

Farewell Homily - Fr. Ed Vilkauskas, C.S.Sp.
August 27, 2000 | Our Lady of Lourdes, Monroe, NC

I look out at you and I see people I know, I look at you and I see real people, with real lives, many stories of faith, I see in your faces the deep love you have for your families, and the efforts you have made to nurture your love for God and the Church.

I look at you and remember the events of your lives that I have shared - moments of joy, when your children were born and baptized, first communions and meeting your families from all around the country, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, mothers and fathers, grandparents who came to share your joy; I look at you and see couples in love who came and said, "we want to be married," and meeting with you and entering the sacred area of your lives and hearing you say "yes" to each other.

I look at you and see troubles resolved in your lives and your families. I stand here and see moments of great suffering and share in your suffering with you, physical, spiritual, emotional, and I see how God has healed you and made you well again, and give thanks for being able to be part of that miracle of God's healing power. I look at you and remember eating with you in your home at your table, I see young people, adults now, who were once children and I watched you grow. I see all of my children running to give me a hug after Mass each Sunday, my, what a lucky father I have been.

Every Sunday, but many times in between, I talked with you about little things and big things, how your tomatoes were doing this season, and the new car you bought, the vacation you were going on, and the one you came back from, the churches you visited, the people you met, the things you did, and the update on the families you visited. Every Sunday, about 600 of them, we prayed as one family in Christ, around the table of the Lord we gathered to hear God's word and celebrate his presence among us. Every

Sunday, for over 600 of them, I tried to reflect and share with you the meaning of God's word for us that week, that day. How much I hoped and prayed that in some small way, the Lord Jesus would reveal himself to you and come into your life through those simple words offered to you in my sermons. Sure, some might have been too long, and so-so, you told me so, some weren't so good and you didn't mention a word. Some homilies through the grace of God touched you, and you said so. It was good to know that at least occasionally God used me as an instrument of his message.

There were parties, and celebrations - the 50th Jubilee of this parish, most recently the groundbreaking for the new church, Mardi Gras, feast day celebrations, holidays and holidays, Halloween costumes, covered dish dinners and lots, lots of good food many times - I don't look like I do for no reason at all - your favorite recipes tried out on me, and I guess I'm bigger and better because of it. A lot of tonnage came on board this guy between 1988 and 2000. But it was fun, now all I have to do is give it away this year. After all I don't want to be selfish and keep all this weight for myself; it was a gift from you, so I should share it with others.

And then, there is this grey hair, it was brown/blond when I got here as a young pastor - it's true, you should see the pictures, new parishioners and children when they see pictures from 1990, ask me who that priest was. Yeah, the grey hair is there and I guess I earned it. As many joys and special moments that have filled these many years, there were more than a few, which pretty regularly provided me with some challenges. Decisions to be made about and concerning individuals' reception of the sacraments, practical decisions that dealt with popular and unpopular causes which sometimes led to differences of opinion, and occasionally some conflict.

How human we are, how weak sometimes, how stubborn, how opinionated, how dose-minded even as we try and struggle to do

the right thing, to do God's will, we sometimes fail, and yes, there were times I did fail, there were times I, yes, me, might have been close-minded, wrong, and so now, if not then, I apologize to each and every person who I might have hurt in anyway at any time. If and when I did, please know it was not by design or desire, please know that at no time did I ever intend to say or do anything that would hurt anyone. So, whether it was you as an individual, and a group in particular, accept now my apology for any hurt that might have come to you through my fault, my weakness, my blindness. I ask your forgiveness, and hope you give it to me.

For those who might have gossiped, misused information, became negative and critical and forgiving and bitter, those who perhaps know they hurt other parishioners or me or any of the priests, know I forgive you, know that I hold no grudge, know that I pray for God's love and mercy in your life to heal you.

As special as so many of you are, have been, and always will be, there are some here who are very special, whom I love very deeply, who are you. I look out and see many of you here. You are the individuals that God, through his son Jesus Christ and through the witness and prayers of someone close to you brought you into our Catholic family and for many into the Christian faith. Yes, you who as adults asked for baptism, were baptized or plan to be baptized, you are God's chosen ones, God has graced your life in a special way and, like Mary, you said yes to God. For those of you received into the Catholic Church and made your profession of faith, received the sacraments of initiation, and discovered in our Catholic family the fullness of life in Christ through the sacraments, my are you ever special, because I know you made a decision, sometimes not easy, to grow more deeply in Christ through the Catholic faith.

And then, I see you now, young and old, men and women who for some reason were away from the Church, some even away from

God, and through God's grace, someone's prayers, your own attentive heart, returned to full participation in the sacraments and to the life of the Church. It has been an extraordinary privilege to walk with you on your faith journey. I hope in some small way, I have been a small help to you. You will always be in my prayers; may God give you perseverance and strength to keep the faith, to remain faithful to the gospel, the sacraments, and the Church. You are loved.

Is this the whole picture of my life and ministry with you during these last twelve years? Of course not, there is much more, much more than can ever be told, much more held deeply in my heart, much only God or you know, that will never be told, but will always be known and remembered. And of course, once again, I have talked TOO LONG, said too much and maybe more than you wanted to hear. But, then, you know, if it is my last chance and God forbid that I miss the opportunity. I can't say this to all of you personally, so include yourself in the place that you know you belong - but all of you are, have been and will remain a significant and special part of my life, my memory and my prayers.

