

For the week prior to Sunday 25 April 2010

Issue 17.10

'A Parish at Prayer!'
Prayer to Start Meetings &
A Resource for Prayer Groups

Dear friends,

Parishes as 'schools of prayer'!

Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI have strongly encouraged parishes to become 'schools of prayer'.

In his Apostolic Letter in January 2001 Pope John Paul II stated:

"We well know that prayer cannot be taken for granted. We have to learn to pray. ... Our Christian communities must become genuine 'schools' of prayer. ... How helpful it would be if in parishes more were done to ensure an all-pervading climate of prayer."

Similarly Pope Benedict XVI spoke to the Bishops of Switzerland in Nov. 2006:

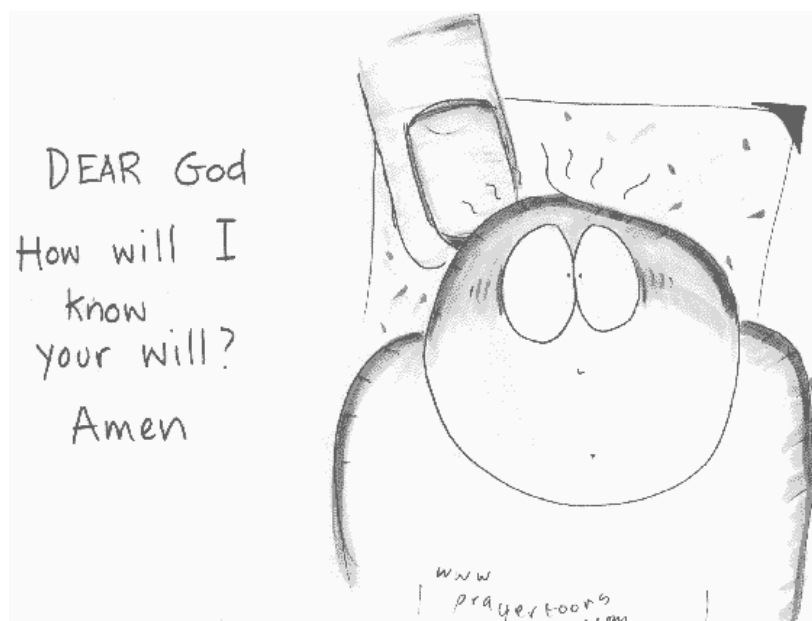
"It is a fundamental task of pastoral care to teach people how to pray. ... We must increase the number of these schools of prayer where it is possible to learn personal prayer in all its dimensions."

The aim of this newsletter – still in trial mode - is to offer some small help to this becoming a reality. Your comments are welcome!

With kind regards,

Anthony

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PART I

Reflection at the Start of a Meeting

A reminder! A little extra time spent in prayer is never wasted – in fact, it makes the rest of our meeting more effective!

Choose the time that works best for you, eg 10 minutes.
Feel free to use as much or as little of the material as you find helpful.

A. Introductory Prayer

- After welcoming one another we begin with a minute of silence
[Silence]
'We become more fully aware of the presence of God.....'
- Father, we rest in your presence. 'I put my trust in God's love forever and ever.' (Psalm 52) ...
- Jesus, you call us like Martha's sister, Mary, to sit at your feet and listen...
- Holy Spirit, help us to hear your voice, to be attentive to your gentle promptings ...

B. Prayerful reading of The Gospel

One person reads the text slowly and prayerfully. The text is the Gospel for the coming Sunday, 25 April 2010.

C. Gospel John 10:27-30

²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one." (NRSV)

(Readings from the 1996 Jerusalem Bible can be found at:

<http://www.catholicireland.net/pages/today readings.php?lang=eng&nextsun=yess>)

D. Thoughts on the Gospel

One or two people might read the following reflection:

'We certainly live in an age where Christian or religious values in general cannot be assumed. In the space of fifty years a sea change in attitudes has occurred. Instead of there being pressure to conform to religious practice and values, the pressure now operates in a very different direction.

'It is into the midst of this perennial problem of many voices that Christ's words come. Yet, if Christ's words about sheep imply that not everyone listens to his voice, it is a message of encouragement to those who do: "I give them eternal life; they will never be lost and no one will ever steal them from me."

