

HOMILY ~ MARY MOTHER OF GOD

DECEMBER 31, 2022/JANUARY 1, 2023

Since I have been ordained, I have had an open door policy. I will talk to anyone who wants to talk to me about anything you would like. You do not have to tell me in advance what you want to talk about, and you do not need to be registered in the Parish. You do not even need to be Catholic. You just need to call the Parish Office and make an appointment. This has always served me well, especially when I am new to a Parish. I meet with people, get to know them and I find out a lot about the Parish.

When I was new at a Parish, not St. Edith, one of the first suggestions I got was to put out a suggestion box so people that may not come to meet with me would be able to make suggestions. It seemed like a good idea, so I did that. I received a few notes over the first few weeks, and I noticed a few things about them. They were all very negative, and they were not suggestions. They were complaints about the prior pastor, parish staff and parishioners; and none of them were signed. These were in total contrast to the meetings I was having with people and the contacts I was having with parishioners and staff, which were all very positive. People loved their Parish and were very committed to volunteering. Because of what was in the suggestion box, I thought there were a lot of negative things happening in the Parish, and people did not want to tell me directly; but because they were not signed, I could not follow up on them. I decided to tell people I would not read the suggestions unless they were signed. Over the next few weeks, I only received one note. It was signed but it had no suggestion. It was signed "FOOL!" in capital letters with an exclamation point.

In the Gospel reading, we heard that the shepherds found Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus and made known to them the message that they had received. The Gospel tells us, "*Mary kept all these things reflecting on them in her heart.*" Notice what Mary did not do. She did not rush to make some judgments about what she heard, she did not accept or reject the message and she did not immediately make an action plan on how she was going to handle things. She reflected on them in her heart. She prayed about them. This was a prayer or meditation or contemplation where she was listening for a message from God.

Getting back to my suggestion box, I learned a number of things since then. I learned that we all have something psychologists call a negativity bias. We tend to pay more attention and give more weight to negative

comments and experiences than neutral or positive comments or experiences. I think we can all relate to this when we think about it. You can get 99 compliments and one criticism, and the criticism is what stands out in your mind. That is what I was doing. I was giving more weight to the handful of negative anonymous notes I got in the suggestion box than the overwhelming positive comments I was getting from people.

Studies also show that we remember negative news more than neutral or positive news. That is one reason why the reported news is so negative. You are more likely to remember their reporting. Studies also show that when we vote, we tend to vote against a candidate that has had negative things said about them rather than voting for the candidate because we agree with their policies. That is one of the reasons why there is so much mudslinging in campaigns. I am not saying that we should disregard all negativity, but I think we need to be aware of our negativity bias, sit in God's presence and reflect upon things before we act upon them.

When I sat with the interactions I had with parishioners and the handful of negative comments I had from the suggestion box, I decided to get rid of the suggestion box. I also think we are too quick to react, make a judgment and decide how we are going to respond to things. I think we should follow Mary's example. I think we should withhold judgment, take it to prayer and reflect upon it in our heart. Sometimes I have a very negative reaction to something someone says or does. If I take it to prayer, sometimes I change my opinion or at least give them a second chance. Sometimes when I hear a suggestion, I have a negative immediate reaction to it; but when I sit with it in prayer, sometimes it does not seem like such a bad idea. When I have a decision to make, I like to weigh all of the positives and negatives. That is my input. Then I take it to prayer. Sometimes I pick the option that has all negatives except one, I have the intuition that it is what God wants me to do. If Mary had done that after the Annunciation, there were probably all negatives there, except one. It was what God was calling her to do. So take Mary's example. Before you make decisions, reflect upon things in your heart, and pray. This would be a great New Year's resolution.

Love & Peace,
Fr. Jim