

Most all of us can remember the teachers we had growing up at school, but all of us from the moment we come into the world to the moment we lead it are people who need the guidance of others, and also become people who often at the same time help guide others too through our confirmation. And while when we look back we might find we put a lot of energy into learning hobbies or our job, deep down, especially as we approach Lent, a question we want to ask ourselves is how can I be taught how to become a better disciple of Jesus, and how, through my words and actions, can I help others on their faith journey as well.

A few years ago, Bishop Michael Barber, a Jesuit priest for the diocese of Oakland, had this in mind when he presented new teacher contracts prior to the start of the 2014-2015 school year.

The contract included the following language:

“The Teacher agrees to serve in a professional manner and to act in accordance with the Catholic doctrine and moral teachings. The Teacher is employed as an educator in a Catholic school, and he/she shall perform his/her duties as a minister and steward of the Catholic faith.

The contract also requires the employee to “demonstrate a public life consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church, and refrain from taking a public position contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church.”

This contract came about after the bishop met with teachers and school administrators over the course of a year. The school superintendent of Oakland said that it was a collaborative and pastoral process that would help further and strengthen the mission of Catholic education.

Bishop Barber himself, who was appointed by Pope Francis, has served as a teacher himself much of his life.

He had served as a seminary professor and a Navy chaplain. He said in doing so, he was serving under strong, fatherly authority figures, captains and admirals, and he learned from his teachers. He says he watched how they delegated and organized and how they articulated a vision and motivated sailors and marines. Through this, he learned how to run a staff meeting and how to direct colleagues, how to establish a high moral standard and how to be accountable to adhering to that standard.

As a Navy chaplain, he worked side by side with other chaplains. And he again learned from them. In his own words, “even though we didn’t have the same beliefs, we had the same mission and worked together. That has been one of the best things about being a military chaplain.” He’s even kept his commission active and uses his vacation days to fulfill his commitment, two weeks every summer and two days every month.

And through it all, he also recognizes He must follow God's teachings first and foremost. What asked what it means to be a Jesuit bishop, he says: "What helps me most is St. Ignatius' discernment of spirits. It helps me make a decision in the light of the Holy Spirit and with the help of my spiritual director and in collaboration with colleagues in the diocese." He also is a man of deep prayer. He says in tough times, he finds himself going to Saint Joseph and the Blessed Mother more and more with his problems and difficulties. When in trouble, he says, use the Novena to Saint Joseph or the Memorare to Our Lady three times a day for 9 days.

His Jesuit formation has also taught him *cura personalis* (care of the person). He says he tries to take care of his priests in the same way that his Jesuit father provincials have taken care of him. They are concerned with his spiritual life, health, happiness in the ministry he is working in and try to develop his talents for the greater good of the Church.

He also recognizes that while there is collaboration, there also must be leadership. As he put it, "when I have to make changes at a parish, some people oppose the changes and say "Everything is perfect here." They don't realize there may be a whole group of people who aren't receiving pastoral care and that needs to be addressed...A true Catholic spirituality is not self-referential. Rather it leads you out of yourself to share with others. People are starving spiritually, and they need to know how they can grow in their experience of faith. Their deep needs must inspire our evangelization and catechesis." That crisis was something he saw in the schools of Oakland. If a school is Catholic, it must stand for something. A person teaching must accept the mission of the Catholic school. One teacher got after him and said "who are you to change the mission of the school" and in her mind the school's mission was to create an "inclusive and diverse" community, and according to the understanding of those terms as the bishop put it that usually meant all opinions are welcomed at the table except for Christ's. However, what he found was that other teachers welcomed Christ as the point of reference in the new language for the school of Oakland. And as far as holding teachers accountable, "Some people in the press say that when I ask teachers to model Catholic standards in their personal lives, I am violating their freedom of conscience. I don't think so. What you do in your private life is between you and God. But what you do in your private life that becomes public — either because you put something on Facebook or let all the kids know about it in class —becomes a source of scandal, and it directly affects your responsibilities as a teacher. That is what I am concerned about."

And through teaching himself as bishop, he has strived to set a good example. He's gotten tough with clergy abuse, releasing a list of accused priests and setting new standards. He marched with people to Planned Parenthood. And he continues to lead his diocese by both word and example.

I have not had the chance to meet Bishop Barber. But I have known great bishops, priests and teachers in my life, people who have shown me the path to follow and continue to guide me to this very day.

The problem as Mary Poppins put it is some people can't see past the end of their nose; or as our Gospel asks us today, "Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?" It's a good question that comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Plain in Luke's Gospel. And we see so much blindness out there. People old and young who are led to believe in relativism, materialism, or that the most important thing is sports, college, or being a busy body. Others get flat out bad advice from people pretending to be spiritual. How then can one learn and teach in the right way so that we can be the good tree that bears good fruit? This is an important thing to ask if we are trying to become saints.

A starting point is looking at a person and their relationship to God. One of the things I've seen in some of the great people who have guided me from my parents to Archbishop Flynn and Fr. Jerome Dittberner, a seminary professor and Fr. Bob White who was and still is pastor of my teaching parish out in Victoria is that these were people who prayed. They took Mass seriously. Their lives were centered around God. Jesus says no disciple is superior to their teacher, but when fully trained they are like their teacher. These great people who I've looked to for a course on how to become a saint have exhibited so many Christ-like qualities through how they have lived. A person who is centered in God isn't worried about their ego or trying to be superior to others; they learn from the Master who washed the feet of the apostles and who always showed humility like Saint John the Baptist who said He must increase; I must decrease. A God-centered person has their life oriented in the right direction.

