

## PASTORAL LETTER: FINDING THE WAY HOME

October 2018

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In the sixteen-plus years I have had the privilege of being your pastor, I have written five pastoral letters. The first was about the Eucharist, the second to the young people of the parish, and then a series of three entitled “Jesus, the Way,” “Jesus, the Truth,” and “Jesus, the Life.” (All these pastoral letters are located on our parish website, [www.stmarthachurch.com](http://www.stmarthachurch.com).)

This sixth letter is different insofar as, even though it will be posted on the website, you may be receiving a copy hand delivered to you by someone who cares about you very much. It is a letter to those who have drifted away from regular practice of their Catholic Faith and weekly Mass attendance, an invitation to come home. If someone is giving this to you, it is a special gift. They want you to know the parish family misses you and cannot worship Almighty God as well as we could be worshipping Him without your presence. The person who gave you this pastoral letter loves you and cares about your relationship with Jesus, a relation we need in this very confusing and difficult world. Please show them your gratitude by reading this letter twice: once for the head, and once for the heart.

I love the term “practicing Catholic.” I think we often fail to see the deep understanding of frail humanity which we can “unpack” from this term. We are *practicing*; none of us are experts or professionals in the Faith. However, just as in any area of life, practicing does improve our “performance.” We practice, perhaps never getting it perfectly right, because we are frail humans, subject to all the burdens and foibles sin causes in us. It is only when we stop “practicing” that we give up and say, “I can never do this—why bother?” Practice of the Faith is very much like practicing any skill or art. Giving up church attendance begins quietly---a missed Sunday here, a missed Sunday there--- and before you know it, what was a habit for our betterment becomes a habit to our detriment and erodes our relationship with God. Something else becomes more important than He is in our lives, and so we worship a false god.

Why do people stop going to Mass? I know from many years of experience that the reasons are many and varied. I know some folks are disgusted with the sexual abuse scandals some of our sinful and cowardly leaders have enabled over the years. So am I; I can sometimes barely contain my anger. At these moments, I try to remember that if the Church’s existence and the truth of her mission depended on the moral goodness of her leadership, she would have disintegrated when Peter betrayed the Master, the rest of the first bishops (the apostles) fled and left Jesus alone, and one

chosen for leadership sold Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. I believe the devil leaps for joy every time someone's faith is shaken by scandal. I am grateful that so many of our people have shared with me that they especially need to be with the rest of the parish family at difficult times, to draw strength from these bonds of fellowship and especially draw strength from receiving the Bread of Life. So, yes, be as angry as I am; but stay and do what too many bishops have not done: make the Church holy!

Sometimes, people have an issue with what they think the Church teaches on certain issues. Often, what they hear from the secular press is not the truth at all. I would hope these folks would sit down and have an exchange with one of the priests to get at the core truth.

Maybe the issue is a personality clash, or a dislike of a certain priest. Personalities are like flavors of ice cream: we don't all like the same ones, and some combinations don't seem to mesh. Even Jesus did not mesh with some people; He could not reach them because they just did not like His personality! Perhaps, sadly, the issue is that a priest did not treat you as you needed to be treated on a given occasion. I can only say that we priests are as human as you, and struggle with trying to "be all things to all people." Sometimes, we fail. When we do, we are sorry and seek your forgiveness. Jesus reminds us we cannot expect forgiveness from our Heavenly Father unless we forgive each other. The first great Catholic TV personality, Bishop Fulton Sheen, is quoted as saying: "Remember, Jesus came into Jerusalem by means of a jackass; perhaps that's also how He came to your parish!" Ask for the grace to get past the shaky shepherds and come home to the Good Shepherd.

I believe that the so-called "values" of our modern age have invaded some folks, especially some younger people. For example, the pervasive idea that one can be "spiritual" but not "religious" is a dangerous error. The very word "religion" comes from the Latin word for binding, or as the modern idiom says, "the ties that bind." By our very existence, we live in relationship with the God Who made us, a relationship with other people, and a relationship with ourselves. Justice (the virtue which disposes us to render everyone that which is their due) informs us that God is entitled to worship, honor and glory, as a sacrifice of gratitude. Other people are to be treated as brothers and sisters, co-heirs of grace. We are to see ourselves as made in God's image and likeness, and new creations because of Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross. So we are "bound" in relationships, and these relationships make us spiritual, not the other way around. The real question is this: these relationships exist, whether I acknowledge them or not; am I faithful to them?

For Catholics, the only way to the Father is Jesus, and the only way to Jesus is His Church. It's never just "me and Jesus" unless by Jesus we understand Jesus living not only in His Resurrected Body in glory, but also in

His Mystical Body, the Church. When St. Paul was blinded and thrown to the ground while traveling to attack the Church in Damascus, Jesus called out “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” not “Why are you persecuting the Church?” Jesus identifies Himself with the Church. His wounds are seen in her weaknesses; His glory is shown in the mysteries we celebrate, especially the Mass in which His Sacrifice is represented for us and becomes present to us in a sacramental way.

Any parent who would see his or her child hungry for physical food would feel a deep pang, and try whatever could be done to be sure the child is being fed. As the one my spiritual children call “Father” it pains me that so many have stopped celebrating Sunday Eucharist and receiving the Bread of Life which comes down from heaven. Make no mistake, the Church from the beginning has faithfully taught that the Eucharist is no mere symbol, no mere remembrance, no wistful representation, but the actual Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ, given to us to be our Manna in the desert, our “food for the journey” back to Him. I plead with you to come back to weekly Mass with the community. Why? It is what the Third Commandment of God demands, what the precepts of the Church call us to do, but, most of all, because you need to be with your brothers and sisters to render back one of the 168 hours our good God gives to us each week, to renew your spiritual ties with the parish family, and to receive the graces and strengths needed to live in a world which seeks to become more godless each day.

Why do people return to church? Over 40 years as a priest, I’ve learned that these reasons are varied as well. For some, it’s the baptism of a child, or children going to Catholic school. For others, it’s the example of good Catholic friends and neighbors and family members. For others, it’s just because they were invited. Please hear Jesus’ voice asking you: “Please come home.”

Need to come to Reconciliation? I can guarantee you the easiest confession of your life from any priest celebrating this sacrament in our parish. Need to talk some things out? Call me (215-632-3720). Need to talk to another parishioner? The person who loved you enough to hand you this letter just might be the one!

You are in my constant prayer, that the Light who is Jesus will shine to show you the way to come home.

God’s Love,  
*Father Al*  
(Rev.) Alexander Masluk  
Pastor