

Homily
Rev. Paul G. Mast
March 1st, 2005
St. Joseph's Parish Retreat Closing Mass
Charlton, MA

Tonight a parish retreat ends, but a mission begins. My work is over, your work begins. Whatever graces God has poured out and we will hear what they are shortly, they are now in your hands and for your doing. I have sown some seeds, God will water them and you will bring them to life for the ongoing spiritual renewal of your parish. That is your mission if you decide to accept.

This retreat began on Sunday as we entered the gospel and journeyed to Jacob's well with a Samaritan woman. Her encounter and conversation with Jesus helped us distinguish the difference between a physical thirst that bottled water can satisfy and a spiritual thirst that only Jesus can satisfy. Once he did that for her, she was inspired to tell others. She was turned into an evangelist. The spiritual truth here is that our conversions of heart means we have new stories to tell others. We can't keep our new hearts hidden from others. Conversions of heart include a new desire to share the good news story with others. Once we tell the new stories, we share with others the Christ who is at the center of the story.

The retreat continued Sunday evening with the theme of St. Joseph as Care Giver. The story in St. Matthew 1:18-25 unmasked the hidden sinister voice of fear tempting Joseph to divorce Mary quietly. God intervened and sent an angel to quiet this voice with the words "be not afraid." This was God's way of freeing Joseph from the grip of fear. In one respect the angel was programming him to see a larger picture of the plan of salvation and his role of cooperating in the plan. Fear only got in God's way. The Nobel Peace Prize winner and Jewish biblical scholar Elie Wiesel once said, "When you see an angel of the Lord coming with the words "Be not afraid" you know you're in trouble." Joseph learned to be a care giver in the unfolding plan of salvation with the incarnation of his Son by giving his heart to trust.

Tuesday night we focused on St. Joseph the Promise Keeper. Long before the Promise Keepers movement for Christian men was started in 1990 by University of Colorado football coach Bill McCartney and long before the Covenant Keepers was founded for Catholic men in 1995 by Steve Wood, the Hebrew God Yahweh was a promise keeper to St. Joseph. God promised to free Joseph from fear so he could walk in trust about being the foster-father of God's only beloved son. God promised to search with Joseph and Mary when they lost their independent, adventurous teenager and had to return to Jerusalem to find him. God kept that promise and because God did not give up on Joseph, then Joseph did not give up on Jesus.

Tonight we focus on St. Joseph the Dreamer. He was a man who took a lot of naps because his life changing encounters with God were always in dreams. I think that is because in intervening in his sleep God allowed Joseph to dream God's dream for him.

Those dreams included taking Mary as his wife, seeking and finding the Christ child in the Jerusalem Temple and fleeing with Mary and the child into Egypt to escape the slaughter of the Holy Innocents by King Herod. This last dream in Matthew 2:13-24 is significant. The first exodus was Yahweh intervening on behalf of the chosen people, freeing them from slavery and leading them out of Egypt to the Promised Land. The second exodus was God intervening again by rescuing the Holy Family in Galilee and fleeing with them to Egypt. The good news in this bad news story is that God's plan is not frustrated by the rage of Herod. Part of God having the last word in this chapter of the plan of salvation is breaking into Joseph's sleep and enabling him to see God's dream of saving the child so He can fulfill his mission to be the savior of all.

This inspires me to ask what are God's dreams for you as a faith community celebrating 105 years of Catholic presence and life in Charlton, MA? Part of this retreat has been to slow down, get quiet, be still and listen. All of this spiritual activity is a prelude to dreaming God's dreams for you. What dreams have been revealed to you during this retreat? What is your part in the larger picture of the ongoing spiritual renewal of your parish as you begin a new year in your faith history? As the retreat director, I would like to share four dreams I have for you.

1. Dream about creating a Perpetual Adoration Chapel. As I look around your new building, I notice it is a work in progress. Four years ago when you dedicated it the idea of a Perpetual Adoration Chapel, it may not have been in the blueprints. But, perhaps the unfinished portion means that God wants you to dream about a sacred space where adoration of the Blessed Sacrament can foster a healing ministry in the parish. A sacred space where hurting families can come, take off their shoes in the presence of Jesus and begin to heal. A sacred space where people who multi-task can slow down and be reminded that there is more to life than increasing its speed. A sacred space where the healing voice of quiet can be heard over the hurting voices of fear and anger. You have a pastor who would encourage such a sacred space and adoration ministry. Listen to his voice as you dream this dream.

2. Dream about more faith witnessing at Masses. At Christmas and Easter parishioners who are rooted here should give witness to those who only pass through those two times of the year. During the 50 days of Easter as part of the mystagogia of the RCIA the newly initiated members need to tell their stories. And you need to hear what they saw in you that they wanted and will find it by being part of this faith community. Finally, your parish feast on March 19th is an ideal time for parishioners to witness to the influence St. Joseph's Parish has had on your faith journey. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Heschel, "There are no proofs for the existence of God. There are only witnesses." I challenge you to dream how that might take shape here at Charlton, MA.

3. Dream about an Evangelization Ministry. For years we were asked to pray for the conversion of Russia. We all rejoice that communism has been abolished and the people of Russia are free to practice their faith. The ones who now need prayer and evangelization are our own non-practicing Catholics. Some of them are lazy while others are hurting or angry. They all need outreach, care and an invitation to come back home.

How you do that is as important as that you do it. Evangelization has been part of this parish retreat. We have heard conversion stories about how people have given their hearts back to God through some life-changing experience. Part of their new life in Christ is the line, "Let me tell you a story." That is the best way to lure your non-practicing Catholic family, friends and neighbors back home. Share with them the story of your renewal in Christ and how you nurture that with the St. Joseph's community. Have some "witness cards" printed similar to business cards. Put information on them about you and St. Joseph's Parish. Pass them out to the unchurched then let God take over from there. But, be ready for them if they return. That includes dreaming about some Rite of Return before guiding them into Cursillo, Marriage Encounter or some other spiritual renewal movement that feeds the deepening of faith in an ongoing way.

4. Dream about spiritual direction as a parish ministry. Last week your pastor invited Sister Rose Clarisse to lead a group session in the practice of spiritual direction. I hope you see a larger picture here, namely going for spiritual direction to dream whether God is calling you to be a spiritual director. What a wonderful ministry that would be for the parish, especially for the youth. Their schools provide them with guidance counselors who help them discern colleges and career choices. Parishes should be providing them with spiritual directors who help them discern a call from God to serve as priests, religious, lay missionaries or evangelists. If ever there was a need for a vocational ad today it is: "Wanted: Wounded Healers." That is what I have become since the clergy sex abuse scandal and that is what our wounded Church needs right now, more people with the healing heart of Christ to help heal our Church. This year you will give to the Diocese of Worcester your first priestly vocation, Adam Reid. Two years later in 2007 his brother Mark will be ordained. There are more vocations here. Dream how you can pay attention to the youth, affirm them, call forth their gifts and help them discern, through prayer, spiritual direction and retreat experiences how God may be calling them to use those gifts for the sake of the gospel.

These are four dreams I share with you. Pray that God will show you how to make them your own dreams and how to give you the courage and inspiration to bring them to life. Chronologically you are 105 years old, but spiritually you are always young because your patron saint, Joseph, and the Blessed Sacrament renew your hearts and spirits daily. These two anchors of your faith along with the graces of this retreat will be the way God will keep you dreaming and use you to give life to the ongoing plan of salvation here in your 33 acres of God's creation. Let's take a moment to hear those graces, those gifts God gave you for being here then going forth to let them bear fruit in the lives of others.