

Back in the old days when gas was 23 cents a gallon, you could drive into a service station where an attendant would actually put gas in the car for you, clean all the windshields, and ask a question few of us hear any more: "Can I check your oil?" It's a question five foolish virgins paid no attention to. Their oil was low and they were caught unprepared for the bridegroom.

There is an allusion to this Gospel every time we celebrate baptism in the Catholic Church. It comes when we give the newly baptized a candle. We light it from the Easter candle, and then we urge the new Christians to keep the flame of faith alive in their hearts so that when the Lord comes they may go out to meet Him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom. So, just as the wise virgins were ready for the bridegroom with plenty of oil, we keep our oil stocked to meet Christ when He comes again. We want Christ to find us wise, not foolish.

How do we keep our oil stocked? We avoid the two mistakes made by the foolish virgins: First, they used up their oil, and then they presumed they could replenish it easily.

They used up their oil. They didn't plan ahead. What little they had they burned. Some of us do this, too. We take advantage of the faith God gives us. We use it up early in life, careless about replenishing faith through prayer, through charity, through sharing our faith with others who inspire us with theirs.

There was a second mistake--the foolish virgins presumed they could replenish oil easily. They turned to the wise and asked for some of theirs, but there was not enough for all. When our faith is spent, some people panic and jerk up an arm for help. And if there is none they blame someone else: Mass was boring, the neighbors are rude, the Church doesn't care. When we are empty of faith, it's tempting to blame someone else.

But those who are wise in today's Gospel avoided these two mistakes. They cared for the precious fuel they owned, they used it sparingly, and at the proper time their flames glowed; the bridegroom recognized them by the fire. Keep the flame of faith alive in your hearts so that when the Lord comes you may go out to meet Him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom.

How do we keep the flame of faith alive? Prayer, charity, of course. The Renew program this fall I hope is rekindling the faith for many in the community. This week the theme is that God calls us beyond the parish and into our neighborhoods. It asks us to let our faith take action. Neighborhood watch areas, block parents, associations are all ways in which we muster our forces as a civic community for the sake of the common good. Good neighbors keep their lamps trimmed and oil ready to help one another.

This is a good week to check the oil in our spiritual car. We can keep it replenished and the flame of faith alive by love of God and love of neighborhood.