

# FROM THE PASTOR'S



## Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time February 8, 2009 B

### NEXT SUNDAY ANNUAL CATHOLIC APPEAL RESPONDING TO THE MYSTERY AND PRESENCE OF SUFFERING IN OUR LIVES

#### **THIS YEAR'S ASSESSMENT: \$265,677**

Next weekend is the annual **Catholic Appeal** in our Diocese. **Catholic Appeal** is the way that the 80 parishes and 12 missions in our Diocese work together to fund the ministries and administration of our central office.

Each parish is assessed 15.7% of their total *offertory income* for the previous fiscal year 2007-2008. Because our offertory income increased 4% during that fiscal year, our assessment this year has increased by 4%. We are *not* assessed on any other parish income, e.g., Bingo, Building Fund, etc.

#### **Six levels of giving in 2008**

Newcomers to our parish who are in a position to participate in our *Catholic Appeal* may wonder how much to give to our *Catholic Appeal*. A general guideline is “*give as the Lord has given to you.*” “*We desire not equal gifts, but equal sacrifice.*” In our parish last year, we received gifts ranging from \$5 to \$5,000.

If you are in a position to be a *major donor* by giving a gift of \$1,000 or more, please consider doing so. If you cannot be a major donor, give at a level that you can and that makes you feel good about your gift.

- Last year, 48 parishioners gave gifts of \$1,000 or more to our **Catholic Appeal**, totaling \$74,276.
- 109 parishioners gave gifts between \$500 and \$999, totaling \$73,758.
- 217 parishioners gave gifts between \$200 and \$500, totaling \$76,472.
- 170 parishioners gave gifts between \$100 and \$200, totaling \$27,260.
- 429 parishioners gave gifts between \$75 and \$100, totaling \$12,750.
- 301 parishioners gave under \$75, totaling \$11,042.

All levels of giving are welcome and appreciated. If you plan to give a gift of, let's say, \$200 and could easily give \$300, consider going with the higher amount. Our goal of **\$265,677** is a huge amount of money to receive pledges for in a few weeks. But we know we can do it when **all** of us pull together.

I am **most grateful** to all of you who, year after year, give to our *Catholic Appeal* and help us take care of a huge

financial responsibility. I know that if your financial situation allows you to participate again this year, you will do so. I am well aware that people's financial situation can dramatically change in a year. This is especially true this year.

How our Catholic Appeal monies are spent, may be found in the brochure that our registered parishioners received this past week in the mail.

**Non-registered parishioners.** I am aware that some people have been coming to our parish for years and do not register. Registration in a parish is a personal choice that each person must make for him/herself. If we decide not to register because we do not want to participate in the financial responsibilities of the parish, even though we are in a position to do so, then we have made a *selfish* and *greedy* decision. If you come to church on a regular basis and benefit from the services offered by the parish, then I would hope you would also take your responsibility seriously to help your parish take care of its financial obligations. If you decide to contribute to Catholic Appeal (checks are made out to Ascension Church), please know that we will *not* register you. You will only become an *official* member of the parish when *you* decide to do so. Envelopes will be in the pews next Sunday to allow you to participate if you choose to do so.

**Winter Parishioners.** We welcome all of our winter parishioners. I know that many of you are registered and play an active part in the parish life, including financially, while you are here. Thank you. I realize that most of you have some form of **Catholic Appeal** in your home diocese. If you are here six months, perhaps you can give 50% of what you normally set aside for the funding of our diocese. If you are only here three or four months, perhaps you might consider sharing with us 25% of what you set aside to help our diocese.

#### **Something to think about**

In his book *The Treasure Principle—Discovering the Secret of Joyful Giving*, Randy Alcorn speaks of six Treasure Principles. The sixth principle states:

#### **God prospers me not to raise my standard of living but to raise my standard of giving.**

Even though I am well aware that God did not prosper too many of us these past few years, the above thought is still worth reflecting on. God blesses us financially so that we can be *more generous* and not *more selfish*. Too often in our world, when people are financially blessed, they only use their newfound wealth to *raise their standard of*

*living and omit to raise their level of giving.* The above principle reminds us that if God blesses us financially, he does so *primarily* to give us the opportunity (and joy) to raise our level of giving. Sure, we may raise our standard of living a bit, but God's generosity to us is primarily intended to make us more generous and not greedier. When we use God's financial blessings to *primarily* raise our standard of living, we place ourselves in a poor position to raise our level of giving.

In Alcorn's book, the fifth principle states: "*Giving is the only antidote to materialism.*" Another way of stating this principle might be: "giving and sharing are God's medicine for our greedy tendencies." My assumption is that most, if not all of us, have greedy tendencies and if these are not kept in check, we will become greedy people — people who use God's blessings *not* as a wonderful occasion to bless others but as an opportunity to bless ourselves and our families. How sad that would be. I believe the only way to keep our greedy or materialistic tendencies in check is to be *consistent* in setting aside a portion of our income to support our church family and the poor.

