

THE TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME, Year A

Is 5:1-7; Ps 80:9,12-16,19-20; Phil 4:6-9; Mt 21:33-43

KEEP THE FLAME ALIVE!

TURN UP THE FLAME HEADS INTO THE HOME STRETCH

Homily by Fr. Michael A. Van Sloun
Saturday, October 1, 2011, 5:00 p.m. Mass
Sunday, October 2, 2011, all five Masses

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning.
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For this work is almost done (see Mt 25:7).

This Sunday is the **fall revival** up for our *Turn Up the Flame* spiritual campaign!

But before we get started,
did you hear about the **two nuns** who were shopping at a **Seven-Eleven Store**?
It was a **warm summer evening**.
They were in the back of the store by the coolers:
the milk, the juice, the pop – and the beer!
The one nun said to the other, “Wouldn’t it be nice to have a beer or two or three tonight?”

The other nun sheepishly agreed, “Yes, it would be fun,
but I’m afraid of the check-out counter.
If people see us with beer, it might cause a scene.
It might be a scandal!”

The other nun said, “No problem. I have a plan.”

So the first nun took a six pack of beer, brought it to the front of the store,
set it on the counter, and the cashier scanned it.
The nun explained, “**Back at the convent we use beer for washing our hair!**
We call it ‘Catholic shampoo!’”

Keeping his composure, the cashier slyly reached under the counter,
grabbed a bag of pretzels, and slipped them discreetly into the bag.
Winking, the cashier told the nun, “**Sister, this will be our little secret;**
the curlers are on the house!”

My friends, this is the **third** and **final year** of our *Turn Up the Flame* spiritual campaign.

As I have said before, this is the **most important campaign** I have ever brought before you.
It might be important to raise money,
but **raising our faith**, giving our lives over to **Jesus** more completely,
which is the **main reason** we are here.

Seven months of Year III have already **passed**.

We have **five months to go**.

It is important to **KEEP THE FLAME ALIVE** as we head into the **home stretch**.

In a **capital campaign** for money, once the pledges are made,
people just make their donations and there is **very little follow-up**.

In a **spiritual campaign**,

like with New Year's resolutions, or like our good intentions at the beginning of Lent,
usually there is **slippage**,

so periodically it is very important to give a **boost**, to **re-energize**.

Initially, I had planned to speak on *Turn Up the Flame* two or three times this fall,
but along came the new **Roman Missal**,

the new English translation for the prayers we use at Mass,

changes that will be implemented in all English-speaking Catholic churches around the world,
changes that will be implemented on the First Sunday of Advent eight weeks from now.

“The Lord be with you.” “And with your spirit.”

We have instructions from both the Archdiocese and the Archbishop

as well as the national bishops conference and the Vatican to teach about the changes,
which is what we will do for six of the next eight weeks.

So over the **next eight weeks** we have **six** on the *Roman Missal*,

one on **Stewardship**, and **today** on *Turn Up the Flame*.

Today is our **big final push**

so we will **Keep the Flame Alive** as we head down the **home stretch!**

This is a **three-year campaign**.

Year One: Learn Your Faith.

Year Two: Practice Your Faith.

Year Three, this year: Share Your Faith.

The **scripture verse** that has been **our focus** is:

“**Keep your lamps trimmed and burning**” (paraphrase, Mt 25:7).

It comes from the **parable** of the **ten maidens** (Mt 25:1-13),

five who were **sensible**, five **foolish**.

The **clean white wick** is a symbol for each of us.

The wick gets **encrusted** with **char** on the edges,
a symbol for **sin**.

The flame **flickers**, gives off **less light**, it **smokes** more, it **stinks** more – **sin is ugly**.

Jesus wants us to **trim away** our **sin**,

so our **light** will burn more **brightly**.

He wants us to turn up our flames,

and then to put our light on a stand for everyone in the house to see (see Mt 5:15).

Our light gives **witness**.

Our light is a way to **share faith**.

This is all about **Jesus**.

Jesus wants us to **come to him**, to **know** him, to **love** him, to **cherish his gospel**.

If we want to know Jesus, we have to know the gospel.

St. Jerome said, “*Ignorance of the gospel is ignorance of Jesus.*”

We hear the gospel proclaimed at Mass on Sundays,

but **once a week** simply is **not enough**.

We need to read the gospel **throughout the week**.

This means **Bible reading at home**.

The **resistance** to this is **amazing**.

“Daily gospel reading at home, that’s **pious church platitudes**, Father.”

People quickly dismiss this as **impractical** or **overboard**.

Lots of people think to themselves, “I’ve gone to Mass, **I’m done for the week.**”

That’s why I say that I get more resistance on this campaign than any I have done.

Giving money, that’s easy.

Reading the bible regularly, “I haven’t got time for that.”

When it comes to **sharing our faith**,

we have a great “**gimmick**” or “**strategy**” for witnessing our faith: **wrist bands**.

It is a **reminder** to ourselves, and a **conversation starter** for others.

If you are **not wearing** a **wrist band**, that’s **OK**, it’s not for everyone,

but plenty of **people** are **wearing them**,

and I am very **grateful** for those who do.

Initially, I thought the **wrist bands** would be most **popular** with **kids**, young people,

but people of **all ages** are using them.

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**.

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.

He is a **pole vaulter**.

An athletic department photographer was at a meet,
and took a picture of him clearing the cross bar.

On his left wrist he is wearing his blue *Share Your Faith* wrist band,
and it is the picture on the Athletic Department's home page.

