

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

For those of you expecting my traditional Fathers' Day homily that I have given for 41 years, I am sorry to say you will be sadly disappointed. Rather, on this Feast of the Loving Family of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—with your kind indulgence, I would like to speak to you as the Father of our Church Family that has experienced heartbreak, sadness, and disappointment in recent weeks.

First, and please forgive me, I would like to share something of my history of which many of you are unaware. It began when I was about ten years old. My grandfather came to live with us, because he had become somewhat difficult as he was well into his 80s. My Grandmother and aunts, with whom he lived, could no longer deal with him. Rather than see him in a nursing home, my Mother and Father said he could come live with us. So, he moved in and shared my room with me. I loved my Pop-Pop so I was thrilled. But one of the problems he had was that he refused to bathe. My Dad told him if he didn't bathe he would have to go to a nursing home. So, I begged Pop-Pop to take a bath. He was very stubborn and refused, until I told him I would help him. He said if I would help him, he would take a bath. He wouldn't allow anyone else to help, only me.

So, it began. I would help Pop-Pop bathe regularly, even at times being kept home from school, until I was twelve years old. Then, as Pop-Pop lay dying, I prayed God not to take him from me. I even promised if He would let Pop-Pop live, I would become a priest. But Pop-Pop died. It was the saddest day of my life.

Not 10 years later, my Mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and given 3 months to live. She quickly wasted away to nothing. I would carry her in my arms to the car to take her to the hospital for treatments that did no good. The last three days and nights of her life, as she lay dying in Nazareth Hospital in an oxygen tent, I sat with her as she begged me to take her home. I assured her she would soon be home, and was blessed to be with my Father and sisters and brothers-in-law as the anguish and pain left her face, replaced by a beautiful smile, as she passed through the veil into what I believe were the arms of the Blessed Mother on her feast of the Assumption.

The next year my Father was diagnosed with cancer in both lungs and, even though I was in the seminary, I became his primary caregiver since my sisters were pretty constantly pregnant and taking care of little ones. For five years he fought the good fight, and I along with him. There were times I had to help him eat, bathe, dress, and walk. But we battled on until three months after my ordination, and he joined my Mother in heaven. I was 28 years old.

Then, I was assigned to Most Precious Blood in 1979, when I was 35. The Pastor, Fr. Bill Finley, was diagnosed a year later with brain cancer and eventually became paralyzed, unable to speak. In his last years of life, I took turns with his brothers, going to St. Francis

Country Home to help him to eat, two or three times a week. Upon his death in 1981, I became the Pastor.

In 1984, when I was 40, my Aunt Kass, who was my Godmother, never married and at 85 had no one to care for her. I moved her into the Rectory at Most Precious Blood. Aunt Kass wasn't afraid of dying, but she didn't want to die alone. So, she often asked if she could sleep with me. I said no she would have to sleep in her own bed, but I would lie down beside her and say the Rosary with her until she fell asleep. She, like her Father before her, developed an aversion to bathing. So, I would have to pick her up and carry her in my arms, as she hit and scratched at me and pulled my hair (I did tell her to take it easy on the hair since each one was precious). I gently placed her in the tub and the housekeeper, Shirley, would come in and bathe her. I would hear her cooing, "Oh, thank you, Shirley, this is so nice." And, we would repeat these battles two or three times a week for three years until Aunt Kass's beautiful heart gave out, with all the family kneeling around her bed praying the Rosary.

In 1993, at the age of 49, I was assigned here and, in short order, the next year I brought Fr. Schneider back home and two years later invited Fr. John to join us. In all of these 21 years, I lavished the same love and affection upon them that I have felt privileged to provide for my elders since I was ten years old. In all of these 21 years no one ever questioned the respect and solicitude with which I cared for, and, yes, loved both Fr. Schneider and Fr. John.

With Fr. Schneider, it was much easier. For instance, when it became apparent that bathing was needed, I would ask him if he needed help in the shower, he would say, "Am I stinking again?" I would simply roll my eyes and shake my head, and he would head to the shower. When I suggested that a bath might be in order for Fr. John, he would say, "Your dog stinks," and continue as he was for a day or two just to be contrary.

The fact is that Fr. John needed care he wouldn't accept and pushed himself in ways that threatened his own well-being. He had severe pain that he wouldn't treat with anything other than vinegar. And while he wouldn't complain about it publicly, it was very apparent to us daily in the Rectory.

In sharing these concerns with his superior in Arlington and mine in the Clergy office, it was agreed that it was time, for his well-being, that Fr. John return to his religious community. The fact that he didn't readily agree is not surprising to anyone who knows Fr. John, and the adversarial relationships he has always had with authority.

This, of course, made this transition very difficult for all of us—for him and for all of us who care for him and truly love him and want only the best for him. However, now, just a week after he moved, Father John wrote the following to Joan Halter, "Dear Joan, Greetings from the far South! All good news! Even my retirement, exactly what I needed. You had a head start on me, so I know you understand what I am talking about! Enclosed, a check for you, it was stuck to a check for me! So, here we go again, we are in it together.

