

Fr. Vin's Address to the Parish

When I spoke two years ago at all the Masses after first arriving to serve as pastor, I told the story of the little girl on the beach littered with starfish. As she threw one back, a well-meaning adult asked, "Do you think you can save all the starfish?" And she said, "I saved that one!" I was soon told that it was one of Fr. Pat Shanahan's favorite stories, and this is a good time to recall it. We can focus – uselessly – on what's wrong with the world and what we can't do – or we can focus on what we can do. I want to start this year off by inviting you to join me in focusing on what we can do.

The world and the church are changing; we can drown in nostalgia for the past, we can get lost in thinking about our own comfort and preferences. Or we can do the work Christ invites us to. He's very clear in the Gospel we just heard that not everyone will be able to follow him; and we see that when we look around. But if you're here because you want to say "Yes!" to Christ, and if you're determined to repeat that "Yes" even when it's uncomfortable – I'm on your side, and I believe a lot of the people around you here in church today are, too. But we need to show that "Yes!" to each other over and over.

People have asked me what my vision is for Our Lady of Grace, what my goals are. But that's not really any secret. My vision and goals are what every priest's are: Abundant life (as Jesus called it) and eternal salvation for the people I've been sent to serve. How we get there won't be according to my agenda – or yours – but according to the best we can discover together of what Christ wants us, with our particular gifts and challenges, to do here and now. So what does it seem we need to do, and what resources do we have to do it?

In last Spring's survey we learned that our parish is pretty strong – better than average, at least – in meeting people's spiritual needs, helping them – you – to grow in friendship with God. We can build on that strength – but we need to explore it some more in order to build on it. I'll come back to how we do that in a moment, but first I want to talk about why we need to.

Our parish exists so that through one another Christ can make us into saints. No one but a saint – or someone at least on the way to becoming one – can do Christ's work effectively. We need to be people who live the virtues – faith, hope, and love, and also the "cardinal" or "hinge" virtues: prudence – knowing how to make good practical choices; justice; courage; and temperance. If we don't live that way, our work will be ineffective. Only people who live according to the virtues – saints-on-the-way – can do what needs to be done for one another, for families and young people, and for the needy of our neighborhood and our world.

So what will help you to become a saint? You may never have asked yourself that question, but I'd like you to ask it now. Not a plaster-statue, pious image of a saint, but someone of faith, hope, and love; of prudence, justice, courage, and temperance. Think of your friendship with God – which is what a saint is, after all, a friend of God – as like any friendship: What do you do to strengthen a friendship? People do different things, because we're different sorts of people: What do you do? If it works for you with other people, it will probably work for you with God. How do you build a friendship?

If "becoming a saint" or "friendship with God" seems too abstract, too disconnected from the daily problems you face – if you find yourself asking, How will deepening my friendship with God help me with paying the bills, or dealing with my kids' problems, or getting along with my wife or my husband, or facing my confusions or sadness, or coming to terms with my failing health – if you're asking that question, good! In every one of those situations, you – you – are a key element. And who you are in that situation is the only thing you can change – so why not try this – discover what a friend of God does in your situation? Don't you suspect that a saint in your shoes might have some new perspective?

We don't do any of this learning alone, of course; that's the point of God putting us with one another in our parish communion. I'm willing to bet that your friendship with God at this point – the reason you're here today – is not because of church rules, or what the Pope or the bishop says – or what I say. It's because some people who mattered to you taught you about friendship with God because it mattered, and you mattered, to them. We're all here because of those people. We learn with and from one another.

What's the future of Our Lady of Grace? I don't know. I do know that we will create that future by the choices we make in response to the opportunities God gives us. There are several opportunities on the horizon this year, and I want to point them out.

The first is the new Faith Formation process for pre-Confirmation young people. Our situation changed, and some people on staff and among parishioners made the most of that to create something that I think will be both exciting and powerful for everyone who chooses to be a part of it. Even if you don't have a child that age and don't think you have the gifts to be a catechist, you can be part of it. There are few better ways to grow in friendship with Christ than to introduce someone else to Christ. Look in the *Bulletin* for details, or ask someone in the Faith Formation process how you can get involved.

The second opportunity is in our care for the poor on Long Island. There's a major effort beginning across the Island this year to reduce the number of hungry people right in our midst. Feeding the hungry isn't charity; it's where we find Christ – in the poor. Again, over the next few weeks you'll find things in the *Bulletin* that you can do – opportunities to meet Christ in his poor.

The third opportunity is always here, but I want to highlight it. It's in how we speak to one another. If we're going to grow in God's friendship, we need to be "on one another's side," not picking at and criticizing one another. There's a saying that "there's so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that there's no point in any of us judging the rest of us." I'm asking you to give me, and one another, the benefit of the doubt. Assume good motives; when you don't like something find out reasons before you come to conclusions; talk to people, not about them. And don't complain about other people in the parish, or about what we do here. Criticize to improve, of course; but only if you're willing to become part of the solution to the problem you're pointing out.

The fourth opportunity comes from the reduction in our staff of paid parish leaders: We're going to thrive only if we relearn some of the skills that made Our Lady of Grace great in its early days: we have to pitch in and work together. We can't be like a supermarket, where people can come, get what they want, and walk away. We're going to have to be like a rowboat, where there's a seat for everyone, but by every seat there's an oar. Paid staff is here to serve: but the lifeblood of the parish will have to be the talents of parishioners offered to one another.

Which flows into the next opportunity: to learn about your gifts and strengths. There's a book available through the parish office called *Living Your Strengths* which I'd encourage you to buy and to work with. I'll be offering workshops on it through the year; but with or without the workshop learning to work from your individual talents and strengths is one of the best things you can do this year for yourself and your family, as well as for our parish.

The final opportunity I want to mention is coming up at the end of the month. Parish leaders and I would really like to know what helps you to grow in friendship with God. So we're asking you to tell us. After all the Masses on the weekend of September 29th – 30th we'll be set up to host small informal discussion groups about just this: What helps you to grow closer to God? And we'll be prepared to gather up what you tell us, and we'll study it and tell you, by Thanksgiving, what we've heard and what we hope to do to make it easier for you to grow closer to God through Our Lady of Grace. So please look in the *Bulletin* at my column today, which has more information. And there are some ways for you to help one another as we do this there too, if you can lend a hand.

I want to go back to my two major points as I close: First, the reason we're together here is to deepen our friendship with God in Christ – to become saints and to help one another to become saints. Nothing else ultimately matters but our eternal salvation and the salvation of as many people as we can help. Second, we're going to do that by building on our strengths, not by wasting time on "if-only's" like "why people don't come" or "the way it used to be" and the rest. Some people – you – do come; you're the core, and the key, here and now. We have a job to do together, and God has given us particular gifts and opportunities. I'm inviting you to join me, and the rest of parish leadership, in doing God's work. Take the opportunities I mentioned: in faith formation, if you can; in care for the poor, to the degree you're able; in speaking in a way that builds us up, every day without fail; in learning about your strengths and putting them to use; and in joining in the conversations at the end of the month. God has put his hopes and his work into our hands. Let's save some starfish together this year.