

[Readings: Num. 6:22-27; Ps. 67; Gal. 4:4-7; Lk. 2:16-21]

The title of Pope Francis' message to celebrate January 1, 2016, the 49th World Day of Peace, is "Overcome indifference and win peace." On Dec. 8, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and the day of the opening of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, the message was signed. The bad news is that it is twelve pages long; the good news is that I have summarized it in a page and a half!

It is divided into eight chapters (see which chapter title speaks to your heart): God is not indifferent, God cares about mankind, God does not abandon us; Maintaining our reasons for hope; Kinds of indifference; Peace threatened by global indifference; From indifference to mercy: the conversion of hearts; Building a culture of solidarity and mercy to overcome indifference; Peace: the fruit of a culture of solidarity, mercy and compassion; and Peace in the sign of the Jubilee of Mercy. The document reaffirms the confidence in the capacity of human beings to conquer evil with good, and indicates the many praiseworthy forms of solidarity present in society in favor of victims of armed conflicts and natural disasters, the poor and migrants.

It concludes with an appeal from the Holy Father to every person, in the spirit of the Jubilee of Mercy, to assume a concrete commitment to help improve the situation in which he or she lives: in the family, the neighborhood, or the workplace. "Therefore, it is not only indifference at the center of the 2016 Message, but also man's capacity, with the grace of God, to overcome evil and to combat resignation and indifference."

How do we do this concretely? Robert Fastiggi is a professor of theology at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit.

He says that the brutal and barbaric acts of violence against innocent civilians have left us struggling with various emotions: outrage, anger, sorrow and fear. The very first response should be an expression of solidarity or closeness with the victims of the violence. The killing of the innocent, whatever the motivation, must be absolutely and unconditionally condemned.

Pope Francis describes the terrorism in Paris and around the world as “an unspeakable attack on the dignity of the human person.”

He reaffirmed with vigor his conviction that “the path of violence and hatred does not resolve the problems of humanity.” In the bluntest words, he says, “the use of God’s name to justify this path is a blasphemy.” The Holy Father was repeating here the strong language of the 2004 Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, which teaches that “it is a profanation and a blasphemy to declare oneself a terrorist in God’s name” (No. 515). Pope St. John Paul II spoke in similar terms in his message for the 2002 World Day of Peace: “No religious leader can condone terrorism, and much less preach it.” Muslim imams from the Middle East and all over the world spoke the same words of condemnation, sorrow and prayer.

Because the terrorists were allied with the Islamic State and invoked Muslim sayings, the temptation to give into feelings of anger or hatred toward Muslims must be resisted. The Catholic Chaldean Patriarch made an urgent appeal at the United Nations to form a coalition to defeat “the Islamic extremist groups” who are persecuting and killing non-Muslims in Iraq and uprooting them from their homes. He made it clear, though, that “these terroristic acts should not be generalized to all Muslims. In fact, there is a silent and peaceful majority of Muslims that reject such politicization of the religion; they are accepting to live a common life with others within the civil state and according to the law.”

It’s particularly sad that these acts of terror committed by Islamic extremists came a few weeks after the 50th anniversary of ***Nostra Aetate***, the Vatican II’s Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.

***Nostra Aetate*** also calls upon Christians and Muslims to work together for social justice, moral welfare, peace and freedom. These words of Vatican II continue to inform the Catholic hope that most Muslims wish to join in the fight against the terrorism of the Islamic State.

While some may dismiss this idea or observation as naive, Pope Francis has consistently reached out to Muslim leaders to collaborate in the battle against ISIS and other terrorist groups.

We understand as Catholics that this is a war that must be fought with spiritual and not merely military weapons. St. Paul reminds us that “our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens” (Eph 6:12). The powers of darkness have inspired many ideologies of violence throughout world history. We must not give in to hatred, anger, or despair. We must stand firm “girded in truth, clothed with righteousness” (Eph 6:14). We must call upon the powerful intercession of Mary, the Queen of Peace, and find hope in the words of Christ: “In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world” (Jn 16:33).

And so, we pray. Heavenly Father, it is Your gracious will that Your children on earth live in harmony and peace. Defeat the plans of all those who would stir up violence and strife, destroy the weapons of those who delight in war and bloodshed, and, according to Your will, end all conflicts in the world.

