

## **"Cultivating a Healthy Priestly Spirituality"**

*Rector's Conference Given to Students at St. Patrick's Seminary*

*October 6, 2014*

### **Introduction**

I know we are not supposed to brag, but I would ask you to indulge me just this one time. I want to brag about my cousin. I can't help myself. It was a year ago at this time that my cousin Joe was awarded the Silver Star for heroism in battle – 46 years after the fact. I was 11 years old at the time, and I remember him going off to fight in Vietnam with the Marines. And I remember that he was wounded and received a Purple Heart. It wasn't a disabling wound, though, and he shows no sign of it today. But I didn't know the full story until last year. Like a real man, he never talked about it.

My cousin's unit walked into an ambush. Bullets were flying and men were falling all around him. Those who were lucky enough, including Joe, were able to take shelter in a ditch behind some trees. But there were men on the ground in an open area, wounded and dying, who were sitting ducks. My cousin, with no regard for his own life, went out there and pulled them back to safety.

I'm sharing this with you not simply because it gives me a chance to brag about my cousin, but because of what he said in the award ceremony that I was privileged to attend. What he said has, I believe, a lot of relevance to those of us who are serving Christ in the ordained Priesthood, and you who are preparing to answer this call. So I want to read for you a long excerpt of his remarks. Yes, it's a bit long, but will be well worth your hearing. This is what he said:

What an honor to receive this award. Once again, the Marine Corps gives me far more than anything I ever gave to the Corps.

It has been almost 45 years since I wore the uniform. But I'm still a Marine. I will always be a Marine.

And I will always be grateful to the Corps.

Why?

For starters, very early on, the Corps taught me to accept discipline imposed upon me from the outside. More importantly it taught me self-discipline. The Corps taught me how to face adversity. The Marine Corps instilled in me the will to give the mission my best effort no matter what the odds. It taught me to keep on going after I felt like I had given it everything I had. We kept on going when we were tired, hungry, sick and disillusioned. The Corps taught me to keep going no matter what.

The Marine Corps showed me that there are things greater than myself. And it made me part of a family that I could rely upon no matter what the hardship – no matter what the cost.

As for this award, I never did anything in the hopes of earning a medal. I never met a Marine who did. That the Corps considers my actions worthy of this award leaves me with a sense of awe and gratitude. I am sure you've heard this before, but the truth is, I was just doing my job. I did nothing more than any other Marine would have done in the same situation.

I certainly know I did no more than any other Marine or Corpsman who climbed Hill 881 with me. That Marines who were with me would recommend me for this honor is humbling. As far as I'm concerned, I accept this on behalf of every Marine who went up Hill 881. If one of us earned it, all of us did. Not a single one of us believes he was any braver or did anything more than the man next to him....

I'm not ashamed to tell you, I was a scared 19 year old kid. I wanted to run away because I was positive that if I stayed there I would die. And I was afraid to die.

But I feared one thing worse than death. Before I ever set foot on Hill 881, I made up my mind that I would rather die than let down the Marine next to me. I would rather die than leave an injured Marine unattended.

But you see, to a Marine, that's not heroism.

I know for a fact that every other Marine on that hill felt the same way I did.

And I watched my friends give their lives honoring that code.

Why did they do that?

Because that's what men in combat do.

Because that is what Marines do.

### **Spiritual Combat**

Discipline imposed from without; self-discipline; living, and risking one's life, for the corporate good. That's what men in combat do.

Make no mistake about it. We are in combat. It has now become unfashionable to speak of the "culture war," or at least, there are some who would like to make it so. They want us to believe that this is a passé concept, or that this war has been fought and won by the ... well, however you want to label them – the secularists, the post-modernists, the social anarchists, the deconstructionists. Of course, they try to force us into believing that, so we will back off.

Now, there are those who say that this language of “culture war” is not helpful to us. Perhaps they have a point. After all, the Church is all about peace and reconciliation. But in another sense, we are, and always have been, at war. The Church has always understood the reality of spiritual warfare. In fact just yesterday we read in the Office of Readings, in the second longer, patristic reading, the following from St. Gregory the Great:

To advance against the foe involves a bold resistance to the powers of this world in defense of the flock. To stand fast in battle on the day of the Lord means to oppose the wicked enemy out of love for what is right.

