

**HOMILY OF MSGR. ROBERT BATULE
FOR THE MASS MARKING THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY
OF HIS ORDINATION**

May 14, 2010

Editor's Note: Msgr. Batule, a priest of the Rockville Centre Diocese (Long Island, New York) was the SCSS's first Chaplain and served in that capacity and on the SCSS Board of Directors for several years.

Two events in my priestly ministry have affected me like no others. The first was the funeral mass for John Cardinal O'Connor in May of 2000. The second was the funeral mass for Richard John Neuhaus in January of 2009. They were not "celebrations of life"; I assure you. Each was a reverent, solemn occasion, and there was no mistaking that someone had died.

The men who died were priests; one a "cradle" Catholic, as they say, and the other a former Lutheran who entered into full communion with the Church at the age of 54. Each had the hands of a bishop imposed on him as the Holy Spirit was invoked. In the case of Fr. Neuhaus, it was Cardinal O'Connor himself who was the instrument of God's gracious act.

On Palm Sunday and at other times in the liturgical year, we listen to these words of Saint Paul: "[T]hough he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . . he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:6-8). We recognize this text as the kenosis passage. Jesus empties Himself in order to save us.

I have always considered this to be a good starting point for talking about the Catholic priesthood. The priest is a man who empties himself in imitation of Christ. The priest's last act of self-emptying is his death. In truth, we die the way we live. A priest cannot feign the manner of his death. Either he has lived kenotically in a spirit of dedication, or he has not. In the depths of his conscience, every priest knows this.

Jesus is a Priest from the womb; His sons who are made priests of the new dispensation are not. I had to learn about dedication and commitment from my parents and brothers and sisters whose love and guidance helped put me on a path to discern what God was asking of me. But they were not the only ones who figured in the development of my priestly vocation. There were men like Fr. Dennis Whalen, an associate at Curé of Ars Parish in Merrick where I grew up; Msgr. Edward

Sweeny, later the Pastor there; Msgr. Charles Guarino, my high school Latin teacher; and Msgr. Hugh Corrigan, a faculty member at Cathedral College and the homilist at my First Mass. Msgr. Corrigan is one of the concelebrants at this Mass today.

Anniversaries are moments to pause and take stock, to remember that the milestone we are marking now had its origin not just with my parents and brothers and sisters and not just with some priests who were role models for me. There was something else, and it had to do with death.

When I was in elementary school, I attended a summer camp sponsored by the Salesians of Saint John Bosco. Each day camp was in session, there was Mass. I was drawn to the mystery of the Mass at an early age, and by God's grace, I have tried to be close to it ever since.

In today's second reading, Saint Paul writes that he has handed on to the Corinthians what he received from the Lord (cf. 1 Cor. 11:23). He recounts how the Lord Jesus took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my Body" (1 Cor. 11:24). Taking the cup, Saint Paul continues, Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant in my Blood" (1 Cor. 11:25). The apostle points out to us that the Lord did this on the night he was handed over (cf. 1 Cor. 11:23), the night before Jesus died.

The Eucharist is the Lord's most sublime gift to His Church. The *Catechism* says of the Eucharist that it contains the whole spiritual good of the Church (no. 1324).

Jesus promised that if we eat His flesh and drink His blood, He will raise us on the last day (cf. Jn 6:54). How good it is to know these words as true when we are told by the funeral director to toss our flowers on the casket and then return to our cars. The Lord's victory over death is not the only triumph we know in the Eucharist, thankfully. In the Eucharist, we also taste and see the goodness of permanence and fidelity. These characteristics are reflected in the vows spouses exchange as they promise to have and to hold. The Supper of the Lamb leads us inexorably to the wedding feast of heaven. In the Eucharist, the true character of love is revealed to us as nuptial.

Pope John Paul II was keenly aware of this, the nuptial meaning of love. The Church is indebted to him for enriching our understanding of marital love with his theology of the body. At the same time, he heightened our awareness of the Eucharist as the sacrament par excellence which unites us with the Lord.

Back in 1996, Pope John Paul II published a little volume called *Gift and Mystery* to mark his fiftieth anniversary of ordination to the priesthood. He writes there that "the priest, in his daily celebration

of the Eucharist, goes to the very heart of [the] mystery [of Christ]. . . . [T]he celebration of the Eucharist must be the most important moment of the priest's day, the center of his life" (75).

