

The Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 14, 2016

Jesus said in today's Gospel, "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!" What was he talking about?

Well, remember how on the road to Emmaus, two disciples were talking about their encounter with Jesus. "Were not our hearts burning within us?" They had caught fire with Jesus' life and message. They were never the same again.

When we were baptized we—or our parents on our behalf—were presented with a candle burning with a flame from the paschal candle with the words: "Receive the light of Christ. Keep it burning brightly..."

How can we keep that light of Christ burning in our lives? How can we experience the words of Jesus burning in our hearts in the same way as the two disciples on the road to Emmaus?

These are just a couple of the questions that we as a parish will attempt to answer for ourselves, both as a congregation and for each of us as individuals in this coming year. And we will do this through Alpha. So what is Alpha?

Alpha is a course and a seminar, it is a gathering of believers searching for answers; Alpha is an experience and opportunity to answer together some of the most fundamental questions for believers (and non-believers).

Alpha is for people who are strong in their faith and those who are weak, doubting and struggling, and everyone else in-between. Over 24 million people worldwide have experienced the 10 week Alpha Course over the years and countless lives have been dramatically changed, simply by getting to the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Here's how Alpha works. Every Monday evening, for 10 weeks, starting September 19 we will gather as a community of believers in the Family Life Center.

We will begin each evening sharing a meal and table fellowship. Next, a 35 minute video will be shown highlighting one of the core components of the Christian faith. Then, the large assembly will break-down into small groups, with table hosts and helpers leading discussions that stem from the videos.

In these discussion groups, people are welcome to ask questions and look for answers with no pressure to contribute. These small groups often form the basis for genuine friendships that can last for years afterwards.

The Alpha video presenter is Fr. Nicky Gumbell, an evangelical Anglican priest, who, as one priest I know said, "...is probably more Catholic than most Catholics I know."

In 169 countries around the world, Catholics and Orthodox, mainline Protestants, non-denominational and evangelical congregations are employing Alpha to help their parishioners to better understand and appreciate what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, how to follow him faithfully and fully, and how to share the wonderful message of Jesus with other people, with those who have left the Church and the un-churched in our families, among our friends and in our neighborhoods.

This past spring, members of our staff, Pastoral Council, and Leadership Team experienced the Alpha Course. Next week, one of these people will speak briefly at each Mass to share with you how Alpha inspired or transformed their lives and their relationship with Jesus.

Each week during Alpha, we will explore together the most important questions related to being a follower of Jesus Christ: Who is Jesus? Why did Jesus Die? How can we have Faith? Why and how do I Pray? Why and how should I Read the Bible? How does God Guide us?

How can I Resist Evil? Why and how should I tell Others? Does God Heal Today? What about the Church? Who is the Holy Spirit and How Can I Be Filled with the Holy Spirit? How can I Make the Most of the Rest of my Life?

Now you may not learn anything new about Jesus during the Alpha series, but you will learn to love the people in your small group. And that can be as important as any of the benefits that will come from this wonderful program.

I say this because we are a parish of over 800 families, and many of us don't know each other as well as we would like. Alpha can be the perfect instrument in transforming us into a real parish family.

Some people will feel that Alpha isn't Catholic enough. It is true that the Sacraments will not be discussed specifically during this series. And that's okay for a couple of reasons. First is that our own Bishop Campbell is supporting the use of Alpha in our diocese and to date there are 12 parishes conducting Alpha courses.

Secondly, Alpha is focused entirely towards the proclamation of the Kerygma, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Fr. Cantalamessa, who is the preacher for the papal household said, "One of the advantages of Alpha is that it focuses on the Kerygma. In the ancient Church there was a clear distinction between the Kerygma and the Didache, the catechesis. The Kerygma was the starting point of faith, and the catechesis had to form the faith. But faith in itself blossoms only by hearing the Kerygma."

Bishop Michael Byrnes of Detroit put it this way, "Alpha really does help people to come to a personal encounter with Jesus. Many Catholics have been Catholics all their lives and they have a relationship with Jesus but they are not really conscious of it and not intentional

about it. Alpha helps them discover the intense relationship that Jesus wants to have with them.”

Now over the next few days we will be posting many other such testimonials from Catholic clergy and lay leaders from around the world on our parish web site that will show how important Alpha is to Catholics and the New Evangelization the Church has been talking about for years. Third, Alpha is a beginning, not an end. People completing Alpha will be encouraged to form small study groups to continue their growth in faith and in the Spirit. It is in these small groups delving into the richness of our Catholic faith can take place.

Over the next three weekends, volunteers will be at each of entrances with information about Alpha and registration materials. You can also get more information and register through our parish web site, stjosephdover.org as well as view the same Alpha introductory video we showed at the parish festival.

And as you consider registering for Alpha, please also consider actively taking part as a volunteer. We need table hosts and helpers to make this work. Table host and helpers will help us receive our “guests” (you) for our weekly, catered, family meal, and they will help lead the small group discussions.

Let me be clear, though, to be a table host or helper, you will not be asked to “teach” your small group, only to be a welcoming presence and facilitate conversation. You only need a servant’s heart to help in this capacity. What little training that is necessary, we will provide for a couple of hours at the Family Life Center this coming Monday immediately following the Mass for the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary which is at 6:00 p.m.

And we will have another training session the following Monday on the 22nd at 7:00 p.m. We will also supply all the necessary resources for these roles.

Finally, I ask for your prayers, both for me personally, for the Alpha planning committee, and for our parish. Undertaking Alpha is asking all of us to take a leap of faith. And that can be a little scary. What is needed here is not fear, but trust – trust that this will be something different and good for our entire parish community, and it will make a great difference in our lives as we explore together some of the most fundamental and important questions about our Christian faith in a fun, relaxed, non-threatening environment, where questions are welcome, and the answers and the person of Jesus can be found.

Jesus said “I have come to set the earth on fire”. Saint Catherine of Sienna said, “Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.” May God Bless our efforts that we may become what God wants us to be so that we too can set the world on fire!