When a pastor has been afraid to assert what is right, has he not turned his back and fled by remaining silent? Whereas if he intervenes on behalf of the flock, he sets up a wall against the enemy.

So, don't fool yourself. Each of us is in a struggle – combat, if you will – for our own soul, fighting to overcome the forces of evil, temptation, mediocrity, moral compromise. You are already experiencing this now, at least, if you are sincerely striving to make progress in the path of self-perfection.

But at this particular moment in history, there is no question that we are also, corporately, engaged in a battle for the soul of our people. You will encounter that as a priest; perhaps you have already had a taste of it in your pastoral field ed. The priest is on the front lines of this battle, he is the one called to lead his people to holiness. In your pastoral ministry, you will see up close the cultural, spiritual struggle in which we are engaged, as you witness the effects of a culture that rejects the primacy of God wreak havoc on your people and their children, even unwittingly.

What are we to do? It is very easy to get comfortable, to try to “earn a medal.” This is the mentality of the priest who measures all of what he does according to what will get him affirmation from the people. On the human level we all need affirmation to keep going, but that should not be the criterion upon which we judge all of what we do, say and decide in our ministry. But it's very easy for the priest to do this, and to lead a very comfortable life. Turning once again to the Office of Readings, we just concluded that long series of readings from St. Augustine's sermon on pastors a couple of weeks ago. I think it is for good reason that the Church designates this as the longest continuous reading of one patristic reading in the entire Office. You will remember the sermon I'm talking about: St. Augustine speaks against those pastors who don't tend the flock, but fleece their sheep for their own gain. They take their milk for themselves – that is, they enrich themselves with lots of nice comfortable things and fun activities. And then they take their wool for themselves, meaning the honors that they seek – praise, social status, special treatment.

That's not what men do, not men who give their lives to a higher cause. You are giving your lives to the highest cause of all: the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Too much is at stake than to want to earn a medal. And, priests do this together, not as

individuals, but in the one ministerial Priesthood of Jesus Christ they share under their bishop. Remember, the priest is ordained into a presbyterate, and shares in the Priesthood of his bishop. As the Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, puts it: "Priests by virtue of their ordination to the priesthood are united among themselves in an intimate sacramental brotherhood. In individual dioceses, priests form one priesthood under their own bishop" (n. 8). This is the family the priest is incorporated into, a family that he should be able to "rely upon no matter what the hardship – no matter what the cost."

And so we must first put our own spiritual house in order. And if you think of all that is going on in the world right now, in the West, in the Middle East, and elsewhere, there is no question that the faith is under attack. But we have to engage on the spiritual level. It's not simply a matter of giving talks, accepting interviews, of political advocacy and strategizing, and so forth, although all of that certainly does have its place. But, all of this is pointless if it does not come from a place of spiritual engagement. That is why the U.S. Bishops have called on our people to enter into a "Call to Prayer" for Life, Marriage and Religious Liberty.

## **Call to Prayer**

The Call to Prayer has five elements, and I would like to reflect with you on four of them, which I have asked Fr. Bud to implement here at the seminary, making the necessary adaptations to accommodate them into the life of the seminary. (The fifth element is the "Fortnight for Freedom," from the eve of the Memorial of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More – June 21<sup>st</sup> – to the Fourth of July; that, obviously, is outside of the academic year and so not applicable here at the seminary.) I especially want to reflect on them with you because they are also a sound program for developing a healthy priestly spirituality – precisely because they rely on the classics of our Catholic spiritual traditions.

### **1. Friday Fast and Abstinence**

The first element is Friday fast and abstinence. The bishops state: "Abstinence from meat and fasting on Fridays are encouraged for the intention of the protection of Life, Marriage, and Religious Liberty, recognizing the importance of spiritual and bodily sacrifice in the life of the Church."

We have a developed theology of penance and specifically of fasting – making reparation for sins, freely choosing to participate in the suffering of Christ, solidarity with the hungry. This is certainly a part of the rationale for offering up acts of penance, to make reparation for our corporate sins of negligence. The Church has not adequately served as the voice of social conscience that she is called to be and so, to some degree, has not kept a check on the slide toward moral anarchy that has been taking place in our society over the last several decades. But fasting also has the very Biblical meaning of a means of imploring God for mercy. In particular, we can see in this in certain variant manuscripts of Matthew 17:21, where the disciples ask Jesus why they

could not drive out the demon from the little boy, and Jesus responds that some demons can only be driven out “by prayer and fasting.” We need to fast to sharpen our skills for spiritual combat.

