Last week I made a crazy decision that kept me up all Saturday night. After a nice day of ministry last Sunday, I was spending my evening praying, catching up on sports scores and reading church stories from around the world on the internet.

In this pursuit, I made my daily pass through a website called “Whispers in the Loggia” (www.whispersintheloggia.com). On the site last Sunday, the webmaster shared a remarkable story about our Holy Father once again preaching about the spiritual benefits of the sacrament of confession during a communal service for the faithful. At that service, Pope Francis followed the homily with an unprecedented move, approaching one of the unsuspecting priests sitting at a confessional, kneeling down in front of him, and then publically confessing his own sins for about three minutes. The priest would have
a great story to share about this confession with friends and parishioners if it were not for the fact that he is bound by the seal of the confessional!

During the Holy Father’s talk last weekend, Pope Francis also referenced a letter he wrote in February to the bishops throughout the world, asking them to assign one parish in their jurisdiction to hear confessions for a twenty-four hour period around the Feast of Laetare Sunday (the Fourth Sunday of Lent). As reported on the “Whispers” site, I guess only two dioceses in our own country took the pope up on his offer – the diocese of San Antonio, TX and the diocese of Juneau, AK. Obviously, Cowboys and Eskimos in our country seem to be given preferential treatment to the rest of us!

As I reflected on this article, I thought to myself, for the sake of my salvation and yours, that I would offer up this parish to host this twenty-four hour marathon of confessions on Saturday, April 5th. I figured that since our Hispanic Community was going to be here at the
parish all night long for adoration on that particular day, I would not be alone in the church hearing confessions. Over the last couple months, a group from our Hispanic community have been investing in an evening of adoration, starting with a special Saturday 6:00 p.m. Mass and extending the adoration through the night time hours.

When I announced this idea of hearing confessions to the morning Mass crowd last Monday, the faithful said that I was crazy; many shook their heads at me in disbelief. In my defense, I thought to myself that the inspiration for me staying in the confessional all night long was from one St. John Marie Vianney (1786-1859), a man who really wasn’t smart enough to remain in seminary but was ordained anyway because the rector of the seminary saw something very holy in this man’s heart.

Assigned to a parish in Ars, France after his ordination, this holy priest chose to serve his people in a significant way through the confessional. Towards that cause, St. John Vianney chose to hear the sins of his faithful anywhere from 12-16 hours a day. St. John once said, “A
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A pastor who wants to do his duty must keep his sword in hand at all times. Did not St. Paul himself write to the faithful of Corinth: ‘I most gladly will spend and be spent myself for your souls, although loving you more, I be loved less.’” As a result, Fr. Vianney subsequently was called “The Curé of Ars,” a man who dedicated his life to healing broken souls in this most important ministry.

Of course, spending sixteen hours in a confessional each day took its toll and at times caused this great saint from the 19th Century to run from the parish in an effort to escape. However, his desire to do God’s will overwhelmed any selfish desires, so Fr. Vianney returned back to the confessional during his “Jonah” moments in life to save souls, one confession at a time.

I thought to myself that if St. John Vianney could hear confessions 12-16 hours a day, I could try it once for twenty-four hours. In retrospect, I really found a great appreciation for why St. John would
offer such a ministry for his faithful. I also have to say that after that much time in “the box,” I’m ready to sleep for the rest of the week!

During those twenty-four hours, certainly more than a hundred souls came to spend time sharing the stories of their lives with me. Within the first half hour in the confessional alone, a beautiful woman gifted me with what she called “A Twenty Mystery Rosary,” a rosary four times the size of a normal one – this woman was so excited that she could confess her sins at 8:30 a.m. on a Saturday morning. The only condition for the gift was that I pray the twenty decade rosary for the sake of the faithful from St. Patrick’s Church. I told her that I was most willing to do so, as it would take me at least twenty-four hours to complete the prayer anyway (tee hee!).

As you might expect, this “Feast of Forgiveness” had its ebbs and flows. Business was light in the mid-morning but at twelve noon I didn’t realize I had two baptisms to celebrate and most everyone at the baptism wanted to have their confessions heard! As soon as that group
calmed down, life was slow and steady until about 3:15 p.m. when Julie Dillenburg (our DRE) brought eight students from the First Communion program to celebrate their First Confession together.

Before and after the 6:00 p.m. Mass that kicked off the all-night adoration, a large flow of people passed through “the box” and I could not believe that by the time the last of the crowd finished, I was looking at 1:30 a.m.! I thought that with the fifty or so faithful attending the 6:00 p.m. Mass, I could finish up confessions in an hour or so but all of a sudden, families from the area congregated in church because of the novelty of the event. Parents were showing up with their two, five, TEN CHILDREN!!! and telling me how grateful they were that this sacrament was afforded them in this particular way.