Teach us to examine our own hearts that we may recognize our own inclination toward envy, malice, hatred, and enmity. Help us, by Your Word and Spirit, to search our own hearts and to root out the evil that would lead to strife and discord, so that in our lives we may be at peace with all people.

Fill us with zeal for the work of Your Church and the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which alone can bring that peace which is beyond all understanding; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, and Prince of Peace. Amen.

Our Lady, Queen of Peace, pray for us. St. Michael the Archangel, patron saint of public safety officers and of military personnel, pray for us. AMEN!

[Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12]

When someone hurts us, what do we most want? Healing, or revenge? Reconciliation of the relationship, or the humiliation of the one who caused us harm? Even if we're kind, gentle souls, there might be a tinge of grievance in our injured hearts that seeks some retribution before things can be made right.

In Isaiah's prophecy, we see the once ruined Jerusalem receiving honor upon honor. Her humiliation -- apparent in broken walls, shattered leadership, and a plundered Temple since the time of their exile -- is changed to glory. The whole world might be darkened with clouds, but divine light pours over Zion. Though nations once laughed at Israel's destruction, now every nation flows in her direction. The powerful come to Jerusalem, and lay their wealth at her feet. What a vision! "Lord, every nation on earth will adore you!"

It's what you call an epiphany: a manifestation of God's glory. An epiphany shows us familiar things but with a renewed vision. At the time Isaiah is writing, Jerusalem is a wreck of a city. The temple hasn't been rebuilt. The city walls are still smashed. Those who've returned from Babylonian exile are hungry and desperate. They don't see a shining city on this hill at all. Far from it. Isaiah invites them to see a transfigured Jerusalem, to see God's dream for them.

To capture and possess that dream, the people have to let go of the desire to strike back and punish their enemies. They must look beyond division to a time when even their enemies will be allies, and all will live in peace.

The down-payment on this dream has already been made: The historian Herodotus claims that magi from Persia read in the stars that a child would be born to create a new empire. That child was Cyrus, who liberated the Jews from Babylon and sent them home to Jerusalem. The restoration of Israel began with Cyrus, predicted by those mysterious magi. And King Cyrus was no saint!

Six hundred years later, the restoration of Israel is completed as other Persian astrologers once more interpret the nighttime sky, announcing a child born to rule. Israel is again trapped under the burden of history, crushed by occupiers, with no rescue or hope in sight.

Her citizens want revenge for this humiliation. It's their turn to be the oppressors! But the king foretold will be a prince of peace, a liberator and no tyrant. How would we take the arrival of such a leader today? Are we capable of following a prince who leads us to a shining city where unity and reverence are in force? Are we prepared to abandon ways of retribution and vengeance, to receive enemies in peace? Never mind the international implications. Are we willing to live in the shining city right here, within our families and communities, in this very city?

"Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem." The Magi were "wise men," Gentile seers who combined astronomy and astrology to divine religious insights from the skies. Here is another example of faith and science informing each other. Naturally the star attracts the magi and leads them to find its meaning. But for them to really find out who Jesus is, they must first learn from the Jewish scripture -- the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem.

The Magi symbolize several things: the need for revelation to inform natural knowledge; the Gentiles' willingness to accept Jesus as the Messiah; and the pilgrimages of religious seekers who set out on long, risky, and uncertain journeys to find the source of their faith.

Why did Herod want the Christ Child dead? Because the little one away in a manger was being called the "King of the Jews," a title reserved for Herod himself. Anyone contesting that title was a political rival who had to be eliminated. But we find out that it is God, not Rome, who designates the Messiah-King, and that though He first appears among the Jews, Gentiles also welcome the revelation, the "Epiphany" of their true ruler.

The Feast of the Epiphany is about the divine mysteries becoming known. How does the light of Christ shine in your life? What "epiphanies" have you had? How does the world around you reflect the glory of God? How does what you know through faith complete what you know through the natural world? How are you a light of hope for others? Ponder these questions this week. AMEN!

(Readings: Joel 2:12-18; Ps. 51; 2 Cor 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

What do YOU do when you hear a siren? The Civil Defense siren, or the siren of a police car, of a fire truck or of an ambulance. Remember, "Stop, Look and Listen? Joel says today to "sound the trumpet in Zion," to blow the shofar, the ram's horn which in "olden days" was like ringing the bell or sounding the siren today. We are forced to stop, to look and to listen. That's what these forty days of Lent are all about. *We stop*. We purposely and deliberately slow down and eventually come to a stop so that we can examine our lives, our choices and the consequences of those choices. We stop to remember that we will die.

