



From the Heart

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The Church:

Crisis or a Chance to Grow?

Over the past two years we have all been reading and hearing about the Church's sexual abuse scandal in the media. It has been covered with varying degrees of accuracy. What do you believe it is all about?

It seems to me that there are two issues in this crisis. The first is what has been done. It is labeled "pedophilia," sexual abuse of pre-pubescent children, despite the fact that most of the cases and allegations against the priests in question actually involve teenagers. To more accurately describe it, I prefer to use the term "the sexual abuse of minors."

I agree with Pope John Paul II who calls the abuse a "crime" and a "sin." It is a crime because society considers it so offensive to the human person and human society that it has made laws against it. Those who break such laws must take responsibility for it. You may be aware that in Connecticut we who are clergy, pastoral ministers, teachers or medical professionals are "mandated reporters." This means that we must, under penalty of law, report any cases of physical, sexual or psychological child abuse within 24 hours to the civil authorities. I want to assure you that here at Sacred Heart we take this very seriously and will report any such situations we become aware of for the protection of our chil-

dren.

Sexual abuse of minor children is also a sin because it goes against the way God wants us to live. It offends the dignity of the human person and the sacred gift of human sexuality with which God has gifted each of us. It wounds and takes advantage of one who is vulnerable. In our tradition we believe that all sin can be forgiven if the sinner is sincerely sorry, repents and takes serious steps to change his/her sinful behavior. With these conditions, forgiveness is even possible for those who sexually abuse children.

I would add to Pope John Paul's description that the sexual abuse of minors is also a serious and mysterious mental illness. The Church and the rest of society have been learning more about this and many mental illnesses over the past 30 years. Serious mental illness needs serious psychological treatment. Those who abuse minors need to be held accountable for their behavior. They may be forgiven if they are sorry, repent and work for change. They may still have gifts to offer to the community, but that can never be within a ministry that gives them access to children, for like alcoholism, pedophilia cannot be cured.

The sexual abuse of minor children is indeed a very complex crime, sin and men-

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tal illness. It is not given to the simplistic solutions that we read of in the letters to the editor or hear in TV sound bites. Priests, though called in a particular way to serve and lead others to holiness, are still human. Sometimes as a result of inappropriately exalted ideas about the person and status of priests we can forget that they are subject to crime, sin and mental illness like anyone else.

The second issue in this crisis is how some Church leaders responded to the incidents of such abuse. Some kept silent sometimes out of respect for the victims who did not want to be publicly named. Giving them the benefit of the doubt some Church leaders actually believed they were serving the best interests of the Church, the priests and the victims. In hindsight we now know that this was a grave mistake. Such a response actually served the best interests of no one. In some cases it has been shown that Church leaders knew that certain priests were child abusers and that after some counseling they merely



transferred them to another parish. This is a sin of the highest order because they failed to do what Jesus would have done. As Church we are called to act as Jesus would act; to take our cues from Jesus rather than from lawyers or insurance companies. Jesus and the solid teaching of the Church call us to have a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. Who is more vulnerable than a child who has been taken advantage of?

How could they do this? That is a very legitimate question for us to

ask. It is difficult to answer, but one image that has been helpful for me in trying to understand such behavior is the image of the dysfunctional family. Dysfunctional families are those who get used to living with pain and never do anything about the source of the pain. Dad is an alcoholic; Mom is verbally or physically abusive; son/daughter is a substance abuser; there is ongoing infidelity in the marriage etc. Everyone knows about it, but no one does anything about it, and it negatively affects the family and its members. It is the proverbial “elephant in the room.” The family



accommodates to the painful activity acting like this is a normal way to live, but it is not normal, and it ultimately corrodes family life and relationships and scars family members. In some ways the Church is like a dysfunctional family. It has gotten used to operating in a certain way over the ages and has come to consider this normal. Bishops and priests make all decisions, and much of the decision-making process is secret. There is a certain sense of entitlement as if we are different because we are the Church and therefore do not have to act like everyone else is expected to act. We “need to protect our own” and avoid scandal for the Church at all costs. We may even view those who raise questions or bring difficult situations to our attention as our enemies.

I believe that if Church leaders had been more faithful to the teachings of Vatican II much of this crisis could have been avoided. There might have been review boards in place in dioceses made up of more than priests to help the bishops in question make decisions about

priests who abuse minor children. There might have been parents on those boards who would have been more attentive and sensitive to the needs of children than priests who are not parents. There might have been lay professionals on that board who had studied this crime, sin and mental illness and would have been better equipped to recommend appropriate measures for the perpetrators. Such boards might also have advised the bishops better about their civic accountability in such matters.

This crisis situation reminds us

From the Heart

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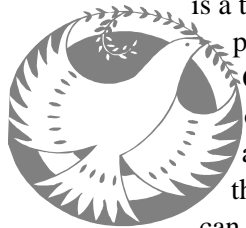
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New members, ideas and Ask Father questions are welcome throughout the year. Please contact the rectory or Katherine Pavone at 264-6599.



again that the Church needs to change the way it operates. I believe that this is a time of great, if very painful, purification.



Crisis always holds the opportunity for change and growth. I believe that God's Holy Spirit can do and is in fact doing something good in all this pain and struggle, just as it has always moved the Church to serious even structural change throughout history. The Church can be moved and shaped to be more of a community in which the mind and heart of Jesus prevail, in which the needs of the poor and the vulnerable are given highest priority, in which the gifts of all people are recognized, revered and incorporated into the life and decisions of the Church at all levels. Such change can help to assure that these horrible situations will not be repeated in the future. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and our own Archdiocese are working hard on this issue. Let us keep them and our whole Church in prayer so that we may be open to where God's Spirit is leading us.