Of course, Deacon Darrell Kelsey was absolutely terrible to me during my time in the Church – his WayPoint Teen Group were serving that night at Shepherd’s Table and they promised me a taco when they returned from their ministry. They were giving away tacos all night, and
yet, alas, the taco never came to my direction. All night passed and I kept dreaming of the Taco that never came to be. Deacon Darrell owes me dinner at El Famous Burrito! (I’m actually kidding about this, FYI).

What really struck me about the evening was that so many friends took pity on me (if that is the right word), thinking I would be famished from spending the day in the confessional. I weigh over 350 pounds – “Fr. Pete Jankowski” and “famished” are words that should never be put together in the same sentence!!! That said, I was amazed that friends from Oswego and New Lenox were coming around to bring me food and drink, caring for me. I can only imagine how St. John Vianney didn’t weigh 350 pounds if people from his time were caring for him the way the faithful from this area were caring for me!

Let’s just say after 1:30 a.m. I had a lot of time to talk and pray, catching up with three years’ worth of Our Sunday Visitor back issues. I heard a couple confessions at 3:00 a.m. and at 4:00 a.m. a slew of people stopped by the church – I can only imagine that after a late night of
whatever, people decided to keep me company in church. Before 7:30 a.m. and our benediction service to close out the evening, I heard my last wave of confessions; I thought to myself that some of these folks probably got a nice evening of rest and came to the confessional refreshed, while I was catching myself talking gibberish at times, I was so tired.

By 8:00 a.m., I offered the announcements at Mass and then took a nap before my own scheduled Mass at 10:00 a.m. That said, this last evening gave me such a great appreciation for St. John Marie Vianney. I’m not sure I would ever sit in the confessional for twenty-four hours again but I certainly feel that we in the diocese should offer this sacrament much more often than we do – as paraphrased from the movie, “Field of Dreams” – if you offer it, they will come. I concluded the evening asking the Lord to give me as strong a resolve to hear confessions as St. John Vianney did. And God bless the Holy Father for inspiring me to pull this stunt... once!
How blessed we were to have a priest like that some two hundred years ago. So blessed we are to have so many holy priests today! I was reflecting on this theme of priesthood all week and my sacrifice to this community because I was reflecting a great deal about the plight of the Roman Catholic cleric this last week. If you attended one of the daily Masses early in the week, you might have heard me comparing the Roman Catholic Pastor to Jelly Belly Jelly Beans.

I told the folks during one of our weekday Masses this week that a priest friend of mine was lamenting about the plight of his own situation at the parish that he serves and that, like me, he is having a difficult time dealing with the negative factions in the parish. In a moment of clarity, I compared the Roman Catholic priesthood to Jelly Belly Jelly Beans, which, by the way, I had to go find at the local Cracker Barrel and pay $28 for because I love you so much (I’m not a sweets person but I did notice that Jelly Belly has a new flavor on the market
called “Blueberry Pancake” which I thought was appropriate to buy since I would be hearing confessions until breakfast time on Sunday).

I told my friend that when I was young, I loved to eat all Jelly Beans but the licorice flavored ones, which my father purposely would pick out from the bag to eat himself. If I were unfortunate enough to find a licorice flavored bean, I would chew it up and spit it out as fast as I could, hoping the next bean would drown out the bad taste of the last one.

In my brief moment of clarity, I told my friend that if the Jelly Bellys represented Roman Catholic priests, then you should imagine a jar filled with 150 beans serving over 600,000 faithful church-goers around 1820, just about the time when the Irish Catholic population in this country started to boom. If you figure out the math, that averages about one priest to every 2,000 Catholics at the time, which makes a lot of sense, considering one priest was covering most of the eastern third of this state back in the 1830s (Fr. John Francis Plunkett).
Then I said to him, imagine how many priests were needed to serve the faithful Irish who were being castigated in this country because of both their ethnicity and their religion. Church statistics tell us that by 1850, 600,000 turned into 1,750,000 Catholics (a million of whom were Irish) and that 1.75 million turned into 46.5 million by 1965 and 63.5 million by 2010. For a while, our number of priests was keeping up with the huge growth of the faithful in this country – in 1975 (our high water mark for priests in this country), we had almost 59,000 priests serving in this country at a ratio of one priest to every 777 parishioners. For reasons we have discussed before, that number of priests has now shrunk (as of 2010) to just under 40,000 priests with the average of one priest to every 1,590 Catholics (statistics courtesy of CARA). In reflecting on these statistics, I came to realize that we are dangerously close to dipping to the same priest/parishioner level that we had in 1820 if we do not start promoting the value of the priesthood (and certainly the religious life!).
As our jar of beans becomes emptier and emptier in the priesthood this age, I couldn’t help but think of my poor friend in the priesthood who has had to endure such vile in his own particular ministry. Anyone who thinks that bashing on a priest for whatever reason is doing good in a parish is fooling themselves - not only does the anger scare others away from the parish but it also scares others away from thinking about the priesthood. We have to stop thinking about chewing and spitting out priests we don’t like as if they were licorice flavored jelly beans instead of appreciating the fact that we still have a few beans left in the jar and that we need to replenish the jar through our support for both the priests we have and the encouragement to find those yet to come.

