

**“John the Baptist, Peter, and the Priestly Virtue of Christ-Centered Humility”**  
**Homily for Mass for Deceased Alumni**  
**Alumni Reunion of the Pontifical North American College**  
**Feast of the Baptism of the Lord**  
**January 13, 2019**  
**Chapel of the Immaculate Conception of the Pontifical North American College**  
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## **Introduction**

The contrast between living in accordance with Church time and with that of the secular culture strikes me no more sharply than precisely at this time of the year – the first couple of weeks of January and, in particular, today’s Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

By now, everywhere else the “holiday season” is long gone and forgotten about: the decorations have been taken down, the lights put away, people have taken care of mulching their Christmas trees or disposing of them in some other eco-friendly way, and everyone is now focusing on what’s coming next – back in our own country, that means January sales, the NFL playoffs and planning Superbowl parties, maybe even gearing up for Valentine’s Day celebrations.

Yet, in the Church, we are still savoring the contemplation of the saving mystery of the Incarnation: yes, all the way up to this last day of the Christmas season, the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

## **St. John the Baptist: a Model for Priests**

In a sense, though, it extends beyond, as the Gospel reading for next Sunday, the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, will recount Christ’s first miracle at the Wedding Feast of Cana, thus marking the third of his three Epiphanies, or “Theophanies,” in which he reveals his divine glory: the visit of the Magi we celebrated last Sunday, his Baptism that we celebrate today, and the first sign of his glory in changing water into wine. These three

Theophanies mark the steps in the soul's journey toward union with her Lord. As Dom Guéranger explains: "The star has led the soul to faith; the sanctified Waters of the Jordan have conferred purity upon her; the Marriage-Feast unites her to her God. ... after having enlightened and purified [the soul], [the Bridegroom] invites her to the heavenly feast, where she is to receive the Wine of his divine love."

In the broader liturgical perspective, we know that the seasons of Advent and Christmas – unlike Lent and Easter, which are marked more by a contrast with each other – are deeply intertwined. And one of the key connecting factors that threads its way all throughout, from beginning to end, is the figure of St. John the Baptist: he appears early in the Advent season as the Lord's herald, the voice crying out in the desert to prepare the way for him; in the final week of Advent, we hear about him again in the parallel Annunciation and Birth narratives; and now, at the very end of the cycle, he appears yet again.

It is good that the Church presents to us often the figure of St. John the Baptist, especially to us who have committed our lives, or are preparing to commit their lives, to priestly service to Christ's Bride, the Church. John the Baptist has always struck me as an especially well-suited model for priests: he points out the Lamb of God when he is near, directing people away from himself and toward the one who really is the Messiah. His fierce courage for the truth is matched only by his profound humility: "I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals." And notice how Luke's version of the Lord's Baptism differs from those of Matthew and Mark: Luke does not mention John as the one who baptizes, rather using the undefined passive voice ("After ... Jesus ... had been baptized"); the Theophany appears not at the moment of Baptism, but afterwards when Jesus is praying. There is a literary technique here of distancing John from the actual Baptism of the Lord – not even giving him credit for being the one honored with this distinction! Not

that it would matter to him; his whole life embodied the utterance that defined his very being: “he must increase, I must decrease.”

### **In the Current Context**

John models the Christ-centered humility that must mark the life of the priest, if he is going to be both happy and effective as a priest. It is, I believe, failures in living this spirituality that lie so much at the root of the turmoil we are experiencing in the Church these days. We are subject to an unrelenting narrative of corruption within the clergy, even at high levels of the hierarchy, a corruption often blamed on clericalism. “Clericalism,” of course, is a multivalent word; the clerical state is an inextricable part of the Church’s life, which is meant to contribute to her effectiveness in carrying out her mission. To be more exact, the problem is clerical narcissism, that is, the exact reverse of what John models for us: “he must decrease, so that I may increase.” This is a pitfall of professional Church ministry to which the priest can easily succumb, for, as secularized as our society has become, our people still love their priests and want to treat them well. A priest can easily pander to adulation and create a personality cult for himself, and in so doing live in exactly the opposite way that St. Paul instructs us to in his letter to Titus.

St. Paul speaks here about the appearance of Christ’s glory as the appearance of grace: “The grace of God has appeared, saving all.” And he goes on to say that he came to train us in right living, which is accomplished by “reject[ing] godless ways and worldly desires and . . . liv[ing] temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age.” This means living a morally upright life, centered in God, following His commandments: in a word, a life imbued with human and Christian virtue – and for us, priestly virtue as well.

Priestly virtue is what orients the priest to living his double duty as a Christian disciple: that is, his calling in life is not only for his own sanctification, but for that of his people as well. In word and, especially, by example, he is to lead his people step-by-step

along the path of enlightenment, purification and, finally, union with their Bridegroom, receiving the Wine of his divine love. This is why the priest must never underestimate the precious responsibility that God has entrusted to him, and the grave harm to souls – not to mention to the credibility of the Church and the very Gospel itself – that results when he fails to live with Christ-centered humility. As Pope Francis wrote to the American bishops on the occasion of the retreat we took together at Mundelein seminary which just concluded last Tuesday: “Whenever the Gospel message proves inconvenient or disturbing, many voices are raised in an attempt to silence that message by pointing to the sins and inconsistencies of the members of the Church and, even more, of her pastors.”

