February 10th, 2019: Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

As I write this column, it’s the day after the Super Bowl. Obviously it’s hard not to be thinking about what I watched during the game, and listened to after the game. It was not the game I—or I think anyone who watched—was expecting. I figured it might be a low-scoring game but thought both teams would score somewhere in the 20’s. Rather, what we saw was a tour-de-force of defense for both teams that—if you love football—was a beautiful thing to watch. I personally had hoped the Patriots would simply dominate and blow out the Rams but, of course, that did not happen. However, I really enjoyed watching the game play out because I love good defensive football.

What was interesting about the game, and what was discussed after, is where the Patriots are. When they began the season, it was not clear that they would make it back to the Super Bowl, or even to the playoffs. The Patriots talk about the season as quarters, and usually seem to get better each quarter, but this year that was not readily apparent. However, something happened towards the end of the season and then again into the playoffs. The team would change their tactics depending on the team they were playing; it was the ultimate in situational football. They seemed like a different football team in each playoff game. Their ability to adapt and adjust, depending on changing circumstances, was really at the heart of why they won. In the Super Bowl they employed a very different defense plan than in their previous games. And they made certain adjustments at critical times that were pre-planned, based on the tendencies of the Rams. Their willingness not to stay to their “style”, but rather to morph into what was needed is one of their greatest strengths.

The same can be said if one is to grow in the spiritual life. How often I have done spiritual direction with people who get down on themselves because they look at others and think, ‘I am not where they are spiritually.’ The Patriots plan their games based on who they are, and not on who someone else is. And we need to do the same. We grow in our faith when we recognize that God made you to be you, and not to be someone else. It really does not matter how someone else prays or how much they pray. It does not matter how much someone else fasts or does not fast. It does not matter how much someone else does this or that spiritual exercise or devotion. You need to look to your gifts and talents. You need to discern the vocation that God has called you to, and to understand the kind of person He created you to be. It is there, and there alone, that you will discover your spiritual life.

Our life’s game plan cannot be a copy of someone else’s. I often say that there are 1.2 billion Catholics, and therefore, 1.2 billion ways to pray. The most important truth and reality is to understand that—yes, there are staples that must be in every Catholic’s life: going to Mass each and every Sunday, praying daily, reading scripture daily, regular use of confession, fasting, and almsgiving. But how we make use of these spiritual aids, and what we might add, is really determined by who you are and the circumstances of your life.

The great Saint Francis de Sales wrote in the Introduction to the Devout Life, “A different exercise of devotion is required of each—the noble, the artisan, the servant, the prince, the maiden and the wife; and furthermore such practice must be modified according to the strength, the calling, and the duties of each individual. I ask you, my child, would it be fitting that a Bishop should seek to lead the solitary life of a Carthusian? And, if the father of a family was making provision for the future as a Capuchin; if the artisan spent the day in church like a Religious; if the Religious involved himself in all manner of business on his neighbor’s behalf as a Bishop is called upon to do, would not such a devotion be ridiculous, ill-regulated, and intolerable?”

It is not a question of whether or not we should have a spiritual life. As a Catholic and a Christian, it is part of the foundation of the life we live. But, to have one we must develop a game plan; it will not just happen. We have to make the determination that our relationship with God is the foundation of our entire life. We must accept the truth that unless our relationship with God is right, then the rest of our life is messed up. And so, we recognize that as with any relationship we must work on it; it does not just happen. It is also
necessary to have a plan in order to determine how God is calling us to live our lives, and to recognize that our plan must morph based on the situation and circumstances of our lives.

How I prayed before I entered the seminary was very different than what I did in the seminary. How I prayed as a young priest was different than what I did as a seminarian. How I pray now as a pastor is still different than when I was a parochial vicar. My prayer life has evolved as I have taken over running multiple parishes. My situations and circumstances have impacted my prayer life. And that must be true for all of us.

The Patriots can teach us something about the ability to change and morph as needed. But our goal is different. We are not looking to win at something or to be a great prayer success. Rather, our spiritual life is about faithfulness and living the life of salvation that Christ has won for us. The great thing is that Christ already has a game plan for you to do just that. Are you willing to discover it?

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at fr.brian@chelmsfordcatholic.org.

Please keep me in your prayers.

In Christ,

Fr. Brian