Share Your Faith has proven to be the **most difficult phase of Turn Up the Flame**.

It is much **more difficult** than **raising money**.

Many Catholics are of northern European descent: Germans, Dutchmen, French, Scandinavians.

Many are quite **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**,

do not want to appear **over-pious** or **fanatical**.

It is very apparent in peoples' body language:

"Ah, **get serious, Father. I'm not doing that!**"

Jesus' **disciples** also **held back**.

Jesus was **not interested in excuses**.

When Jesus cured the Gerasene demonic, afterward he told him,

"Go and announce to your family all that the Lord in his pity has done for you" (Mk 5:19).

Jesus **expected his disciples to speak up**,

even if they felt **shy** and would have **preferred to remain silent**.

If we are going to reach out to others to Share Our Faith,

that would make us **MISSIONARIES**.

There are **foreign missionaries**,

those who **carry Jesus** and the **gospel** to **distant places**,

and there are **domestic missionaries**,

people like you and me,

who **carry Jesus** and the **gospel** to our **immediate vicinity**,

to those **where we live**,

the other people in our **family**, the people at **work** or at **school**.

There are very **different ways** to be **missionaries**.

Maybe you saw the movie, *The Mission*, with Robert DeNiro and Jeremy Irons.

It was about Jesuits from Europe on mission to South America.

When the missionaries arrived, they were **pushy** and **aggressive**.

We've got Jesus and you don't.

We do it right, you do it wrong.

It was **arrogant**, stuck up, and conceited – **demeaning, unkind**,

and it ended in **terrible conflict**.

Please steer clear of this approach.

There is a **new way** of doing **missionary work**.
I learned about it at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago,
in the **missiology** department for those going on **distant places**.

The **Crosiers** used this approach in **Indonesia**.
Mother Theresa used this approach in **India**.

When the missionary arrives in a distant place,
go **meet the people**.

Get **acquainted**.

Learn their **language**, learn their **names**.

Build a **relationship**. Become **friends**. Earn **trust**.

If they are hungry, provide food.

If they are sick, bring medicine (see Mt 25:31-46).

Be **joyful** and **kind** and **energetic**.

People will see a **glow**, an **inner peace**, and **inner joy**,
be **attracted** to it, and **wonder** about it.

At that point, they will ask, “**Why are you like that?**”

It will be **the opening** to share, “Is it because of **Jesus** and **my belief in him**.”

Then, instead of jamming something down someone’s throat,
it is the **other person asking questions** and giving us the opening.

Sharing the faith is missionary work.

It is about being **on fire for Christ**.

It must be **gentle** and **respectful**.

Missionary work begins at home, and it is **very difficult**.

Look at our own church. **Attendance is down**.

That balcony used to be full for this Mass.

But attendance is down not only at St. Stephen’s,

but also at St. John the Baptist in New Brighton (one less Mass),

at St. Timothy’s in Blaine (one less Mass),

at St. Hubert’s in Chanhassen (more empty seats).

And this **phenomenon** is **not only** in **Catholic** churches.

Attendance is down in Lutheran churches,

and Methodist, and Baptist, and Episcopal – and Jewish synagogues.

Why?

There are **huge forces** working **God** and **organized religion**,
against Jesus and **his gospel**.

The forces of darkness have always been strong (Jn 1:11; 3:19b),
and it is particularly strong these days.

Secularism is rampant in America,

a belief that people can get along **without God and church**.

Individualism is a powerful force.

Everything revolves around me!

Materialism and **consumerism** is pervasive in America.

Advertising tells us that we need things,

and people spend enormous time and energy acquiring things.

Individualism and **materialism**,

life is about **me** and **my stuff**!

This road leads to nowhere. It leads to **emptiness**.

My friends, as people of faith **we believe** that **Jesus** is **the answer**.

Our faith in **Jesus** is a **great treasure** (Mt 13:44),

so great that we must not keep it to ourselves.

We ought to ***Share Our Faith!***

When I was at **St. Benedict the African in Chicago**,

our pastor, Fr. David Baldwin, had a **four-week program** to **invite people to church**,
to ***Share the Faith***, and it was **very effective**.

On the first week, invite someone in your **family**.

On the second week, invite a **young person**.

On the third week, invite a **neighbor**.

On the fourth week, invite **someone from work**.

And don't send them to church, bring them yourself.

There is no plan for whom to bring, or on what week. This is a matter of personal choice.

The old pledge sheets are out, not to turn in, but to serve as a reminder about options.

It is up to **you** to **decide who** to invite, **when** to do it, and **how** to do it.

Just **be gentle** and **kind**, **not hard-driving**.

And, an **invitation** to **come to church** is just **one option**.

It might be to **talk** back and forth about **spiritual matters**.

It might be an **offer to pray** for each other, or to pray together.

We need to **let** the **Holy Spirit** be our **guide**.

There are some **new motivational tools** on the tables at the entrances.

There are two different **window clings** – for the car, the glass on a door, or wherever.

There are plenty. Take more than one if you wish.

And there are ***Share Your Faith pens***.

The pen is blue. The ink is black. Go figure!

Again, there are plenty. You are welcome to take more than one.

For many people, it is **outside of their comfort zone** to share their faith.

Remember what Jesus said the Gerasene whom he cured (Mk 5:1-20),

***“Go home to your family to announce to them all that the Lord
in his pity [goodness] has done for you”*** (Mk 5:19).

Jesus instructed him to ***Share His Faith***, and he wants us to **do the same!**