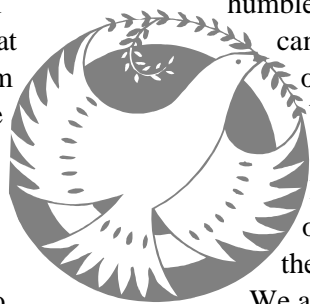
But what can we do within Sacred Heart Parish? I suggest several ways in which we can respond to this current crisis in the Church.

I believe that we must be in solidarity with the victims of child sexual abuse and their families. I realize that some of you may have suffered from physical or sexual abuse in your life and that the recent attention of the media may have stirred that memory and experience in you. I am willing to meet with you, have a pastoral conversation or refer you to a mental health professional if you wish.

In accordance with the "Charter

for the Protection of Children" we have been mandated by the Archdiocese to do background checks on all staff and volunteers who have regular contact with children. We are doing that to assure you that your children will be safe and secure in our parish programs.

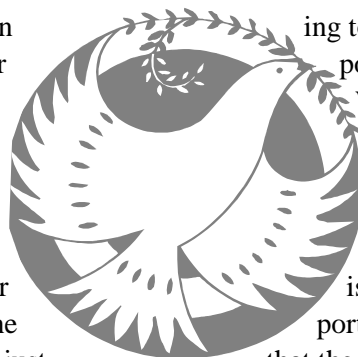
I believe that the Church needs new structures not only to insure that these horrible things do not happen again, but also to provide for the participation of diverse people in leadership and decision-making in the Church. The gifts of all members need to be recognized, respected and used for the good of the mission of the Church. We are trying to do just that in our parish. We are restructuring our parish Pastoral Council to enable it to reflect the insights and perspectives of more people of our parish. We had a wonderful pastoral leadership gathering recently at which we shared our reflections about the blessings and challenges for Sacred Heart Parish. But we also need to be part of movements for such changes in the larger Church too. We love the Church and want her to grow and be effective in continuing the work of Jesus in the spirit of Jesus.



I believe too that we need to be a humble Church. We cannot look at ourselves as better than or above others; to lord it over others or to tell them what to do. We are called to serve the rest as Jesus reminded his disciples whenever they had lost sight of that truth. It is a reminder we

need to hear again and again as the Church journeys through history.

Some might suggest that the Church can no longer preach and give credible witness to the truths of the Gospel, the values that Jesus taught and to the Church's social teachings regarding the value of human life, the dignity of all persons,



and the importance of attending to the needs of the poor and vulnerable. We must not back away from this essential part of our preaching of the Gospel now. It is all the more important to recognize that the good work of the Church needs to continue and that the Gospel of Jesus Christ still needs to be proclaimed.

I believe that we also need to teach and practice chastity. Chastity is the virtue that helps us to appropriately order the expression of and experience of our human sexuality according to our state in life. Whether married, single, divorced, widowed or celibate we are as disciples of Jesus called to express our sexuality in certain moral and appropriate ways. Chastity is a virtue that our American culture, long given to doing whatever feels good, neither supports nor encourages. We need to witness to and teach our children the true value of being sexual persons and of being chaste in the ways we express our sexuality.

Some people are saying they will leave the Church or at least not contribute to the ministries of the Church any longer. Think about that. Who will suffer as a result of such a boycott? The poor and vulnerable who depend on the charitable ministry of the

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Church: the elderly, the uneducated, the homeless and hungry etc. We need to assure that the good works of the Church continue and thrive. Stopping such contributions is not an effective response to this crisis.

Some people have expressed their concern about how I am doing with all this. "What's it like to be a priest these days, Father?" I have truthfully felt embarrassed—not embarrassed to be a priest for I truly love this ministry. I am rather embarrassed for the priesthood and for the Church. I feel betrayed by some of my brother priests who have done this and by some bishops in the Church who handled it so inappropriately. I feel sad and angry about the whole situation. But I also feel hopeful for I truly believe that God's Holy Spirit can make something good from this sad and tragic experience. And it will happen because good people who love God and love the Church remain committed to making the Church express what Jesus meant us to be. Let us reaffirm our faith in Jesus Christ and work together to continue his ministry!

Fr. Joe

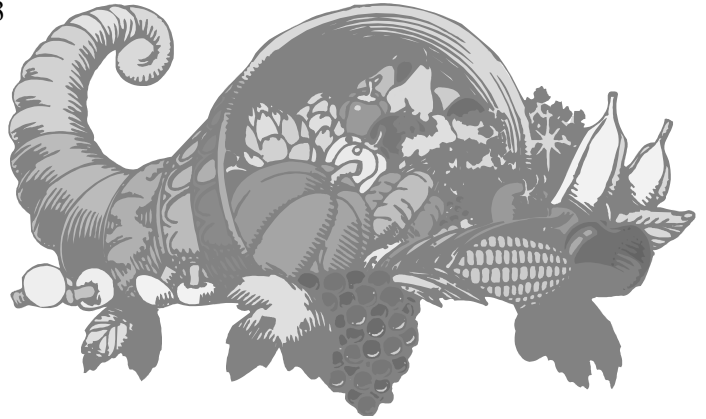
Covenant to Care 2003

The Covenant to Care Ministry continues to provide assistance to abused and neglected children in the greater Waterbury area. During the past three years, Sacred Heart Parishioners have provided \$75,357 worth of desperately needed goods and services to 3,563 children. The children we serve are often tremendously needy, having lived chaotic lives and suffered from abuse and neglect.

