

KEEP THE FLAME ALIVE!

TURN UP THE FLAME HEADS INTO THE HOME STRETCH

By Fr. Michael Van Sloun

The Final Countdown. We are midway through the third and final year of the *Turn Up the Flame* spiritual “capital” campaign. The kickoff for the last phase was March 5 and 6, 2011, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, and the final weekend will be February 18 and 19, 2012. There is a little less than five months to go, and it is time to make the final push to the finish line. As in all races, it is important to finish well (see 2 Tim 4:7).



Three Stages. *Turn Up the Flame* is comprised of three successive one-year stages: Year One, **Learn Your Faith**; Year Two, **Practice Your Faith**; and this year, the third and final stage, **Share Your Faith**.

Not Like Your Regular Campaign. From the outset this campaign has been about raising faith, not money. The driving force behind everything we do is our faith in God, our belief in God’s Son Jesus, and our trust in the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus announced, “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15).

Repent. Jesus wants us to keep our lamps trimmed and burning (Mt 25:7), to shave off the charred edges of our wicks, to cut away all evildoing and bad habits, to restore our wicks to their original sparkling white condition so our lamps, which for a while were flickering and dim, smoking and stinking, will once again burn clean and bright. Our lights should be set on a lampstand and radiate so brilliantly that they illuminate the entire house, particularly where we live, work, or go to school, and be easy for all to see (Mt 5:15).

Believe in the gospel. To not know the gospel is to not know Jesus. The predominant message of Year One, *Learn Your Faith*, is that it is imperative to listen to the gospel, such as at Mass; to read the gospel by ourselves or with another or a group; and to meditate upon the gospel in prayer, and to do so regularly. As we become more and more familiar with Jesus and what he said and did, our belief will get progressively stronger and stronger.

Wrist-Bands: Outward Signs of Interior Belief. Hundreds of parishioners are still wearing *Turn Up the Flame* (TUTF) wrist bands to church and school, work and play. They are a great way to witness faith and excellent conversation starters.

My Most-beautiful Personal Wrist-Band Story. My most-moving wrist band moment was an emergency call to the hospital. The patient was dying – and wearing only a hospital gown and a blue TUTF wrist band. The patient motioned to her wrist and whispered, “The doctor told me that I do not have much time left, but my flame is strong.” She received the Sacrament of Anointing with deep devotion and before I left she told me, “I want to be buried with my wrist band.” A short while later she died, and in the casket her hands were laid one on top of the other with her blue *Share Your Faith* wristband in plain sight. Even in death she shared her faith.

Wrist-Bands Galore! People are wearing their TUTF wrist bands everywhere and anywhere which is precisely according to plan. I see them regularly in church at Mass, particularly in the Communion line. There have been many sightings at local restaurants and grocery stores. Many students wear them to school, and some during sporting events. My favorite is a college athlete from our parish who is on the

track team at Marquette University in Milwaukee. On the athletic department web site there is a picture of him clearing the bar in the pole vault, and on his left wrist he is wearing his blue *Share Your Faith* wrist band.

Faith Sharing is Not Easy. Objections and Resistance. *Share Your Faith* has proven to be the most difficult phase of *Turn Up the Flame*. It actually is more challenging than raising money. Many Catholics are private and would prefer not to speak about their personal beliefs and faith experiences. Some are unsure of themselves. Others do not want to be pushy or intrusive, or appear over-pious or fanatical. Jesus' disciples also held back. We do not know all of their reasons, but in most cases fear is the root cause of timidity. Jesus was not interested in excuses. Jesus told the Gerasene to share his faith: "Go and announce all that the Lord in his pity has done for you" (Mk 5:19). Likewise, before he ascended Jesus told his disciples, "Go, make disciples of all nations. Teach them all that I commanded you" (Mt 28:19,20). Jesus expected his disciples to speak up, even if they felt shy and would have preferred to remain silent. Only after they received the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost did they begin to share their faith in earnest.

SHARE YOUR FAITH TIPS

Begin with prayer. Before doing anything or saying anything, if at all possible, begin with prayer. Our relationship with God is our firm foundation. The Holy Spirit will guide us about when to speak up and when to be quiet, and if we speak, the Holy Spirit will guide us as to what to say and how to say it.

Actions speak louder than words. "Your life may be the only gospel someone else ever reads." Good example is the best way to share our faith. To do so it is necessary to live a virtuous and decent life, to perform good deeds, and be cheerful and kind. The goal is to be a witness, to walk the talk, and to be so on fire for the Lord that curious on-lookers will be tempted to ask, "What's up with you?" If anyone asks a personal question, it is an opening for us to share our faith.



Be sneaky – in a good way. Try to find ways to slip God and faith into the conversation. Don't be preachy or aggressive, but be ready. If someone asks "Why?" gently explain your spiritual motivation. If someone brings up a person problem, offer to pray for them. When saying farewell, it is nice to say, "God bless you!"

Make Personal Invitations. Invite someone to come with you to Mass. Young people can invite a friend to go with them to the Refuge or on a mission trip or to Middle School Madness.

Be Inclusive with Invitations. Aim your invitations at all sorts of people. Start at home with a family member. Then branch out. Possibilities include a relative, a co-worker, a neighbor, a classmate, a teammate, a person whose faith is inactive, or someone who is unsettled and searching for deeper meaning and purpose in life.

Follow the Master's example. Jesus spoke in Capernaum (Mk 1:21). Then he went to nearby villages, then throughout all of Galilee (Mk 1:38,39). Whether at home or on the road, Jesus was on a mission to share the faith, and as Jesus has done, so we must also do!