### **Signs of Renewal**

Of course, all of this is only part of the story. You and I know that there is an awful lot to the rest of the story that is good news. We have to bear this in mind, too, as a necessary driving force for the purification of the Church in our time. There are so many signs of this good news. As just one little example, God gave me a good taste of this precisely on my flight back home from the bishops’ retreat in Mundelein.

After taking my seat on the airplane, a young woman religious was boarding after me whose habit I recognized as a Congregation of sisters working in both San Jose and San Francisco. It is one of those congregations that is young, vibrant and growing. We see the seeds of these kinds of religious communities beginning to sprout up all around us. As she walked past me, she smiled and said, “We’re praying for you!” The devout Christian gentleman from Dallas sitting next to me with whom I had struck up a conversation gave me an inquisitive look, so I told him, “We’re both doing work for the Church in the San Francisco Bay Area.” To which he replied: “You have your work cut out for you.”

Then the young lady in the seat behind me recognized me and, bubbling over with faith as she was, couldn't resist, of course, talking to me, even through the little space between the seats. She couldn't contain her excitement at the FOCUS Seek Conference she had just attended. After arriving in San Francisco and waiting at baggage claim, we had a chance to chat more at length. At the Conference she joined 18,000 fellow college students united to pray, learn, grow in the faith and renew themselves in spreading the faith to others – *on their college campuses*. Her excitement and love for being Catholic was palpable, even in the midst of the resistance she faces in living that out.

### **Mentors in Priestly Virtue**

Such signs are all around us. It is very clear where the Church is alive and flourishing. Which brings us to our Mass today, this Mass for the deceased alumni of the Pontifical North American College. We are all here because of our predecessors in the Priesthood, and especially those who have been examples, inspirations and mentors to us along our own path to and through the Priesthood. They are seeds that have borne fruit. They have brought us to where we are now in our lives. Even more than a time to relive memories and rekindle friendships, as valuable as that is, this time of reunion is a time of renewal in our priestly life and calling in which they have formed us. Even for those of us for whom the passage of time has flown by in the quantity of decades, returning here brings us back to a very formative period in our lives, a time that has defined to a great degree the people we have become.

This chapel, in particular, is at the heart of that formation. It's hard to believe that it was over forty years ago that I first stepped foot into this chapel, as I would do very many times over the next four years of my life. But one of those times stands out far and above all of the others: that was the time I, and my classmates, entered to lie prostrate on the floor

of this chapel and receive ordination to the diaconate (my class was the last to be ordained deacons in this chapel).

The gesture of prostration is a powerful symbol of the humility necessary for priestly virtue. Pope Francis, in that letter to us bishops, spoke of *inconsistencies of the Church's pastors*; Blessed John Henry Newman teaches that holiness is characterized by *consistency*. Of course, to be consistent with the Gospel message when it is – as Pope Francis puts it – inconvenient or disturbing, will not always be appreciated! It will always involve some kind of suffering, whether from within in striving to grow in human, Christian and priestly virtue, or attacks from without for standing for truth and leading people to holiness. I am reminded here of what we just read last Monday in the Office of Readings for the Memorial of St. Raymond of Penyafort. Writing to his confreres, he said: “May you never be numbered among those whose house is peaceful, quiet and free from care; those on whom the Lord’s chastisement does not descend; those who live out their days in prosperity, and in the twinkling of an eye will go down to hell.” We don’t really talk that way anymore. Maybe we should!

This is why we first came to the College, and why we return: as the Serran prayer for vocations puts it, to “consume ourselves for souls.” Not for self-promotion, nor career, nor a life of comfort and prosperity; all of that is *inconsistent* with the call to ordained ministry. As I have often said, and I’m sure it’s true for most (if not all) of you, I can never repay the College for all she has given me. The only way that one could even begin to try to repay such a debt is by striving for excellence, for holiness, in one’s Priesthood: that is, consistency with the priest’s high calling and the way that he lives.

Of course, studying and praying here brings us shoulder-to-shoulder with another outstanding model of priestly life: that, obviously, is St. Peter. You may know that a young Polish bishop was moved to write a poem about St. Peter when he was attending the Second

Vatican Council. Years later, when recalling the mysterious gift of the Priesthood, St. John Paul II revisited this poem. In *Gift and Mystery* he said:

When I wrote these words, I was thinking of Peter, and of the whole reality of the ministerial priesthood, and trying to bring out the profound significance of this liturgical prostration. In lying prostrate on the floor in the form of a cross before one's ordination, in accepting in one's own life, like Peter, the cross of Christ, and [in] becoming with the Apostle a floor for our brothers and sisters, one finds the ultimate meaning of all priestly spirituality.

That is the price to be paid for consistency, that is to say, holiness. And that is why we come here. That is, the purpose for pursuing preparation for the Priesthood in Rome is not to probe the possibilities of promotion but to ponder the proximity of Peter.

## **Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, then, let us meditate on these words about Peter penned by a saint in the Basilica so near and dear to us:

Our feet meet the earth in this place; there are so many walls, so many colonnades, yet we are not lost. If we find meaning and oneness, it is the floor that guides us. It joins the spaces of this great edifice, and joins the spaces within us, who walk aware of our weakness and defeat. Peter, you are the floor, that others may walk over you .... You want to serve their

feet that pass, as rock serves the hooves of sheep. The rock is a gigantic  
temple floor, the cross a pasture.