Closely related to this is a great teacher who will help us become a saint has that humility to acknowledge their need for a Redeemer or Savior. Remember the words of Pope Francis when asked by the Italian newspaper interviewing him that made headlines and he was asked who are you, and he replied a sinner. He then raised eyebrows by going to confession at Saint Peter's one day in one of the regular confession lines. If we want to be saved or be led by Christ, who better than to help us on that journey than a person who has realized the same thing, that like Peter, they need someone to pull them out of the water. Jesus says why do you noticed the splinter in your brother's eye but not the wooden beam in your own. If a person is willing to give us advice or tell us what to do, while it's good to have someone be honest with us, if they themselves aren't open to seeing their own faults and sins, they might not be the best person to lead us.

A good teacher is also someone who is not just connected to God, but also connected to the Church that Jesus created. Remember that the Church is there to guide us, and we have Tradition with the capital "T." We go to Mass and receive the sacraments to grow closer to God, but we also have the Church to help us learn the content of the faith. So we are looking for someone to guide us, we should look at if they go to Mass and are active in the Church, but also make sure they know what they are talking about if we are seeking guidance on faith and morals. A book for instance will have the imprimatur symbol from a bishop on it so one can know if it's teaching is in-line with our Catholic faith. Catholic speakers are vetted by bishops. Now this isn't to say there's not a lot of good stuff to learn from non-Catholics; some of my best Scripture commentaries

on my shelf are written by a Church of Scotland theologian, William Barclay, and the seminary library has lots of books written by non-Catholics. But the point is that particularly when we are trying to learn what the Church teaches, the Church may approve of certain writers and speakers. Even just last week, I got a letter that said one priest was suspended by his bishop because he was preaching things contrary to the faith. So the Church is always making sure what is being taught is orthodox teaching, but bishops and pastors at parishes do that too, but so too must we as Catholics. There are a number of people out there who prey on Catholics and try to sell them theology that is a lie so they will leave the Church. And so too can there be ignorance among us as Catholics too. Just because a person likes to pray or had a conversion/re-version does not make them a qualified teacher on Catholic theology, and you sometimes see people who left the Church who are now self-proclaimed experts on Christianity pull people away, or even well-intended Catholics on social media or in parish settings not know what they are talking about. Ultimately I look for someone who is trained in the faith, but also someone who submits to the authority of the pope and bishops too. This is important for us all to remember, because sometimes we can get bad information from people who mean well, even within our own families too or on the Internet. There is so much good content out there though if you know where to look for it.

Here's another thing: does a person walk the walk or just talk the talk? That's why the part about Bishop Barber's teacher oath struck me so much. He was aware that a teacher can't be saying things in public or doing actions known in public that could cause scandal. Some of the most important lessons on how to be a Christian came to me from my parents. They know the faith with my mom a cradle Catholic and my dad being confirmed shortly after they were married. But they are people of their word. They would pray with me. They would talk about the importance of loving others but then show it in how they treated my sister and me. They would talk about service and then do it by working hard around the house and helping their aging parents, and provided for our family and for a Catholic school education. As Fr. Jerome would say in our theology class, talk is cheap. Indeed it is. Anyone can talk a good game. But if you are looking to someone to teach you, look at how they live out their life. Do they pray. Do they go to Mass. Do they treat others with love and respect. Do they serve others. Words always must be backed up with actions.

Lastly, one of the qualities I look for in a teacher is someone who recognizes they need others. Other people are there to guide us and give us strength. A wise teacher realizes they have much to learn from people around them, and isn't afraid to ask for help and guidance no matter how experienced they may be. Think of some of the great married couples you've known; there's been a mutual love and respect between the husband and wife as they've helped each other become better people. Just as teachers in classrooms realize a piece of paper on the wall doesn't mean learning has ended, all people we look to for guidance should realize learning is ongoing and they have so much to learn from one another.

Of course, it goes without saying all of these things apply to ourselves too. We are all teachers and students. We are learning our faith and growing in it. The other day when

we were at a conference, the leader made note that some corporations and even parishes don't know what their mission is. When Randy Haney, our parish director asked me what I thought ours was, I said without hesitation salvation of souls. We want to create saints. That's our primary job as a parish; to bring people closer to God and to help them on their faith journey. But it's also our job too as Christians. We need to know our faith; we need to articulate it; and we need to use the tools to make that happen by relying on God and one another, by being people of action, and through trusting the Church to help us. All of us have a mouth. And now most of us have a smart phone or a computer and a connection to the internet. The ability to say anything instantly doesn't make one a teacher, it just gives one a soap box. Hopefully we want to not just be heard, but be good guides that show others how to get to heaven.

When I was in about second grade, my eyesight began to get worse so I needed glasses that corrected my vision. All of us through original sin's effects suffer from spiritual near or far-sightedness, but thankfully we have great ways to correct that through the teachers that God puts in our life. So let's seek them out by being aware of our need for them, realizing that over the course of our lives learning and teaching is a two way street, and when we grasp how to embrace both, we can truly become for God the tree that bears good fruit.