

On June 1, 2016 area Christian congregations celebrated our annual Central HS Baccalaureate service. It was a beautiful ecumenical service. Three senior students from our parishes—Beth George, April Feist and Joe Lemmer—were among those who gave talks. They shared about how they valued their Catholic Faith. Parishioners in attendance and I were encouraged, edified and grateful for their witness of faith. I am especially grateful for their parents & families for handing on to them the treasure of our Catholic Faith—THANK YOU! Today we hear from Beth's talk. The following 2 weeks we will hear from April and Joe. Yours in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Fr. Gregory

*So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.* Ephesians 2:19-22

Good evening, my name is Beth George. I am a parishioner at Ascension Catholic Church here in Norwood Young America. I have been a Catholic since the moment I took my first breath on this earth, and being Catholic is one of the best parts of my life. I am so lucky and blessed to be raised in the Catholic faith. My parents have always been such wonderful teachers to me, and they have helped throughout this journey. My mom says that I am blessed to be given the level of faith that I have, but there have been circumstances that have caused me to slip away from my faith. I haven't had the easiest life, but don't get me wrong, I haven't had the worst life either. There have been many ups and downs throughout my life. Sometimes the bad outweighs the good, and sometimes it's the other way around. Even though I am not always the most grateful person for the life that I live, I know that I am more blessed than many others who are not as fortunate. No matter how the day is going, I always know that I need to pray and send praise to God, the creator of my life.

To feel completely alone is one of the worst feelings that one can feel, and I went through a period of my life where I did not feel God's presence. I didn't believe that God was there anymore. I stopped sending prayers, and my religion wasn't as important to me. I felt as if God had abandoned me. I felt as if he had betrayed me. There have been things that I did not think that I would be able to get through, but I finally found myself able to trust in God once again, and through this, I overcame the difficulties. God has always helped when I have needed him, even when I don't realize that he is there. He is there listening. He is there crying with me. He does not want me to be in this pain, he does not want any of his children enduring this kind of pain. My trust in him was shaky at first, and there are still times that I get frustrated and scream out in anger to God, but now I feel like I am finally screaming to someone. No longer am I screaming to myself and to thin air. I am screaming to the being that loves me more than I can even begin to comprehend. I finally did not feel alone. I never thought that I would ever be able to love God like this again after some of the things that I have endured, but now I realize that they have just driven me closer to God. I started going to adoration weekly, and when I did, my understanding grew stronger, but believe me, I am still very far from understanding the path that God has planned for me.

I was blessed with the opportunity to be Consecrated to Jesus Christ through Mary during a 33 day retreat with other parishioners from my church. It was a beautiful and mind-altering experience. Father Michael Gaitley, the author of the book written for this retreat, stated that "when we are suffering, we are close enough to Jesus that he can kiss us." His arms are wide open on the cross ready to embrace us as we fall. Through suffering, we are made closer to Jesus who endured the greatest suffering of all. How wonderful it is to be that close to Jesus, our Savior. Would I have the faith that I do now if I had not endured this suffering? I

don't know, and I won't ever know. But I do know that any amount of suffering on this earth is nothing compared to the glories that God has waiting for those who believe in him.

From this retreat I know that whenever I feel alone or unwanted, I can recite my favorite Bible verse Ephesians chapter 2, verses 19-22, and it will bring me back to an open heart ready to accept anything that God has waiting for me. "Whenever you feel unloved, unimportant, or insecure, remember to whom you belong." This inspires me to think twice when I feel alone or when I feel that I am not good enough. This Bible verse allows me to realize that even through the harshest storm, I am never alone. Whenever someone hurts me, whenever I feel like I am not good enough, I am able to realize that it does not matter, because the one that matters most, sees what matters most in me. No matter what I do, no matter how much I push him away or scream at him, he will always be there beside me. He will never abandon his children. How blessed I am to have God in my life. How blessed we all are to have God in our lives. God is carrying us all on his shoulders through our best and through our worst. This also helps me to forgive those who hurt me, because the same God that forgives my trespasses and loves me immensely also forgives their trespasses and loves them immensely. He sacrificed his son for us. He sacrificed his son for those who do good, and he sacrificed his son for the evildoers and the sinners. God never promised happiness in this lifetime, but if we honor his will and follow him, we too shall be in paradise with Jesus someday.

I have learned that in the troubles that I have faced, that there are always things, even if they are the tiniest of tiny things, that are beautiful. We would only truly notice them if they were not there. Too often we take for granted those small things that make large impacts in our lives. I've been working hard to appreciate those small things, and it has made a world of a difference. Just praising God in the small things like not tripping down a flight of stairs or not completely messing up a presentation in class, has made me so much happier.

Being Catholic is and will always be one of my favorite things about myself. I am proud to believe in God. I am proud to be a Catholic. And I am proud to be a servant of God. No one will ever take that away from me, although some have tried. Some people have tried to tear me away from my faith. I do not lash back in retaliation, and my faith does not weaken. I pray for them. I pray for them to someday know God better and seek his loving forgiveness. Through, this I am able to be the person that I am destined to become with God beside me. I cannot wait to see what lies ahead in the future that God has planned for me.

So I encourage all of you, throughout all of the troubles and difficulties that you have faced and will face, to never lose faith in God. There will be people that will try to tear you away from your faith. There will be circumstances that will try to tear you away from your faith. I encourage you not to run from those problems, but to face them head on with the help of God. Delight in our Savior and pray. Laugh and rejoice. Learn to appreciate those small things and praise God for them. Praise God for the things you take for granted. And remember that no matter how alone you feel, no matter how hopeless you feel, no matter how lost you feel, God will always be there to lead you back to him whether you are willing to reach out to him or not. So reach out to him in the times when you need him most. He hears every prayer that you cry out to him. I promise you that you are never without him. He will not abandon you. He will not forsake you. He will never forget his own. Therefore, we must not forget him. Thank you.

*The family is the foundation of co-existence and a remedy against social fragmentation. Children have a right to grow up in a family with a father and a mother capable of creating a suitable environment for their child's development and emotional maturity.* Pope Francis Humanum Conference November 17, 2014