On March 22, 1992, we signed our first covenant with the Department of Children and Families under the "Adopt a Social Worker" program. We currently have two covenants with DCF and one with Chapman House, a safe haven for abused and neglected children. Eighty children have been cared for there since December 2000 and then appropriately placed.

We attend monthly meetings at Chapman House and regional meetings of Covenant to Care. Current needs are addressed and we determine where we feel Sacred Heart will be able to help. A recent emergency need at Chapman House involved a major purchase of an industrial refrigerator to replace the one that the Board of Health determined was unsuitable and unreliable. Our first covenant was the responsibility of the kitchen (other church groups adopted other rooms and are also involved with the upkeep). Our goal was \$1,000 toward the purchase.

Other recent needs identified by DCF social workers were three brothers (7, 9 and 11) who had no clothing, two moms and newborns with bare necessities needed help with baby items, cribs, clothing and food, displaced families whose children had



no beds, basic needs, or lamps to see in the dark, teens starting independent living while attending school. A sixteen year old girl needed a winter coat; we found out she went through last winter without one. In another case, a single foster mom with two foster children agreed to take in an additional brother and sister, but she would not receive assistance for two weeks. Our social worker, exhausting every means possible, finally asked us for a food gift certificate. Most of our work is on an emergency basis and is not predictable.

In addition to filling these needs, we have ongoing projects. We assemble welcome baskets for the kids at Chapman House, which include basic toiletries, a comforting Beanie Baby, and a flashlight to light a strange room in a strange house. During the year we assemble backpacks, Easter and Thanksgiving baskets. We help stock the healthy snack

SPOTLIGHT ON YOUTH

food at DCF, provide foster children's lifebooks supplies and collect Christmas gifts for the children we serve. Our prom and graduation dress project for the teens we serve has been a huge success. It has enabled high school girls to attend school dances and graduations in the dresses and accessories donated by our parishioners.

For the past two years we have supported a drug-free education weekend at the Connecticut Junior Republic in Waterbury, supplying sports equipment and food to help make the event a success.

Sacred Heart also provides an activity and a meal for the children at Chapman House on the first Saturday of every month. Susan and Jack Ellis coordinate this, and parishioners are asked to donate different parts of the meal. On occasion, a CCD class has gathered food to send with the meal. Currently, we have a talented family that is painting murals in a bedroom and the entryway at Chapman House.

We measure our success knowing that we have helped many children and families and understanding that we have given our parishioners a way to share. The needs and problems that our social workers share with us continues to inspire our work.

We thank the parishioners of Sacred Heart for their unselfish support to our ministry. By their generosity and the power of the Holy Spirit, we continue to grow.

*Joanne Gracy
Ellen Baczeski*

After several years of ever changing leadership in Sacred Heart's youth ministry program, the future is looking bright with the introduction of Marge Griffin as the youth minister coordinator.

Marge Griffin has been a Eucharist minister for many years, constantly helping out at Mass on weekends and Tuesday mornings. Along with that, Marge brings communion to East Hill Woods regularly. For the past three years she has been involved in a bible study called Women in Faith, and for two out of those three years she has acted as a facilitator. The list doesn't end there. Marge is also part of the Stewardship Core Committee which helps plan activities. The church has also been graced by her consistent and admirable work as a catechist for the past six years. More recently she has been coordinating her efforts with Roseanne Franco to reopen the Catechesis of the Good Shepard, a Montessori religious education program for children between the ages of three and six.

With Marge directing the youth ministry, the upcoming months will certainly be very promising and auspicious. In early November, a Sean Forrest concert took place and members from all area churches were invited. Once again in early December a lunch with Santa will be held where food and music will fill the halls of the church. In addition to young children, residents from a cottage at Southbury Training School will be invited to meet Santa. On December 14, Sacred Heart will hold its annual Christmas pageant to which everyone is invited.

Due to the great success and interest in the mission trip last summer, plans are already underway for another group of 20 kids from Sacred Heart to go to Bloomsburg, PA next summer. As a result of last years trip, a new youth group was formed by Caroline Bradshaw called Hearts of Fire. It will focus on organizing and implementing service projects.

In the upcoming years, Mrs. Griffin hopes to get more adults involved in youth group activities. With more adults, the youth groups can offer a wider range of activities such as a family roller skating night, trips to Great Adventure and more community service. A new service project already in the works for early next year is a blood drive, hosted and sponsored by Sacred Heart. Mrs. Griffin encourages kids to help with advertising the blood drive along with preparing and providing food and snacks.

More than luck was on our side when Mrs. Griffin was assigned her job. With her at the helm, I think we can expect great things for Sacred Heart's youth ministry in the years to come.

Matthew LeFurge



Family Focus

A New Generation

It is more frequently the comments of the older Catholics that make the headlines and bylines in today's media, not the younger people who are the future of our church. It was my pleasure to interview one such young family for this issue.

The De Palma's, Mark, Lori and their children Samantha 4 and John 8 weeks, are in every respect a young and, we pray, typical, Catholic family. It's their real enthusiasm for their faith in general and our parish in particular that is contagious, even to this reporter of the "older generation."

One day at the University of Connecticut, Mark, minding his own business and his exercises, was drawn to the cute strawberry blond who was also working out. Sometime later, after a few games of ping pong (where Mark let Lori win) they became acquainted and started dating that last year of Mark's stay at college.

