

Sabbatical at Christmas

This is my last weekend before I leave on my sabbatical. I want to take the opportunity first to wish everyone a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, and also to explain what a sabbatical is and deepen further what I will be doing and give some explanation for the reason for my sabbatical at this time. You may or may not be aware that I have a degree in canon law, and it is meant for service to the whole of the Diocese. To that end, since 2010 I have been the Vice Chancellor for Canonical Affairs, assisting the bishop and priests, deacons and laity of the diocese when it comes to matters of the internal governance of the Church that fall under the purview of canon law. This includes bylaws for organizations, norms for buying and selling properties, sacramental matters, as well as disciplinary matters among clergy, and various and sundry miscellany. However, most people are aware of canon law as it pertains to questions of the status of persons, most especially in questions of marriage. The process of a declaration of nullity is something that many have an awareness of and maybe even have experienced it themselves. For the past year, I have been acting as Adjutant Judicial Vicar for the Diocese of Nashville, and in that capacity have been a judge on the marriage tribunal that we currently share with the Diocese of Nashville. The sharing of the tribunal has been an arrangement that we have enjoyed since the beginning of our Diocese in 1988. However, after 30 years, Bishop Stika indicated his desire to establish our own tribunal here in the Diocese of Knoxville, and he tasked me with that responsibility. The plan is to establish the tribunal for adjudication of canon law cases arising from the Diocese of Knoxville by July 1, 2020.

After fifteen years of priestly ministry and nine years of canonical service to the Church, and in order to prepare for the next 15 years and this momentous occasion of beginning the Tribunal of the Diocese of Knoxville, I asked Bishop Stika for some dedicated time for retreat and prayer. He graciously granted me this time and has released me to go to the monastery of Christ in the Desert. I leave the day after Christmas, December 26th, and will return to the parish March 9th, 2020. I will spend the first few days visiting my relatives in Louisiana, and then I will be in New Mexico at the monastery for the whole of the month of January. In February, I have the opportunity of taking a two week pilgrimage to the Holy Land, accompanying a group led by the noted Catholic apologist, Steve Ray.

Many people are familiar with what a sabbatical is, while others have never heard of it. A sabbatical is a Biblical term in its origin. The sabbath, of course, is the seventh day of the week and was the day of rest. There was a corresponding sabbath year in Scripture, when debts would be repaid. There is also a sabbath year, also known as a *sheviit*, mentioned in the Scriptures, when a plot of land was left to lie fallow, as if to let the land rest from its labors. In academic circles, this same idea was taken up to allow professors an opportunity to take a break from their teaching responsibilities to focus on writing or research or some other personal goal. Many other professionals take this idea up to prevent burnout and the staleness that comes with repetitive activity. Priests in the Diocese of Knoxville are given the privilege of applying for a sabbatical for every seven years of service, and it is defined as an extended renewal period to promote the personal renewal of the priest and to foster the development of his ministerial effectiveness. After being pastor of this parish for six years, a priest for fourteen, and a canonist for nine, and after having accomplished so many things since my time as being pastor, this seemed like an opportune time for renewal before I come back for the many more responsibilities and projects that my future holds. In case anyone was worried – no, this is not a vocational crisis or a struggle in my identity as a priest, but in fact is an attempt to focus more intently on my interior life and relationship with the Lord to make my priestly ministry even more effective by grounding it in the relationship with God in prayer.

To do this, I look to the wisdom of the ancient Church, especially the monastic tradition by which I have been formed greatly in my seminary days, and to which I have turned often in my priestly life for the yearly retreats that the Church asks of her priests. My four years of college were spent at a Benedictine monastery, Conception Abbey, at the college seminary that they run. When I was in Rome, I visited many monasteries in Europe for retreats, in particular, Pluscarden Abbey in Elgin, Scotland, where I made both of my canonical retreats before my ordination to the diaconate and priesthood. Since my ordination, I have frequently done retreats at monasteries, most notably the Monastery of St. Benedict in Norcia, Italy, and Christ in the Desert, in Abiquiu, New Mexico, where I will be taking my sabbatical. I find that the daily rhythm of prayer, called the *horarium*, helps me to focus on the interior life with the Lord by giving those privileged times – morning, noon, and night – to the Lord in praise through the praying of Psalms. The atmosphere of silence, which is not vowed or obligatory all the time as some would assume, is, however, very conducive to the concentration on the interior life. The monks see *tacernitas*, or quietness, as a virtue for developing the life of interior prayer. The general rule is not to talk unless it is necessary, and to avoid too much idle chatter that would disturb the soul's contemplation. There is, of course, the Grand Silence that takes place across the whole monastery from after Compline (Night Prayer) till the end of Lauds (Morning Prayer) the next morning. This is meant to keep our hearts vigilant through the night and focused only on God. Some may question my sanity for wanting to be so quiet when we are used to noise and distraction in our modern technology-saturated world. But this is one of the things I am most looking forward to, especially as it is so difficult to find in the ordinary active ministry of a priest. I have joked to many that my plan is to throw my cell phone into the river when I get to the monastery. And it is only half-joke, half-reality. Perhaps I may still do it, even if I tie a string around it so I can retrieve it before I come back. I assure you that during this time of quiet prayer, you will not be far from my thoughts, even if I will purposely be far from communication with you. I will bring you daily to my prayers, and I beg the same of you. Again, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Rev. J. David Carter