

The Good News: How God Transforms Us And Our World
By Father Anthony Co

One thing that I really enjoy as a priest, as a christian, is to sit down with people and have conversations about Jesus. And if in any way I can help them along their journey, that's a great blessing for me.

I also really like to talk with people who don't believe in God but have some big questions and want someone to help them through it all. One of the prerequisites of these conversations, of course, is that the person is interested in the conversation.

And what's interesting as a priest, I'm sure other priests throughout the U.S. experience this, that every once in awhile we'll be placed in front of a person who feels obligated to talk to us but doesn't really want to talk to us. You know, they'll have a loved one who says, "You gotta talk to Father" or you know they are going to get married and their marrying a Catholic and they are a non-Catholic so they feel a little obligated or forced to talk to us. And it makes for a very awkward experience. It often proves to be fruitless.

But, in the last couple of years I remember I had a conversation with a young man who was in that situation. He was kind of obligated, forced to talk to me and so when he came before me I said, "Boy, this is kind of weird". He said, "Why is that?". I said, "Well, I get the sense that you're not that interested in this conversation. You feel kind of obligated, but, you're here. I'm here and do you happen to have any questions about Jesus? Any questions about the Church? Anything that I might help you with?"

So, then he proceeded to go down a list of big important questions about life. The problem of evil and all these different sorts of things. And he was going through this list because he was trying to show me that God doesn't exist, Jesus is not the Savior, and the Church is not the bride of Christ. And at the end of his list he wanted me to respond to these questions and I could tell right away that the walls were up. Okay? Now, when a person's walls are up you can't get anywhere with a person then.

So, I decided to change my strategy and to answer his questions I said to him, "Well, let me ask you this question. Before I answer the questions you asked, which are very good questions." I said, "What do you think the circumstances need to be

for a person to arrive at the answers of very big questions about life?" And he kind of looked at me like, "What are you talking about?" I said, "Well, what kind of environment do you need to be in that allows for these questions to be answered?"

He still didn't understand what I was talking about so I said, "The real environment is friendship. That you have two people who provide a very safe environment to vocalize opinions, ideas, thoughts that just aren't completed yet. And they help each other. They are willing to do the work to help find the answers to these questions." And I said to him, more on that topic. And I could tell, right away, that he didn't have anyone in his family or in his close friendships that matched that description. And I knew, as a fact, that I wasn't that person for him.

So, after I went though that I shifted gears and I said to him, "What do you think the Gospel is about? What do you think the Good News is about? Jesus proclaiming the Gospel." So, he give an answer, a very quick answer. And this is a kid who is raised Catholic, goes through instruction and things of that nature and he said, "Well, you believe as Catholics that Jesus came and died on the cross so that you could be saved." I said, "That's a really good answer. It's a really good answer. It's not a complete answer but it's a good answer".

He said, "What do you mean it's not a complete answer?" I said, "Well" and I again I could tell that his walls were up and I said, "Well, let me ask you this. Do you see me as a friend on your journey? I mean, we're going to have this conversation. If you want to have this conversation. Do you see me as a friend, a companion on your journey of life?" He of course looked at me like, "What are you crazy?". And then after that I said, "What are you willing to sacrifice if you find the answer? What are you willing to sacrifice to find the answer?"

Well, the conversation didn't go very far, I kind of witnessed my faith about how Jesus Christ has made my life better and happier but I could tell he wasn't having anything of it. But, what I found was very interesting was he was a Catholic who was trained in the faith and he only had a partial answer to understand what the Gospel is all about. And I think if we are honest with ourselves, and somebody said, "Well, what's the Gospel? What's the Good News?" I think many of us would struggle to articulate in a very cohesive and helpful way what Jesus is all about.

And I think it's important for us to discuss that today because in today's Gospel passage Jesus goes out into the desert. Does battle with Satan. After 40 days of fasting, 40 days and 40 nights, he is in some way debilitated. The angels administer

to him. Then he goes to area of Galilee, to the countryside, and he begins to proclaim.

And what does he proclaim? This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel. The time of fulfillment has come. The kingdom of God is here. Repent means, “turn around”. And believe in the Gospel which means, “good news”.

When we talk about the Gospel it's important for us to understand that it took three years of Jesus' life in his public ministry for the Father, God the Father, to reveal what the Gospel was all about. The good news; this initial proclamations of the revelations of God.

It took three years and Jesus did all sorts of different things for it. But the Gospel itself needs to be understood in a context of the history of our faith.

