suffering. Governments were in economic chaos, unemployment was rampant and people in many places were starving to death.

The stability of the old social and political orders that had embraced royal houses and crowned heads of state were crumbling. The victorious warring powers sought severe penalties and unreasonable reparations from the vanquished Germans through the Treaty of Versailles.

Pessimism, a sense of helplessness compounded by hatred among the nations, was overwhelming. The time was ripe for the rise of tyrants, and rise they did. The festering philosophies of fascism, National Socialism (the Nazis) and communism now spawned the likes of Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. Pope Pius XI's predecessor, Pope Benedict XV, had warned about this prophetically in 1920 when he wrote, "There can be no stable peace or lasting treaties, though made after long and difficult negotiations and duly signed, unless there be a return of mutual charity to appease hate and banish enmity."

In their distress, people clung to anyone who offered them hope, offered some kind of direction out of the chaos and promised to put food on their tables.

They gravitated to the emerging dictators, and as they did they often sought to be self-sufficient to the exclusion of God from their everyday lives.

Many considered the basics of morality and the teachings of the Church to be out of date, no longer relevant in 20th-century society. Modern thinking allowed that, at most, Christ might be King in the private life of the individual, but certainly not in the public world. Does this sound familiar and ring true today?

Some political regimes advocated the banishment of Jesus altogether, not only from society, but from the family as well. As nations were reborn and governments restructured, their foundations, policies and laws were often being fashioned without regard to Christian principles.

In all these developments, the new Pope Pius XI saw that people were denying Christ in favor of a lifestyle dominated by secularism, material advantage and false hope created by the tyrants. He realized that he had to address the political and economic forces that were crowding out the kingship of Jesus. As a start, he dedicated his reign and motto as pope to “The Peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ” (*Pax Christi in Regno Christi*).

In 1925, the Church celebrated a jubilee year in honor of the 1,600th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. The council fathers taking part in that ancient gathering in A.D. 325 had affirmed the full divinity of Jesus Christ as God the Son, one in being with God the Father. Their pronouncement became a creed that was later expanded into what we now call the Nicene Creed, which we still profess at Mass every Sunday. Throughout the anniversary year, Pope Pius constantly emphasized the kingship of Christ as declared in the Creed: “His kingdom will have no end.”

On Dec. 11, 1925, of the jubilee year, and in order to acknowledge perpetually the supremacy of Jesus Christ over all people, nations and earthly allegiances, the pope issued the encyclical *Quas Primas*, which added the feast of “Our Lord Jesus Christ the King” to the annual Church liturgical calendar. More than 340 religious leaders had asked for this feast day.

The pope instructed the faithful to use this annual celebration as a time to consecrate themselves, or renew their consecration to, the Sacred Heart of

Jesus, explicitly tying the celebration to devotion to the Sacred Heart and to the living Christ in the Eucharist. He also called for Catholics to make reparations for the widespread atheism being practiced in many countries.

In 1969, Pope Paul VI changed the name of the celebration to the feast of “Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of All” (*Domini Nostri Iesu Christi universorum Regis*) He also changed the date to the last Sunday in the liturgical year and its rank of celebration on the Church calendar, to that of a “solemnity.”

Today, peace still eludes us; social, political and economic orders are shaking; and the nations continue in many ways to reject the light of the Gospel. We can be grateful, then, for the chance to celebrate each year the Solemnity of Christ the King — for the world needs now, more than ever, our witness to His rule over all things. Pope Benedict XVI says this:

“But in what does this “power” of Jesus Christ the King consist? It is not the power of the kings or the great people of this world; it is the divine power to give eternal life, to liberate from evil, to defeat the dominion of death. It is the power of Love that can draw well from evil that can melt a hardened heart, bring peace amid the harshest conflict and kindle hope in the thickest darkness.”

This Kingdom of Grace is never imposed and always respects our freedom. Christ came “to bear witness to the truth” (Jn 18: 37), as He declares to Pilate: whoever accepts His witness serves beneath His “banner.” Every conscience, therefore, must make a choice. Who do I want to follow? God or the Evil One? The truth or falsehood?”

My friends, if we believe in the words of Jesus -- and that’s the biggest *if* we’ll ever be confronted with -- then all power over our lives belongs to Him and His reign, which has no end. This is a long term by any standard and “absolute power” in the infinite sense. No term limits and no territorial boundaries mean nothing on earth can challenge the authority of Jesus.

And if we find ourselves bowing our heads to another King or tipping our hats to a different Lord, we might ask ourselves why. Certainly we sympathize with Pilate for clutching the tatters of worldly power and not letting go when faced with something exponentially greater. The King of Elsewhere is a curious Lord to

follow, and putting our faith in him in no way implies that the powers of this world won't have at us -- as a glance at the cross soberly reminds us. Yet His testimony is truth, and His is the only authority that lasts.

In *History of the World: Part One*, Mel Brooks, playing Louis XVI, had a running gag: "It's good to be the king." It implied that the king was free to do whatever he wanted, wherever he wanted, and however he wanted to do it. Funny? Maybe. Historical? Not at all. What he really was describing was a despot or a dictator, not a good king. In reality, a good king was more like who Arthur grew to become in the movie *Excaliber*, a person who reflected the strength and beauty of the people during good times and the limitations and weaknesses when things weren't going well. Without the consent and hearts of the people, a king dominates with force and fear only.

Today we proudly proclaim Christ as our King. That means we freely take up the task of being loving, kind, and compassionate so as to reflect those qualities of Jesus. Jesus does not force Himself upon us. We listen to him. We know that His message is true, and so we respond. And in so doing we help Him create a Kingdom that will not be destroyed, a Kingdom of hope, and a Kingdom of justice for all. And the more that we live out our faith, the greater the grandeur of Christ our King will be revealed to the world. It is an awesome responsibility and partnership that we share. AMEN!