When I look back over twenty-five years, it's remarkable how different all the days have been. I've kept my appointment books—all of them—and they show I've offered Mass in a lot of different places and at a lot of different times. A funeral Mass one day, followed by a weekday Mass the next, followed the day after that by a Mass during which a husband and wife are joined together in holy matrimony. Mostly, I've offered Mass with a congregation, but without one from time to time also. I've celebrated the Lord's dying and rising before going off to teach and after returning from seeing someone in the hospital. Although the circumstances have varied greatly, the constancy of the Lord has not.

Would that we could be so dependable, so reliable. The record, however, shows otherwise. We're distracted, and we get absorbed in other things. We even get lazy and don't want to extend the effort.

Jesus, who is really present to us in the Eucharist, is Emmanuel, the Lord dwelling with us. But like Moses who had to be told to take off his sandals for he was standing on holy ground (cf. Ex 3:5), we forget Whose presence we encounter in the Holy Eucharist. We get so used to the noise and activity of our own dwelling, of our own dwelling with others, that the Lord becomes an afterthought sometimes.

We need to see and recognize. Our eyes must be opened. Jesus will do that for us if we let Him—just as He did for the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:31). We all need to do our part in recovering—where it has been lost—that sense of holy awe in the company of the Lord's Real Presence. Silence is not just golden; it's holy, befitting the One Who is holiness Himself.

The most important part of a physician's day might be when he sees a patient. The most important part of an attorney's day might be when she confers with a client. Doctors and lawyers help people. In the Mass, the priest can't help anyone with his expertise or skill. All that he has is a gift from the Lord. In the end, the priest is a servant of grace. He does not cure even though the Lord may use him to heal. He does not counsel even though the Lord's wisdom may come through him.

The priesthood is a mystical vocation, and the Eucharist makes this especially clear. To those who are called and chosen (cf. Jn 15:16), grace is never on the periphery or margins, but always at the center of life.

The primacy of the mystical does not eliminate what we might call social facts. These are observable, sometimes measurable realities found in the environment where the saving mysteries of the Lord are

celebrated. At the altar and in the pulpit, the priest must be aware of these social facts. But he's probably most conscious of them at the doors of the church on Sunday mornings, meeting and greeting.

There's a lot less meeting and greeting at the doors of the church than there used to be. When I was ordained in 1985 and assigned to Saint Boniface in Elmont, there was a total of 8 weekend Masses in an upper church seating 1200 and a lower church seating 1000. I'm sure that's not the case now. The truth is that Mass attendance then was already in marked decline everywhere, and it's continued to drop. Reliable surveys show that just 20 percent of Catholics attend Mass regularly in urban and suburban areas now. This will not improve in the immediate future; all signs point to a continued fall off.

Along with declining Mass attendance, other social facts which are implacably there and which impinge on the priesthood today are moral and philosophical relativism, materialism, secularism, and pervasive religious illiteracy. These are not just conceptually problematical, for priests are always encountering the practical consequences of these social facts in their ministries.

To those of you who know me well, there is no surprise that I would mention declining Mass attendance, bad moral and epistemological theory, catechetical failure and the like from the pulpit on what is manifestly a happy occasion. You also know that I don't abide in happy talk. Happy occasions—all occasions—call for truthful assessments. My friend, Fr. Jim Schall, writes not infrequently about knowing things as they are. This pertains not just to philosophical inquiry; it's a *sine qua non* of vocational integrity.

Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver, writing in the journal *First Things*, observes “[w]e need to stop over-counting our numbers, our influence, our institutions, and our resources, because they are not real” (*First Things*, June/July, 2009, p. 9). What is real and what is absolutely fundamental to priestly identity is the disclosure made by Jesus in today's gospel.

The passage is taken from the Farewell Discourse of Saint John's Gospel. Jesus confers a new status on the apostles here. He now calls them friends (cf. Jn 15:14). He has shared with the apostles all that He has heard from the Father (cf. Jn 15:15); He has appointed them, and they are going to bear fruit that will last (cf. Jn 15:16).

To be a priest is to be a friend of Christ. The Lord has indicated, too, what this friendship looks like. He has laid down His life for His friends (cf. Jn 15:13), and thus we should be prepared to lay down our lives—if only spiritually—by making sacrifices. The sacrifices of time, presence, devotion—too costly to put a price on—derive their meaning

from the Lord's sacrifice of His own life on the Cross and its foreshadowing in the First Eucharist. The priesthood is demanding because love and friendship are demanding.