## **RESPONDING TO THE MYSTERY AND PRESENCE OF SUFFERING IN OUR LIVES**

The book of Job, from which today's first reading is taken, is the story that addresses the perennial issue of why bad things happen to good people.

Job is a good and faithful servant of God. But Satan tells God that the man is only faithful because God has blessed him greatly. If God removed Job's blessings, he would not be nearly as faithful. So God allows Job's blessings to be removed. He loses his material blessings and his children, and he is afflicted with sores all over his body. His nagging wife tells him to "curse God and die." To make matters worse, Job's friends, his so-called "comforters," tell Job that all these bad things are happening to him because he is a sinner. If only he would repent of his sin, his blessings would be restored.

Job rejects the traditional belief that bad things are happening to him because he is a sinner. While Job rants and raves and becomes very impatient with life and even with God, he does remain faithful to God. His fidelity is summed up in the well-known lines:

*"The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."*

Job's story has a good ending. In the last chapter, God praises his servant Job and restores all his blessings.

One cannot write an essay about suffering with a beginning, middle and end. When we write about suffering, we write around it, and we explore it

philosophically and theologically. We try to make some sense of it. But we can't package it.

### **Two reasons for human suffering**

When we ponder the mystery and presence of human suffering in the world, especially the suffering that good people sometimes experience, most of us ask why? Why, God, are you allowing this good person to suffer in this way?

Two reasons for the vast majority of human suffering, if not for all of it, is the misuse of free will and the imperfect evolving world that we live in.

**Reason #1: Misuse of free will.** God created us with free will, which means that we humans can use our free will to make good or bad choices. The vast majority of human suffering occurs because of poor choices and misuse of free will.

For example, we make poor choices when it comes to career or relationships which result in a lot of unhappiness and, sometimes, a lot of suffering. Greed on Wall Street and Main Street is causing our economy to almost collapse. We drink and drive, and people are killed or injured for life. We don't take care of our bodies and our health breaks down. We abuse Mother Earth and we incur all kinds of negative consequences.

We have character defects which rob *us* of our peace and often causes *others* we live and work with all kinds of stress and suffering.

On a global level, we witness much suffering because of the terrible, sinful choices of individuals and leaders of nations, and of ethnic and religious groups.

We wonder why God allows some people to do terrible things. The answer is simple: God respects our human freedom. He could remove it and make us all human robots, but I doubt any of us would vote for that solution.

### **Reason #2: We live in an imperfect evolving world.**

The *Catechism* states that as creation moves towards its final state of perfection, God allows physical evil (sickness, natural disasters, etc.) to co-exist alongside physical good.

We live in an imperfect universe whose secrets we humans are constantly seeking to discover. It is a good thing to often pray for all engaged in scientific and medical research, whose findings (and their responsible application) will help us to enjoy life more fully on earth.

In the meantime, we live with "pockets of chaos" that can cause us humans immense suffering, e.g., earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis, etc. Yet in the past fifty years, enormous strides have been made to help protect ourselves against such calamities. Because medicine is an imperfect science, we must live and die

of certain diseases. But here again, wonderful advances have been made in this area and in many other areas that impact the quality of our lives here on earth.

### **Jesus' response to suffering**

God did not answer Job's question of why a good God allows bad things to happen to good people. Neither did Jesus. He did say that it was not a case of God punishing someone (Jn 9:1-5). Someone once said: "Jesus came not to answer the question of suffering. Rather, he came to fill it with his presence." This, he surely did. Nowhere in the gospel do we see Jesus indifferent or aloof to people's suffering. Nowhere do we find Jesus saying to sick people, "Put up with your sickness, it will bring you closer to God." Rather, we find Jesus confronting sickness as an evil, healing it everywhere he meets it - which is not to say that he healed *every* sick person in Palestine 2,000 years ago. He probably did not. Of course, God will sometimes use sickness for a higher purpose to waken us up spiritually and/or to lead us closer to him. Yet, as I say this, I am also very aware that sickness can lead people away from God and Church. I sometimes wonder what our parishes would be like if all pastors and parishioners took Jesus' mandate to "heal the sick" more seriously. It would mean that we would have lots of prayer teams and healing services where suffering people could come to receive healing prayer. I feel the Church in general has failed her people badly in this very important area of Christian ministry. We have made a few efforts to have a healing ministry at Ascension but, unfortunately, we have not persevered.

### **Our response to human suffering**

When it comes to coping with and responding to human suffering, I find the wisdom in the *Serenity Prayer* to be most helpful.

*God, help me to change what can be changed, to accept what cannot be changed, and grant me the wisdom to know the difference.*

#### **"Changing what can be changed"**

When faced with human suffering, we can always pray for the grace to know what can be changed and to have the courage and strength to make the change. For example:

**Change of attitude.** One of my all-time favorite sayings is: "*It is not the circumstances of our lives that will make us or break us. Rather, it is our attitude towards the circumstances of our lives.*" Two people could have the same set of circumstances: a health issue, an imperfect work situation, an unhappy relationship. However, one person may have developed the skills and attitude to

cope rather well with his/her situation, while the other person is miserable.

