Jail chaplains deliver God’s mercy and forgiveness

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Categories: News
Tags: Diocesan News, Featured
Father Tony Gargotta was preaching about salvation to a group of men holding onto hope.

“We all sin, but Jesus died for our sins,” he said. “We want to imitate Him, to die to our own wants and needs.”

The men listened, sang hymns, received Holy Communion, then returned to their cells at the Allegheny County Jail. For a year, they have been on lockdown 23 hours a day due to the pandemic.

“When they arrive here, they suddenly have a lot of time on their hands,” said Father Gargotta, Catholic chaplain and interim director of chaplaincy services. “Many start to read the Bible or Koran and want to learn more. We try to answer their questions and walk this journey with them.”
Dedicated teams of chaplains and support staff serve many of the 1,700 inmates at the Allegheny County Jail, hundreds more at jails in Butler and Beaver counties, and others at the state correctional facility in Greene County.

“In the final judgment, Jesus will ask did you visit me in prison,” said Deacon Keith Kondrich, quoting Matthew 25. “He forgave the penitent thief on the cross next to him. Our job is to constantly offer God’s forgiveness.”

Before the pandemic, Masses were celebrated in the jail’s chapel, and inmates could take part in faith formation classes and Scripture study. Now, Mass is recorded and visits are limited. Communion services like the ones held Wednesday began recently.

“I need this,” said one inmate, who is from Pittsburgh’s North Side but has been in jail since last September. “When I was younger I used to go to church. It was important to my grandmother.”

Jean Marie Farina, Catholic coordinator, said that simply being present to the men and women can be healing.

“We recognize that we’re always more than our mistakes,” she said. “It’s important to see Christ in them, and to be Christ for them.”

The team is part of Foundation of HOPE, an interfaith non-profit that works to empower incarcerated and released individuals to restore their relationship with their God, rebuild their lives, and reconcile to their communities.

When COVID hit, volunteers could no longer bring communion or mentor inmates in-person, so they began to write letters, Deacon Kondrich said.
“It really took off, writing back and forth, two to three times a month,” he said.
“Powerful letters, deep sharing. It’s been a great solution to the physical and social isolation that inmates have felt.”

Foundation of HOPE helps former inmates look for jobs and housing, and offers support groups.

“Most of us aren’t called to jail ministry, but we can say a daily prayer for men and women who are incarcerated,” Deacon Kondrich said. “Also, we always have a need for clothing and toiletries, simple things.”

“The Gospel message is about life and forgiveness,” Farina said. “People here can experience freedom by being reminded that they are loved.”

“Working with the inmates has been great,” Father Gargotta said. “We’ve shared some of the deepest conversations I’ve ever had. We need to think about them and pray for them.”

Fr. Tony preaches about the community of Christians in Pod 3A.

Working on an assignment in the HOPE women’s pod.

Fr. Peter Mawanda, Jean Marie Farina and Fr. Gargotta in the jail chapel. Fr. Rich Zelik, OFM Cap. (not pictured) is also on the team.
Stepping forward

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Most attendees at St. Bonaventure Church, Glenshaw, were wearing face coverings at the 10 am Mass on Sunday, May 16.

Father Jim Gretz is philosophical when it comes to new directives related to COVID.

“It’s about adjusting to change,” said Father Gretz, pastor of Saint Matthew Parish in Etna/Glenshaw/Millvale/ Reserve Township.

On May 14, Bishop David Zubik announced that effective immediately, fully vaccinated people may attend Mass and all gatherings on parish properties in the diocese without wearing a face covering. The announcement was in continued alignment with local, state and federal health guidelines.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control say people are fully vaccinated two weeks after receiving a second dose of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, or two weeks after the single-dose Johnson & Johnson/Janssen shot.

Pastors are maintaining sections of pews in their churches to accommodate those who are not fully vaccinated, or for people who may feel more comfortable seated
around others who are wearing masks.

Parishes will continue to follow cleaning and sanitizing protocols, which currently advise that buildings should be cleaned once a day.

On Memorial Day, Monday, May 31, another important step toward reopening takes place as all churches in the diocese may return to 100 percent seating capacity.

“The people of our parish have been looking forward to it,” said Father Larry Adams, moderator of team ministry at Christ the Divine Shepherd Parish in Monroeville/Penn Hills. “When I talk to folks about coming back to church when they’re ready, they say they’re relieved and happy to be with their community.”

The parish sponsored a food truck (event) at North American Martyrs Church on May 15, and plans are underway for an Octoberfest that was postponed by the pandemic.

“One parishioner had tears in her eyes coming up for communion,” Father Adams said. “It meant that much to her.”

