

INTRODUCTION

Way back in the summer of 2008, I started a practice which I had hoped would happen every year: writing a pastoral letter to the people of the parish, on various aspects of Catholic Christian life and practice. My first was on the profound sacrament of the Eucharist. A year later, I wrote to the young people of the parish, encouraging them to stay close to the Lord Jesus and avoid behaviors which lead to nothing but heartache.

Well, the cost of mailing these letters, especially as we were cutting here and there to climb out of our fiscal problems, prohibited me from writing another Pastoral Letter---until now! It finally dawned on me that these letters could be posted on the parish website, so that at least most of our people could gain access to them! Therefore, we now have a special page on the website www.stmarthachurch.com which will give access to my letters to you, the shepherd writing to the flock.

These will be different from the Pastor's Blogs on Facebook, and even my weekly letter in the bulletin. They will, I hope offer deeper opportunity for reflection and a bit of instruction, to help all grow in the Faith.

JESUS: THE WAY

August 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

It has been too long since I have written a pastoral letter, a practice I hope to revive with great vigor during this year of preparation for our Fiftieth Anniversary. For the first three of these new letters, I have decided to use as a theme Jesus' own words, "*I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life.*" (Gospel of John chapter 14, verse 6) In the Preface of one of the special Eucharistic Prayers, entitled "Jesus, the Way to the Father," we find these words: "*[Jesus] is the way that leads to You, the truth that sets us free, the life that fills us with gladness.*" This letter will offer reflections on Jesus as "the Way."

As with most things Christian, we owe a debt to our "older brothers and sisters," as Saint John Paul II called them, our Jewish ancestors in the faith. We often translate the word meaning the first five books of the Bible, Torah, as "law," but it means much more than that. Granted, there are many legal issues expressed, especially in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, but the meaning of Torah is closer to "instruction" or "guidance," helping someone find the way to God. In fact, the root of the word Torah comes from a verb from the sport of archery, meaning aiming and guiding the arrow to the target. It was not enough for the children of Israel to not break the commandments to be considered just and in communion with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: they also were expected to walk a certain path: participating in the worship life of the community, caring for aliens, widows and orphans (those on society's fringes) and

fulfilling religious obligations. All these, done in the proper spirit, were signs that the person was on the righteous path, the way to God. In Psalm 119, we read:

Happy are they whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law (Torah) of the Lord.” (verse 1)
How shall a young man be faultless in his way?
by keeping to your words. (verse 9)
Lead me in the path of your commands,
for in it (the Torah) I delight. (verse 35)
At midnight I rise to give you thanks
because of your just ordinances. (verse 62)
I am the companion of all who fear you
and keep your precepts. (verse 63)
Seven times a day I will praise you
for your just ordinances. (verse 164)

Notice themes of worship (verses 62 and 164), fellowship (verse 63) and responsibility to others (verses 1,9). Most of all, try to understand the underlying sense that Torah was and is so much more than “keeping rules;” it was and is the way to God, a way which He Himself revealed to His people!

On the night before He died, Jesus declared Himself “the Way.” In chapter four of his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI explores the idea that Jesus presents Himself as the “new” Torah. In other words, Jesus Himself not only presents the new instruction (The Sermon on the Mount), but He Himself is the new path which leads to the Father, as the One who came from the Father and therefore knows the way back. Consistently, we find Jesus less concerned with blind keeping of the human rules than responding to real human needs and gathering God’s children into the Kingdom (He cured on the Sabbath, shucked grain heads on the Sabbath, touched the dead and a bleeding woman, incurring ritual impurity, etc.) At the heart of His actions is the fact that the deepest human need is the need for God; pursuing this deepest of all needs disposes the human person to live in right relationship with God, others, self and nature, and therefore keep the Torah, that is, follow the righteous way back to God.

I believe there are no coincidences with God, only Providence. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the earliest “title” for what we now call Christianity was “the Way.” The early followers, realizing they were the Body of Christ, not only pointed out the Way as the Master did, but lived in such a manner as to “stick out” from the pagan world, causing the Romans who controlled much of the world to scratch their heads and utter, “*Hi Christiani! Quomodo amant se invicem!* These Christians! How they love one another!”

We either follow Jesus as “way” or we do not. There is no middle ground. We cannot claim to be followers of “the Way,” Christians, unless we walk the path shown us by the One Who came from the Father, and so knows well the way back. Just as it was for our Jewish ancestors, we are called to take part in certain actions as we walk the Way.

The person who follows the Way which is Jesus never walks alone. Each person is a member of the Body of Christ by baptism and a member of the Communion of Saints. Therefore, we walk back to the Father together: community is an essential aspect of belonging to the Way. For Catholics, we must gather for Eucharist every Sunday, to worship Almighty God, to give thanks (“make Eucharist” in Greek) for the sacrificial death and Resurrection of Jesus, to renew our ties of community, and to be empowered to go forth and spread the Gospel and care for our brothers and sisters in need. To neglect any of these aspects of Christian life is to “miss the target.” It is not “Torah” (proper aiming at the target, life with God) but rather what the Greeks called “hamartia” (which means “missing the target” and is one of the words used in the Bible to describe sin.

It was at the Last Supper that Jesus revealed Himself as the Way. For many months, He had cultivated intimacy with His chosen Twelve. At this meal celebrating the deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt, He changed the meaning of the celebration by declaring the bread and wine His Body and Blood. He showed the Twelve how to be Eucharist by washing their feet. He told them that what He had done, they must do. Eleven, after initially abandoning Him, were forgiven and persisted in the Way, even unto death. For us to really follow Jesus as the Way, we need to develop an intimate relationship with Him as those Eleven did, and that only comes through prayer, personal and liturgical/communal.

One of the original Twelve did not persevere. He pulled away from the Supper, betrayed the Torah, despaired and hanged himself. (Jesus lost 8 and 2/3 percent of His first “seminary class”!) Many of our fellow parishioners---much more than 8 2/3 % --- stay away from the Sunday Eucharist, believing they can find their own way to God. They can not. “No one comes to the Father except through Me,” said Jesus. Reach out to those in your family, on your block, in your social circle, who have given up attending Sunday Mass and help them find the Way again. Bring them to Sunday Mass. Support them. Most of all, pray for them daily.

May we, as God’s People, spend another 50 years, believing, welcoming and serving, and as always, like Saint Martha, may be always be friends of Jesus.

God’s Blessings on you!

Father Al

(Rev.) Alexander Masluk

Pastor