*We look*. We look at our lives. Are you where you wanted to be a year ago, five years ago, ten years ago? Did you think life was going to be different than it has turned out? How much of that is because of our shift in options and our priorities? Could we have done things differently? Should we have?

And finally *we listen*. We listen to God's Word proclaim a message of hope and joy. We listen for the sounds of new life stirring in the ground and stirring in our hearts, in the depths of our being. We listen for the affirming power of God's love shown in the shameful death and glorious Resurrection of His Son.

Lent is about finding God and discovering the fullness that can only come from Him. To identify the barriers to God's grace and God's action in our lives. To turn away from sinful habits and selfish addictions and reach out to others.

As we prepare for Synod 2016, let us be open to the many opportunities we have to become set on fire anew, to re-evangelize ourselves before we can set the world on fire with our faith. Go to "Come, Encounter Christ." Come to "Salt and Light." Attend one our parish dialogue meetings. Use your Little Black Book for Lent and Easter. Sign up with Dynamic Catholic online to receive a daily meditation on the book, Rediscover Jesus, which all of you received as a Christmas present from your parish.

The next time you hear the siren -- ask yourself: What have I done for God lately? How can I turn back to God with all my heart? Have a blessed -- and disturbing -- Lent. AMEN!

[Readings: Deut. 26:4-10; Ps. 91; Rom. 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13]

Just before the start of a church wedding rehearsal, the groom approaches the minister with an unusual offer. "Look," he says, "I'll give you \$100 if you'll change the wedding vows. When you get to me and the part where I'm to promise to 'love, honor and obey' and 'forsaking all others, be faithful to her forever,' I'd appreciate it if you'd just leave that part out." He passes the minister the cash and walks away satisfied.

The wedding day arrives, and the bride and groom have moved to that part of the ceremony where the vows are exchanged. When it comes time for the groom's vows, the minister looks the young man in the eye and says, "Will you promise to prostrate yourself before her, obey her every command and wish, serve her breakfast in bed every morning of your life and swear eternally before God and your lovely wife that you will not ever even look at another woman, as long as you both shall live?" The groom gulped and looked around, and said in a tiny voice, "Yes." Then he leaned toward the minister and hissed, "I thought we had a deal." The minister puts the \$100 into his hand and whispers back, "She made me a much better offer."

Today is World Marriage Day, and Valentine's Day, and it is providential that we celebrate it on this First Sunday of Lent. A marriage that is truly a sacrament is a marriage that mirrors the relationship between God and God's people. Over and over again in the OLD Testament, and we have an example of that in today's First Reading, God and God's people pledge and vow to be true to each other – in good times and in bad, for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. That is how the marriage vows were developed in the Catholic Church. The words are inspired by Sacred Scripture.

As we enter Lent, I would propose that this analogy also applies to our individual relationship with Jesus Christ Himself. The same steps you take to enter into a relationship and grow in that relationship though marriage is the same way to enter and grow your relationship with the Lord. It's all about getting

to know each other, falling in love with each other, and living to serve the other.

I am honored and blessed when we have our opening prayer experiences at staff meetings, parish council and commission meetings, and when you open your heart to me in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I have not experienced such openness as I have from you folks here at St. Martin de Porres. You hunger, you thirst, you long for a closer walk with Jesus, and with your fellow pilgrims. We cry out to the Lord in our loneliness and in our need.

How many times have you called on the name of the Lord and been disappointed? How many times have you experienced disappointment in your marriage? Was it because you didn't get what you wanted? Was it because the answer you got was what you didn't expect?

Moses gives us a short history lesson that teaches us confidence and gratitude. He challenges the Chosen People – and us – to remain faithful even in difficulties. In our Second Reading, St. Paul challenges the Romans and us to live with that confidence and gratitude. Then we come to the temptation of Jesus in the desert. Jesus is “led by the Spirit” into the desert to fast and pray. The “desert” in Old Testament times was a place of evil and death. Scapegoats were driven there. Fugitives often died there. But Jesus makes the desert a place of holy encounter. Jesus makes the desert a place of deep contemplation and prayer. And the devil leaves him... for now. “For now” are two important words. Because the devil will come back, when Jesus is at His lowest and most vulnerable two more times: in the Garden of Gethsemane at His agony and when Jesus is hanging pitifully on what would become His Holy Cross.