At Christ Our Savior Parish on Pittsburgh’s North Side and the Shrines of Pittsburgh, Father Nick Vaskov said they’ve had good success in keeping people engaged.

“We maintained the same Mass schedule, and have taken opportunities to hold virtual events,” he said, noting that Father Larry DiNardo held a Bible study in-person that was well-attended on Zoom.

“We will need that kind of creativity going forward,” Father Vaskov said.
“As we have seen at several points throughout this pandemic, health guidance and directives can change rapidly,” said Bishop Zubik. “I continue to express my gratitude for the flexibility of the faithful, and the hard work of our clergy and their parish teams in implementing the changing directives in our parishes.”
“Waiting For...”

MAY 21, 2021

Categories: Columns
Tags: Bridging the Gap, Featured

Bridging the Gap

By Bishop David A. Zubik

Back in the early 1970s, I was studying for the priesthood at Saint Mary Seminary and University in Baltimore, Maryland, where Bishop Vincent Leonard had assigned me.

Saint Mary’s is the oldest Catholic seminary in the country. It was established in 1791. At the time I was a student there, the total population was close to six hundred seminarians.

As you can well imagine, I have many memories from my four years there: an outstanding spiritual director; great professors; challenging classes; difficult exams; growing prayer times; beautiful Masses among them.

There were also personal experiences that colored my time there: a few paralyzing snow storms; developing friendships with men from other parts of the country; being introduced to different foods; celebrating the victory of the Pittsburgh Pirates.
in the 1971 World Series against the...Baltimore Orioles! (Pirates fans were definitely outnumbered in Baltimore on that night of October 17, 1971—the date of our victory.)

Several years later, while I was still a seminarian at Saint Mary’s, our nation faced a severe gasoline shortage, reminiscent of what we have recently witnessed in various parts of our country. I can vividly remember waiting four hours in a mile-long, bumper to bumper traffic line-up to get $5.00 worth of gas. During those months, it often felt as though we did nothing but wait. But looking back, even that was spiritual formation. Isn't it true that Jesus so often tells us to wait, not in anxiety but in anticipation.

We are nearing the celebration of the great feast of Pentecost—the birthday of the Church. Jesus promised the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles on the evening of Easter. He again made that promise to them on the day He ascended into heaven.

In the “in between time,”—the gap between “the already and the not yet,” between the promise and the fulfillment—the Apostles were faced with WAITING. They were WAITING for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Their experience resembled what waiting sometimes is for us. It is a time of anxiety! And what did they do with the anxiety? They went into the Upper Room, as Saint Luke writes in the Acts of the Apostles (1.12-14), “all in continuous prayer.” And what happened when they prayed? Anxiety turned into anticipation.

I don't know about you, but I can tell you from personal experience that almost every morning I wake up to anxiety over what my day holds. This anxiety is fueled by attitudes in our culture that have invaded some quarters of our Church—anger, relativism, harshness, factions, divisions. All of these work against what it means
for us to be Church—the Body of Christ, today, in 2021. As a student of the Acts of the Apostles—(sometimes called Luke’s Second Gospel)—I am always consoled and comforted by seeing how the first leaders of the Church handled the many difficulties that they faced in those early decades.

Yes, the early Church had anxieties caused by anger, relativism, harshness, factions, divisions—all of which threatened to divide the Church as it was emerging. Reading and reflecting on the Acts of the Apostles shows that what we are experiencing today is nothing new, nothing unfamiliar.

We must not forget—those anxieties of the early Church led to anticipation, an expectation, a pregnancy, rooted in the reality that the Church could not be born by itself or grow by itself. The Church can thrive and grow only by the guiding light of the Holy Spirit. That reality offers great comfort today.

What happened to the Church way back then, and what is happening to her today, can become a blueprint in our personal lives. Whatever obstacles we face—you name them—financial struggles, job insecurity, family tensions, personal guilt, jealous competitions, fractured relationships—can be overcome if we follow the lead of our apostolic ancestors and yield our struggles to the Holy Spirit. The anticipation of how the Spirit will transform these anxieties into opportunities for new life can, and will, bring comfort.

Near the beginning of this column, I recounted my frequent morning encounters with anxieties. Now I will tell you the secret for moving past them. What turns those anxieties into anticipation is a healthy dose of prayer. In the midst of those worries, I turn them all over to Jesus. His promise to send the Holy Spirit to intervene and guide is as real to me each morning as it was to Mary and the Apostles on Pentecost Day.
We all have those seemingly endless moments of waiting—either in a mile-long line to fuel a car or to be relieved of some cloud that hovers over our lives today.