The charism of celibacy makes Christ's yoke easy and His burden light (cf. Matt 11:30). And thus the priest is able to move freely as a friend among the sons and daughters of God. His is a friendship that bears fruit later when the children of the Lord claim their inheritance in heaven.

And yet we cannot shortchange the friendship of the ministerial priesthood now. How richly blessed my life has been by friendship wherever I have been assigned: Elmont, Uniondale, Mineola, Rockville Centre, Amityville, Hicksville, Rome, Huntington, and Greenlawn. It includes friends I have met through the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, the Corpus Christi book discussion group, and the Corpus Christi *Catechism* study group and so many other associations along the way.

The conferral of friendship upon the apostles is tied to a sending forth, an appointment. This appointment by Jesus in today's gospel is given a specificity in the first reading today. Jeremiah reports there that the Lord appointed him from the womb to be a prophet (cf. Jer 1:5).

The ministry that the priest begins at his ordination requires him to speak prophetically. We know from the first reading Jeremiah's fears and misgivings. He considers himself too young (cf. Jer 1:2). The Lord nonetheless assures him, "I am with you to deliver you" (Jer 1:8).

Deliverance for the priest comes through formation. As Pope John Paul II notes in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, his 1992 apostolic exhortation on preparation for the priesthood, formation is inexorably self-formation, and it is ongoing. A thoroughgoing commitment to self-formation and ongoing formation means for the priest that he identify with Saint John the Baptist, the prophet of whom Jesus says no one is greater (cf. Matt 11:11). John's greatness stems from the fact that he announces God's word. But the prophet also knows that he must decrease, and Christ must increase (cf. Jn 3:30). Then-Cardinal Ratzinger comments "like John the Baptist, the priest is only the precursor, servant of the Word and minister of the word. The listener is not taken up with him but with the Other" (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Life and Ministry of Priests," Priesthood A Greater Love, Congregation for the Clergy, International Symposium on the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, October, 1995).

Exercising the prophetic ministry is never easy for the priest. For he is charged with preaching the word of God in season and out of season, whether convenient or inconvenient (cf. 2 Tim 4:2), meaning, of course, that he must be countercultural. He becomes and remains a veritable sign of contradiction (cf. Lk 2:34) in our world.

Those of you who know my parents understand I was not raised to be a contrarian. Those of you who know my brothers and sisters realize, too, from their stories about me, that I was not a gadfly growing up. And those of you who met me after my ordination can attest that I am no iconoclast. Countercultural witness is not a personality trait. It runs much deeper than that. It is the faith itself which requires that we be non-conformists of an evangelical type.

Popularity cannot, in the end, be what sustains a priest. Human approval he must resist; otherwise, he may wittingly or unwittingly empty the Cross of Christ of its meaning (cf. 1 Cor. 1:17). In his preaching of Christ crucified, the priest's voice fades away and still the word remains.

How critical then is that exchange between Jesus and Peter at the end of the Bread of Life discourse in Saint John's Gospel. After watching many disciples walk away, resolved not to follow Him any longer, Jesus asks the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?" Peter then says, "Master, to whom should we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:66–68). The words of eternal life come to us through the Word made flesh (cf. Jn 1:14), Christ. His words at the Last Supper are awesomely repeated by the priest at every Mass: This is my Body. This is my Blood. Christ and His priest are not separated then by words, and thus they ought not to be separated by anything away from the altar. The most sublime union of the High Priest and the ministerial priest happens only with the latter's death. The priest realizes this when he goes up to the altar of God, the joy of our youth (cf. Ps 43:4).

The youthfulness that Jeremiah finds an obstacle to his prophecy, the Lord does not see fit to remove. He leaves it in place because His grace is enough for us (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9).

Prophecy and sacrifice inform the priest's life at the deepest level of who he is. The truth is what makes us holy even as it sets us free (cf. Jn 8:32). This I have seen and heard in twenty-five years.

Well, you have been most kind in listening to me this evening. It has been a wonderful twenty-five years, and I consider myself extraordinarily blessed. I am profoundly grateful to God for calling me to the priesthood and deeply appreciative to my parents and brothers and sisters for their encouragement and support along the way. To you, my friends from so many different places and seasons of my life, I thank you for joining me on this joyous occasion.

Let us heed the advice of then-Cardinal Ratzinger and remain focused on the Other, the One Who sacrifices out of love, the One Whose priesthood insures that the entire priestly People of God is fed, reconciled and anointed unto life on high.

Praised be Christ the Eternal High Priest!