

Holy Hour for Vocations, 2021  
St. Joseph Church, Newport, RI  
Gn 14:17-24; Jn 6:60-69

There is a universal reality that can be found in every human person. Every human person wants to be happy, or perhaps a better way to put it, every human person wants to be fulfilled. And we live in a world that is all too ready to offer its own answers to how to reach that fulfillment. Lots of shortcuts and easy solutions are out there. Sex, drugs and rock & roll are just three of many, many options the world tries to offer. However, the priest offers a different answer, a unique answer. It is the priest who offers the only real, the only true answer. The only answer that will actually provide fulfillment, that will actually provide more than just a fleeting happiness. The only answer that provides an eternal happiness. That answer is Jesus Christ. The Catholic priest has a monopoly on that answer, because outside the Church, there is no true happiness or fulfillment. And by extension, through the sacraments, especially through the Eucharist, the priest brings that reality to people and invites them to join him in it.

Peter says it so perfectly in the Gospel that Deacon Pryor just proclaimed for us. “Master, to whom shall we go? *You* have the words of eternal life.” Deacons Dan & Doan, tomorrow, after you are ordained, you will go up to the altar at the Cathedral, and you will join Bishop Tobin, Bishop Evans and all your new brother priests. You will say the words of eternal life over the gifts of bread and wine that harken back to Melchizedek in the days of Abraham. You will say “This is my Body” and “This is the chalice of my Blood”. These words you have probably uttered before in classes or conversations or even

in your Mass practicums. But when you say them this time, over those gifts of bread and wine, and when you say them again as celebrants at your first Masses of Thanksgiving of the Feast of Corpus Christi, and again at every Mass you celebrate for the rest of your lives, they will be words imbued with incredible power. The power to bring about eternal life. And the same will be true every time you say those words of absolution in the confessional, “*I absolve you from your sins.*” And again whenever you anoint the sick and the dying with the sacred oil, “*Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up.*” These words will have power, they’ll have the power to turn bread and wine into flesh and blood. The power to remove the darkest, most shameful sins from the repentant soul. And the power to prepare a soul to face its greatest battle, to overcome the realities of death, to hold firm to the faith and enter into the kingdom of everlasting life.

The sacramental words of the priest that you will use have power because they really aren’t *your* words. They are actually the words of Christ, the words of the Holy One of God. They are His words, they are the words of eternal life passed on to his Apostles who stayed with Him even though the teachings got hard. They are the words that the Apostles then passed down, through the help of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, to their successors, the bishops of the Church by whose hands we have been ordained. They are words of great power.

They are fighting words. Words we use to fight the great battles of the soul. The battle that we fight for each and every

soul that God puts into our pastoral care. For our enemy is powerful, and he too has powerful words. His words are words of division. His words are designed to instill fear and doubt. His words are petty and unjust. They are not the words of eternal life but words of eternal death. And so we go into battle, as brother priests, every day. Not knowing what challenges will arise, not knowing most days what souls we will be called to bring Christ's healing love to. But we go into battle each day always relying on the Lord, because, as I said, they are His words, not ours.

Not only are they words worth fighting for, but they are words worth dying for, as so many martyrs in the 2,000 year history of our Church have done. Especially priests. Saints Peter and Paul, the patrons of the Cathedral in which you will be ordained tomorrow, gave their lives for these eternal words. And the victory of their sacrifice, the continual flowing of the grace of those words, is evidenced by the fact that the very city that executed them, is not the central hub of Catholics throughout the world. Pray for their intercession that you might have a slice of that victory in the cities and towns you are called to serve. St. Boniface, on whose feast day tomorrow you'll be ordained, died to bring that word to the pagan tribes of Germany. We still have some work to do with the Germans though! But pray for Boniface's intercession as well, since you will now share a special bond with him.

So many great priests and bishops have given their lives to spread these words of eternal life to the far corners of the globe. All the Apostles except John were called to martyrdom. Many priests and bishops of the early Church, like St. Boniface, died

spreading the Gospel message throughout the Roman Empire and other parts of pagan Europe. And later during the reformation, there were saints who died trying to preserve those words, like Saints Thomas More and John Fisher. And of course the many Jesuits, Dominicans and Franciscan missionaries who spread the faith to the Far East and our own side of the world in the Americas. And it's not over. 8 priests were reported murdered for the faith across the world just last year in 2020. And that's not including Michael Nnadi, a Nigerian seminarian, not yet a priest, who was murdered while preaching the faith to his kidnappers.

And the unfortunate truth is that the people will often push back at your words. "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" is echoed throughout the Church today. We need women priests because the world demands it. We need access to abortion and contraception, because the world demands it. We need to bless "same-sex marriages", because the world demands it. We need to catch up with the times, because the world demands it. As I said at the beginning, the world is always offering its own answers. But they are not the true answers, they are not the answers of Christ, who is truth. When people walked away from Him, Jesus did not change His teaching. He doubled down. He turned to His closest friends and said "Do you also want to leave?" Almost as if He was daring them to do so. Thankfully, Peter replied in the beautiful way that he did. And from that response, and with the grace of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the Church was born.

And so for 2,000 years we have labored to spread those life giving words, but we cannot be a Church that rests on its laurels.

We cannot be a Church that maintains, we must be a Church that continues to grow, that goes out into the world. We cannot be a Church that focuses only on those fish already in the net, but also, and perhaps even more so, on the fish who have yet to be caught. We need to do it not to keep the coffers full and the churches open. No, we can celebrate Mass in the parking lots if we have to. We need to do it because souls are being lost. They're being lost because they're not hearing the words of eternal life. They are being lost because they aren't coming to the source of eternal life, the Eucharist. They're believing what the world tells them, that their happiness, their fulfillment can be found elsewhere. We have a monopoly on the real source of happiness, the only true source of fulfillment. There's nowhere else to find it. And it requires good priests, anchored to the truth that is Christ, anchored to the words of eternal life, to bring it to those who have yet to hear it. I pray, Deacons Dan and Doan, that you have that strength to hold fast to the truth. And I encourage everyone here tonight, please pray for these two men who will go before the altar of God tomorrow, and offer their lives as priests, that they may be good and holy, that they may be men of truth. And then pray for others to follow in their footsteps. Men who will step forward and bring the words of eternal life, particularly the Eucharist, to the people. Because the reality is, there is nowhere else to go.