Unfortunately, there has been enormous confusion over the practice of Friday fasting over these last fifty years. Friday has never ceased to be a day of penance. Friday, obviously, has profound significance for us as Christians in that it is the day our Lord died – every Friday is a little Good Friday, just as every Sunday is a little Easter Sunday. I would like to review with you what was really supposed to happen.

With the Apostolic Constitution *Paenitemini* of February 17, 1966, Pope Paul VI legislated the reform of the practice of Friday penance. The whole point of it was to urge a more mature spirit of penitence. He condemns what he calls “formalism” and “Pharisaism,” that is, purely external obedience to a law in a way that violates its spirit. There were lots of examples of this. The Spanish-speaking countries were exempt from the requirement of Friday abstinence from meat. Growing up in San Diego, I used to hear stories of priests who would drive across the border to Tijuana on a Friday night to enjoy a steak dinner! Or the story told me by a pastor I once lived with who, in his youth when the reform was issued, heard the bishop’s housekeeper remark, “Oh, the bishop is going to be so disappointed. He so enjoyed his Friday lobster dinners.” So you see the problem. A good thing was being abused. But we don’t fix that problem by eliminating what is good; we fix it by correcting the abuse. That was the whole point of it. In fact, Pope Paul went on to say something very important for us who are or are preparing to be priests: “The precept of penitence must be satisfied in a more perfect way by priests, who are more closely linked to Christ through sacred character.”

Some local adaptation was allowed, and the U.S. bishops wasted no time. They issued a pastoral statement on Penance and Abstinence on November 18, 1966. In it, they reminded us that Friday is a day of penance “from time immemorial,” which is where abstinence from meat comes from; but because this is not such a great penance nowadays as in the past (the bishop’s lobster dinner!), they issued some revised norms. However, they gave primacy to continuing the practice of abstinence from meat. This is what they said:

Friday itself remains a special day of penitential observance throughout the year, a time when those who seek perfection [certainly the ordained!] will be mindful of their personal sins and the sins of mankind which they are called upon to help expiate in union with Christ Crucified [i.e., participating in the sufferings of Christ].

Among the works of voluntary self-denial and personal penance which we especially commend to our people for the future observance of Friday, even though we hereby terminate the traditional law of abstinence binding under pain of sin, as the sole prescribed means of observing Friday, we give first place to abstinence from flesh meat. We do so in the hope that the Catholic community will ordinarily continue to abstain from meat by free choice as formerly we did in obedience to Church law.

... let it not be said that by this action, implementing the spirit of renewal coming out of the Council, we have abolished Friday, repudiated the holy traditions of our fathers, or diminished the insistence of the Church on the fact of sin and the need for penance.

So you see, as I said a moment ago, the whole point of this reform was to urge a more mature spirit of penance. Yes, we have a big, big need to catechize our people on this. But there is something else here to keep in mind: we have always known from our religion that words alone are inadequate to catechize; the Church has always understood that teaching happens much more powerfully through symbols than through words. So, Friday abstinence from meat *is* the catechesis, and it is all the more powerful when we do this together, in solidarity, as a corporate whole. This is why the bishops have asked us, in this Call to Prayer, to engage in Friday fast and abstinence together, minimally for all of us to abstain from eating meat. And this is why I've asked Fr. Bud to instruct the kitchen staff not to serve meat on Friday.

But this is a minimum. It is a lesson that we are to do penance on Friday, and we should do more than the minimum, especially those of us who are in or moving toward Holy Orders. Remember, "[t]he precept of penitence must be satisfied in a more perfect way by priests, who are more closely linked to Christ through sacred character." Therefore, I want to earnestly ask all of you to choose at least *one more* act of penance to perform on Friday (in addition to abstaining from meat). It could be giving up another form of food you enjoy as well, such as sweets, or a type of drink such as coffee or soda. It could be skipping a meal, or skipping watching television or surfing the internet. It could be performing a specific act of charity. It could be all kinds of things. But, please, do pick at least one additional form of penance. Do this to give glory to God and make reparation for sin, not to earn a medal.