The first thing is this. When God created the universe, he created everything to be good. Everything! Everything in the universe. Things that are visible or invisible, all was made good. But, due to sin, the world fell. All sorts of things happened because of the sin of Adam and Eve and because of our own personal sin.

Now here's the third point, this is the important point. The third point is this, God came back into the world to recreate everything. So, if someone asked you what the Good News is all about; it's all about God re-creating everything.

Now, if you want to be more detailed than that, you can break that third point into three other points. So, what is he recreating? Now, memorize this, so pay attention. There are three things. He's giving us a new relationship with God. He makes us into a new kind of person. And then, he restores the world around us. A new type of relationship with God. We become a new kind of person. And then, thirdly, He transforms and re-creates the whole world around us. Those three things.

So, for the first one, we believe that God became man. The divine person takes on human flesh and is with us. And so, that's a new type of relationship but it's not just that. We believe that when He descended into heaven the Holy Spirit came down and now is not just with us, the Holy Spirit is in us. So, this is a new way of relating to God. The more we go into our faith the more we experience the closeness of God that God is not only with us, He is in us.

Then, we also become new types of people. Where the Spirit comes down and He fills our lives up. To make us into the people that we were destined to be. Filling us with strength and creative ideas and humility and courage and love and hope and faith and all these different things. Filling our lives, re-creating us as people.

And then, thirdly, through us and through His other means He re-creates the world around us. So, this is what the Good News is. The Good News, again, is that He re-creates everything. He's giving us a new relationship. He's making us into a new type of person, a new kind of person, wonderfully made. And then, finally, He re-creates the world around us.

And we see foreshadowing of this when He does all these different miracles. The blind people get their sight back. They are enlightened. People who are sick are restored in their bodily health. That's what He wants to restore when He recreates us. Not simply our emotions, not simply our spirit but also our bodies. He raises the dead. He walks on water. He just shows, through power, what he aims to do.

So maybe to give you just a personal example, for those of you who were at the Ash Wednesday service, I was sharing with you that I did a 3 day fast from food. So, no food for three days. And it wasn't that I was trying to punish my body or suffer or something like that. The way I fast is that it is an expression of the body of what pre-exists in the heart. So, I was expressing in my body what I have in my heart which is my heart is hungry for God.

And whenever I do three day fasts, I've done a lot of them, I'll write down like 25 to 30 intentions for miracles. And I want those miracles to be answered if God wants it within the three days. And so, I had all sorts of intentions. Some of you sent in intentions and it was a beautiful experience.

So, the first part, a new type of relationship. As I was entering into this three-day fast, when I woke up in the morning, guess what I heard? I heard God say to me, "You are my beloved son with whom I am well pleased". That started my day. Through the fast I had this closeness, this new relationship with God where I hear His voice saying, "You are my beloved son".

And throughout the day, I had this spiritual delight within my heart, a joy because of sensing how close God was with me during those three days. When I would go to bed at night, what would I hear? I would hear the Lord say, "Job well done good and faithful servant. Go to bed in peace. You had a great day". So, these are the things I would hear the Lord say and experience as I was fasting these three days.

A new type of person. I tend to be, and maybe you don't see this very often, I tend to be kind of prone to being sharp and hardened. Maybe that's why I was probably going to go into law enforcement or the military. Being tender within my heart is something I constantly have to invite God to, to come into my heart. To make my heart docile and tender. And through this process of these three days, I just saw Him recreating my heart to be more gentle and softer and more docile to His Spirit.

Also, I got creative ideas that came into my mind as I was praying. And that creative idea is a sign of being a new kind of person. It was Friday, or maybe it was Thursday night, I heard of a young woman, 41 years old her last name is Mendoza. She died tragically in the area. I had no idea who she is. I never met her before. I know a person who is connected with her. But the thing I heard God say in the three days of fasting was, "Go to the visitation". "Well, I don't know her Lord". "Go to the visitation".

So, I went to the visitation and it was packed! It seemed like the road outside the parking lot had rows of cars for like a half mile long. I mean there were tons of people there. I think she was connected. I think one of her siblings was a sheriff or deputy or something like that. And anyway, it was just packed.

I went in there. I prayed a rosary. I prayed my Divine Office and then I had a chance to meet the family and just tell them, you know, I'm just a Christian. I came here to pray with you. And I would never have done that before and usually things don't occur to me unless I'm asked. And so, this was the Spirit of God working in me.

