

Homily for Fifty-fifth Anniversary of Priesthood

Robert F. Leavitt, P.S.S.

St. Mary's Class of 1968

I was ordained to the priesthood on Ascension Thursday, May 23, 1968, at St. Joseph Cathedral for the Archdiocese of Hartford. The memories of that are as fresh today as that Thursday fifty-five years ago. Congratulations to all my classmates from St. Mary's celebrating your anniversaries this year. Reviving a happy memory renews the spirit.

The Gospel of Mark 10 recounts a conversation. Peter asks Jesus what he can expect for following him. A fisherman is fishing for a payoff. Far from being offended, Jesus promises Peter and anyone who gets in line behind him a windfall. A hundred times as many blessings as anything surrendered. Compounded interest for any self-gift made.

A priest who can say priesthood has brought him that would be one happy person. I am because I can.

I left Hartford, Connecticut for St. Mary's Seminary Paca Street in 1962 to study philosophy with the Sulpicians. Two years later, I came to Roland Park as a member of the Class of 1968. After I stood up in the sanctuary of St. Joseph Cathedral many years ago, after a bishop's hands were imposed on my head, little did I know how Christ would fulfill his promise.

On this special anniversary, my mind naturally goes back to May 23, 1968 at St. Joseph Cathedral in Hartford. Prostrate on the marble sanctuary floor there, a spectrum of colors from the stained-glass windows enveloped me. Choir voices were chanting the Golden Sequence of Pentecost – *Veni, sancte Spiritus*. A bishop's hands were imposed on me in the ancient gesture of ordination. This time every year all those memories come to me in the special time between Ascension Thursday and Pentecost Sunday, in the blessed interval separating the parting of Christ from this world and the sending of the Holy Spirit into the apostolic community.

Life turned around for me that May fifty-five years ago, and it turned around again three months later when my archbishop decided to return me to St. Mary's Seminary to study for a doctorate in theology. I found myself in doctoral seminars with Fathers Raymond Brown and Maurice Duchaine. A few years later, I was at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in courses with the French philosopher Paul

Ricoeur. In 1974, I would be in Paris at the Husserl Archives studying with him again. It was all like a dream then and feels more unreal now.

My seminary studies under the Sulpicians in philosophy and theology were repaid hundreds of times over reminding me of Jesus' promise and a debt I can never repay.

Life turned around again for me in 1979 when my name was entered as a non-Sulpician candidate, in a *terna* of candidates, for the combined offices of president and rector of my *alma mater*. I was thirty-seven, eleven years ordained. Now, I am eighty. There is a framed photo on a bookshelf where I live showing a young priest seated in the front row with the seminary's Board of Trustees at the time. The faces of Archbishop William Borders and Edward Frazer, PSS, Provincial of the Sulpicians are there along with trustees Owen Daly II, Anne Pinkard, Patrick Deering, Father Joseph Bonadio and Msgr. Paul Cook. Another one two decades later shows me flanked by Owen and his son, trustee Clinton Daly in St. Mary's Laubacher Hall. Photographic evidence of Jesus' promises fulfilled.

Many trustees and benefactors of St. Mary's became my close friends. I cannot resist the impulse of gratitude in me at eighty to name a few of the living and the dead. The names of men and women on recognition plaques around the building at Roland Park are public symbols of St. Mary's recent milestones. For me, they are reminders of Jesus' promise given to a priest by lay persons who put their trust in him long ago. Their faith blessed my own Sulpician ministry a hundredfold. Like Ben-Sira (Ecclesiasticus) in the Old Testament, there is a time to name names as he did in his famous Chapter 44 "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men" about Israel's ancestors. In the Eucharist we name none of the living except the Holy Father and local bishop by name and any deceased for whom the Mass is said. So, I will name a few deceased who cast their dice and gifts in the direction of the future of the priesthood which allowed St. Mary's to move forward. The living know who they are and how much I love and respect them. Edward J. Donnelly and Owen Daly II, Henry Knott, Margaret Riehl, Patrick Deering, William Gaudreau, Dorothy Bunting, Anne Pinkard,

