

LENTEN NOVENA NUMBER 4

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Welcome to the fourth evening of our Lenten Novena, where we will continue to reflect on the gift of marriage and family life. The idea that our way to God comes primarily through family life must in a certain way penetrate the mind and heart of every person.

The church and each parish must pattern her behaviour after the Son of God who goes out to everyone without exception. We are called to show mercy because mercy was first shown to us. God's love which always seeks what is best for us, is for us mercy and mercy, is therefore, the very foundation of the Church's life. 'The Church is not meant to be a burden. It is the house of the father where there is a place for everyone with all their joys and sorrows.

So, for these last few weeks we have been reflecting on various aspects of marriage and family life. The invitation this evening is to try to come down to earth a little and recognise what we are called to as Catholics and as Christians and as the parish of Holy Redeemer. How do we support marriage and family life in our parish?

If anyone were to look at the number of people who attend our church every weekend, they would be astonished; we have a fantastic number of people who come every single week and that is a great blessing for us. That's something we take a certain pride in that there is something attractive about our parish, about our church and our community, but it's very easy for us to become complacent, spiritually speaking, to say wow it's wonderful we have so many at church every week, we are the best parish in the Archdiocese. We can say all kinds of things but there's always more to be done. A church and a parish is not measured by numbers; it's measured by mercy. That is the ultimate challenge of any parish, and I think in a certain special sense of our parish here at Holy Redeemer. We are grateful for the numbers, but are we a merciful parish? And what are we doing practically to assist all families to draw closer to God, to one another. What are we doing to sustain families, especially in times of difficulties?

Pope Francis gave us this wonderful vision: what is a parish? A parish is a family of families; such a beautiful image; a family of families. And it's a beautiful ideal to hold onto and to cling to but it is also something that doesn't just happen. It's something we have to work towards, to create a family of families. This is where, time and again, we are thrown back on the need for mercy. I want us to try to be practical; ask ourselves what structures do we have in place as a parish to support family life, to support married couples, to support those who are experiencing many difficulties? We have so many people and so many ministries in this parish. I want us to reflect quite starkly. We have a St Vincent De Paul Society; our care for the poor and the needy is sorely lacking in our parish. We are generous, but it is easy to bring a loaf of bread once a week. It's not so easy to step out and to take that loaf to the poor. So, in a parish where we have so many, many people attending church every week, why do we have a St Vincent De Paul society with five members? There is something wrong; there is some kind of disconnect between the Gospel and our spiritual lives. We can talk about our young adults and young people. We have quite literally hundreds of young people who come to church every Sunday. We are the envy of many, many parishes. Those young people are a gift to us. Why is it we have a young adults group which, if it exists at all, has only five members. There must be something wrong in our structures. These are just little examples; we can do the same for any group. We have the Men's group who are striving to do their best to support the men in our parish. Why is it that they only have 5 or 6 active members. So, it speaks to us of the dangers of privatising our lives. We have our faith, we come to church week by week, but we are not apostles, we are not missionaries. We are passive Catholics. This is a challenge which calls not just the Redemptorists, it's a challenge that presents itself to all of us. You can take a look at those who are actively involved in ministry, in our parish life. Maybe one in a hundred; I think I'm being generous. Imagine if it were 10; imagine if it were 20; imagine if it were 50. That's what it means to be a church of mercy where all of us are trying to create a family of families. I want to throw out a few suggestions this evening, whether anything happens or not is largely up to yourselves. In the world, the non-Christian world, people everywhere celebrate Mother's Day, celebrate Father's Day, to a lesser extent for some reason. We certainly celebrate Valentine's Day. What about if on Mother's Day we have a consecration of all the mothers of our parish? What about if on Father's Day we have a consecration of all the fathers and on Valentine's Day for everyone who certainly love and for whom love is active. We have so many opportunities which we somehow let us pass by; opportunities which enhance our parish community life; which creates structures of support.

One of the things I find most amusing about Cape Town is that everyone knows everyone. You notice this, or maybe it's because of Br Gavin....., everyone seems to know everyone. I don't want to be disrespectful; everyone seems to be related to everyone else. You have to be very careful what you say. I come from a small town in Scotland. There is maybe about seven thousand people there. If I know 50 of them, that is exaggerated but we all know one another, and you walk into any area of the parish as I do; there are Catholics 2 doors down, there are Catholics 5 doors down, there's Catholics across the road there. What about if families gathered with their Catholic neighbours and prayed the rosary once a week? Simple. Practical. Life changing. We have small Christian communities, 2 or 3, with 2 or 3 members and here we are with huge numbers called to be missionary. And I like to say here, called to be missionary precisely because we are a Redemptorist parish and St Alphonsus wanted our places of worship to be places of mission so we can support one another. We can talk all day about the lack of support, but we have got to be... ourselves; just a simple action and life would be very different for us. Just a thought.

What about support of family life? We could do a lot more. Our Pastoral council, our Redemptorists, our ministries... we have to pledge to do what we can to try to create a parish which is a place of mercy, not of judgement. A place of mercy and not status, or privilege. One area which stands out indeed of huge support of the parish is the many, many cases of those who are divorced or separated or remarried. Now for Catholics this is something of a taboo subject. We don't like to talk about it but it's the truth that many of our good people, holy people, people like yourselves have also known the pain of separation and divorce. We are largely silent about this community within our parish. Pope Francis, I think, has gone further than any other pope in saying that the parish must be the first place of mercy for anyone who is wounded in love. The first place. It's a question for all of us. We thank God for all the good and loving marriages in our parish, but do we do enough, do we care enough, do we walk with our wounded, do we walk with them, accompany them, lift them up when they are broken. This is something which I think is critical in our parish life today. We need to be, to work much harder at being compassionate. Pope Francis again made it very, very clear if you want to be a parish, a Catholic parish, it must be what Fr Sean spoke about a couple of weeks ago, a hospital for the wounded. We have so many, they have the right to our care, our support and our love.

Can I just say here, it's again a very Cape Town thing, in that many, many of our parishioners think that they cannot receive holy communion because of the situation of being separated or divorced. It's like a common response and I'll be very clear, there is no reason whatsoever why a divorced, separated person should not be receiving Communion. Pope Francis went much further in finding ways that all of those people who are somehow caught up in that difficult or awkward situation, be judged by mercy and not by law. Nothing should keep us from receiving communion. We don't receive holy communion because we're good. We receive Holy communion because we are weak. We receive in order to be strengthened by the Lord Jesus. And sadly, I sometimes see people, pointing to the next person: "Why is that person allowed to receive holy communion? What's going on? I thought this, I thought that, I thought the next thing." We are a house of mercy and no-one, what's so special of the priest can ever say to another person, standing in line you are not worthy. That's our prayer. None of us.

So these just a few scattered practical points to highlight that we still have a way to go, a long way. St Alphonsus, our founder, founded the Redemptorists to be a group of people who strive to reach the most abandoned and that means that any of our parishes or churches must be a place where the whole parish strives to reach the abandoned and the wounded. It's a beautiful vocation; it's a vocation that we share. My invitation this evening: let's be grounded, let's not be passive Catholics. Let's find ways to show from the heart that truly we are a church of mercy.