

Pastor's Column

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You Are Not Alone

Fr. Rich is coming back to St. Thomas More to help cover for me while I am on pilgrimage to see the Passion Play in Oberammergau, Germany. I am leading a group of 42 pilgrims who will experience this very special, spiritual event. I will be away from the Parish September 2-14.

With Fr. Rich coming back to us, I wanted to share a Pastor's Column that I wrote about him in the year 2000!

Fr. Rich Lewandowski, a close priest/friend of mine since college days in 1967, is a priest in the Diocese of Worcester, Massachusetts. He is the Newman Chaplain of Fitchburg State College and the Pastor of St. Camillus Parish in Fitchburg. In recent years he has become the author of (at last count) four children's books.

His most popular children's story, "The First Easter Bunny", has sold over 50,000 copies. Several years ago, Fr. Rich was with us, sharing with the children of the Parish his "The First Easter Bunny" tale.

As a college chaplain, pastor and successful author, Fr. Rich feels that one of his most prized accomplishments is his sobriety. For years, he wondered about his alcohol consumption. While not requiring a large quantity of alcohol, he did, nevertheless "need" a drink or two or three daily in order to function comfortably. As time went by, he realized that he was in the midst of an addictive cycle and sought help to break its bonds. Today, after almost thirteen years of sobriety, he's both proud and humbled by the fact that he can "not drink."

His path to sobriety began with an acceptance of his addiction, a three-month stay at Guest House in Michigan, a residential alcohol-treatment center for priests, and then on-going participation in AA, Alcoholics Anonymous.

Whenever we are on vacation together, at least one evening in the week is devoted to attending an AA meeting. Miraculously, AA meetings are held everywhere around the world, everyday of the week, at almost anytime of day. You can always find a meeting!

Last week, Fr. Rich and I spent a few days in Palm Springs for some R & R. On Monday night, Fr. Rich attended an "open" meeting and I was invited to be there with him.

Spending an hour with honest and sincere people, who in complete vulnerability share their failures and victories, is always a rewarding experience.

What struck me most last Monday Night was a simple carved wooden piece on the table that read: "You Are Not Alone." Such a simple message, a cliché of great magnitude, but in the AA setting, a very profound reality.

One can find a meeting in any place and at almost any time in the world. Help and support are there just for the asking. What comfort and strength there is in that knowledge.

Also, in the AA setting, one begins to realize that despite our individuality, we are all very similar as human beings. We are not alone. We all have strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices. We are all sinners striving, hopefully, to become saints.

In the Church setting, I pray that all of us can create together a climate in which we all realize that we are not alone; that all of us, as human beings and as Disciples of Jesus, have strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices.

As sinners on the way to sainthood, we, as members of the Body of Christ, are present to each other to support and help each other in our weaknesses. We are to be present to each other to build each other up, not to tear each other down. What a great definition of Church! What a great mission statement for a Parish!

One of the great miracles of the 20th century has been the AA movement, the 12 Step Process which is the basis of AA, Gamblers Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Sexual Addicts Anonymous, etc., etc. In these programs, God has been very active in healing people and helping them to celebrate life.

I truly believe that Parishes have much to learn from these programs. We need to continue to create a climate of vulnerability in which we can honestly, sincerely, and safely share our stories and unite our stories to the stories of Scripture.

I pray that our Parish continues to be a safe place in which we can tell our stories, support one another, and challenge one other in growing in "wholeness," in "holiness," into the image and likeness of Christ.

Today and every day, let us remember that: "YOU ARE NOT ALONE."

Fr. Rich is now celebrating 23 years of sobriety. Please congratulate him when you see him!

Fr. Mike