

Holy Redeemer's Special Treasure: Our Good Friday Muse and Guide

Upon the Death of Reverend Charles Smarsh

My Dear Holy Redeemer Family, Friends, and Visitors,

It is a privilege and gift to gather with you and my brother priests to concelebrate this Mass of Resurrection for Father Charles Francis Smarsh. My condolences to all of you, but especially Father Smarsh's sister Jane and her husband Drew, as well as his brother Joseph and wife Carol, and each of you who call him uncle. May you know the comfort of faith. Thank you, Father Mark, for this opportunity to preach the resurrection as we salute and commit Father Charles to the mercy of heaven.

For many years, Father Charles and I tag-teamed the Triduum here at Holy Redeemer: me on Holy Thursday, him on Good Friday, and whomever was pastor took the Easter Vigil. But I had met Father Smarsh long before then and long before my ordination. It would have been sometime in 1973-74 when he arrived here. He was part of a great band of diocesan priests and Sisters of Providence who collaborated to form my heart to love God and follow Christ. Forever I am grateful to this great priest of Christ the Redeemer, a special treasure of this parish, our Good Friday muse and guide. Allow me to speak of the gift of Father Charles' priesthood at Holy Redeemer, a divine gift now fully given in the resurrection of the body.

I.

For a parish, the altar is as the dining room table. At the dining room table, families break bread as they simultaneously break open their lives. The events of a day are shared, though not in the way of calendar but tragic and comedic story. At the dining room table, families pray God's blessing, toast the graces of life, and enjoy one another's company. At the dining room table, families remember, celebrate, and believe the love that holds them together as one. It is a thing preciously good and easily broken that unites a family across generations and busyness and sickness and aging and suffering and sin, and it is the dining room table that quietly invites a family to conserve and preserve such a fragile treasure, both when being used and in waiting to be used. It invites and it calls, does this table, to remain in the gift of love and to abstain from the harm of hate, to sustain affection and restrain resentment, to contain the sacred and detain the mundane, to explain and maintain this domain divinely ordained!

For a parish, the altar is as the dining room table, which Christ sets, where Christ opens the Scriptures and breaks the bread. It is sign to us that God loves the human race and always walks with us on the journey of life. Around this table, we remember God, celebrate so great a love, and believe in his only begotten Son. We present our lives as they are for healing and forgiveness. And we pray to become by the power of the Holy Spirit what we eat, the body of Christ and so bread for the world; the compassion of Christ and so mercy for hearts imprisoned by shame; the fullness of Christ and so healing for the wounded and worn. "Remain in my love," Jesus said at the Last Supper, and so here, around this table, we confess his love and attach to his love and live in his love and remain in his love so to share his love to all the world.

For a parish, the altar is as the dining room table, but it is not a dining room table. It is the table of the heavenly banquet and altar of God's throne. Indeed, in faith we believe that when we gather at this table, we are sacramentally participating in a feast set by God in heaven. This is why we seek to arrive at church in good conscience, best clothes, abstaining from food and other distractions. And it's why, to recall a song from my childhood, we tip our hats to a priest and call him Father. The priest in the Mass is *persona Christi*. He takes on the person of Christ, becomes Christ, and at this table takes the bread and wine as Jesus did and consecrates it to become the Body and Blood of Jesus. And as Jesus on the night he was betrayed, the priest at Mass invites us into fellowship and friendship with God. Friends, all of this we must understand if our hearts are to be stirred to proper gratitude for Father Smarsh's gift to this community of faith, for there is no one so long a servant at this table *persona Christi* than Charles Smarsh. No one who profoundly bowed and revered with a kiss this altar for so many years. Nearly five decades, through five pastors, amidst three different sanctuaries; 49 of his 57 years as a priest spent here with this family celebrating Eucharist at this table. God be praised. Alleluia!

And how he loved you. How he came to love you. How he became a priest because of you. Perhaps his last prayer was to thank God for you, especially those of you who cared for him so generously to his very last breath. It's said that a priest is saved by his congregation. I think that's right.

II.

How his voice used to boom and echo through this place. He commanded our attention. He used colorful stories and rich analogies to speak of God. He regaled us with history and theology. He preached true Christmas joy: "Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race." He taught true Easter hope: "Behold how God makes all things new." Once, at Christmas, he preached about Easter, or was it at Easter that he preached about Christmas. I don't remember, but the point was the same. "Don't say *Merry Christmas*," he announced. "Say *Happy Easter*, for Christmas is not Christmas without Easter." Nor is Easter Easter without Christmas. Thus did he provoke us to believe in God, understand the mystery of faith, and watch for "the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." It was such love for God, the love of a priest, that motivated this man who was the secret treasure of Holy Redeemer, a man who by day, as it were, ran a physics lab at the University Maryland for 34 years.

Father Smarsh was for many years our Good Friday muse and guide. He exuded the dignity and sanctity of Good Friday, the holiest day of the holy days, a day of silence and solemnity. How fitting that today's Gospel tells of the hour that Jesus took his last earthly breath on the cross. Can't you hear Fr. Charles: "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*"

Father Smarsh led us to the cross on this solemn feast. How seriously he took on the task of Good Friday, including the prostration before this sacred altar, including the chanting of the long prayers as he drenched in perspiration, including new perspectives each year on the mystery of salvation as he preached this cross, the gift of redemption, and the self-offering of our Holy Redeemer, Jesus Christ! Many of us well remember the annual reading of the Passion on Good Friday, lectors around the altar, Charles standing among the congregation almost theatrically as Christ being judged by Pilate. He dignified that role and showed utmost regard for our Savior's words: "You say I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." The words ring within me, spoken with his solemn tone and bold inflection.

Father Charles listened to Christ's voice, and he spoke Christ's words to us with conviction and clarity. His truth to our place of truth to open us to accept Christ as our truth. He did this well, as if it was for us that he was born and came into the world. Now he enjoys the fullness of truth, the completion of his ordination, and becomes what we hope to become, *persona Christi* in heaven, communion with Christ at the heavenly banquet. God grant him and all who have died in Christ the gift of resurrection.

III.

Friends, today we salute a good and holy priest, Father Charles Smarsh, our Good Friday muse and guide for nearly half a century, the special treasure of Holy Redeemer. Thank you, Father Charles, for setting this altar for us for so long and for giving your life to Christ's activity at the Last Supper. Praise be the wisdom of God that brought this priest to us as constancy, integrity, and love. We entrust him now to the mercy of heaven. For us who remain, may we possess Good Friday faith and courage, never forgetting the dignity of Father Charles' performance both in life and especially in liturgy. May Good Friday be our witness going forth from this place, like Mary and John at the foot of the cross, newly summoned to bring Christ's Good News to all the world. May Holy Redeemer become ever more the Body of Christ consecrated and given as eternal food and drink. And may we inspire from among our young one or maybe two to take the place of Father Charles in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. It's a legacy thing, a Sunday dinner thing, a dining room table thing, a Catholic thing, this magnificent thing we do as priests and people of God with our God at the altar of the Eucharist.

Your brother in Christ,

Reverend Daniel J. Issing, C.S.C.

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