

■ ■ AROUND SAINT PETER'S

St. Peter's Parish and the Paulist Legacy

As I am sure many of you know better than I do, the Paulist Fathers, who served this parish for more than one hundred years, were founded in 1858 by Father Isaac Hecker. Father Hecker was a convert to the Catholic Faith and was not baptized until he was 25 years old. He was first ordained a priest as a member of the Redemptorist Missionary Priests, but later founded the Paulist Fathers with the particular mission of bringing the Good News to those who had not yet heard it. Most of the priests who joined this new community were men who had converted from other Protestant denominations. The Paulist Fathers were the first religious order that was founded in the United States and one of their community's main charisms was to attempt to bring the Catholic Faith to the mainly Protestant population of the United States of America in a way that was both exciting and new by using new methods of communication and focusing their preaching on the Bible. After the Second Vatican Council, which took place in the early 1960's, the mission of the Paulist Fathers centred more specifically on evangelizing all people and using the modern methods of communication to do so. The Paulist Fathers came to Toronto in 1914 at the invitation of Archbishop Neil MacNeil and began their work here at St. Peter's Parish and at the Paulist Centre. Other than their parish in Rome, this parish was their only house outside of the United States.

The impact which the Paulist Fathers have had both on this parish and in the Archdiocese of Toronto has been great. They have served this parish faithfully and made it a centre for formation and evangelization within the Church of Toronto. They are going to be deeply missed and it will be very difficult to follow in their footsteps. The legacy which the Paulist Fathers leave this community is the reminder that we are all called to be ministers of Evangelization. Every Christian, through the sacrament of Baptism and Confirmation, is called to be a minister of Christ and to be a witness of His love for all people. The Paulist mission statement says that the Paulist charism is "to awaken seekers to the love of Jesus Christ." The greatest tribute that this parish can give to the Paulist Fathers is for all of us to take on this mission as our own. In fact, as Catholic Christians, this is indeed what each of us is called to do through our own Baptism and Confirmation.

Now one of the things that can be said about every Christian charism is that they simply focus upon one aspect or reality of the Christian teaching which was given to us by Christ. The mission to evangelize and to share the faith was given to the Church by Jesus when He sent His first disciples to go out into the world to baptize "in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and to take the Faith to all corners of the world. Jesus' apostles gave us the first example of those who were transformed by the Holy Spirit and had the courage to overcome their fear and preach the Good News to those whom they are sent. The greatest example of those first disciples who were sent was the great apostle St. Paul. He brought the Good News of salvation and the Church to many corners of the Mediterranean. His letters provide an outstanding witness of the extent to which he was willing to go to share the Gospel message. We hear from him in this Sunday's second reading as he speaks of his own weakness in the face of the great challenge of being a witness to Christ. He is aware that in the face of the many obstacles that will confront him in the world, humanly speaking he is but a weak person. Uncertain as to how he will stand up to the many powerful voices that take a position against the Gospel that he has been sent to preach, he is ultimately able to realize that it is not a question of his own personal strength, but the power of Christ that he has been sent to proclaim. Asking the Lord to take his weaknesses from him, Jesus answers him that it is through his own weaknesses that the power of the Lord will be revealed. St. Paul, who should be thought of as the first Paulist in the true sense, reminds all of us that we are to have the courage to speak the Gospel message to those to whom we are sent, regardless of how weak we may feel when up against the power and forces of our consumer and individualistic society.

Someone who has recently placed a great emphasis upon this Paulist charism in the Church's life has been Pope Francis. In his first Apostolic Letter as Pope, called *Evangelii Gaudium* or in English, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis writes about the responsibility that belongs to every Christian to be a minister of the Good News. He speaks of this Paulist charism using terminology which is spoken of now quite commonly in the life of the Church as the "New Evangelization." This term the "New Evangelization" is concerned with the reality that we are now living in a world that knows about Jesus, but has not experienced or encountered the saving power of His love. In the face of this reality, Pope Francis reminds us that every Christian has the responsibility to know his or her faith and be able to speak about it in the many places that he or she is sent in the course of the week. It is important to remember that each Christian is sent to bring Christ into his or her home and workplace. There are many places that each person is sent that the "official Church" does not go to from day to day. And yet, through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, each Christian is more or less officially mandated to go to these places in the name of Christ, bringing the Good News of His love. In order for the the Christian faith to be alive and well in the world today, Pope Francis reminds all Catholic Christians that the mission to be ministers of the New Evangelization does not belong only to the clergy, religious and the Paulist Fathers. This is a responsibility that belongs to all Christians, and must be taken seriously by all Christians, as a result of their Baptism and Confirmation.

