

## **Pastor's Pen: It IS About Relationship!**

*This is a Facebook post from this week that I wrote. I am expanding on that post in this column.*

When we want a relationship with someone, we learn about them. The greatest way of learning about someone is spending time with them. If we merely learn about them like we would a historical figure or literary figure, then a relationship does not develop. Why? Because we are not opening ourselves to be known by them as we come to know them.

For too many people, even well intentioned people, God has been a subject studied. Religion gets reduced to rote memorization. Mass? I don't know. I would find it intolerable were there no relationship.

### ***In Exile and out of Exile***

I know this because when I had no relationship with God, Mass was intolerable. It was boring theater. I felt nothing. I wanted to on some level. But, I felt nothing. Having been in the seminary for 8 plus years in the touchy feely 80s, God was this distant thing out there. I knew facts about Him like I knew facts about Lincoln or Descartes or Charlemagne. But I didn't have relationships with these men either. That lack of a primary relationship with God made leaving the Church easy and inevitable.

In my years of self-imposed exile from faith, it was dating that started to open my eyes. I wanted to know about these young women. Getting to know them was messy at times as I had to open myself to be known as well. That meant taking risks and being honest. It struck me that this was a missing component in my faith life.

When I started coming out of my exile, I knew I did not want to go back to where I was. Over time, I started to read about those who had these wonderful relationships with God. I read St. John of the Cross, St. Theresa of Avila, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Augustine, and St. Anthony of the Desert. I wanted what they had. They didn't speak of God as a thing to be studied but as person to be known and loved.

Over the years, that understanding that we come to know God through His loving self-revelation so that we may come to know Him and open ourselves to Him grew. Like I found out in dating, I had to open up and be honest. Unlike the young ladies I dated, God already knows me...better than I know myself. But to know He knows me and still loves me blew me away. It made me want to know Him more. The more I loved God the more I saw myself more truthfully and the more I saw others truthfully.

Where Mass was boring and tedious before, it is intimate now. I get this opportunity to make Him known in the homily and, more intimately, in the Eucharist.

## ***Being Realistic***

Yet, I know there are many who are sitting in my pews and many more who abandoned those pews as I did years ago who feel like I did. I hear it in the agnostic tones of some. I hear it in those for whom faith has been little more than a set of factoids (usually watered down) that are little more than info given in a class. That coldness in relationship to God transfers into an overall coldness in our parishes.

It is coldness, sometimes a polite coldness, which I associate with other entities. For example, in school, I had few relationships based on subjects we studied. I never became friends with someone because we both understood Pythagorean theorem, Cartesian philosophy, or Renaissance history. If faith is reduced to an academic exercise, then the relationships follow. Only the teachers and administrators stick around school after graduation. Sometimes Church can feel like a business where holy stuff is sold. When I go to the store, I am pleasant enough to the staff and other shoppers, but I don't have any meaningful relationship. If our parishes are businesses, we get that relationship...a highly volatile and disposable relationship.

Parishes can feel like icebergs with statuary. The lack of relationship with God leaves us cold. I deeply believe if the focus is off God at Mass, it none too subtly says that a relationship with Him is not why we are there. If we aren't presented with a God who so desperately wanted an eternal relationship with us that He offers His Son who offers Himself to reestablish a lost relationship, then what is the purpose of going? If we understand where God is coming from, will that not melt even the coldest unbelieving heart? It does. I know because it melted my frigid heart.

But it is not just me and God. He has put me in a group of people. My love for Him is shown in loving what He loves: those around me as well as me. I am to love them because the God I love loves them. I am to treat them as I would His Son.

### ***Edit from original post:***

What kind of parish do we wish to be? In most parishes, Catholic and otherwise, there is a mentality of a tiered system. You have those who have been here their entire lives. They were born here, baptized here, married here, and will be buried out of here. There are those who have moved into the area either because they married someone from this first group or because a job or retirement brought them here. There are some who are visitors, some who are just here for the single moment, some who are going to college nearby, and some who are silently searching for a place to call their spiritual home and family.

I challenge you to this: talk to those not of your group. Get to know them. Someone should not feel like an outsider in a well-functioning parish. You never know if that unfamiliar face is just a visitor or is one of those who are searching for a spiritual home. That welcome and invitation is huge. The Benedictines are very big on the idea of hospitality, seeing in every stranger Christ in disguise. Taking that mentality in our own parishes WILL grow our parishes, not just in numbers, but in relationship as well!