The couple was still dating when Lori graduated and took a job in New Jersey, leaving Mark in Connecticut, and putting a slight strain on their relationship. Soon Mark's work followed to New Jersey and they married two years later. But Lori, even though she had her "dream job," didn't see raising her family there. Fortunately the couple found a way to return to Connecticut, settling in Brookfield and attending Saint Joseph's, where they participated in parish life and the various ministries offered.

When Lori was expecting Samantha, the couple looked to more permanently settle. They bought a home in Southbury and became torn between their comfortable relationship in St. Joseph's and the new, unknown, Sacred Heart Parish. They decided that Sacred Heart was to

be their new baby's parish and that they should have the Baptism here. Lori presented her very pregnant self to the rectory and inquired about scheduling the Baptism. Initially she received resistance, as they had not been in Sacred Heart the requisite six months. Fr. Mark relinquished only after a letter attesting to their involvement in the ministries of St Joseph's had been obtained from their former pastor. By the time their second child John was expected, there was no need to go through similar hysterics since both Mark and Lori were well involved in our parish ministries.

Mark is working hard at his job as a software engineering manager for a Danbury-based firm to allow Lori the time to recuperate from what was her second difficult pregnancy, and to enable her to be a full-time mother. Even with his heavy work schedule he continues to be active in various ministries. Mark's involvement with our



Mark and Lori DePalma with their children. John is three months old and Samantha (holding a favorite friend) is four years old.

parish website committee over the past three years, the last two as its chairman, has produced many changes including an overall new look, online tour of our church, a parish history page and a youth page. In addition, Mark finds time to participate in the Men's Prayer Group which, he feels, has aided him in his walk of faith.

Lori lamented that she has one year left on the Parish Council. Renamed and with the new direction of the Pastoral Council set by Fr. Joe,

she wishes she were just starting. She feels that this new direction will make the council much more meaningful in the life of our parish and its ministries, and will make attracting willing people to serve much easier.

Even after leaving the council, Lori expects to continue her work with our youth, such as chaperoning the

Steubenville trip, which she did in 2002, and being a first grade catchiest. She plans to continue as a member of Women in Faith and participate in a new ministry, Heart to Heart, which focuses on the family.

When I asked them how they viewed the current difficulties in our Church, I was not surprised with their response that the Church is made up of people, and people make mistakes for which they should be held accountable, but we should pray for them and that our Church will be stronger for the trials.

It wasn't too difficult to understand that Mark and Lori had some definite views on what could be done for our youth. They both are very excited about Heart to Heart. They suggested the addition of a youth or family Mass to get the younger families and the youth involved and attending services. Changes like these can only be brought about by people like Mark and Lori, who have strong faith and the energy to make ideas become reality.

Ernie Swanberg

Women in the Bible

Hannah Prepares her Son

Hannah by her unceasing prayers became the mother of Samuel, the earliest of the great Hebrew prophets after Moses and the last of the Judges. She was a worthy mother and bore a worthy son.

Hannah was married to Elkanah, a good man but an undistinguished priest. In those polygamous times he had another wife, Peninnah who had several children while Hannah had none.

Hannah believed that God would allow her to have a child, and each year she and the rest of the families went from her home at Ramah to the temple at Shiloh. As they traveled the Palestine hills she saw all the children and grieved, for she felt she had no part in the coming generation. What made her even sadder was the fact that her husband made sacrifices in the temple and would give portions to his other wife and her sons and daughters. He did give Hannah a worthy portion but it was smaller because she had no children.

Each year it became harder for Hannah to make the journey, and finally on one trip she refused to eat and wept bitterly. She went into the tabernacle to pour out her anguish to

the Lord. She promised God if he would give her a son she would give him "unto the Lord all the days of his life and no razor would come upon his head." This reminds us of Samson's mother and John the Baptist's mother who also consecrated their sons to God. The hair would be a sign of the consecration.

Eli, the priest who tended the temple, saw her and thought she was drunk because her lips moved, but no sound came out. She assured him she was not, and he listened to her. Seeing her sincerity, he joined her with his prayers for her request. Hannah left the temple confident her prayers would be answered. Soon after their return home, a son was born, and she named him Samuel meaning, "asked of the Lord."

The new mother took her role very seriously, nursing and tending her child and making his garments. She would not leave him even to go to Shiloh.

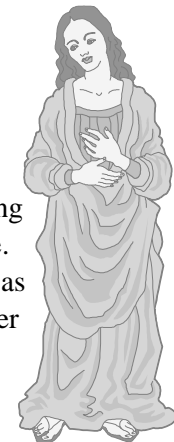
However, she did not forget her promise to God, and when Samuel was weaned she brought him to the tabernacle where she was to leave him. Imagine what a sacrifice this was and even more difficult because

Eli's two sons were doing evil things in the temple. She possessed fortitude as well as vision and put her trust in God. Before she left Samuel with Eli she prayed a triumphant prayer that has been called the forerunner of Mary's Magnificat.

Hannah continued to pray in good times and in bad. She affirmed that God would keep the feet of his saints on the right road and the wicked should be cut off in darkness. She was grateful that her son was doing menial work in the temple, and each year when she visited brought him a bigger garment keeping up with his growth. The priest Eli seeing her unselfishness and devotion prayed that God would grant her more children, and he did, three more sons and two daughters.

Hannah, like the Blessed Mother gave her child to God, and after she did, slipped into the background. Samuel like Jesus "grew in wisdom and in favor before God and man."

Yet again, a worthy mother bore a worthy son.