We cannot change the fact that we have some permanent ailment or that a loved one has died, but we can change the attitude we bring to our present reality and that change of attitude can make a world of difference. It is usually the only difference between people who are miserable and people who are happy.

**Willingness to reach out for help.** Pride keeps many of us from seeking help that could reduce the suffering or pain in our lives and help us to live happier lives. Fear of change can also keep us from doing things that could reduce stress in our lives.

Some years ago, I went to counseling on and off for a period of time. The counseling, plus some spiritual direction, helped me cope more effectively with personal issues and also helped me deal more effectively with people, especially difficult people. Going to the counseling and spiritual direction reduced the stress level in my life and helped me to live a happier and more meaningful life.

All of us carry some character defects within us. After all, none of us is perfect. Some of us have character defects that add a lot of stress and emotional suffering to our lives. For example, we may have big egos that need a lot of attention. We may have a bad temper and an excessive need for control. We may have a difficult time forgiving life's hurts. We may have a very hard time saying, "I'm sorry, please forgive me." We may have insecurity and self-esteem issues that make it hard for us to see our own goodness, to forgive ourselves and to confront people who mistreat us. We may carry a lot of fear within us—fear about the future, fear of dying, fear of failure and rejection. All of these weaknesses do impact our lives and our personal relationships.

The good news is that, with the help of Jesus, a bit of counseling and spiritual direction, participating in some church spirituality programs, and opening up to others, we can bring God's healing touch to many of our character defects and weaknesses. But the question is: are we willing to reach out for help? Sadly, all too often, we are fearful or too proud to seek the help that could reduce the pain in our lives. Often, people carry a burden of guilt for years for some past failure. A good confession, in most cases, would free us of that burden. But fear or pride keeps us from seeking the help we need.

Our bad economy is forcing many people to seek help for the first time in their lives. Some parents with children in our school would rather pull them out than seek tuition assistance. In this case, the pride of parents hurts their children.

**Deepening our spirituality.** A decision to deepen our spirituality can help us immensely as we deal with any and all forms of suffering in our lives. Many of you can testify how your faith has been a big help in difficult times. Just the other day, a woman shared with me how her faith is helping her to become more detached from material things during these hard times. She and her husband lost 50% of their investments in the past few months.

A true deepening of our relationship with God will help us to be more forgiving, more compassionate, more trustful, more joyful and peaceful, more humble, less jealous, less ego-centered, less controlling, etc. A false or superficial spirituality will not help us.

Of course, if we suffer from deep-rooted problems, we will most likely also need some psychological counseling.

### **“Accepting what we cannot change”**

Some things cannot be changed, e.g., loss of a loved one. Some things cannot be changed—at least for *now* and maybe *never*, e.g., a particular physical or mental condition, a bad relationship, etc.

When the great poet John Milton went blind, he was initially very miserable. But when, with the grace of God, he was able to *accept* his blindness, he said that “he was filled with the light of God.” The loss of his physical sight was replaced with spiritual enlightenment.

When preparing this column, I read a powerful story about a man who ended up in a mental institution due to a boxing accident which left him to deal with paranoid schizophrenia. Fortunately, Michael had a spiritual life or had developed one which helped him tremendously to deal with his pain. In the article, Michael writes:

*The constant struggle for me over the years was trying to be healed, as well as always wondering where I had gone wrong and why this cross had been given to me, one which I could not shake. The harder I fought, the worse it became.*

*Then one night during my Holy Hour, Our Lord led me to accept what I had been so desperately trying to heal and to change and could not, no matter how many times I was prayed over or how many times I went to confession.*

*Then, when I accepted the simple truth that I had a cross to carry, a great joy and peace came into my life, because I suddenly realized that being mentally ill was not a character fault, as some would seem to suggest. Instead, I understood that it was a great grace and that healing comes in the acceptance of reality. I had to accept the reality that this suffering would be a constant companion - not an enemy but a loving friend, who would teach me compassion, gentleness and meekness.*

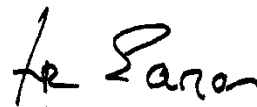
Coming to accept what cannot be changed can be a huge challenge. Our ability to come to this acceptance will depend, a lot on the level of our spirituality and, to some extent, on our personality make-up. Most of us would probably benefit from some counseling during a time like this.

### **“The wisdom to know the difference”**

The *Serenity Prayer* asks that we discern what can and cannot be changed. Sometimes this is clear and sometimes it is not. When a death occurs, we know that a loved one will not return though we may struggle with denial for a long time.

In the case of some health issue, we don't always know. Some ailment may be permanent, but then again, it may not. In this situation, our challenge is to accept what cannot be changed *now*, while doing all we can to bring healing to our body or mind. This is a time when we need the help of good doctors, a strong faith, and the support of faith friends.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Aron". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.