

THE RECTOR'S CHRONICLE

A NEWSLETTER OF THE CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL

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Dear Parishioners and Friends,

I think it safe to say that we all value being Christians. God has done a lot for us and we are grateful. But when it comes to telling non-Christians about the faith, what do we use as our selling points? How do we tell them that they, too, can benefit from being Christians? How do we make the faith attractive?

Here we run into a problem. Empirically, Christians are not always wealthier, more successful, happier, healthier, more intelligent, better looking. They do not always have better family life, good grades in school, a satisfying career. They are not necessarily efficient and able to accomplish a lot. We cannot show that Christians are always better-adjusted emotionally than non-Christians (though some studies show that faith helps). I suspect many Christians would express dissatisfaction with their prayer life. So how do we "sell" the faith to those who do not believe?

A striking answer to this question comes up in the Wednesday Bible study, currently looking at the book of Esther. Near the end, we are told that many pagans converted to Judaism (Esther 8:17). Rabanus Maurus, a ninth-century commentator, comments on this verse (seeing the Jews of the Old Covenant as prefiguring the Christians of the New): "Thanks to the strength, wisdom and constancy of the holy martyrs – and to the virtue of Christ which shines among them – many of the Gentiles and the enemies of the church abandoned their idolatry and their pagan superstitions and were converted to the Christian faith because it does not hide the suffering of the saints and the triumphs of the martyrs from those it encounters. And therefore, through God's mercy, the number of the faithful increases daily and the flocks of the church are filled. The power of the Christian name causes terror among infidels and joy among believers the world over." (cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Old Testament volume V, p. 394) His answer to the question of what converts unbelievers is the joyful and steadfast suffering of Christians (not the first thing that comes to mind for us!). In Esther's time, this was prefigured by the faithfulness of the Jews who were under the sentence of death from the machinations of the wicked Haman. Even then the Jews did not abandon their faith, but humbled themselves and called upon God with prayer and fasting. For Rabanus, it was not just their miraculous deliverance which converted the Gentiles: even more it was the faithful willingness to suffer for the faith.

His approach could hardly be more different from ours. Our inclination is to look for some worldly attraction to draw people to the faith. We assume that if we cannot point to some worldly benefit, no one will want to consider being Christian. Yet we cannot prove that from a worldly standpoint, Christians really are better off – and with good reason. Jesus did not fare very well (from a worldly perspective) in His earthly life. Insofar as they live in Him, His followers are not likely to fare better.

It comes down to this: the benefits of the faith are primarily eternal, not temporal. What the faith has to offer is not so much worldly health and wealth, but truth, beauty, virtue and eternal life. I suspect that it is only when people realize that worldliness only goes so far that they are willing to consider what Christianity has to offer. Worldliness cannot finally satisfy human nature. Only God can give contentment – and Christianity shows the way to Him. If this is right, then our witness to the faith will be strongest and most credible when it attests to the eternal realities of truth, virtue and beauty. And this testimony will have its greatest power when we suffer for our devotion to God, as Rabanus claims. The suffering will give credibility to our words, and substance to our claim that there is more to life than this world alone. The early Christian martyrs impressed their tormentors by going joyfully to their deaths rather than cursing and screaming. Such behavior could not be accounted for (except perhaps by insanity) unless the Christian knew something that the persecutors didn't. The same principle holds in our day.

It will be our godly suffering of whatever ills may come our way which will give credibility and power to our witness to the faith. It is this in our character which will suggest to unbelievers that we might know something they do not – and which will open them to hearing the Gospel. Everyone suffers something: our suffering must be distinctively Christian.

This means that St Michael's has a particular advantage in proclaiming the Gospel and inviting others to believe. We lost much that we held dear when we left St James. While in many ways we have

left that behind, I suspect that there are still times when the loss tears at our hearts. Love always carries vulnerability. In God's providence, this is our cross to bear. We must seek the grace to bear it as Christ bore His. We must seek the spirit of the martyrs, which includes joy.