Dina Carella

FROM THE LIBRARY OF DEACON MIKE

“You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is required. The stars neither require it nor demand it.”

—Annie Dillard

If any of you are like me, there have been times when, because of life’s circumstances, I have asked, “Is God listening? Can he be trusted? Does he care?” If so, I have a book I am sure, you will enjoy—*Disappointment with God* by Philip Yancey.

For me, Philip Yancey articulates very clearly a feeling that many of us experience as we walk our journey of faith. Often times there is a large gap between what we expect from our Christian faith and what we actually experience. As he writes, “From a steady diet of books, sermons, and personal testimonies, all promising triumph and success, people learn to

expect dramatic evidence of God working in their lives. If they do not see such evidence, they feel disappointment, betrayal, and often guilt. As one woman said, ‘I kept hearing the phrase—personal relationship with Jesus Christ. But I found to my dismay that it is unlike any other personal relationship. I never saw God, or heard him, or felt him, or experienced the most basic ingredients of a relationship. Either there’s something wrong with what I was told or there’s something wrong with me.’”

As you will learn, Philip Yancey has a gift for articulating the knotty issues of faith. In this book he poses three questions that Christians wonder but seldom ask aloud: Is God unfair? Is he silent? Is he hidden? This very insightful and deeply personal book points to the odd disparity between our concept of God and the realities of life. Why, if God is so

hungry for relationships with us, does he seem so distant? Why, if he cares for us, do bad things happen? What can we expect from him after all? Yancey addresses these questions with clarity, richness and biblical assurance. He takes us beyond the things that make for disillusionment to a deeper faith, certitude of God’s love, and a thirst to reach not just for **what God gives, but for who he is.**

Philip Yancey has written twelve Gold Medallion Award-winning books, including *Where is God when it Hurts?* and *The Gift of Pain*. His books *The Jesus I Never Knew* and *What is So Amazing About Grace?* were also awarded the Christian Book of the Year. Once you have read this book, *Disappointment with God*, I think you will agree it is one of his finest works.

Enjoy

Going Forward

Our new pastor Father Joe Donnelly invited the heads of the various Sacred Heart ministries, staff, deacons and any other interested parties (e.g. myself) to participate in an hour-long dialogue on September 27, 2003 to gather input on Sacred Heart’s impact on faith and to discuss opportunities to become more faithful going forward.

Father Joe first discussed various models of the Church over time, comparing the hierarchical model to the corporate model and the collaborative model—that sprang from the Second Vatican Council—which has the potential to “bring us back to our roots,” as a Church, according to Scripture. This gathering of about seventy-five of our faith

community was an excellent example of collaboration.

Father Joe asked the attendees to discuss two questions and to select a spokesperson from each table of roughly 8–10 parishioners to present the consensus of each group.

Question 1: *What is one dimension of Sacred Heart that has personally nourished your faith?*

Lively discussion ensued and soon resulted in many offerings from the groups. The “activeness” of Sacred Heart and its ministries, our “fellowship” and “welcoming or inclusive” nature were some of the offerings. (A definite consensus of “belonging” permeated the responses.) Our liturgies were singled out for their ability to draw

people in and evoke participation. Another example of faith nourishment was the R.C.I.A. program (Right of Christian Initiation of Adults).

Question 2: *What is one area of challenge facing Sacred Heart so we can be more faithful to the mission of Jesus? Or, "Where do we go from here?"*

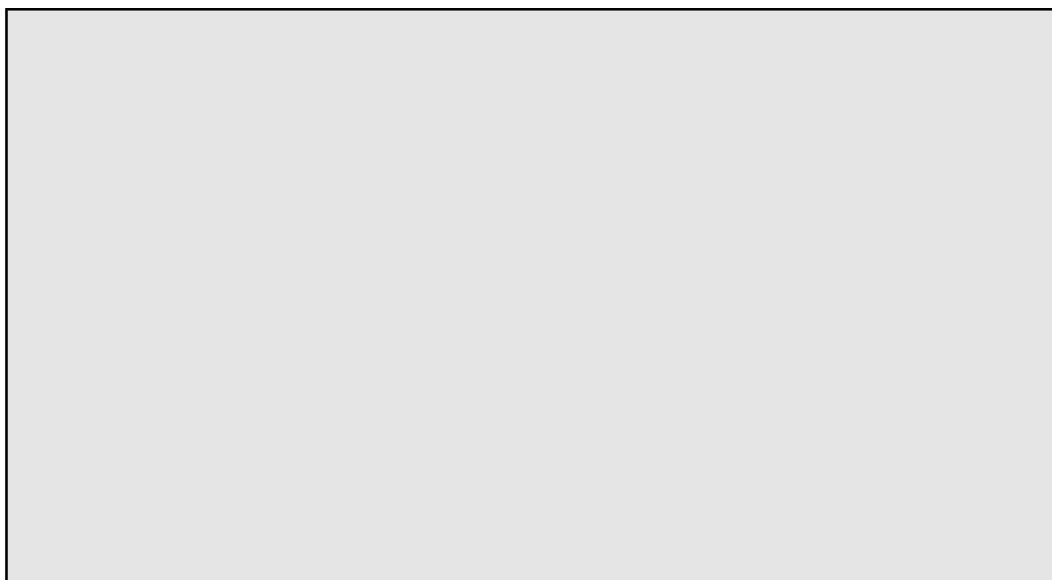
The groups again discussed the question and delivered several opportunities which focused on the areas of outreach, evangelization, stewardship, ecumenism, and adult and youth faith education to bring about a more "living faith" to our children, their parents and religious education instructors. Many agreed that we need support for the elderly and disabled and also to develop programs that

families can use to combat the moral decline and civil behavior in the larger community. Twenty-five suggestions in all were submitted.