One last word, truly, I mean it - the end.

What now? For the good that has been, we give thanks Lord, for whatever failure or wrong that has been, we are sorry, Lord, now, you AND I look ahead to a new day, a new future, in God's hands. We surrender to Jesus and His will for us; we put ourselves and this parish under the guidance of Mary, our patroness, and in the certain power of the guidance that comes from the Holy Spirit who assures us of God's active presence and direction in our lives as we keep faith. God has plans for all of us, and we surrender to that plan. We look forward to supporting one another in that plan.

As you look forward to a new priest serving you, a new pastor,

resolve to welcome him, support him, stand by him and respond to his needs as he begins his service and ministry among you. He will undoubtedly not have my weaknesses, and perhaps many more strengths. Let the strengths of the priests who serve you stand high about the weaknesses they might have, and fill those gaps with your offer of time, talent and treasure so that together you can build up the kingdom of God in Union County.

May God bless you all, and keep you in his care, and deepen your faith. Thank you, hope to see you in the hall.

The Stories Not Told
By Fr. Don McEachin, C.S.Sp.

Spiritans can sometimes feel unappreciated, that our accomplishments are unsung and unnoticed by confreres. Several reasons for this come to mind. The first reason may be our geographical separation; that for some of us, out of sight means out of mind. A second reason may be our hectic lifestyle, which allows us little leisure time to be in touch with one another and to notice one another's accomplishments.

A third reason may be that for many of us, our personalities are such that we don't think community first (we are rugged individualists). The net effect of this is that on occasion, we may feel over-worked and under-appreciated in our ministries. This is a common feeling expressed among priests today, and we are certainly no exception.

I just returned from Our Lady of Lourdes in Monroe, NC and the farewell of Fr. Edward Vilkauskas as he leaves OLL after 12 years. I would like to tell you a bit of the story of what I experienced this weekend. In doing so, I invite you to rejoice with me, and give thanks for the marvelous story of Ed's - and the Spiritans' - 12 years in Monroe, and let it be your story as well, perhaps a "stand-

in” for the marvelous work that you do that is not heralded.

At Our Lady of Lourdes, there are three English-language Masses each weekend, and two in Spanish. After each one this weekend there was a reception for Fr. Ed, with either delicious Mexican or delicious Southern home cooking.

The two Sunday morning Masses were combined into one outdoor Mass for the occasion, under the pine trees where the new church is to be built. During the Sunday Mass, there were people weeping openly during the whole Mass. The cantor stopped half way through the opening hymn and turned away in tears. Ed had asked me to speak after the Gospel and he would speak after communion, afraid that if he spoke at the homily, he would be unable to finish the Mass. There were people everywhere. They had run out of chairs and people were standing in the grass in the back.

Ed told me that people would come up with their hands across their chest, who were unable to receive communion for one reason or another, and they expected a blessing instead of the host. Ed had started this tradition a few years earlier, when he noticed people in church who were not coming up for communion. Some were in need of annulments, or other situations that prevented them from receiving the Eucharist. He told them to come up to the altar anyway, for a blessing.

Today, almost everyone there lined up behind Fr. Ed, many who could have received communion but chose to fold their hands across their chest, in order to receive his blessing. It left the rest of us Eucharistic ministers with nothing to do but watch. When Ed spoke after communion, it was as a pastor addressing his flock. His words were so inspired that we have included them with this newsletter.

Ten years ago, the first Spanish-speaking family showed up in the

church, and were warmly welcomed by Fr. Ed. Now, only ten years later, there are two Spanish language Masses every weekend, both filled and way overflowing. There are Spanish choirs and folk music groups, youth and retreat groups, and Mexican food served after each of the Spanish Masses, every weekend.

OLL is a phenomenal success story. It is true that Catholics are moving into the Charlotte diocese as a whole; it is one of the fastest growing Catholic populations the country. However, OLL is an older town parish, with defined borders. The large influx of Catholics is into new neighboring parishes in the outlying area of Monroe. The increased participation of especially the Spanish-speaking population can be attributed to the Spiritan presence, and mostly to Fr. Ed.

This is a population that has been around for a long while, and it just took the right approach to make them feel welcome and at home. I heard numerous stories of how people were brought back to the faith as I sat eating beef enchiladas and beans, in the parish hall Saturday night. The youth group has its own Mexican band, which played. for us that evening.

As Ed departs for a well-deserved sabbatical, he can leave with a feeling of deep satisfaction at a job well done. But it must be incredibly difficult for him to leave this community; which has become such a part of his life's story; I came away with a feeling that I wished I could have been there throughout the years to see the parish come alive with the Spiritans who served at Om Lady of Lourdes with Ed. These other Spiritans who served at OLL (in alphabetical order) were: Fr. Vincent Donovan, Fr. Egbert Figaro, Fr. Robert Graves, Fr. William Joyce, Br. Luke Kneiper, Fr. Frank Malinowski, Fr. John McAndrew, and Br. George McLaughlin.

I knew that Ed had served as Director of the Office for Evangelization in the Diocese of Charlotte, but I didn't know until this

weekend how much he has put the theory into practice, and not just “talked the talk” but has “walked the walk” at Our Lady of Lourdes. I want to say a very special thanks to Ed, for an incredibly uplifting weekend, and especially for his dedicated pastoral-missionary presence in the Diocese of Charlotte.

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