It has never been easy to follow Christ, which is why so many of us do it badly. Yet Christ is clear that the sometimes difficult road of listening to his voice is the way to true and authentic life in God. The voice of Christ does not try to dazzle us, to manipulate us or to control us. It is a voice that is not for mindless sheep,

but for sheep who decide for themselves and who are prepared sometimes not to follow the herd.'

Excerpt from a homily by Fr. John O'Connor OP

E. Sharing

Take another minute of silence!

How is God speaking to me/us through this text?

What points can I take away to energise me in the week ahead?

F. Closing Prayer

Prayer of St Ambrose (c.337-397)

Lord, teach me to seek you,
and reveal yourself to me
when I seek You.

For I cannot seek you
unless you first teach me,
nor find you, unless you
first reveal Yourself to me.

Let me seek you in longing,
and long for you in seeking.

Let me find you in love,
and love you in finding.

Amen.

[It was St Ambrose who baptised St Augustine in 386.]

Time for a Smile

A priest and pastor from the local churches are standing by the side of the country road pounding a sign into the ground that reads:

'The End is Near! Turn yourself around now, before it's too late!'

'Leave us alone you religious nuts!' yelled the driver as he sped by.

Then, from around the curve they heard screeching tires ... then a big splash.

The pastor turns to the priest and asks, 'Do you think the sign should read "The Bridge is Down"?''

Part II follows.

PART II

Scripture Prayer Group Notes

[For groups that can spend more time in prayerful reflection.]

A. Introductory Prayer

- After everyone is welcomed, allow a short period of silence
[Silence]

'We become more fully aware of the presence of God.....

- Father, we rest in your presence. 'I put my trust in God's love forever and ever.' (Psalm 52) ...
- Jesus, you call us like Martha's sister, Mary, to sit at your feet and listen...
- Holy Spirit, help us to hear your voice, to be attentive to your gentle promptings ...

B. Prayerful reading of The Gospel

The Gospel is read three times, each time by a different member of the group. After each reading there is a time of silence as we allow the Word to speak to us. [The *Lectio Divina* method.] The Gospel text is:

John 10:27-30

²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one." (NRSV)

(Readings from the 1996 Jerusalem Bible can be found at:

<http://www.catholicireland.net/pages/todaysreadings.php?lang=eng&nextsun=yess>)

C. Prayerful Sharing

While remaining in the prayerful atmosphere, members of the group speak of a word or phrase that stood out for them in the text. One person speaks two or three sentences. Then there is silence - no comment, no discussion. Then another member of the group speaks.

D. Thoughts on the Gospel

'We certainly live in an age where Christian or religious values in general cannot be assumed. In the space of fifty years a sea change in attitudes has occurred. Instead of there being pressure to conform to religious practice and values, the pressure now operates in a very different direction.

'It is into the midst of this perennial problem of many voices that Christ's words come. Yet, if Christ's words about sheep imply that not everyone listens to his voice, it is a message of encouragement to those who do: "I give them eternal life; they will never be lost and no one will ever steal them from me."

It has never been easy to follow Christ, which is why so many of us do it badly. Yet Christ is clear that the sometimes difficult road of listening to his voice is the way to true and authentic life in God. The voice of Christ does not try to dazzle us, to manipulate us or to control us. It is a voice that is not for mindless sheep, but for sheep who decide for themselves and who are prepared sometimes not to follow the herd.'

Excerpt from a homily by Fr. John O'Connor OP

E. Sharing

Take another minute of silence!

How is God speaking to me through this text?

How will this Gospel affect me and what I do during the coming week?

F. Notes on the Gospel Text

Notes on John 10:27-30

27My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. 29What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. 30The Father and I are one." (NRSV)

Here, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter we have a short but powerful statement of what the resurrection means for us:

- 'My sheep' (v.27) This text follows a longish dissertation by Jesus earlier in the same chapter (John 10: 1-18) in which Jesus uses the analogy of sheep and shepherd – and twice refers to himself as 'the good shepherd' (John 10:11 & 14).

John McKenzie SJ in 'Dictionary of the Bible' describes the close relationship which existed in biblical times between the shepherd and his sheep: 'The type of pasture available in biblical regions imposes upon the shepherd the necessity of the nomadic life; he must travel with his flock from one pasture to another as the seasons change. The shepherd also leads them to shelter in inclement weather and defends them against attacks of prey and bandits.'

