

Fr. Roberto's Message
25th Priestly Anniversary Mass of Thanksgiving

In our Gospel today, Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a seed scattered on the land. The seed sprouted, grew and yielded fruits, even shelter for the birds of the sky.

We are all like seeds planted by God in this world to yield a fruitful harvest for the Lord. In my case I was planted in different soils, in the Philippines where my faith and relationship with God has taken root, was nurtured and nourished through my family, my Catholic school education and the whole Catholic environment of the Philippines.

Fast forward, with regards to my priestly vocation, God planted me at St. John's Seminary. Seminary literally means "seed-bed". St. John's became a fertile ground for this "seed" to sprout and grow towards priesthood. For my internship, I was planted at St. Joseph the Worker in Canoga Park. After ordination I was scattered in different fertile grounds: Christ the King in Hollywood, St. Raymond (Downey), All Souls (Alhambra), St. Joseph (Pomona), and now Nativity (here in El Monte). In these places, God used the people, the ministry, the sacraments, my challenges and trials as fertilizers for me to continue to sprout, grow and with God's grace and in His time, to yield some wonderful fruits for the *kingdom*.

When I look back on my journey from childhood to priesthood, from priesthood and beyond, I can truly say that it has been quite a ride, "*an adventure of love and faith with God, with Jesus and friends.*" This 25th Priestly Anniversary celebration evokes in me feelings of deep gratitude to God for the blessings all these years. Though there were many blessings, beautiful and significant memories, I can only highlight some. Otherwise, we'll be here all night. *[* If this is a little bit long for a homily, I beg your forgiveness. I already told my sister to limit her sharing during the program so I can speak a little longer.]*

- (1) The soil of St. John's Seminary instilled in me the importance of not only being holy but wholly [w,h,o,l,l,y], meaning to have a good balance in my life in terms of prayer, leisure, exercise, friendship, spiritual direction, having a support group & continuing education. I thank God for this, because the seminary could never prepare me for the unforeseen challenges and surprises of being a priest. A balanced priestly life, however, has helped me face & cope with these surprises.
- (2) St. Joseph the Worker, my internship parish introduced me the joy of serving together with priests and parishioners. For the first time, I also experienced what I call the "*pangs of celibacy.*" My friendship and affection for a particular lady in the parish forced me to make real choice between marriage and priesthood. Being a priest, there is indeed profound joy & fulfillment but also sacrifice. I thank God for giving me a human heart that can be stretched by love, and therefore, can expand its capacity for sacrificial love.
- (3) Christ the King was my first assignment after ordination. Though I was still in the honeymoon stage, it also felt like I was *breaking in* a new pair of shoes. I was adjusting to my new life as a priest. Like any new shoes, there were some tight and loose spots

(some joy & aches). But I thank God that the thought of tossing out or changing this new pair shoes which was priesthood never entered my mind. A pilgrimage to the Holy Land during this period (1998) was opportunity for God to affirm my priestly vocation.

- (4) St. Raymond was my second assignment. My involvement with Life-Teen ministry reminds me of what Pope Francis once said to the young people *“everything that Christ touches becomes young, new, and full of life.”* Our young people continue to bring vigor and freshness in my priestly life & in our church. With some young people from the parish, we joined Pope St. John Paul II in Toronto for World Youth Day. I felt so blest to concelebrate as a priest at the final and last World Youth Day Mass of Pope John Paul II.
- (5) To All Souls Church in Alhambra I was sent to help as an administrator. I was there for only 10 months. Though short lived I thank God for the fond memories I have of the faith and giftedness of the people. Though financially challenged All Souls parish was rich in human resources and giftedness.
- (6) It was during my assignment at St. Raymond and All Souls when the American Catholic Church faced a very dark period in its history. The church sex abuse scandal hit the fan (2002f). Not a good time to be seen with a “collar” in public. In public, some priests might get an unfriendly look or a negative comment.

Maybe because this church crisis was preoccupying my mind, I had a dream where I saw myself no longer able to celebrate Mass. The feelings I had in my dream was that of despair and deep sadness. So actually, it was a nightmare. I thank God - I woke up. But the dream showed me that to celebrate the Eucharist and make Jesus present to the people was the joy and fulfillment of my life.