Father Joe concluded that the forum's contributions were a good basis, which the Pastoral Council might use to create a vision for Sacred Heart and to organize next steps to bring it to fruition through a community of prayer.

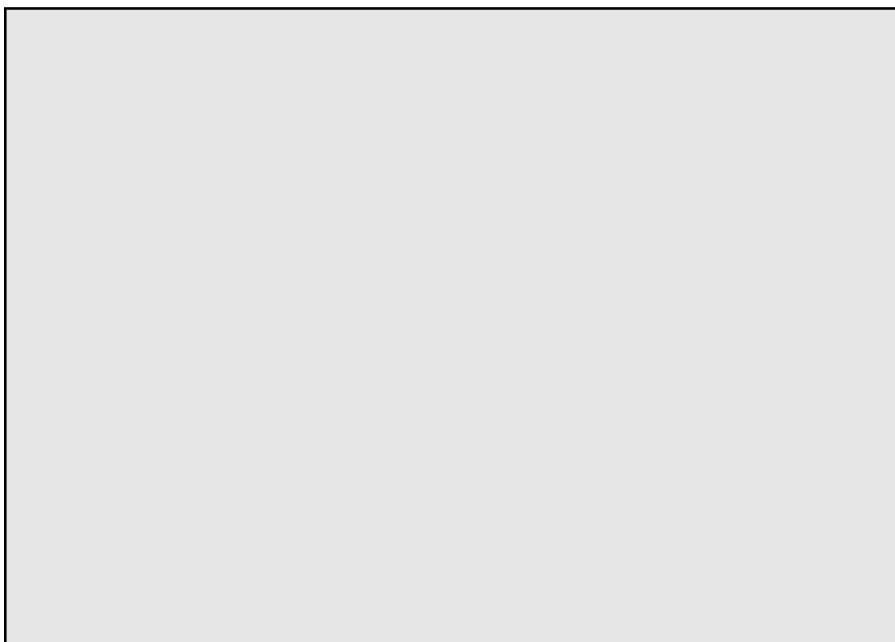
It was evident that Father Joe is a strong advocate of the collaborative model of "making Church together" as we go forward to help Sacred Heart's faithful become even more nourished in their faith.

Rich Stephens



At the September pastoral leadership gathering, Joe Ruggiero is shown reporting on the challenges the group at his table perceive that Sacred Heart needs to face in order to be more faithful to our mission here.

Mary Comstock reports on the consensus at her table of the challenges facing Sacred Heart. To her left, Julia Sayegh tabulates these comments while Fr. Joe listens intently.



The Blind Beggar

It was cloudy and cold that Saturday in Manhattan a week before Christmas over three decades ago. At Lauren's insistence, we (the *we* including Tommy, a sophomore at Fordham Prep, Paul, an eighth grade student at St. Joseph's Grammar School, and Sean, a vibrant fourth grader attending the same school) traveled into New York City deserting the comforts of our eight room co-op in Bronxville for the purpose of viewing the Christmas windows on Fifth Avenue, more specifically, Sak Fifth Avenue. I suspect this must have been the latest rage among Lauren's senior classmates at Mount St. Ursula's High School in the Bronx, but I wisely said nothing.

We viewed the store windows, and I can inform you the boys were absolutely unimpressed.

But we were in the Christmas spirit, most of us anyway; therefore I suggested a visit to St. Patrick's Cathedral that was on the next block.

As we passed a blind beggar on our way up the cathedral steps, to my surprise, Tommy gave the man a dollar bill followed closely by Paul and Lauren. Strangely, Sean, Mr. Charity himself, gave nothing. Sean must be going through one of the financial crises that one has in fourth grade. I, of course, will hear about it sooner or later.

"Thank you! We appreciate your generosity."

Hearing the word "we" made me pause. A strange word to express appreciation I thought as I herded my little group up the steps, through the splendor of St. Patrick's atrium and into the church proper.

Walking down the center aisle approaching the altar, to the right was a manger, symbolizing the birthplace of baby Jesus, and surrounded by a bed of a magnificent variety of flowers. Standing next to it was a beautifully decorated basket with a small printed sign affixed to it saying "OFFERING."

"Dad!" whispered Lauren. "It's him!"

Hearing the tap, tap, tap of a guide stick on the cathedral floor I turned and followed Lauren's gaze. We watched him walk slowly toward the altar and then stop just before he touched the steps. He reached into his pocket, took out some folded bills and then as if guided by an unseen hand, deposited the money directly into the small opening at the top of the offering basket.

The blind beggar bowed his head, turned and left as he came, with the tap, tap, tap echoing through the church.

"Put that money back young man before I call the police." yelled an elderly female parishioner.

I heard her. The whole church heard her.

"What idiot would be stealing from the offering box?" I said to no one in particular.

"How about Sean, Dad!" said a smiling Paul, eager to get his little brother into trouble.

And standing in front of the offering box was a triumphant Sean clutching three singles in his hand. "See! These are mine. I marked them with red ink. Ha! You guys were supposed to hold my money. You should have given the beggar your

own cash. I just knew you couldn't be trusted."

The woman looked at Sean as if he were a serial killer. "Put the money back!" she ordered emphasizing each word.

Silently, Sean complied and realized that he was now the center of attention within the hallowed halls of the cardinal's seat.

Time for my own intercession in case the Holy Spirit was attending to other business.

