

Back to Better, OUR ROAD TO EMMAUS

PASTORAL LETTER *by* BISHOP WILLIAM D. BYRNE



A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke

Luke 24:13-35

That very day, the first day of the week,
two of the disciples of Jesus were going
to a village called Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem,
and they were conversing about all the things that had occurred.
And it happened that while they were conversing and debating,
Jesus himself drew near and walked with them,
but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.
He asked them,
“What are you discussing as you walk along?”
They stopped, looking downcast.
One of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply,
“Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem
who does not know of the things
that have taken place there in these days?”
And he replied to them, “What sort of things?”
They said to him,
“The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene,
who was a prophet mighty in deed and word
before God and all the people,
how our chief priests and rulers both handed him over
to a sentence of death and crucified him.
But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel;
and besides all this,
it is now the third day since this took place.
Some women from our group, however, have astounded us:
they were at the tomb early in the morning
and did not find his Body;
they came back and reported
that they had indeed seen a vision of angels
who announced that he was alive.

Then some of those with us went to the tomb
and found things just as the women had described,
but him they did not see.”
And he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are!
How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke!
Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things
and enter into his glory?”
Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets,
Jesus interpreted to them what referred to him
in all the Scriptures.
As they approached the village to which they were going,
Jesus gave the impression that he was going on farther.
But they urged him, “Stay with us,
for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over.”
So he went in to stay with them.
And it happened that, while he was with them at table,
he took bread, said the blessing,
broke it, and gave it to them.
With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him,
but he vanished from their sight.
Then they said to each other,
“Were not our hearts burning within us
while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?”
So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem
where they found gathered together
the Eleven and those with them, who were saying,
“The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!”
Then the two recounted
what had taken place on the way
and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,



WILLIAM D. BYRNE,
Bishop of Springfield

Easter is the reason for our hope and so I offer to you this message of hope.

At Mass, after we pray the Lord's Prayer, the priest prays these words, "May we be always free from sin and safe from all distress as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ." That prayer is most poignant to me these days. Each time I

celebrate Mass, I see entire congregations wearing masks, socially-distant in the pews and unable to shake hands with one another. Some wonder if things will ever be the same. Some wonder if the crowds will ever come back to Mass.

The COVID crisis follows decades of difficulty. The abuse scandal, declining numbers of parishioners in our pews, no diocesan seminarians, young couples not being married sacramentally, and large numbers of parents choosing not to have their children baptized remain causes of great concern.

So, what are we to think in this time of distress? Has God given up on us?

I begin this pastoral letter to you with the definitive answer: NO! God has most certainly not given up on his people of western Massachusetts. He loves us more than we can imagine and suffers with us in this time of trial.

This letter is intended to be a message of hope, and, I pray, a guide for our future. Since it is intended to be a road out of the dark and into the light, I think we should begin by meeting our Lord on the road, not just any road, but the road to Emmaus.

Luke 24: 28-53 tells the story of two disciples on their way home after having witnessed the horror of the crucifixion. On the way, they encounter the Risen Lord Jesus, although they do not recognize him. As he walks with them, he explains the Scriptures, breaks bread with them, and disappears from their midst. These two disciples hurry to Jerusalem to announce to the Apostles that they have seen the Risen Jesus and have recognized him "in the breaking of the bread."

Let us together see how this encounter will show us the road to the Kingdom of God in western Massachusetts.

Looking Downcast – Facing our Troubles

It's not hard to imagine these two disciples experiencing disappointment, if not despair, after having witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus. By all accounts, the Roman punishment of crucifixion was intended to be brutal and humiliating. It was a message sent to insurgents to let them know that controverting the Roman government would be painful beyond imagination and humiliating to you and to everyone whom you knew. The disciples we encounter at the beginning of the Emmaus story had just witnessed Jesus, "a prophet mighty in word and deed" for whom they had left family and friends behind, undergo the same brutal death endured by the worst of criminals.