'The pasture to which Jesus leads his sheep is that of eternal life.' ('The Gospel According to John' by Bruce Vawter CM)

- 'hear my voice.' (v.27) Pause a moment to take in the significance and depth of the word, 'hear', so often used in the Bible:
 - 'If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts!' Psalm 95
 - 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.' Deut 6:4 - the centerpiece of the morning and evening Jewish prayer services.
 - 'The seed sown in the rich soil is someone who hears the word and understands it.' Matt 13:23 – The Parable of the Sower is about 'hearing'.
 - 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and put it into practice.' (Luke 8:21) – To hear the Word in depth is to obey.
 - Profound theologian, Fr Karl Rahner SJ, described Christians as 'Hearers of the Word'.

- 'No one will snatch them out of my hand.' (v.28) The image conveyed is that of sheep being attacked by wolves. When they are guarded by a 'hired man', he 'abandons the sheep and runs away as soon as he sees a wolf coming'. (John 10:12) Jesus is the Good Shepherd who will not allow the sheep, given to him by the Father, to be taken away from him.
- 'The Father and I are one.' (v.30) 'Jesus utters one of his "hard sayings" that provokes the wrath of the Jews. Jesus is amplifying his statement that no one can snatch the sheep from him because they have been given to him by the Father; Father and Son are one in mind, will, and action. Jesus does not say merely that he and the Father are "at one" but that are "one thing". This meaning is, in fact perceived by the Jews, as appears in the following verses.' ('The Gospel According to John' by Bruce Vawter CM)
- 'It was an affirmation such as found in v.30 that ultimately led the 4th century Church to the doctrine of the one divine nature in the Trinity.' ('The Gospel According to John' by Raymond Brown)

G. Closing Prayer

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For I cannot seek you
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Let me seek you in longing,
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Let me find you in love,
and love you in finding.
Amen.

St Ambrose - Biographical Note

The life of St. Ambrose of Milan is a particularly fascinating story. He was born around 339 in what is now France, the son of the Roman prefect of Gaul. Following in his father's footsteps, Ambrose embarked upon a career in law and politics and by 370 AD, he had become the Imperial governor of Northern Italy. When the episcopal see of Milan became vacant in 374, the people demanded that Saint Ambrose be made their bishop. The neighbouring bishops and the Emperor convinced him to accept this call as the will of God, and so the catechumen Ambrose was baptized and ordained first deacon, then priest, then bishop, all in a single week!

This politician-turned churchman was profoundly aware of his lack of preparation for this great responsibility and so set himself immediately to prayer and the study of Scripture. His deep spirituality and love of God's Word married together with the oratorical skill acquired in law and politics made St. Ambrose one of the greatest preachers of the early church.

St. Ambrose proved to be a fierce opponent of heresy, paganism, and hypocrisy. He battled to preserve the independence of the Church from the state and courageously excommunicated the powerful Catholic Emperor Theodosius I for a massacre of innocent civilians in Thessalonica. St. Ambrose also had a significant impact on sacred music through the composition of hymns and psalm tones that are known to this day as Ambrosian chant. Besides numerous sermons and treatises on the spiritual life, Saint Ambrose is responsible for two of the first great theological works written in Latin, 'De Sacramentis' on the Sacraments and 'De Spiritu Sancto' on the Holy Spirit.

Around 385, an ambitious professor of public speaking named **Augustine** came to hear Saint Ambrose preach in order to study his technique, and in the process, was attracted to the Catholic faith. In 386 Augustine was baptized by St. Ambrose and went on to become bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Ambrose and his pupil, Augustine, together with St. Jerome and St. Gregory the Great, make up the four original Doctors of the Latin Church. Saint Ambrose, the great bishop of Milan, died on Holy Saturday (April 4) in the year 397 AD. His feast day in the Roman calendar is December 7, the day he was ordained bishop.

by Marcellino D'Ambrosio, Ph.D.

Time for a Smile

A priest and pastor from the local churches are standing by the side of the country road pounding a sign into the ground that reads:

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The pastor turns to the priest and asks, 'Do you think the sign should read "The Bridge is Down"?''

**'The love of God has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit,
which has been given to us.' (Rom 5:5) –
and it is our privilege and opportunity
to allow the love of God to flow through us to others!**