

From the Pastor's Desk

Lent 2012... begins this Wednesday. At 8 am we'll have a Scripture Service with ashes, and at 7 pm we'll have a Mass with ashes. On Ash Wednesday the gospel reading is always the same, with Jesus teaching us about prayer, fasting, and giving to the poor. These are the three "disciplines" of Lent. We pray, fast, and do good works. An excellent way to enter into these disciplines is by Operation Rice Bowl, which began in 1975 as a response to a drought in Africa. Today roughly 13,000 parishes in the U.S. participate in the Rice Bowl program. Seventy-five percent of all money raised goes to support food, water, and other programs in 40 very poor countries around the world. The other 25% is used in our country in food pantries, soup kitchens, and other forms of outreach to the poor. Last year Operation Rice Bowl raised more than 7 million dollars. The reason a cardboard rice bowl is used is to remind us that millions of people survive on only one bowl of rice each day. There's an accompanying calendar with information for every day of Lent. At Mass on Holy Thursday the Rice Bowls are brought forward and placed at the foot of the altar.



At our parish this Lent we will be having our Lenten Soup Suppers in the church basement on Thursdays at 5:30 pm, followed by the Stations of the Cross at 7 pm. On Wednesdays in Lent the Blessed Sacrament will be exposed for silent prayer and adoration after morning Mass until 12 noon. (Since we are in the process of planning for tomorrow's parishes, perhaps praying for an increase in vocations to the priesthood might make for an appropriate focus of prayer during these times of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament.) Also, be sure to take a Little Black Book home for daily Lenten prayer.

Lenten Regulations: *Fasting* (on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday) is undertaken by those who are 18-58 years old and in good health. On fast days one full meal is allowed. Two other smaller meals (enough to maintain strength) are taken, but these meals, even when combined, should not equal a full meal. Additionally, there is no eating between meals on fast days, but liquids (including milk and juice) are allowed. *Abstaining* from meat on Fridays is observed by all those 14 years old and older. All those preparing to become Catholic at Easter should undertake these practices as well.

The Bishop's Letter: If you read Bishop Cistone's letter in last week's bulletin (or have been following this issue in the news) you are aware that the Catholic Church in the U.S. has strong objections to the Federal Government requiring ALL employers (even religious ones) to offer health insurance that would pay for contraceptives, sterilization, and abortion-inducing drugs. The Catholic position is that pregnancy should not be regarded as an illness needing prevention and treatment. That is, conceiving human life in the womb is not like getting the measles. The U.S. Bishops are prepared to take legal action if this requirement is not undone by legislation in Congress.



Core Team Progress: Our parish core team met again this past Thursday and the process of evaluating our parish continues. In late March we will meet with core team members of the other parishes in our "cohort" (the group of parishes St. Joseph's will be working with) for discussion and future planning. I hope to announce our cohort parishes in the next few weeks.

Why Do We Confirm 2nd Graders? This question surfaced on the parish surveys, so I thought I'd explain it in print so the whole parish can see. Some history will help:

Confirmation was originally the second sacrament someone received. It was part of a "set" of three sacraments called the *sacraments of initiation*: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist, and they were received in that order at a special liturgy we call the Easter Vigil. To become a full member in the Church, people were usually baptized in a pool housed in a separate building called the baptistry on Holy Saturday after the sun had set. After coming out of the water, they were confirmed to "seal in" the Spirit given to them at Baptism. Sacred Chrism was used over their entire body, and they were robed in white. Then the newly-confirmed and the bishop would walk next door to the church, and he would knock on the door with his staff. The doors would fling open, and all the Christians inside would rejoice and greet them. Then they would continue the celebration of Easter, and the newly-confirmed would receive their First Communion. Sometimes even entire families would be received into the Church this way, parents and children together. But note the order: first Baptism, then Confirmation, then Eucharist.

Confirmation began to be separated from Baptism in the West, that is, in the Latin Church. The reasons were many. First, most adults had already become Christians, so the majority of baptisms being celebrated were those of infants. Second, the teaching of St. Augustine (and others) on original sin resulted in a stronger emphasis on baptizing infants as soon as possible after birth. But most of all, in the Roman (Latin) Church in the West, it was decided that only the bishop could confirm. In the East, whoever presided at the baptism was allowed to confirm. Thus, as dioceses got larger and larger, the bishop could not be present at all celebrations of the Easter Vigil, and Confirmation was postponed until he could come. This "gap" between Baptism and Confirmation kept getting bigger over the centuries, until Confirmation was generally celebrated at the age of fourteen or so.

Unfortunately, this big gap also delayed First Communion until people were fourteen. Consequently, at the beginning of the 1900's, Pope Pius the 10th lowered the age for First Communion to seven. And so the original "order" of the sacraments of initiation was changed officially. But Confirmation was left out there at age fourteen. This resulted in Confirmation being understood completely differently: no longer as the "sealing" of the Spirit of Baptism, but as a *you're-now-an-adult-member-of-the-Church* sacrament. Catholics did not see Confirmation as connected to Baptism in any way. Instead, Catholics being confirmed were often quizzed at Mass by the bishop about the Faith, and people chose "Confirmation names" of saints to be their patron and guide in a harsh world.

The Second Vatican Council called for the Rite of Confirmation to be revised so that its connection with Baptism would be clear again. It was the wisdom of Solomon. The baptismal character of Confirmation was called upon by the Church to be officially renewed. So strong is the move for unifying Baptism and Confirmation that no adult may be baptized Catholic without being confirmed immediately afterwards, unless some serious reason actually prevents it. The original order is being restored: first Baptism, then Confirmation, then Eucharist. Think about it: we don't quiz 2nd graders at Mass on First Communion Sunday about how well they can explain Transubstantiation or the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The Church is also encouraging people to use the name they received at Baptism as the name they are called during Confirmation, since we are asking God to "seal in" the Spirit given to them on the day when they were baptized.

Fr. Pith