If we are to move past those anxieties, you and I need to continually follow the lead of our Blessed Mother and the earliest architects of the Church—the Apostles. We do need to turn over the anxieties of now in anticipation of intervention and guidance from the Holy Spirit.

We should not be surprised at what follows. Nothing short of another Pentecost!

And after all, when all is said and done, isn’t the waiting worth it!
Pope makes catechesis a lay ministry

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Vicki Pavalko teaches Catechesis of the Good Shepherd at St. James the Apostle Church in Pulaski. (file photo)

Pope Francis has issued a new apostolic letter that elevates the lay ministry of catechist, formally recognizing it as vital to the evangelizing mission of the Catholic Church.

In the letter entitled *Antiquum Ministerium* or “Ancient Ministry,” the Holy Father embraces with appreciation the catechists who teach the faith.

Archbishop Salvatore Fisichella, who leads the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, called the document, known as a motu proprio, “a step further” for lay Catholics.

“With the institution of this ministry of Catechist, Pope Francis further promotes the formation and engagement of the laity,” the archbishop said.

“This is wonderful news for all of our catechists,” said Judene Indovina, diocesan director for Catholic identity. “Pope Francis is confirming that they are essential to the Church’s mission.”
All catechists teach in collaboration with their bishops, and are commissioned through priests to educate those seeking to grow in friendship with Jesus Christ.

In the document, Pope Francis said the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments will publish “in the near future” a liturgical rite for the ministry, to be adopted by bishops “in accordance with their own local traditions.”

Indovina said it will be a unique category of catechists in support of the bishops’ work, and is expected to vary by diocese. Pope Francis wrote that national conferences of bishops will decide “the necessary process of formation and the normative criteria for admission to this ministry.”

“The formal establishment of the lay ministry of catechist by Pope Francis emphasizes in a profound way the integral role of catechesis in the work of evangelization and the importance of the sound preparation of catechists,” said Bishop William Waltersheid, vicar for evangelization. “It underlines the necessary collaboration between the clergy and the laity in helping people to have a deepening relationship with Jesus Christ who is the Divine Teacher of truth and the way to the life of salvation.”

Darcy Osby, director of faith formation at Saint Aidan Parish in Wexford, agrees that catechists are critical to evangelization.

“We are on the front lines of spreading the Good News,” she said. “Evangelization and catechesis go hand-in-hand.

“We have catechists who have a lifelong dedication, teaching the faith for 30 or 40 years.”
“In a time of increasing secularism, catechesis and evangelization are more important than ever,” Indovina said.
The Holy Spirit- Devouring Fire!

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Categories: Columns
Tags: Featured, Guest Contributors
By Father Richard S. Jones
Chaplain, UPMC Mercy Hospital

“Unless the eye catch fire, the God will not be seen. Unless the ear catch fire, the God will not be heard. Unless the heart catch fire, the God will not be loved. Unless the mind catch fire, the God will not be made known.”

–William Blake (1757-1827), English poet and artist

On the day the Church commemorates as “Pentecost,” the first disciples in Jerusalem were huddled in the Upper Room behind barred doors with locked hearts, scared out of their wits, racked with confusion and torn with conflict.
During this COVID pandemic we, too, have been “behind closed doors” in quarantine and tempted to ask – “Where is the Lord?”

He is with us, and wants to empower us with the Holy Spirit, as he did those first disciples.

Despite their fear, they were keeping the faith through the ancient Jewish observance of Pentecost, a celebration of new life and spiritual renewal. As they prayed together, the Holy Spirit entered the Upper Room with literal flames of inspiration, fired up their hearts and changed everything.

The disciples emerge from that room transformed, dynamic, burning, courageous, united, confident, joyful, peace-filled, and hopeful. They had experienced Jesus’ first gifts of the Resurrection – forgiveness and peace – and were overwhelmed with eagerness to share them.

Those who have experienced such conversion want to tell others, because they are overflowing with joy and want to transform the world through God’s love and mercy.

The Church was born from the joyous outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the first Pentecost. Some 3,000 people were baptized. The apostles spoke a universal language that day: the language of love, forgiveness, peace, joy, and hope. No fear, adversity, tragedy or death could keep Jesus from being with us. Jesus is with always!

Those first disciples shared that joy as far and wide as they could. Tradition tells us that Peter ends up in Rome, Thomas goes to India, James to Spain, and Mary Magdalene travels to France. They shared the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ with everyone they met, despite hardship and persecution.
Pentecost should shake us up! Perhaps we must overcome obstacles such as complacency or fear of rejection that prevent us from being ardent and sacrificial in our love of God and neighbor. Our joy may have been sapped by anger toward God or the Church, by resentments towards others, or lingering pain from the past. Pentecost calls us to pray fervently and faithfully to the Holy Spirit, asking the Divine Fire to burn away all obstacles, difficulties, and divisions that prevent us from fully living our Catholic faith.

