

Fr. John M. Fontana, OSM, delivered this homily on Oct. 31, 2015, during liturgy at the Sponsor Formation Program for Catholic Health Care in Chicago.

Good Formation Is All About Transformation

FR. JOHN M. FONTANA, OSM

They're all over the place today — Star Wars characters, superheroes, pirates, Minnie Mouse, witches, Minions from “Despicable Me” and, of course, nurses dressed as they usually are in your health care institutions, in white fishnet and 6-inch heels!

And after collecting all their treats, the little ones will come home, take off their masks and reveal — beneath them — their fresh and (usually) innocent faces, filled with laughter, awe, food, trust and dependence on others. After all, they're children, and children of God. And that's how they'll wake up tomorrow, on the solemn feast of All Saints.

It's often a different story with adults. We can take off Halloween masks, and find that there are some other masks still covering our true faces. They may include our professional persona, our various roles and vocations, our titles and degrees, or, some days, the forced smile or business face that covers up our own pain, struggles and shadows, as well as our potential, deeper goodness and our truest identity, which is the same as the kidos. We are born of love, and continue to be God's beloved children, at any and every age. As St. John reminds us, we are still growing into what will be revealed when we see God as God is and will actually be like God. Wow! May I take a shot at saying this another way?

You are participating in a “sponsor formation program,” and I believe that good formation, though full of *information*, is ultimately about *transformation*. The goal of the Christian spiritual life is nothing less than transformation into: our truest selves, beloved children of God, part of the Body of Christ. In St. Paul's words, “no longer

I, but Christ in me.”

Doesn't that sound radical, challenging and unrealistic? Most of us don't think of having our haloed pictures pop up on the walls of a church, or having people celebrate our feast or carrying around pieces of us as relics. Actually, I'd like to see artists portray more saints who look like us: people who wear glasses, have wrinkles, laugh uncontrollably, or have saints with a fork up to their mouths, in hospital gowns, or scratching their heads because of their questions and doubts about this journey. In other words, real people who live imperfect lives, struggle with limitations, weaknesses and relationships, and who sometimes fail. Even Pope Francis self-identifies as a sinner. But despite it all, the saints are people who allow God to do amazing things within us, and — despite ourselves — through us, in the service of others. Isn't that why we're all here?

When Jesus calls his disciples up the mountain, he didn't say, “blessed are the flawless, the professionals, the intelligent,” or even “blessed are those who read spiritual books, practice yoga or spend a nice autumn weekend at a formation program,” unless, of course, any of those activities or qualities plays a part in becoming our truest selves.

As one writer puts it, the Beatitudes are not proscriptive, but descriptive. They're not so much ethical indicatives, asking us to *become* poor, to mourn, to be meek and merciful. Rather, they



offer consolation, blessing — can we even call it a degree of happiness? — to those who “get it,” those who resonate deeply with his message, including, especially, many of the little ones and weak ones who lie in your hospital beds, and also those of you who live and work not only effectively and efficiently, but compassionately, as an extension of Jesus’ healing presence to them. As we more fully become Christ’s continuing incarnation in the world, we, too, are blessed, happy, holy.

So let’s adjust the words and proclaim:

■ Blessed are those who may have great skills and intelligence, but who also have a profound trust in God (poor in spirit).

■ Happy are those who lead from executive suites and boardrooms with a non-dominating gentleness (meek).

■ Holy are those who may profitably run the institutions, and who also empathize in solidarity with those who suffer within them (mourn).

■ Happy and free are those who do their jobs with personal integrity (pure of heart) and who have an urgent longing for equality in relationships and fairness in business (hunger for justice).

■ Blessed are those who forgive and reconcile among their staff (merciful and peacemakers) and even those who experience painful rejection because of Christ, like standing in front of a TV camera to state a corporate ethical principle that is counter-cultural and politically incorrect (persecuted for my name).

I’ve heard it wisely suggested that, in order to become more like this, in the middle of sobbing in a waiting room, settling a squabble in a boardroom or being insulted for taking an unpopular ethical stand, we also would do well to nurture an attention to a soft voice among all the loud ones, which reminds us that we are loved, blessed and, through it all, are growing into holiness. We’re becoming saints, who continue the healing of Christ.

I am simply passing on to you the invitation that I hear, once again, to unmask ourselves, little by little and layer by layer, in order to glimpse our truest face and deepest self, what we have always been in the eyes of our Creator — the way a parent sees a child beneath the scary or superhuman Halloween mask. When we see other faces that way, we are more prone to notice a family resemblance among all of our sisters and brothers.

The rabbi was asked what makes a person a



genius. His answer: “The ability to recognize.”

“Recognize what?” asked the student.

“The butterfly in a caterpillar: the eagle in an egg; the saint in a selfish human being.”

Let us continue to celebrate the sacrament of transformation — not only of bread and wine, but of all of us who present ourselves at this altar, willing to be changed, along with the food, into Christ’s healing body and lifeblood for those who suffer, and for the world.

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JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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