

Parish Mission Offers 'Dreams'
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CHARLTON – A perpetual adoration chapel, witnessing at Christmas and Easter Masses, and parish ministries of evangelization and spiritual direction.

These were the four “dreams” the pastor and parishioners of St. Joseph Parish were invited to consider as their Lenten mission closed Tuesday.

“Tonight a retreat ends, but a mission begins,” Father Paul G. Mast, chaplain of the Benedictine School for Exceptional Children in Ridgely, Md., said, explaining why he called his program a retreat. “My work is over as retreat leader. Your work now begins.”

His work had included preaching, leading centering prayer, inviting responses from the congregation and responding to their impromptu responses.

Centering prayer goes back to the desert fathers, and involves letting go of any voice that interferes with giving oneself exclusively to God, Father Mast told the congregation Sunday night. He told them to sit in silence a few minutes, choose a sacred word, and return to it whenever they got distracted. To begin and end the silence he hit a Tibetan prayer bowl, which resounded through the church.

Sunday he had teenagers distribute candles to members of the congregation who signified they wanted one. Each of the dozens of recipients was to give the candle to a non-practicing Catholic, and invite that person to come to the close of the mission, bringing the candle.

Tuesday he had the two guests who came stand in front of the church with their candles. He asked the congregation what they wanted to say and they called out “welcome” and applauded. He told the guests to relight the candle when Satan tempts them to leave the Church community.

When he invited the congregation to name a grace they had received from the retreat, they called out: “understanding,” “inner peace,” “hope for carrying on a dream.” Father Mast prayed that they would share these dreams with others, who would come home and join them in the dream. He told them he loved them for passing on these graces.

A parishioner then stood in the aisle and shared how the retreat helped her when she was giving up on her son.

Father Mast said he told a father whose son did not want to attend Mass that on one level the youth was saying, “Dad, I’m testing you. Are you going to give up on me?”

As he said that, a man sitting by himself started sobbing aloud. Father Mast kept talking, easing his way over to him.

“Your brother needs our prayers,” he told the congregation, and began singing, “Spirit of the Living God.” Then he prayed over the man: “Teach him to reverence his tears, for you are freeing him from darkness...so he can give all his heart to you.” Later two men in the congregation went and sat with the man.

“That was a real Christian community thing for them to do,” the man, who declined to be identified, told The Catholic Free Press afterwards. He said the world runs away when people show emotions, and it views men crying as a sign of weakness.

Father Mast’s words moved him because it is easy to give up on people, he said. He said he has a 24-year-old son who seems to have given up on himself and he wants to let the young man know he hasn’t given up on him.

After summarizing retreat themes of becoming evangelists like the woman at the well and cooperating in the plan of salvation like St. Joseph, to whom God spoke in dreams, Father Mast asked the congregation what their part in salvation history is and suggested four dreams.

Speaking of the dream of a perpetual adoration chapel, he said this would provide a place to seek healing, silence and family prayer. It is wonderful the parish has some adoration times already, he said.

The second dream was witnessing at Masses, especially at Christmas and Easter, to tell people not usually present what it does for one to stay rooted there. Parishioners also need to hear what drew new members to their Church, Father Mast said.

Speaking of the dream of evangelization, he said prayers for the conversion of Russia have been answered.

“Now we need to pray for the conversion of our own Catholic brothers and sisters who are no longer practicing,” he said. Evangelization involves telling a story, as parishioners who gave their testimonies on the retreat did, he said. He also suggested a rite of welcoming for returning Catholics, ongoing spiritual renewal, and a parish business card with Mass and religious education schedules and who to contact for what services.

Speaking of the dream of spiritual direction, Father Mast said Sister of St. Anne Rose Clarisse Gadoury, adjunct professor of spirituality at Blessed John XXIII National Seminary in Weston, is already offering it at the parish. He said he hoped some parishioners would discern the call to become spiritual directors too – for youth, lay evangelists, and those discerning a vocation.

Father Mast said his energy was depleted by his anger about the clergy scandal until he was told to move beyond bitterness.

He read a story from “Chicken Soup for the Soul” about a successful scientist whose mother had taught him to learn from failed experiments. When he spilled milk, his mother let him play in it, then helped him clean it up and practice carrying a bottle so he wouldn’t drop it.

Father Mast said he put that story in the context of the scandal and that what he has done to help “clean up this mess” is tell his story.

In closing remarks Father Robert A. Grattaroti, St. Joseph’s pastor, said Father Mast’s four suggestions were great and that the parish’s celebration of their patron’s feast March 19 is a time to invite everybody home. After the 4:30 p.m. Mass that day there is to be a dinner (\$5 per person, \$15 per family, to defray costs).

Asked if the parish will implement the four suggestions, he said they have already talked about adoration and evangelization.

“We certainly want to do whatever is going to promote the faith and encourage God’s saving action among us,” he said.