The devil will come back to tempt us and to test us in our relationships.

Do we remember how God has been there for us when we most needed God? Surely you and I have called upon the name of the Lord and in some way have been saved. Even through our spouses. Think about those times. Think about what there is in your married life – maybe something no one else in the whole world even knows – that you can thank God for seeing you through. Love can be a comma, a question mark, or an exclamation point! Or as someone put it, love is an exploding cigar we willingly smoke! AMEN!



[Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18; Ps. 27; Phil. 3:17-4:1; Rom. 10:8-13; Luke 9: 28b-36]

Today's Gospel is called the Gospel of the Transfiguration, but it might help us to see it as a Gospel of Transformation. Transformation experiences – significant and subtle, good and bad – are part of being human. We experience transformation when we see a baby grow to full stature as an adult. But when that same human being is ravaged by some illness or disease, one has to look deeper to find the person's true beauty.

Have you had any transforming experiences that have left you better for the experience? Abram does in today's First Reading. He is made a solemn promise by God Himself, who "seals the deal" by "cutting a deal" (this is where the expression "to cut a deal" comes from.) Remember a few weeks ago when I said that to "cut a covenant" meant to stake your whole life on the agreement two parties make with each other. The animal sacrifices are carcasses cut in half and placed on a road. The two parties of the agreement walk between the severed halves, saying, "May this happen to me if I fail to fulfill this contract, this covenant." Here we have the actual description of God making His covenant with the human family with Abram.

We also remember that Abram – later to be called Abraham – was asleep, or in a dream-like trance of some kind and did not walk between the sacrificed animals. Only God commits Himself to the covenant here.

It was the late, great Archbishop of Recife, Brazil, Dom Helder Camara, who said, "We must all be transformed so that people see Jesus shining out from us." People said that they saw Jesus shining in Dom Helder Camara's face. Have we seen that glow in people that reflects the very presence of Jesus?

Then we come to the Gospel story of the Transfiguration. As Jesus is transformed and is speaking to Moses and Elijah, representing the Jewish Law and the Prophets, the three sleeping disciples finally awake. Note that in both our First Reading and in our Gospel, the key people are asleep. Only God is alive and active in both scenes! Are you and I still "asleep?"

Imagine how the disciples must have felt seeing Jesus in a gloriously transformed state! Were they dreaming? What was happening? Could they even understand what they were experiencing?

A man visits a psychiatrist. He says, "I am having an identity crisis. One day I wake up and I think I'm a wigwam. The next day, I wake up and I think I'm a teepee. Wigwam, teepee. Wigwam, teepee. Wigwam, teepee." The psychiatrist says, "I think I know what your problem is: You're two tents (too tense.\*)" St. Peter is so overwhelmed with the glorious vision before him, he wants to build not two tents, but three tents.

To "build a tent" in the time of Jesus, was to establish residence. "My Father and I will come to them, and we will pitch our tents within them." God will establish His residence in the heart that welcomes him. Peter doesn't want to leave the mountaintop. He wants to stay there forever with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Then they hear the voice of God the Father say, "This is my chosen Son; listen to Him." Again, I ask you to reflect on the transforming experiences in your life. Especially those brought about by relationships and encounters with others.

During a recent visit with young people, Archbishop Allen Vigneron was asked a few personal questions following his formal presentation. The two that I remember from that experience were these: What do you like most about your job, and what do you like the least? His first answer, without hesitation was: teaching. Archbishop Vigneron loves to teach. My own father, when he was preparing for the permanent diaconate, had to take several classes at the seminary. He told me that hands down, then-Monsignor Vigneron was his favorite teacher. He taught clearly and he graded fairly. The only eccentricity that my dad said Monsignor Vigneron had was constantly brushing the chalk dust off of his black suit after writing on the blackboard. Thank God for smart boards!

The thing that Archbishop Vigneron said he liked doing the least, the worst part of his job as Archbishop, was "dealing with difficult people." He did not elaborate, but I cannot imagine the number of clergy, religious, lay people,

e-mails, phone calls and meetings he has to deal with, in addition to his VERY full sacramental ministry every day. Difficult people drain the Holy Spirit out of every encounter. They do the work of the Evil One. That should scare us.

