

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to meet with Karen Aquino Chang and Joe Martin, members of our parish Vocations Promotion Team. Over a year ago, Karen and Joe participated in a workshop on how parishes can work to promote vocations to married life as well as priesthood and consecrated life. This workshop took place at St. Anne of the Sunset Church in San Francisco and brought together lay women and men who are committed to bringing greater awareness of these states of life within a Catholic context. In meeting with Karen and Joe, we proposed a few ideas to begin to establish a strong and supportive vocations team here at St. Pius. During the season of Lent, we invite you to join us in praying the Rosary on Tuesday, February 23rd and Tuesday, March 23rd at 5:30pm before confessions at 6pm. Please see the information in this bulletin to highlight proposed action ideas moving forward. I am very grateful for this enthusiastic leadership role taken by these two highly regarded and respected parish members.

Today's reading from Genesis presents us with Abraham standing at a crossroads: he must make a seemingly unwinnable decision. He must discern whether to offer his son Isaac up to God as a sacrificial offering. Imagine the overwhelming difficulty he faces. Abraham deeply loves God and wants to serve Him with all his heart. Yet, quite naturally, he loves his son Isaac and knows that if he listens to God Isaac will die. What must have been going through Abraham's mind as he carried his child in his arms as he ascended the mountain at Moriah. How many of us have lost someone or something so valuable and cherished by us? The pain and the loss can present a struggle for us. Yet, Abraham plodded on. In his total trust and surrender to God, God is moved by Abraham's love. "Abraham, Abraham!" "Here I am!" he answered. "Do not lay your hand on the boy," said the messenger. "Do not do the least thing to him. I know how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son."

The existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, in his book *Fear and Trembling*, spoke of Abraham thus: "Many a father has felt the loss of his child as the loss of the dearest thing he has in the world, to be bereft of every hope for the future; yet no son was the child of promise in the sense that Isaac was for Abraham. Many a father has lost his child, but then it was God, the unchangeable and inscrutable will of the Almighty, it was his hand that took it. Not so with Abraham. For him a harder trial was reserved: along with the knife the fate of Isaac was put into Abraham's own hand. And he stood there, the old man with his only hope! But he did not doubt, he did not look in anguish to left or right, he did not challenge heaven with his prayers. He knew it was God the Almighty that tried him, he knew it was the hardest sacrifice that could be demanded of him; but he also knew that no sacrifice was too hard when God demanded it..."

During this Lenten season, the experience of Abraham affords us the opportunity to reflect upon our own ability or lack thereof to trust how God is working in our lives. Are we willing to be utterly obedient to God's will for us? The faithfulness of Abraham can perhaps inspire us to meditate on where God figures in our lives and how we can learn to detach those things, as important and valuable as they may be, if they hinder us from following the Lord in a spirit of freedom and detachment. Abraham's fidelity and obedience so moved the Lord that he was promised abundant blessings and descendants. How many blessings and graces have we received when, discerning to do God's will or our own, we capitulated to following Jesus Christ? Abraham is a heroic figure, an admirable example for us to follow as we strive to conform ourselves to giving generously and freely back to God in response to His unending love and mercy for us!

In light of the dramatic exchange between God and Abraham, St. Paul in his letter to the Romans asks this question: “Brothers and sisters: If God is for us, who can be against us?” I have noticed that in recent funerals, families are using this scripture passage more frequently. Amid the pandemic and the very difficult situations in which families have been placed, this passage really speaks of hope. Amidst the many trials and heartache this time has caused, including having a very limited number of family and friends at funerals, this sentiment of hope speaks to the triumph of the Cross. Nothing, no situation or circumstance, can separate us from the love of God, not even death itself. No judgement in this earthly realm even remotely measure to a God who acquits us because His love and mercy is without limit. His Son is our closest ally and intercessor...who daily shows us his care and love. God is indeed for us!

The Transfiguration story is well situated within the context of Lent as we continue to contemplate and meditate upon the earthly mission of Jesus. Mark’s account of Jesus revealing his divinity is replete with significant milestones of salvation history. Jesus takes his three closest companions, Peter, James and John, up a high mountain (which symbolizes one’s proximity to the divine). Two preeminent figures in Jewish history, Elijah and Moses, appear. They had been given a mission by God which they fulfilled and now Jesus reveals his mission, which is to suffer the passion, die and then rise again. Peter is so caught up in the moment that he doesn’t want it to end. “Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah!” Alas, it is not to be and Peter must experience necessary loss which is a cost of authentic discipleship. Jesus revealed to them the suffering he would have to endure but it was lost on his disciples. God said to them, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!” It was only after the resurrection of Jesus Christ that Peter, James and John would come to understand the profound significance of the Transfiguration.

I want to share with you a reflection by St. John Chrysostom which I hope helps guide us through this privileged and holy season. “Prayer and converse with God is a supreme good: it is a partnership and union with God. As the eyes of the body are enlightened when they see light, so our spirit, when it is intent on God, is illumined by his infinite light. I do not mean the prayer of outward observance but prayer from the heart, not confined to fixed times or periods but continuous throughout the day and night.

Our spirit should be quick to reach out toward God, not only when it is engaged in meditation; at other times also, when it is carrying out its duties, caring for the needy, performing works of charity, giving generously in the service of others, our spirit should long for God and call him to mind, so that these works may be seasoned with the salt of God’s love, and so make a palatable offering to the Lord of the universe. Throughout the whole of our lives may we enjoy the benefit that comes from prayer if we devote a great deal of time to it.” [St. John Chrysostom was born in Antioch in Syria in the year 347 and died in 407. He was a great writer and preacher and served as Bishop of Constantinople. He is a Doctor of the Church and is a revered saint in both the East and the Western churches].

Fr. Tom