With their hopes dashed and dreams shattered, confusion soon began to arise among the Emmaus disciples. Some women

in the group were claiming they had seen Jesus. How could this be? The two disciples had seen him die. In the midst of so much confusion, the disciples did not recognize Jesus when he joined them on the road.

The inability to see Jesus results both from the darkness of their spirits and from the reality that the resurrected Jesus must have looked different. Sadness and despair can make the world look different to us. Our expectations can cloud our vision. In these days in which we are living, it can be difficult to see how Jesus is walking with us, but it does not mean that he is not truly present.

These disciples are not the only ones who do not recognize the Risen Lord. When Mary Magdalene meets Jesus after finding the empty tomb, she mistakes him for a gardener (Jn. 20:15). Jesus must have looked different because indeed he was, and is; he was the same but transformed from our perspective. Why this is we won't know fully in this life, but I do know that things had clearly changed, not just for Jesus, but for all of humanity. Resurrection literally changes everything for everybody.

St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come." Our calling is now to bring life from death as we have been brought from death to life. Here are some ways:

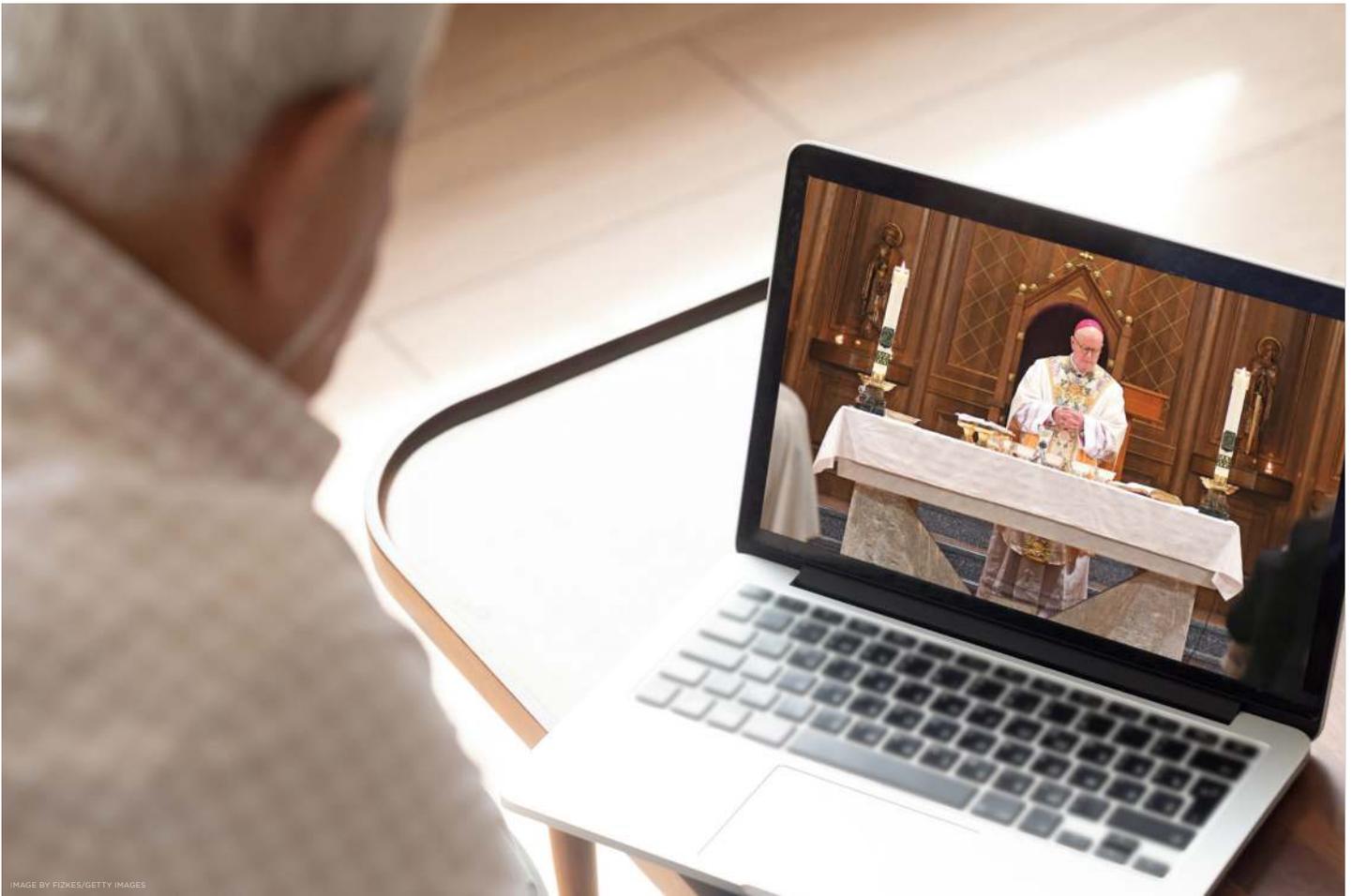
Abuse Crisis

The most devastating wound we face is one caused by a relatively small number of clergy who did unspeakable crimes against our children. As I have said since my arrival in the diocese, bringing healing to the victims/survivors, atoning for these sins, and honestly communicating what we know must be our priority. The ongoing work of the Independent Task Force is charting a path for the future rooted in the principles of transparency and accountability. These efforts are not the culmination of our commitment, rather just the start.

Pope Francis wrote in his apostolic letter "Vos Estis Lux Mundi": "The crimes of sexual abuse offend our Lord, cause physical, psychological and spiritual damage to the victims and harm the community of the faithful."

Recognizing the harm done to victims/survivors and their families must be a guiding concern as we move forward. I pray for all those harmed and pledge to never forget our Church's past failures. We will continue to create safe environments for our children and implement best practices to prevent sexual abuse of anyone in our faith communities in the future. Together we need to pray and encourage victims/survivors who have not yet come forward to know we will support them should they choose to do so and that our efforts give them some courage to know that they are not alone.