During this crisis, in a letter, I wrote to Cardinal Mahony, I said *“our priests are feeling very vulnerable and disheartened... We feel that we are just a phone call away from being removed from the vocation we love... This crisis reminds me of what Christ said that ‘the Shepherd will be struck and the flock will be scattered.’ If we have been scattered by this crisis, I believe we need to renew and re-strengthen our bonds: with Christ, with our brother priests, with you, and with our people.”*[end of quote]

I thank the Cardinal for being a shepherd during this difficult time, and for embracing and carrying the heavier part of this cross during this crisis. Holding on to Christ, together with you [our archbishop], other bishops, my brother priests, and the people who knew and loved us, we were humbled, we endured, persevered and remained faithful.

- (7) St Joseph was my first pastorate where I served for 13 years. Aside from the day to day administration and ministry, lots of interesting things happened. For example, because of a mountain biking accident where I broke my left scapula, I had to learn how to celebrate Mass with 1 hand. In spite of the accident, I thank God that a year later, I was still able to complete a biking pilgrimage in the El Camino de Santiago in Spain. It was a top item in my bucket list of things to do before I die.

There is the ‘Copper King’ story. Someone known as the ‘Copper King of Pomona’ was stealing our church rain gutter because it was made of copper. In the middle of the night, together with some parish leaders, we did a stakeout, a surveillance. We had our

coffee, donuts, rice porridge ready for the night, and we caught the guy.

We also had a *Goldilocks* story. One morning as I was preparing for Mass, I saw crumbs of cake in the kitchen counter. Canned goods were opened. Suspecting that someone broke-in, I started to check the rooms. In one of the guest rooms, I saw a stranger sleeping on the bed. Quietly, I went out and called the police. They came immediately and apprehended the guy.

During my time at St. Joseph, I said goodbye to my dad in 2014 and to my mom the following year. I hope they are praying for me up there. During my last year at St. Joseph, there was a crisis in the school that had the possibility of exploding into a big scandal. I felt that I was going through a gauntlet. Going through this gauntlet gracefully and coming out of it OK was Jesus telling me "*I am with you always...*"

- (8) In 2017, I bid farewell to St. Joseph and was sent to Nativity. The parish I didn't apply for. Of course, I was disappointed for not getting any of the 3 parishes I applied for. To console myself, I said "*I just need to trust God.*" I am now finishing my 4th year here in Nativity, and the thought that comes to mind is "*Truly, Father Knows Best.*" If my last year at St. Joseph was like a gauntlet, Nativity is like my trophy for going through it.

I feel so blest to walk this chapter of my priestly life with Nativity. As a parish we successfully completed so many projects like our *Drought Resistant Garden*, the *Re-roofing of the Parish Center*, and our *Called to Renew* campaign. In December of 2019, we kicked-off our preparations for our Centennial in 2023. Then without much warning the Covid pandemic hit.

If celebrating Mass with 1 hand was strange enough, how much more celebrating Mass in an empty church and talking to a camera. My experience in dance performance in college and background in computers, maybe, made it a little easier for me to adapt to this.

The pandemic may have shut the doors of our church, but it did not shut the doors of our hearts to Christ. As a parish, Nativity embraced and adapted to this new reality. Though some ministries have temporarily stopped, new ministries and programs sprouted like the Phone Tree Ministry, our Reopening Team, the Covid Food Drive, our St. Joseph the Worker Ministry in action, our School Teacher's doing a hybrid of in-person & zoom teaching. Next school year, our school is offering *Homeschooling* via zoom.

Thank God that since we reopened last year on the Feast of Corpus Christi, we never went back in depriving our people of the Eucharist and other sacraments through our outdoor services. Because of the pandemic, together we prayed for our loved-ones, parishioners, those infected and for our frontline workers. Together we cried and grieved, but we also remained faithful, connected and hopeful.

Our journey continues... the adventure of love and faith with God, with Jesus and friends continues. It is marked with joy and sacrifices, surprises and challenges, some storms and sunny days, success and failures.

In the different seasons of our journey, ***may we always sing our Song of Thanksgiving to the Lord*** for the blessings, the beautiful memories, for the crosses & trials, and most especially, our thanksgiving because of our friends and companions in the journey.