Those who joined with us to strengthen the Society's flagship seminary told me they admired my priesthood and drew a measure of faith and courage from it for their own lives. Some asked that I celebrate wedding anniversaries, preside at marriages of their sons and daughters, at baptisms of children and grandchildren and first communions. At the end of life, their families called me to their bedsides to anoint their fathers and mothers who had blessed St. Mary's with their wisdom when they were strong. I celebrated some of their funerals in the St. Mary's Main Chapel.

Sulpicians and other faculty, who taught at Roland Park and then moved on, gave so much virtue and intelligence to build up the program, together with the

talented senior staff working behind the scenes in administration and advancement to strengthen the seminary's human, physical and financial resources.

The spiritual rewards of serving God as a sacramental priest in the Roman Catholic Church are too manifold to go into any detail for my brothers in this ministry. We need no homily to remind us about that. As Sulpicians forming priests able to carry on ministry with the same dedication and competency as we have mentored them in it is the whole point of this life. Hopefully, a byproduct of that might be larger enrollments of even stronger candidates for priesthood. Like Peter, or any other minister in the Church, we take the Lord at his word.

When Jesus promises blessings for sacrifices in the Gospel of Mark 10, he does not leave out mentioning the pain and suffering which often attends them. St. Mark is alluding in this passage to what is still hidden from Peter about his future martyrdom in Rome. The sign of the cross hangs over the table of blessings. A hundred more blessings than sacrifices in priesthood can come served with bitter herbs. In the Jewish Passover Seder, along with the cups of wine and the lamb, the bitter herbs at the table serve as a taste of former enslavement in Egypt. In the Eucharist, in these times, our herbs are made more bitter by the shame that has befallen the priesthood. Not to mention that, even on a happy day, is to hide from reality.

On my 50th anniversary of ordination, we were on the cusp of the Covid-19 pandemic which killed so many and soon emptied church pews. In American culture, a secularism and a Christian nationalism embittered civic life. Confidence declined in all institutions. On my 55th anniversary, the State Attorney of Maryland released a report on accused priests in the Baltimore Archdiocese. The State of Illinois will follow Pennsylvania and Maryland in releasing names of priest abusers there. The tragic story of priests who betrayed trust and caused deep trauma in victims will play itself out for years to come. "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the son's teeth are set on edge."

This dish of bitter herbs is set on the altar of history. The wine cruet smells of vinegar. We ask will there be no end to these revelations of things done in the darkness now shouted from the rooftops? Yet is that not inevitably how history plays itself out and punishes secret crimes? Significant actions taken by the church in recent decades to prevent future abuse are mocked and discounted. The public shame visited by media on bishops and priests is not delivered without a certain schadenfreude. Admission of guilt, contrition, and serious amendment, for the time being, seem incapable of restoring confidence in what the priesthood is and what God meant it be.

In the Book of Exodus, a disheartening saying gets our attention. "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the sons' teeth are set on edge." Centuries later, the prophet Ezekiel rescinded the pain of inherited guilt. People must only answer and suffer for

what they have done. But history and politics do not work like that. Blame is contagious like a pandemic. For now, priests understand the old proverb's bitter taste.

Enough said.

Despite that. Despite what has taken place and been revealed, as a priest and a Sulpician, I must celebrate priesthood. It has been for better or worse my vocation and my mission. And, lest we forget, the title of priesthood in the Catholic Church belongs first to Christ himself not to us. The Letter to the Hebrews bestows the title of high priest on Christ precisely because of his sacrifice on the cross. A Preface in the liturgy hails Christ simultaneously by three titles -- the priest, the altar, and the lamb of sacrifice. Jesus himself suffered, we say, for the sins of others. The innocent one became the victim.

