

If I suddenly walked into the nearby Wal-Mart or went down to the Chula Vista J Street marina and asked several people to come and follow me, I don't think they would budge. In fact, they might think that I was deranged and even call the police to report that a lunatic was on the loose. Yet the four fishermen in Matthew's gospel account, Peter, Andrew, James and John, responded immediately, dropped what they were doing, and, in the case of James and John, even walked away from their father to follow Jesus. In the description of this extraordinary event, nowhere does it say a word about the charisma of Jesus, or how he had to convince the men to follow his calling. Nothing is mentioned about how Jesus looked at them or even why they chose to follow him. They simply did. And just as those first apostles were called when Jesus was starting his public ministry, we too are called to follow Jesus. By virtue of our Baptism, we are marked, we are chosen to answer his call. As the great theologian and scholar Raymond Brown once wrote: "The day when a person is baptized is more important than when a person is ordained priest and bishop." Baptism is so important and significant because it is the way all of us have become connected to Jesus Christ just as those first apostles were.

Actually, our call is greater than the call of those four apostles in the gospel because at that time Jesus had not yet died and risen from the dead. We on the other hand have the benefit of dying to sin and being raised to eternal life in Baptism where we become a new creation because of what Jesus did for us. We are literally born again in water and the Holy Spirit. We then are able to receive all the graces that flow to us from Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for us on the cross. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, each of us participates in the divine life of Christ as his brother or sister. And we become heirs to eternal life as adopted sons and daughters of his Father. Now one of the great joys I have is to baptize young children. Last Sunday we baptized four youngsters.

Sunday Baptism is always a very joyful celebration. Sometimes you never know what will happen with the little ones. I am reminded of the story where the baptism ceremony was well underway when all of a sudden the baby's six year old brother leaped up in the front pew and called out anxiously to the deacon: "Be careful, she bites!" But regrettably there is sadness when I interview young parents before the baptism. I find that somehow we have lost our sense of what Baptism is, how significant it is and how much it changes the lives of the children who are baptized. It's almost as if the parents see the baptism as something you do as a right of passage or a necessary routine step after the baby is born rather than a most significant event where the parents assume responsibility for raising their children in the faith. In fact, during the rite of Baptism, the priest or deacon says to the parents: "You have asked to have your child baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training them in the practice of the faith.....Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?" Very profound words. Yet often I find it necessary to teach parents about the basics of Baptism, or even more fundamentally about what a sacrament is and what their awesome role will be in passing the faith on to their child. Why do we see this lack of knowledge and understanding? I think it all stems from the fact that over the last twenty five years or so we as a church have not been very attentive to the religious education of our children. And regrettably, today, this major problem in our church community is still not being adequately addressed and unless we make a change, it will continue unabated. For our children become the parents and families of tomorrow. Let me give you a concrete example. Right now, most Catholic parents bring their children to the church starting in the first grade to receive religious instruction. Then after two years, they are able receive their first holy communion toward the end of second grade.

Yet on average only about half of these children continue their formal religious education after First Communion. Of those who do continue to the third grade and beyond, many drop out later on even though this education is essential for a child's faith development. If today the parents of children in the third grade through the eighth grade do not have them enrolled in formal religious education, they probably are not meeting the commitment they made at their children's baptism. All elementary and middle school children should be enrolled in the catechism program every academic year. In high school, they should continue their religious education as they begin their two year preparation for the sacrament of confirmation. Unfortunately, the majority of our children are not. And this is happening right here in Saint Rose of Lima parish. Children today are involved in many after school activities such as soccer, gymnastics, and little league. But time for faith development and time for Jesus must take priority. If not, children will grow up without a real understanding of their faith and will be deprived of the opportunity to grow in their love of God, his son Jesus, and his church here on earth. They never gain a real understanding of the sacramental graces Jesus offers them as members of the Body of Christ, they never come to know and love the person of Jesus, and they never are able to answer Jesus call to continue his mission here on earth. And so if we fast forward to the adult age, we find many who don't come to Mass on Sunday. This is because they do not really understand what the Eucharist is. And then when two notionally Catholic twenty-somethings have met, fallen in love, and decided to marry, they want to do it right away. They are wonderful young adults but they are confused. They find it hard to comprehend why the church requires so much preparation and time to prepare for their marriage. My friends, this is because they have no formal religious education. So they do not understand what the Sacrament of Matrimony is.

They have never been taught that the only way a baptized person can be married is through this sacrament. By baptism, they belong to Christ and his church and the lifelong relationship of marriage can only be established in and through the love of Jesus. So as a result they often simply enter into a civil arrangement, a so called court sanctioned marriage, and they begin to live together. They are still Catholics but essentially they have made themselves estranged from the church. Then later on they start to have children and come to have them baptized. And here's where they start to realize that something is not right. They want to baptize their children and raise them in the faith except they don't have the tools in their tool box to do it. They can't pass down to their children what they themselves do not have. And this starts the cycle all over again. Even when young adults do come to see the priest or deacon to begin their preparation to receive the sacrament of matrimony, we find many do not have all their Sacraments of Initiation such as First Communion and, much more often, confirmation. So then what can we do about all this? Today's scriptures can help us with the answer. First we need to be energized to once again answer the call of Jesus in continuing his mission and proclaiming the good news. The kingdom of God is at hand. We have seen a great light, a light has arisen among us, and we have been empowered with the abundant joy of repentance and salvation in Jesus Christ. And Saint Paul tells us we do not need the wisdom of human eloquence to preach the good news about what the cross of Christ means to each of one of us. We just need to take those small but all important steps to make the miracle of conversion happen right here at Saint Rose. For parents, make sure your elementary and middle school children are enrolled in religious education and that they stay enrolled through high school confirmation. Make a commitment that you are not going to be part of bringing up another Catholic generation which is faith ignorant.

For couples who find themselves living together in a civil arrangement without the Sacrament of Matrimony, you can make it right. You can once again become a shining example for your children in the practice of your faith. We want you back in full communion with the church. Don't worry about the whys and wherefores. Don't worry about money for some big wedding ceremony at some mythical future date or whether one or both of you does not have all your sacraments. Just come to see any priest or deacon and he will help you to receive the Sacrament of Matrimony easily and quickly. All it takes is a conversion of your heart to make Jesus a part of your relationship and to receive all the graces he gained for us by his death and resurrection. And all of us need to pray for the success of our church's evangelization efforts where we as a people focus on those who are baptized but have become lost along the way, those who are in need of the healing power of Christ and his Holy Spirit, and those who have never known the wonder of the person of Jesus. We all can do more to preach the good news and bring Jesus' message to those who are right among us. Jesus is calling each one of us. Will you respond by following him?