Shortly after my heart attack, triple bypass and recovery back in the summer of 2010, I saw Archbishop Vigneron at a function at the seminary and solemnly told him, "My cardiologist says I need an immediate transfer. I need to be transferred to a parish where there is no worry, no stress and no anxiety." His answer: "I have a great parish to send you that is worry-free, stress-free and anxiety-free. Unfortunately, there are no people in it!"

Just as the transfigured Jesus has a transforming effect on Peter, John and James, significant people have had a transforming effect on me. Most were married women and consecrated religious. There were times when I would be in conversation with them that our faces would just glow with love, holiness and delight. You can have that same transforming effect.

We start with our hearts burning during the Liturgy of the Word. The second is when we receive the very Jesus in whom God is well pleased. And then we have to come down the mountain... And are charged with bringing God's transforming power to the world. We take the radiance of the glory of God, experienced in Word and Sacrament and in our relationships, and carry that light into the darkness of the world. AMEN!

[Readings: Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15; Psalm 103; 1 Cor.10: 1-6, 10-12; Lk.13: 1-9]

This is a weird grouping of readings we're invited to consider! We've got a bush that's burning and also not burning. We've got a rock that migrates all around the desert and is the Christ. And we've got a fig tree that doesn't produce figs. What are we to make of this biblical collage?

The characters in these passages are trying to do the same thing: fit the pieces together so they can see what each puzzling series of events is about. First there's Moses. He grew up in a palace raised by Pharaoh's daughter. But he's not an Egyptian, he's Hebrew -- a dangerous thing to be since Hebrews aren't treated so well by Egyptians. Which makes Moses mad enough to kill. Which he does, murdering an Egyptian who's beating a Hebrew slave. Now Moses is a man on the lam.

Flash-forward to Moses 2.0. He's the husband of the daughter of a Midianite priest. But Moses is no Midianite. Nor is he really an Israelite, since he's never been circumcised. Moses sees a bush on fire that's not actually burning. Weird! What's even weirder is that the God of Israel is waiting for him there. God wants Moses to go back to Egypt and set the Israelites free. You've got to be kidding!

Second reading: Paul is writing the Corinthians. They're not Jewish. Paul's not Greek. But Paul is something more than Jewish -- he's an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul tries to explain Moses to the Greeks by way of Jesus. This leads to a very strange metaphor about Christ being the rock from which Israel drank in the desert years. And it followed them around, of course, because what good is a drinking rock if it's not there when you need it?

We arrive at the gospel. Folks are discussing current events with Jesus. Pilate just had some Galileans slain. Hardly newsworthy: Josephus says Galileans were troublemakers, and Pilate had put mobs of them to death before. Jesus is a Galilean. The people telling him these things are probably not. Jesus is in Judea. So the reporters are Judeans.

Jesus responds to them by noting that some Judeans were also killed in a tower collapse recently in Jerusalem. He equates the two events: Pilate's coldblooded killing with a random accident. The message: Don't read the will of God into either of these things. I shudder when I hear someone say after surviving a near accident, a near house fire, a near collision with another car, "My Guardian Angel must have been watching over me." What about those who suffer the accident at work, or whose house goes down in flames with all their uninsured possessions with it, or who dies in the car crash? Where was THEIR Guardian Angels? Taking a cigarette break? On their day off? On vacation?

Don't try to read or control the will of God in the bad things that happen.

Moses was wondering if the whole thing about leading the Israelites to salvation was going to work. There he would be, an unknown appearing out of nowhere claiming God had sent him to lead God's -- and his -- people out of slavery. He needed some credentials. Asking God's name would do it.

One thing you might not know, is that to know someone's name was, in a sense, to have power and control over them. But God will not be controlled. So God tells Moses "I am who am..." Moses was the first to hear this new name, which was not a proper name at all but a form of a verb: "to cause to be, to create"; "I am what I am"; or "I will be what I will be." From this moment the "LORD-YHWH" would mean a God who is and always will be utterly free and powerful to do great things -- like free God's people. God is an action verb!

Moses would find his mission and return to his people -- but though he knew he was in the presence of God, he still had some reluctance -- not the last Israelite prophet to feel that way. So, if even a great figure like Moses could be out of place and struggle to find out what God was calling him to, it can happen to anyone. Come to 24 hours with the Lord. Remove your sandals. Stand on holy ground. Come to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Find YOUR holy ground.

When you feel adrift or without purpose, how do you find direction? That is YOUR burning bush, your drifting water rock, the will of God for YOU. AMEN!