As a priest and a Sulpician, I must celebrate priesthood despite everything that has happened. I celebrate knowing crimes have been committed by priests and concealed by the church. That knowledge alone is a bitter herb over there on a credence table. Knowing how many will likely abandon our faith because of what has happened is a bitter foreboding. To the women weeping for Christ on the way to his shameful death, he said weep for your children not for me. If abuse ends up driving even more of the young and their elders away from Christ into the arms of an anti-religious secularism, will that assure their salvation? Read and think about the poem, "Sunday Morning" by Hartford poet, Wallace Stevens.

On this anniversary, I will not allow what has happened to diminish what I tried to do in the fifty-five years I served St. Mary's Seminary & University and in the many blessings that have come my way on that account. In Luke 6:38 in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Give and gifts will be given to you, a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over." I have known that bounty in a hundred ways at Roland Park.

Anniversaries regenerate joy by returning us to graced beginnings. The generation of priests to which I belong often found their vocations serving the Latin Mass. The enchantment of a mystical choreography at the altar, a silent pantomime of the sacred, a whispered soliloquy of a priest facing the tabernacle captivated young imaginations. We wanted a taste of transcendent sacramental encounter with the Divine for ourselves. So, many entered the seminary. When the Latin Mass changed, all choreography in religion turned around. The priest had to face the world, the laity asking for a role, women asking to be included in ways equal to their Christian dignity and ability. The changes in liturgical mood and pastoral manners swept many out of seminary and some good men out of the priesthood.

I remain forever grateful to the Sulpicians who taught us other means of priestly enchantment than the glories of a Gregorian Latin Mass allowed. They instructed us in

modern philosophy, asking modern questions. At Roland Park, they taught us how to exegete Sacred Scripture to harvest its deeper truths with the tools of criticism. In theology, they showed us the paths from first naivete in faith to a second naivete. They taught us how to think as priests and by thinking well to believe more in priesthood. The enchantment of Word and Sacrament was redoubled in our minds and hearts. We were learning how to preach to our contemporaries with a deeper conviction and passion. Even with that, I reluctantly admit that the crucible of a difficult pastoral apprenticeship to priesthood for seminarians under the eyes of masters in pastoral leadership was absent. What army recruits in training get on a march and medical school students get on grand rounds with surgeons and psychiatrists in a hospital, seminarians still do not receive.

Some thirty years ago, on my twenty-fifth anniversary as a priest, a Sulpician friend described me as joined at the hip to Roland Park. In the years since, I have done everything I could to provide the setting and the resources for the Sulpician mission in its foundational Baltimore seminary going forward. I believe I have done what God and the church gave me to do, and what was possible, and what the times themselves allowed. That conviction is a blessing I take with me into the future.

Retirement from seminary work has brought additional blessings for me. After leaving administration, I returned to the classroom to teach courses I loved in philosophy and theology. I remain grateful for any recognition my successors have given me. I interceded with a major benefactor for the seminary's Pastoral Program. I wrote a book which received a national award in theology. I served as a weekend assistant at two local parishes in Monkton, Maryland.

Anniversaries are times to remember, times for Eucharistic *anamnesis* in the fullest sense of the word, times for returning to graced beginnings in life which were mysteriously auspicious. *Haec quotiescumque feceritis, in mei memoriam facietis* were among the first Latin words I heard as a boy serving Mass. "Whenever you do this, do it in memory of me." At my ordination in Hartford in 1968, and on every Pentecost Sunday after, the words of the Golden Sequence, *Veni, sancte Spiritus*, stir something up in me that feels as ancient as the words, as pleading and importuning as it sounds: "Come, Holy Spirit." The invocation cheers my priesthood on despite everything.

Beyond betrayals, beyond the ideology of any moment, beyond the accusation and bitterness, and the seeming paralysis of faith as I break the bread and bless the cup, every springtime the invocation brightens hope, "Come, Holy Spirit. Come!"