Please pray for and encourage our priests who uniquely feel the pain of this crisis. They live lives committed to their parishioners and yet often feel distrusted. These good and dedicated men need to be celebrated for their commitment and not associated with those few who did so much damage to their victims and the whole Church.



Declining Numbers

In the past 70 years, the culture of Catholicism in New England has dramatically changed — in some ways good and other ways not so good. We have mirrored our culture and found ourselves awash in a secular age.

In his apostolic exhortation “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” Pope Francis states: “The process of secularization tends to reduce the faith and the Church to the sphere of the private and personal. Furthermore, by completely rejecting the transcendent, it [secularization] has produced a growing deterioration of ethics, a weakening of the sense of personal and collective sin, and a steady increase in relativism. These have led to a general sense of disorientation, especially in the periods of adolescence and young adulthood which are so vulnerable to change” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* #64).

The pope is spot on!

The remedy is seen in our encounter with God. The disciples encounter Jesus on the road and they encounter him in Scripture and sacrament. All good things flow from him “through whom all things were made.” This encounter with the Risen Lord sends them immediately to Jerusalem to proclaim that they have met Jesus and recognized him in the breaking of the bread. The encounter with Jesus compels us to encounter one another.

I repeatedly use the word “encounter” for good reason. It is a word rich in meaning. It is a word Our Holy Father often uses, especially when speaking of what it is to build a culture of encounter:

“In today’s world, the sense of belonging to a single human

family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia.... Isolation and withdrawal into one’s own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal. Rather, it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no; closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes” (Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* #30).

In our relationship with God, “we encounter in the community of the three divine Persons the origin and perfect model of all life in society” (*Fratelli Tutti* #85). True community only flows out of our knowledge and love of Jesus. “Back to better” will only happen when we as individuals and as a church move closer to Christ through the Scriptures and the Mass.