## **2. Daily Rosary**

With regard to the second element of the Call to Prayer, the bishops say this: "Families and individuals are encouraged to pray a daily Rosary, especially for the preservation of Life, Marriage, and Religious Liberty in the nation."

The rosary is a powerful prayer; do not underestimate its effectiveness. The Church has frequently taken recourse to the rosary in times of distress. I trust you all know the story of the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, from which we have the Feast Day of Our Lady of the Rosary, and why October is the month of the rosary. (If you don't know the story, just ask Mr. Cordoba – he'll give you all the detail you could ever imagine!) But there have been other such times in history as well, even very recently.

I had heard this story about Austria before, and I was once able to ask Cardinal Schorborn of Vienna directly myself, and he confirmed what I had heard. This is how the story goes. Immediately after the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union occupied the nation of Austria – something they were not supposed to do, according to how the allied powers carved up middle and eastern Europe. It was a very tense political time, when, so it seemed, Austria would not be able to wrest itself free from

Soviet control without further bloodshed, if at all. So the Austrian bishops implored their people to pray the rosary, and pray the rosary the Austrian Catholics did. After six months, for no stated reason, the Soviet Union quietly withdrew from Austria.

Yet another example is the “People Power Revolution” in the Philippines in the 1980’s, which toppled the Marcos dictatorship there. On February 25, 1986, millions of people gathered in one of Manila’s main thoroughfares, armed only with rosaries, to face off troops Marcos had sent to crush the uprising. The people at prayer were confronted with tanks and machine guns, and there was every reason to believe that they would be gunned down. But after four days of non-violent demonstrations and praying, the soldiers not only didn’t fire, they joined the protesters and Marcos was forced to flee. As one participant observed, “They may have been bad soldiers, but they were very good human beings.”

As you may know, here in the Archdiocese of San Francisco a group of the faithful have revived the Rosary Family Crusade begun by Father Peyton in the 1940’s. This Saturday we will celebrate the third annual Rosary Rally. When you consider the precarious situation of the world at that time, along with these examples of the power of the rosary to effect peace in the world (just a few of many), you can understand one of the classic slogans Father Peyton used to identify the Family Rosary Crusade: “A world at prayer is a world at peace.”

We are now facing different kinds of threats to peace in our own time, threats to stability and human thriving which are unprecedented in history: the destruction of family life; the disregard for the sanctity of human life in so many different ways; economic systems that trap people in poverty; the diminishment of religious freedom around the globe, and in more subtle forms even now in our own nation, a nation – unlike any other – which did not evolve, but was *founded*, and founded precisely to guarantee freedom to its citizens, of which religious freedom is the first and most cherished.

This is all endemic of the “throw away culture” of which Pope Francis speaks so often. And we bishops are alarmed at it, and hope that our people are, too – and if they are not, we have to teach them. And so the need for prayer, and no prayer (short of the Mass, of course) has proven more powerful than the daily rosary.

The Christian faithful have always known this power. Do not underestimate the power of the rosary! And teach this to your people who, God willing, will one day be entrusted to your pastoral care!

### **3. Eucharistic Holy Hour**

The third element of the Call to Prayer is a monthly Eucharistic Holy Hour, ideally on the last Sunday of the month. This is to connect it with the feast of the Holy Family, which normally falls on the last Sunday of December. The Call to Prayer is directed toward the goods of the sanctity of life, the integrity of marriage, and the preservation of

religious liberty. But of course, marriage is the foundation of the family, and the family is foundational to everything else.

And of course, the priest's connection to the Eucharist is obvious. The priest exists for the Eucharist: to prepare his people for it, and to celebrate it for them. A priest who does not cultivate a Eucharistic spirituality will be at best ineffective, at worst actually harmful to the faith of his people. As marriage and the family are foundational to the good of Church and society, so the Eucharist and the Mass are foundational to everything in our faith. I urge you to spend an hour every day before the Blessed Sacrament. If you are not doing so already, and it seems like a lot, work up to it. Eventually, you will learn to organize your life around it, and the graces that will result will sustain you through good times and bad. It is your lifeline.

