

4th Sunday of Lent
Cycle A
April 2-3, 2011
Saint Margaret Parish, Bel Air

I Have Returned

As I stand here this morning, I am hoping that all of you know that I was away on a sabbatical since January 2.

I just got back on Friday. I'm almost afraid to ask if you missed me!

I decided that I wanted to speak at all the Masses this weekend, if only to say hello. When I was preparing my thoughts, I recalled a funny anecdote that I read a while back.

This anecdote appeared in a little article entitled *Church Bloopers*. We all know that sometimes things don't come out and sound exactly the way we planned them.

We can call this a "bloop" and there is a whole series of these church bloopers. These are things said in bulletins or at the pulpit that did not come out exactly the way they were intended.

Well, the story goes that on this one Sunday the pastor of this church was giving his last homily; he was retiring. The cantor, before the service began, was announcing the order of worship.

He said this: *"Today, Pastor Jack will be giving his last sermon here. And immediately afterwards, the choir will sing 'Now Thank We All Our God.'"*

Today, on this Sunday of Lent, I wondered if our cantor might announce: *"Today, Father Mike will give his first homily as he returns from sabbatical. Immediately afterwards, everyone will sing 'Take Up Your Cross.'"*

Why A Sabbatical?

It is great to be back – back home!

Back in November and December, I shared with you that Archbishop O'Brien had granted me approval for a three-month sabbatical. I had planned these three months very carefully.

First, I wanted time to do some serious reading and study – something that my schedule here just does not allow. I bet you all understand that in your own lives too.

So, the first two months of the sabbatical – January and February – I wanted to spend my time reading. I asked Father Robert Leavitt, a professor of theology at the seminary in Baltimore, to be my mentor.

I gave Father Leavitt a list of topics that I wanted to read on, and he supplied me with a bibliography. I was to read at the pace of about one book a week and we met once a week for discussion.

My third month of sabbatical, March, was a thirty day retreat at a Jesuit Retreat Center in California. I will talk about that some other time.

What did I Read?

Okay, what reading did I want to do?

In a way, my primary topic was: what is happening to Catholicism? Why has there been some decline in Catholicism and, for that matter, in many other Christian denominations as well?

And by the way, this decline is not related only to the sexual abuse scandal. That is a horrible problem, but the decline was happening before this.

My question was and is: Why are some people leaving Catholicism? Why are some Catholics not really practicing and by that I mean not coming to Mass and receiving the sacraments?

I wanted to read and study and think more in depth about this. I felt almost called to do this as part of my responsibility as a pastor.

Could the main issue be that we live in a very secular society, a society that has a lot of values that compete with religion? Could it be that secularism leaves little or no room for God and faith?

Or could it be us, the Church? Could it be that we need to adjust to the times and minister differently or celebrate liturgy differently or teach about God and the Christian life differently?

And then, as if the above was not enough, I also wanted to read about our country. What are we to make of our country that seems so polarized?

What are we to make of the lack of civility in American politics, in at least some American news networks, and maybe even in ourselves? And what contribution might we as a Church make in this situation?

Lord, That I May See

Today's gospel is the beautiful story of the man born blind.

This man wants to see and the Lord gives him his sight. Well, my friends, I ask Jesus: *"Lord, I want to see."*

"I want to see into what is happening today. And I want you to give me that sight and I will try to be open to seeing what it is you want me to see."

That has been my prayer. In the weeks ahead, I will be sharing with you some things that I am seeing and we will see together where we go.

I think this is probably enough for today. I am pleased to be back with you, and now I am wondering if the song leader is going to ask you to sing *Take Up Your Cross*.