"Ma'am, these are my four children that have been raised in a highly dysfunctional home. I take them out only on occasion but usually to a church as the surroundings seem to give them great comfort."

"Oh, good grief," I heard Lauren mutter. I noticed big sister was slowly separating herself from us.

"And he did put the money back. No harm, no foul as I always say." I cheerfully said.

The woman stared at me for a few seconds and then with righteous indignation proclaimed, "In a house of God, you should watch your children more carefully."

Sensing now was the perfect time to exit, I said in a loud voice, "Come children. Make sure you use the Holy Water in blessing yourself when we leave." I offered the surrounding crowd my best charming Irish smile as we walked casually down the aisle to the door. By this time Lauren was in another aisle also heading for the door. No doubt my daughter was ready to deny our existence if the situation arose, probably three times.

On the steps outside sat the blind beggar. "There he is!" cried Tommy.

“That money was for you, but you put it into the basket.” The blind beggar did not move. After a few seconds, he turned his head and facing Tommy, he said quietly, “Who needs it more, me or the Christ Child?” The beggar shrugged and then turned away.

And indeed, what more could be said. In silence we walked away.

I heard a voice cry out. “I felt something on those bills!”

Sean turned and replied. “Red ink.”

“Red Ink?” said an incredulous blind beggar.

Lauren laughed and said, “It’s a short story.”

Now it was the blind beggar’s turn to laugh.

On the following Tuesday, I was in Fortunoff’s on 46th at Fifth in full panic mode. The sales personnel

remedied my anxiety attack and since I was only a few short blocks from St. Patrick’s steps why not stop for a short visit. Who was I kidding? I was looking for a blind man who in a few words put Christmas in proper perspective, at least for me. As a matter of fact, for one reason or another, I found myself passing St. Patrick’s every day that Christmas week looking for him.

“Give it only to the blind man!” dramatically instructed Sean while handing me a folded bill.

But I never saw the blind beggar again. When I asked a police officer stationed in front of the church whether he had seen him, he informed me begging was not permitted in front of the Cathedral. I knew differently, at least on that Saturday afternoon. Besides, I know that God moves in mysterious ways and I felt sure the

blind beggar was one of his ways. Here I had carried a dollar bill from Sean, to be delivered to him or was it actually for Him? Since I could not find the middleman, I went into the church and deposited Sean’s dollar, marked with red ink, into the offering basket.

And so life goes on.

Dennis J. McLaughlin



Saint Stephen

The word martyr comes from a Greek word meaning “witness.” St. Stephen, a Greek-speaking Jew, lived during the time of Jesus in Jerusalem and was the first Christian martyr.

Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, the early Church grew dramatically, through the wisdom and courage of the apostles inspired by the Holy Spirit. During this time some disagreements arose between the Hellenists, Greek-speaking immigrants who had come to Jerusalem from various settlements throughout the Roman world and the Hebrews, Aramaic-speaking people who lived in Palestine. There was a great deal of poverty in the area and proper distribution of alms was of the utmost importance. The Hellenists claimed that their widows were being neglected while the Hebrew widows were not. The apostles knew it was important for them to continue praying and spreading the word of God, so they

told the people to select seven men filled with the Holy Spirit whom they would appoint to be administrators. The people chose Stephen along with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolaus, all staunch defenders of the faith. The apostles prayed over them, and though they were selected to be administrators, they became the first deacons.

Stephen was a fiery preacher. He commanded everyone’s attention and performed many signs and wonders among the people.

There came a time when members of the synagogue of Freedmen, Jews freed from slavery, began to disagree with Stephen. Knowing they could not get the better of him they brought some men together to bear false witness against Stephen, accusing him of blasphemy.

They incited the people, elders and scribes and

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Saint Stephen

(Continued from page 11)

Stephen was brought before the council, the Jewish high court, and charged with blaspheming God and Moses and undermining temple worship.

When asked if these charges were true, Stephen took the opportunity to defend the Gospel of Jesus and to explain the meaning of the new Church. Stephen expounded on Israel's history from Abraham to Solomon, showing that Israel was hostile to all the prophets sent by God and yielded to the temptation of idolatry. He quoted Isaiah, "Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool. What house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?" Stephen elaborated that the temple is a man-made structure and is no longer a place of meeting with God, because they value the temple building more for its beauty than for what it stands. Stephen ends his speech by saying, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit as your fathers did. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the righteous one, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

When the people heard this they were furious. Stephen

knew the end was near and gazed into heaven and seeing God's glory said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." The crowds seized him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. As he lay dying he asked the Lord to receive his spirit and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

St. Stephen's feast day is December 26. He is the patron saint of casket makers, deacons, stonemasons and horses. In Europe, farmers decorate their horses on St. Stephen's day and bring them to church to be blessed by the priest, and later in the day families go for rides in brightly decorated wagons. This is known as St. Stephen's ride. Hay and oats are also brought to the church to be blessed, along with water and salt to use during the year in case of illness. In Poland, oats are tossed at the priest on this day to symbolize his martyrdom, and special breads are baked in the shape of horseshoes called *podkovy*, or St. Stephen's horns to be eaten on December 26.

St. Stephen is represented carrying a pile of rocks and holding the palm of martyrdom in his hands.

Diane Tomas

New Ministry, New Hope—New Life

Anyone who has experienced divorce knows that it takes time to work through the resulting pain and loss. One of Sacred Heart's newest ministries, New Life, is one that reaches out to divorced or separated members of our parish and helps them with the grieving stages of divorce.