But of course, the priest's prayer life is also to serve as an example to his people if he is to edify them and lead them to holiness. As Pope Pius XII once eloquently remarked in an address he gave to the clergy of Rome:

If you wish the faithful to pray willingly and piously, set an example for them by praying in your churches before them. A priest on his knees before the tabernacle, with a proper disposition and in deep recollection, is a model of edification for the people, a reminder of, and an invitation to, prayerful emulation [Quoted in the Instruction of the Congregation for the Clergy, "The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community," n. 21].

#### ***4. Prayers of the Faithful***

Finally, we cannot ignore prayer of petition. The Call to Prayer encourages parishes to include specific intentions for respect for all human life from conception to natural death, the strengthening of marriage and family life and the preservation of religious liberty at all levels of government, both at home and abroad at all Sunday and daily Masses. Sample prayers for the General Intercessions are available on the USCCB website.

Prayer of petition is also a way of reminding us of our dependence on God, and helps to maintain our awareness of the urgency of these issues, of standing for all that is good, true and beautiful in whatever specific ways that might be challenged in a particular moment of history. Of course, God does not need to be informed of what we need. We know from St. Augustine that the purpose of our prayer of petition is not to tell God what we need (much less what we want); rather, it is the way that God prepares us to receive the good things He has in store for us. This is the disposition of the trusting believer whenever we approach God with our requests.

#### **Conclusion**

All of these spiritual practices will prepare you well for your future life as a priest and sustain you in that life after ordination. They will instill in you the strength of self-

discipline, so that you will have the spiritual stamina you need when confronting head-on the very real and practical resistance to the Gospel so common in our contemporary culture, in ways both obvious and subtle. Whether it's teaching and witnessing to the truth in charity when faced with hostile opposition, or struggling with your own inner temptations, weaknesses and failures, the strength of your spiritual life will help you to persevere in times of struggle and so to solidify evermore your priestly identity and interior adhesion to Christ, priest and victim. This, too, has always been a part of the priest's call and identity. In fact, a little later in on that reading from St. Gregory the Great in yesterday's Office of Readings, we find this:

The word of God accuses [the false prophets] of seeing false visions because they are afraid to reproach men for their faults and thereby lull the evildoer with an empty promise of safety. Because they fear reproach, they keep silent and fail to point out the sinner's wrongdoing.

The word of reproach is a key that unlocks a door because reproach reveals a fault of which the evildoer is himself often unaware....

Anyone ordained a priest undertakes the task of preaching, so that with a loud cry he may go on ahead of the terrible judge who follows. If, then, a priest does not know how to preach, what kind of cry can such a dumb herald utter? It was to bring this home that the Holy Spirit descended in the form of tongues on the first pastors, for he causes those whom he has filled, to speak out spontaneously.

I spoke about the challenges of our contemporary culture, but we can see that, really, not that much has changed. Doesn't this describe to a "t" what we so often see today? I often hear complaints from people about bad preaching. They want to hear the hard topics preached on. Yes, it's tricky to do that in a way that is both forthright and compassionate, but it *can* be done.

But again, as we just heard, this is not really new. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. After all, human nature doesn't change. But neither does God's love and mercy. Where, though, do we find the strength to persevere? Yes, in our individual spiritual lives, but also in the fact that, as priests, we do not do this alone. Priests share a common bond of Priesthood with their bishop in Jesus Christ, for the sake of his people, his Church, the priestly people of God. The priest has to be clear in his own priestly identity as he lives this out in the context of his three-fold relationship with his bishop, with his brother priests, and with the lay faithful. That decree of the Second Vatican Council on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, treats this three-fold relationship quite explicitly.

When a priest isolates himself, he ends up failing to heed this call, which strikes at the very root of our priestly identity. *Do not do that!* You will end up being a whiner. Real men don't whine. You will end up being that kind of pastor whom St. Augustine says milks the sheep and fleeces the flock for his own comfort and prestige, the one who flees the battle and backs down when things become uncomfortable; he is too

intimidated to utter that word of reproach. You are capable of a life much greater than that; you are capable of excellence; with God's grace, you are capable of holiness.

For a priest to live out his life and ministry in the context of this three-fold relationship is of the utmost importance. And so, in my other three rector's conferences throughout this academic year I will treat each of these three relationships.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Fr. Bud for the opportunity to address you this evening, and for the other opportunities he has afforded me to speak with you throughout this year. I look forward to being with you at those times.