Jesus Interpreted All the Scriptures

As the disciples walk along with him, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them what referred to him in all the Scriptures.” Jesus, the “Word made flesh” (Jn. 3, 16), opens their minds and their hearts to his revelation from the beginning. So, too, for us on life’s journey the opening of our eyes in the light of faith begins with our encounter of the Lord. Jesus is clearly giving the entire scope of the history of salvation, the complete rescue mission decreed by God for the salvation of the world. All Scripture points to Jesus. The Word flows through history, indeed history is HIS story.

The cross that scandalized our two disciples is the moment and place when Jesus took on our suffering and died under its burden. The resurrection is the beginning of God’s new creation. This is to

say that we are not just sitting around waiting for Jesus to come again. We who are baptized into the Body of Christ are part (or not!) of an active new creation. We are called and empowered to build and to manifest his Kingdom.

Scripture is our blueprint and the teaching of the Church is our action plan. Ignorance of either, or both, will leave us unable to carry out our mission — to make all things new. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?” our friends on the way exclaimed. If we want others to know Jesus, our hearts must be burning with his love. We must constantly listen to the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church.

With that in mind, I strongly encourage all opportunities for Bible studies, both personal and small group. As St. Jerome famously said, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.”

In the Breaking of the Bread

In the story of Emmaus and its account of the breaking of the bread, we witness the second Mass in human history. There is a Liturgy of the Word as Jesus explains Scripture to them. Then there is the Liturgy of the Eucharist when “he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them.” The language is intentionally eucharistic and, in fact, the earliest Church referred to

the Mass as the Breaking of the Bread. Their first reaction is to share the news and so they head back to Jerusalem.

A true encounter with Jesus compels us to share the news. If we are not prepared to do that then perhaps we still do not recognize the Risen Lord.

While I am grateful that technology has allowed many parishes to stay connected with parishioners, particularly with regard to virtual participation in the Mass, it is not and should never be the norm. For the truly homebound, it is a blessing which we recognize and have offered since 1957 through our televised “Chalice of Salvation” Mass. I am grateful for the hard work of Passionist Brother Terrence Scanlon and his production team and the generosity of WWLP-22NEWS for their gift of Sunday airtime which make this Mass possible.

However, beginning again means getting back to church, participating in person, and renewing our sacramental encounter with Jesus. Today, as from the very first days of the Church described in the Acts of Apostles (2:42), we as Jesus’ disciples need to come together to listen to the Word of God, to renew and strengthen our community bonds, to share in our prayer and joy and, above all to celebrate the Eucharist and receive the Lord’s Body and Blood together.

We NEED to be back together as soon as we can.



Eucharistic Adoration

Pastors and administrators who have begun some form of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament will tell you that it has transformed their life and the life of the parish. Where it does not already exist, I encourage parishes to consider beginning this practice. Just as the disciples recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread, our encounter with the Lord in eucharistic adoration is transformative. It helps us see and cherish the things that truly matter.

Vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life – A Call to Holiness

The staggering fact that there are no seminarians for our diocese is a clear sign of the need for us, priests and lay faithful, to take up the privilege of inviting the next generation of future priests to hear and embrace the call. Each of us should be a vocation recruiter. What are we looking for? One question is: Would he make a good son-in-law? Bring it up.

Recently, I interviewed a man who was applying to the seminary. A few years before, I had suggested the idea and he was a bit put off, even annoyed. But that seed grew and now he is studying to be a priest.

A joyful priest is the best invitation for a young man to consider the seminary. True joy is intimately connected to a strong prayer life. A prayerful priest is a priest that prays daily and with great personal fervor. I have asked my brother priests to pray a daily

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Catholic Communications – Diocese of Springfield
Originally published in the April 2021 edition of *The Catholic Mirror*