Thanks for everything. Say hello to Rich and everyone. Greetings and prayers, Father John.”

Thankfully, Father John himself now seems to realize that this move is what he “needed”. I am grateful to all of you for expressing your great love and appreciation for Father John in wanting him to stay among us longer. It is a great tribute to him and his ministry among us. I do hope and pray that you can now appreciate that his “retirement” among those he refers to as his confreres in Arlington was likewise done to provide him with what he needs at this point in his life out of the same love, appreciation, and concern.

I have shared the brief history of the love, care, and respect in which I have held my elders all of my life. Please understand, I am neither bragging nor complaining. Actually, the love and care I provided for my elders, including these years I have spent living and working with Father John, I count among the most privileged moments and happiest memories of my life.

But, now, as a Church Family, we have to let go of the hurts and the angers and the disappointments and the frustrations that have arisen in these past few weeks, and get on with the work that Christ has given us to do. I pray with Moses today, “If I find favor with you, O Lord, do come along in our company. This is indeed a stiff-necked people (and, yes, I count myself in there too, Lord): yet pardon our wickedness and sins, and receive us as your own.”

In this closing of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians we heard today, taken in isolation, might lead you to think Paul is writing to one of his most successful congregations. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Church at Corinth was full of divisions, personality cults, and cliques. There was gross immorality, drunkenness during the Lord’s Supper, adultery, and homosexuality widely practiced. The Corinthian church was a prime example of a church reaching out to the unchurched, but it was having difficulty converting them to a Christian lifestyle. It contained, therefore, a number of Christians with rough edges.

Our Church doesn’t have very many members with rough edges. That’s not because we are superior to the Corinthian congregation. It’s because we are not reaching out to the unchurched or the dechurched. If our church was filled with lots of young people with body piercings and tattoos, who smelled of weed, would we thank God for them? Paul did. These new members of Corinth made his life more complicated. He was always putting out fires, answering questions about marriage and sexual practices, food offered to idols, drinking and diet and the like. But life was never dull. It sure beat presiding over a cemetery.

Paul gave thanks for the Church at Corinth. Why? Because this church was fulfilling the command of the Lord, “Go, make disciples, baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Our Church isn't doing that, and I submit for your consideration, that is why we are dying. There are fewer people worshipping with us this year than last, and fewer last year than the year before. That's why we just had to close 16 parishes in the Archdiocese, not just in Philadelphia, but in Bucks, Delaware, and Montgomery counties too. We are not a church fulfilling the Lord's command, "Go, make disciples..." We have to change or we will die.

This book, REBUILT, is the story of a church that changed. It changed from a parish that was struggling to maintain itself to one that reached out to the unchurched and the dechurched. Like us, it had 1,100 registered households. It is now approaching 5,000. Six months ago I made REBUILT required reading for our Pastoral Council, who concur that we should use it as a blueprint for rebuilding our own parish.

I have asked each of our Pastoral Council members to invite three or four households into their homes to discuss how we might adapt some of the strategies they used in Nativity parish to our own. We are a very different parish from Nativity in Timonium, Md. For example, while their parish embraces only one zip code, ours takes in seven.

I encourage, even plead with, every member of our parish to get this book, read it, and become part of this conversation, recognizing that on this Trinity Sunday, each and every one of us has been called by Christ Himself to "Go, make disciples, baptize them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Finally, with Fr. John's leaving, questions apparently have arisen among some of you as to the future of St. Malachi's. Let me assure you that there is so much good to be found here that serves as a microcosm, even a laboratory, of Christian community for our whole parish, that I see it as essential to the growth of our whole congregation. Many of the strategies that have worked at Nativity are already at work here.

Presently, as we look to the Fall, we are still committed to arranging our weekend Mass schedule around the catechizing and evangelizing of our children and young families. The latest consideration, after listening to the suggestions that have been presented thus far, include continuing the 5:00 P.M. Vigil Mass at Our Lady of Consolation; keeping the 8:00 A.M. Mass at OLC, with a 9:30 start for C.C.D., to be followed by an 11:00 A.M. Mass at the Parish Center. In this arrangement, families who need to be on the move earlier can bring the children to the 8:00 and C.C.D. at 9:30; while families whose children can benefit from sleeping in a little later, can come to C.C.D. at 9:30 and then participate in the 11:00 o'clock Mass.

In this configuration, it would be helpful to celebrate Mass at St. Malachy's at 9:30, rather than 10:30. With an hour and a half between each Mass, if or when necessary, I would be able to cover all of them. Please prayerfully consider if this could work for you and your family and share your thoughts with me by calling or e-mailing me as soon as possible. Or if you have other suggestions, I would love to hear them too.

Finally, please pray for our church family that we may model the love of the God Family, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.