And then finally, through these three days of fasting, I got to see the Lord releasing power into peoples lives. One person said that through the prayers of the fast, they had a physical ailment and the physical ailment went away. I haven't talked to them personally yet. So, that was really amazing.

One intention was to talk to a very specific person I never really had a faith conversation with before. A very deep one I was asking for. And God, within those three days, set it up to have this really defining conversation with this person that is changing our relationship and changing the way we look at our faith in God. So, I got to see the answers to those prayers, of God releasing blessings through me.

Okay, those were the three things. That's what we call the "charigma" or the initial proclamation, the Good News, a re-creation.

Does anyone know what the number one candy in America is? Reece's Peanut Butter Cups. Alright, so, I want to see if you guys are paying attention! Anybody under 12, if you could answer, if you could tell us the three things. The three things that make up the proclamation. A new type of what? A new kind of what? And a new... what? You'll get a Reece's Peanut Butter Cup. Anybody want to do it? Under 12? And if the kids don't answer I'm gonna ask their parents. Uh oh! Any idea what I said? There are three types of things.

Go ahead, whattaya got? [Child speaks to Fr. Co and Fr. responds] Perfect! A new relationship with God! I new kind of person and a new world. Good job! Alright! Come on up here! [Congregation applauds]

Just so you know, during Lent, the Church only really tells us Ash Wednesday we fast, Good Friday and that we don't eat meat on Fridays. Penance and all that stuff, enjoy the chocolate. I'm glad you shared with us.

That's it! Those are the three things. So, if a person asks you, you know, "What is the Good News?". You know it! And the hard part for all of us is to then look at our own lives and to see how God is transforming us. And that's the whole point of friendship.

So, I'll be with Fr. Charles in the Rectory and we'll just be talking about experiences that we're having and some of them might be very difficult circumstances and situations, some of them may be really just joyful ones. But by the process of us just asking each other questions, we fill out the picture and we can see the hand of God working in our lives.

Right now, Fr. Charles and I and a group of people are starting a retreat for 21 year olds to 32 year olds. It's called, "Advance" because we find that in the Quad-City area that's a neglected group. And so, we're trying to have this co-ed retreat. It's going to be on Palm Sunday weekend. And it's kind of like Crucio but it is it's own little thing.

Anyway, one of the people on the team gave their talk. It was a very good talk. And after a team member gives their talk, they go to a separate room. And then the team, kind of, talks about what they experienced as they heard it. Maybe give some suggestions and also positive feedback.

So, I went with that team member to the separate room and he had wonderful stories of God's grace. But one thing he didn't do was give a lot of detail. So, I was telling him all the things that I thought were really great about the talk. I said, "Would you like some suggestions?". He said yes. And all I did was I asked him questions. Like, he had this personal experience of helping somebody. I said, "What was happening in your heart when you were helping this person? How did it affect you when you left? Did you feel close to God? What did you see in their face? What did they say after you had this experience?"

And before I knew it, he had filled out this picture that was so amazing! And you can see how he was re-created in his relationship with God, how he as a person changed as they changed, and how they release blessings in the world. It's that simple!

So, here's your challenge, this is your homework when you go home. And kids, make your parents accountable to it. Okay, so you're driving home, ask each other these questions: How has God made you a new person? How have you had a new relationship with God? And, how has He used you to transform the world?

If you have a hard time answering it, that's okay. That's often a very natural experience. Just keep asking each other questions.

Like, "What was something special that happened to you in the last few months?"

"Well, I got to go to a family reunion."

"Okay, okay, let's start there."

"Now, what was so special about it?"

"Well, I got to see Aunt Ruth. I haven't seen her in a long time."

"Okay. Now, why is Aunt Ruth special to you?"

"Well, I know she's been lonely for a while. Her husband has been gone and I've been praying for her."

"Okay, what happened?"

"Well, I went up to talk to her and we had a great conversation."

"Okay. What happened in the conversation?"

"She was filled with joy. I was filled with joy."

"Alright! Did you sense that God was a part of that conversation?"

"Yes."

I mean, that's all it really is. You're just doing this investigative conversation of helping each other identify what God is doing. And I have no doubt that in this church God is doing amazing things. A new relationship with Him. A new kind of person. And then a new world that is being blessed through us.

Let's pray that the Lord will bless us through this Lenten season. Know that you are in my prayers. Keep sending me your prayer intentions and keep asking each other to pray for each other as we enter into the Easter season.