July 4 - 5 2015

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Here in the Archdiocese of Toronto, a few years ago Cardinal Collins launched what is called the Archdiocesan Pastoral Plan as a way of realizing the mission for the New Evangelization within our local Church. This plan has five core directions which are focused on realizing the Church's mission in our own local community. These five directions are: 1) Parish Life; 2) Vocations; 3) Evangelization of Society; 4) Catholic Outreach in Justice and Love; and 5) The Cathedral as a Sign of Mission. In each of these areas there are stated objectives that are intended to help our local Church more effectively live the faith and reach out to others to share this faith. Perhaps the best way to summarize the nature of this plan is to use the words of Cardinal Collins who wrote: "Our mission is two-fold. Our pastoral (inward) mission is to nurture and strengthen the faith experience of committed Catholics, drawing on the model of St. Peter, to whom Christ said, "Feed my lambs." Our apostolic (outward) mission is to announce the Gospel, both to the faithful and to those outside the Church. Our model for this effort is St. Paul, who first encountered Christ through conversion and then proclaimed Him throughout the world." It is hard to think of two better models than St. Peter and St. Paul for St. Peter's Parish with its rich Paulist heritage. Over the coming months and years, it is my hope to work in dialogue with all of the members of this parish community to continue the Paulist legacy in this parish by working to implement and take up the challenge of Pope Francis' letter *The Joy of the Gospel* and Cardinal Collins' Pastoral Plan for the Archdiocese of Toronto.

The Paulist mission—the mission to be ministers of the New Evangelization—is a subject that we hear addressed clearly in this Sunday's readings. In the first reading, the Prophet Ezekiel finds himself sent to a rebellious people who will not listen to his message. Like the Prophet Ezekiel, each one of us is sent into a world that does not want to hear the Christian message. The Prophet Ezekiel reminds us that we must speak this message with courage, whether the world we live in wishes to hear it or not. As the Gospel tells us, even Jesus was often not listened to and was dismissed. All too often, we might fail to speak because we feel that those we are speaking to know our weaknesses or may ask us who we think we are to speak in such a bold and prophetic manner. Yet, like Christ and St. Paul, we must dare to speak and not fear the consequences of being ministers of the New Evangelization. As St. Paul reminds us, it is because of our weakness that the power of God will be able to make itself known. God's plan may not be revealed or fulfilled today or tomorrow, but we must have confidence in God's power and have the courage to speak as His witnesses and prophets in the world. The Paulist mission to speak and witness to the Gospel is a mission that belongs to each of us through our Baptism and Confirmation. Each one of us is to be sent out into the world to be witnesses of the faith.

As I begin my own ministry in this parish, many people have asked me how I intend to replace the Paulist Fathers. My own answer to that question is very simple: I cannot and I do not intend to replace the Paulist Fathers. I am profoundly aware of my own weakness and inability to replace the Paulist Fathers. I have not come to the parish to replace the Paulist Fathers. I was sent to this parish to serve you because the Paulist Fathers discerned that they were required to withdraw their ministry from this parish community. As I arrive in this great parish, I am aware of my own weakness and unworthiness. I take great courage in the words of St. Paul: "I will rather boast most gladly of my weakness, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me." These words of St. Paul ought to bring great comfort to all of us. They remind us ultimately that it is our common faith in Christ that is the source of our community's life. This parish was served for many years by the Paulist Fathers, but it is ultimately a Christian community of faith and it is from Christ that we are all called to find our strength. As the readings this Sunday challenge all of us to have the courage to witness to our faith in a world that can at times be hostile to the message of Jesus' love for all people, it is difficult to think of a better way of paying tribute to the legacy of the Paulist Fathers in this parish than by each of us embracing the call given to us at our Baptism to dare to be Christ's witnesses in the world. The readings this Sunday call each of us to be Paulist in the truest sense. They remind us of the call that each one of us has received from Christ in baptism to be ministers of the New Evangelization and to witness to all whom we are sent in our daily lives. If we as members of this community are each able to embrace this call, I think we will give the greatest tribute possible to the Paulist Fathers who served this community over the past one hundred years and this will ultimately be their greatest legacy in this parish and this city.

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