New Life is a nine-week program designed to help people cope with the stresses and strains associated with divorce. The program

offers a safe place to gain a new perspective and helps people understand some of their emotional responses with the aim of growth and eventual restructuring of lives.

Each participant receives a book addressing the topics: self-image, stress, anger, blame and guilt, loneliness and how to move toward growth. Readings are done at home and during sessions. Weekly attendance for the nine weeks is encouraged but not mandatory. Watch the church bulletin

for dates and times of the next session, or call the rectory for details.

New Life is not a counseling session, but every word shared is held in the strictest confidence. The program is based upon the premise that sharing one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences with other people in similar situations who are willing to listen is a helpful way to move beyond the pain so that "we too might walk in the newness of life." (Romans 6:4)

Advent Reflection

Once more, we begin the new Church year with the season of Advent. The word means “arrival,” or “a coming into being,” and Advent has traditionally been a time of prayer and preparation for Christmas. For most of us, it has also been a time of shopping and baking, card writing, home decorating, and present wrapping.

Have you ever stopped to think about our tradition of giving presents at Christmas? It’s a reciprocal thing... I give you a present; you give me one. There’s an unspoken expectation at work here. People tend to keep track of the presents and even the cards they send each year. If they are not reciprocated, the exchange stops; the non-reciprocating party is dropped from the Christmas list. That’s the way it is with presents. The least you should be able to expect is a thank you note. This practice can also lead some into an escalating round of one-upmanship with each person trying, consciously or not, to outdo the other in the value or quality of the present given.

There is another interesting thing happening here. Have you ever been given a present and not had one to give in return? I’ll bet it made you feel really uncomfortable. There’s an urge to run right out and buy something in order to reciprocate. The specter of being seen as a freeloader, of being eliminated from someone’s list of worthy recipients, is intimidating. The ability to give in return is an indication of our self-worth. As long as we can maintain the status quo—give presents to cover those we receive, we are comfortable. But

Advent isn’t about presents. It’s all about a gift, and a gift is different.

There are no strings attached to a gift. It is always freely and generously given. Reciprocity is not an issue, and even a thank you note is not required, although it is still polite. I’m not trying to undermine good manners here! As humans, we are less comfortable with gifts than with “presents.” We like the exchange. It’s not in our nature to expect something for nothing; in fact it usually makes us suspicious of the giver’s motives. Gifts are difficult for us, and although we may not like to admit it, we have a hard time giving true gifts. We do expect something in return, even if it’s just the pleasure of seeing the happy smile on the face of the recipient. But Advent is a time for us to prepare to receive a gift. Something given with no expectation of return—something of such value that no amount of money can ever approach its worth—something we do not deserve and can never earn.

Advent is the beginning of our salvation. We know that Jesus came to earth for that one reason, and though the resurrection is still in the future, we prepare now to receive the baby Jesus. He is the Gift, the manifestation of God’s divine love for us, the promise of a far better world, both here and in eternity. We do not deserve the Gift; we cannot attain it; we can only receive it and use it wisely. But it also will not be forced upon us. God, who gives with no strings attached, will not “make” us accept his Gift. It is offered freely, but we

must accept it.

And this is what Advent is for me. It is a time to prepare myself to receive a true Gift. It is a time to reconcile myself to the fact that I cannot reciprocate. Nothing I can do or say, nothing I can buy or make, nothing can begin to equal the value of the Gift of Jesus as my personal savior. Even my desire to express gratitude for this Gift is itself a gift from God. My faith is a gift from God. My life is a gift from God. All that I am and all that I have is God’s gift to me. My talents, the time I have here on earth, the successes I have in life, the fortunate fact of my birth in this country, my ability to provide for my family, my health... the list is endless... all are God’s gifts to me. The greatest Gift, Jesus as my savior and my shepherd to eternal life, is what I am preparing to celebrate.

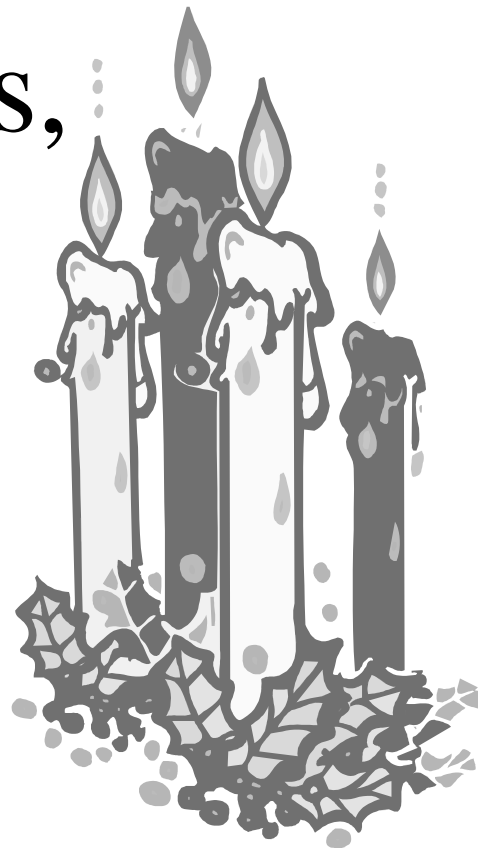
And at the beautiful liturgy of Christmas I will be aware, as the bread and wine of the Eucharist are transformed, that Jesus comes silently, in stillness, only to those who will accept such a won-

Deacon Chuck Dietsch



God bless us,
everyone!

—Tiny Tim, from *A Christmas Carol*



From the Heart

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