To put it another way, we must find our joy not in the things of the world – even in a worldly version of Christianity – but in being redeemed and knowing the love of God in Jesus Christ. If we act as though we believed that only success and wealth and health and ease mattered, then we are bound to be dejected when God asks us to bear the cross. That will not only undermine our Christian life, it will also undermine our witness.

We do have treasure to offer to others. We need to remember just how precious it (He) is – and how much everyone needs it, whether or not the need is recognized. We deceive ourselves if we think that since it includes the Cross no one will be interested. Christ alone can satisfy our deepest nature. One can pursue worldly gratifications for a time, but (apart from increasingly difficult self-delusion, or selling out to the devil) these will prove empty and unsatisfying. At that point, one needs to hear the truth, however challenging it may seem at the time. For who would think that satisfaction comes by self-denial? That life comes from dying? That God is more humble than man? All this is not, I'm afraid, intuitively obvious. If we are to get the message across, it will need the support of true and robust Christian character – the kind which is formed by a spirit of martyrdom.

June

Even as things wind down for the summer, there are several parish events of note in June. The first Sunday in June (the 7th) is Trinity Sunday. What a blessing it is to be reminded, and to celebrate, God's self-revelation of how He is in Himself! He has admitted us to that blessed intimacy, which we observe in every prayer to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. I'm grateful that the Church has given us this special observance to allow us to focus with gratitude on such a blessing.

The following Sunday all St Michael's people are invited to a baby shower for Carolina Roehner. Perhaps I should call it a "babies shower," since she is carrying twins. The shower will be at the rectory after the ten o'clock Mass. If you have questions, please speak with Angela Johnson (856-642-1408). As you are probably aware, these are the Roehners' first children.

The annual Synod of the Diocese of the Eastern United States is set for June 17-20 at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Orlando. James Altona, Mark Johnson and I will be representing St Michael's. I know it would be appreciated if you could remember Bishop Campese and the Synod in your prayers. We have tentatively scheduled a report on the Synod for Sunday, June 28th, after the ten o'clock Mass, to let you know what happened, and give you the opportunity to ask questions.

On the Second Sunday after Trinity, June 21st, we go to a said Mass at ten o'clock on Sunday rather than the full, Sung Mass. The early Mass on Sunday continues through the end of June. During July and August, we will again impose upon the eight o'clock congregation, by going to a single Sunday Mass at ten. As in the past, this allows the two congregations to worship together, and the ten o'clock hour, while not ideal, seems the best balance. During the summer we will also omit the "first Sunday" Morning Prayer.

In June, we welcome a new organist, Su-Mi Park. She is a Masters student in piano performance at Temple. Our current organist, AeJin Chang, is leaving (Whitsunday was her last Sunday) in order to be with her husband on Sunday Morning; he has recently been made a Presbyterian deacon in their church. We will miss her and bid her Godspeed.

Homework Club Grant

The East Falls Community Council has made a modest grant towards the expenses of our after-school tutoring program, which meets in the Gatehouse of Laurel Hill Cemetery in the "old" neighborhood (thus within East Falls). The money will be used to cover expenses for "enrichment" trips – the first of which took place in May with a visit to the Please Touch Museum in its new home in Centennial Hall in Fairmont Park. We are grateful for the encouragement which the grant represents, as well as the substantive program improvement which it makes possible. A special thanks goes to Barbara Freeman for preparing the grant proposal (as well as overseeing Homework Club).

We are planning a week-long day camp for our younger members and Homework Club children, tentatively scheduled for July 27th-31st. If all works out, it will be at the Laurel Hill Cemetery Gatehouse. Volunteers are welcome! Also this summer, the plan is for a single summer issue of the *Rector's Chronicle*, covering July and August, and probably appearing late in July.

I enclose an article by James Hitchcock which recently appeared in *Touchstone Magazine*. It contains some very useful observations which help us to make sense of what's going on in the world around us. I commend it to your attention, and am grateful for Dr Hitchcock's permission to reproduce it.

Faithfully,