In my reflection, I took my Jelly Bean analogy one step further, entering into the world of the Right to Life. As I was thinking about how we often discard priests as if they are disposable, I was thinking about how some doctors in our society do the same with the gift of life. To keep this homily in the “Rated G” range, let me put the world of the test
tube baby in Jelly Bean language. Imagine a doctor puts ten Jelly Beans in a jar and then waits a while to see which Jelly Beans look the best. Let’s say, for arguments’ sake, that the doctor chooses to keep three of the Jelly Beans in the jar and, in order to give the three beans room to breathe, he discards the other seven. Three beans stay, seven beans get discarded. In the world of morality, we have a fancy term for this type of thinking – it’s called Selective Reduction. The illustration I just offered being equivalent to a mortal sin times seven. In an attempt to preserve a couple or three, we are willing to discard the rest… think about that.

In the world of the gospel, imagine that there is only one Jelly Bean in the jar. It’s a pretty important Jelly Bean, infinitely the most important bean in the jar. Let’s come back to reality – we are talking about Jesus Christ. In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet tells us the story of how dry bones will come back to life, symbolizing a repentant Jewish People returning back to the Promised Land that they once lost. In our gospel reading today, in an effort to show his believers that he truly is God,
Jesus literally resurrects a human being named Lazarus as the last and greatest of the seven miracles that St. John describes in his text. As soon as this revelation takes place, the Sadducees and Pharisees of the first century declare that this specific act was the last straw and attempt to discard the Son of God like he were a Jelly Bean.

As we know from John’s gospel, what Jesus does for Lazarus also happens to Jesus himself – the Son of God resurrects from the dead and comes back to life. And because of his resurrected act, the disciples find purpose and cause in this mission to carry this mission out into the world. And as the story is told, as the mission is revealed, the jar that symbolizes the life of faith becomes fuller and fuller with believers who understand the import of this message.

The challenge for us today must be to fill this jar and follow Jesus’ example. No, most of us probably do not have the resolve to resurrect the dead but we can give people hope and raise the faith through our words and actions. So often we sit in these pews very passively, waiting
for the faith to come to us, but faith is not meant to just come to us –
faith is meant to be given away. And when we give this faith to others,
we provide a hope not to empty the jar but to fill it with those who
believe. And isn’t this the point of living the Christian life, to share
God’s blessings with others and finding the joy in saving souls?

If we truly believe in the readings for today, we fill the jar by not just
listening to the story but by responding to it. For those who invest in the
Círculo de Oración or the Legion of Mary or Adoration or any of our
other services that St. Pat’s offers, eventually you and I need to respond
to this call of God otherwise the call is an empty one without purpose. If
we fall into the trap of the “me” generation of this age, we will find
ourselves in a life of despair, living in an empty jar. If we follow the
calling of Christ and raise the hearts of those we meet, then we
understand that the raising of Lazarus is a symbol of what we need to
do with this community. For me, I can answer this call this one
confession at a time. For all of you, with whatever gift you have been
given, the gospel implores you to use those gifts to allow others to be saved.

I thought it fitting to conclude my homily with the words of St. John Vianney, a prayer attributed to his him. What is offered is a beautiful sentiment. May we strive to offer this sentiment to the people that we meet. Here is the prayer…

I love you, O my God,
and my only desire is to love you until the last breath of my life.

I love you,
O my infinitely lovable God,
and I would rather die loving You than live without loving you.

I love you, Lord
and the only grace I ask
is to love You eternally.

My God, if my tongue cannot say in every moment that I love you,
I want my heart to repeat it to You as often as I draw breath.