The late Father Ted Hesburgh, a longtime president of the University of Notre Dame, once said that one prayer that is always appropriate in every circumstance is “Come, Holy Spirit!” May we allow the fresh breath of the Holy Spirit to breathe on us anew, so that we may be inspired, amazed, encouraged, and fired up!

If we do not have the Holy Spirit, our faith becomes an intellectual exercise, the Church an organization, the sacraments empty rituals, the Trinity a theory, the words of Jesus on the Cross mere history and the Resurrection an old legend.

With the Holy Spirit, all is transformed: the Gospel becomes the living Word of God; the Church is the very Body of Christ and the Holy Spirit unites everyone on earth and in heaven to build God's kingdom as we sing His praises. Through the Holy Spirit, the Resurrection is our victory over sin and death; the sacraments are vessels of eternal life.

At Pentecost, we see a spiritual renewal that is explosive in its power. Its dynamics can be summarized in the acronym CPR: Community, Prayer, and Repentance. We need to open ourselves to the Spirit’s power by following that same pattern. Let us support, encourage, and build bonds of community life through our selflessness and sacrifices. Let us make a daily commitment to pray. Let us purge from our lives any deliberate or mortal sins through repentance and conversion.
May we petition the Lord to pour out the fruits of the Holy Spirit on our world, our country, our diocese, our parishes, our communities, our families, our schools, our workplaces, our prisons, and our hospitals as well as our pope, our bishops, our priests, our religious, our deacons, our lay ecclesial ministers, our teachers, and our catechists. Pray for a new Pentecost! All for Christ! All in the Holy Spirit! All for the honor and glory of God!
Pointing to Pentecost

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Catholic at Home
Jennifer Antkowiak

This week, we’ve passed more big milestones on the road out of the COVID pandemic. And, as we’ve seen with other COVID-related news, the information seemed to fuel division.

Some quickly celebrated the latest CDC directive, which says the fully vaccinated no longer have to wear a mask in most settings. Others quickly became concerned, feeling that it’s too much, too fast. There was also confusion over how the policy would be implemented and anger with political overtones about government involvement.

Local parishioners feel all of this, and share their opinions through our social email pages, and in emails and letters to the diocese. Sometimes the opinions are well-stated and respectful; other times, they are mean-spirited and abrasive.

Confusion and fear can make us behave in strange ways.
Many heavy and challenging moments throughout the pandemic have forced each of us to find our way. How will we choose to interpret information? How will we react to it? What kind of influence will we have on others?

Imagine having all your fears and confusion wiped away. That’s what Jesus did for the apostles—and for each of us—through His gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday.

As a Catholic school student at St. Stephen’s in Oil City, learning about the miracle of tongues drew me closer to my faith. I loved the powerful story of how the Holy Spirit came with a sound from heaven, wind, and fire, and in an instant, people were unified. Confusion and fear were wiped away.

That gift of the Holy Spirit is a gift of faith and love for all of us today, in our time of division, confusion and fear.

I was honored to sponsor my godson at his confirmation a couple of weeks ago, and the gifts of the Spirit are fresh in my mind: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord.

Each of us received these gifts at our baptism, and they are strengthened through the sacrament of confirmation. Pentecost Sunday gives us reason to reconnect with these amazing gifts; and to commit to using them in our daily lives.

We can use the gift of wisdom to calm our own bias and prejudice, and to try to see the world as God sees it. We can use the gift of understanding to talk less and listen more, with a goal of learning more. The gift of counsel helps us distinguish right from wrong. Fortitude allows us the courage to stand up for each other and for what is right. We can pursue the truth with the gift of knowledge. Piety gives us
reverence for the divine presence of our Lord. And the gift of fear of the Lord, or wonder and awe, helps us appreciate and cope with the mysteries of life.

When we use these gifts, we welcome the Holy Spirit into our daily lives, and in turn, are inspired to do more to become the people that God wants us to be.

Filled with the confidence and trust that Jesus is with us, we understand that we truly are protected, especially during our darkest, most confusing, most fearful moments. The Holy Spirit pushes us into action to realize our potential as children of God as we continue to emerge from the pandemic.

How can we let the Holy Spirit work through us to bring light and hope to others at this time of great need? Let’s ask Jesus to help us open our hearts to that this week.