

Master Priest's Retreat Spring 2011

(Given to the priests of Birmingham, Mobile, Memphis, Wichita, Corpus Christi, Harrisburg, Oklahoma City, La Crosse, Baltimore, Lafayette, Ind.)

“May God Who Has Begun This Good Work in You Bring It To Fulfillment.”

Eight Conferences

- Conference 1: Jesus is Never Outdone in Generosity!
- Conference 2: The Hero of the Modern Age is the Parish Priest
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- Conference 6: Eucharistic Amazement
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- Conference 8: Confidence on the Day of Judgment! (Review of Retreat)

Conference 1: Jesus is Never Outdone in Generosity!

Scripture: Luke 17:7 *Attitude of a Servant* (Scripture of the servant coming in from the fields; he is only doing his duty.)

Story: St. Ignatius Loyola; a wealthy widow woman gave him a large sum of money for his education, room and board. His landlord stole his money, used it all up on debauchery and then, a month later, kicked Ignatius out on the street. St. Ignatius was so good. He just forgave the man and went on and God took care of him. Many years later, Ignatius had already founded the Jesuits and he was in a city about 90 miles from Rome. He got word that this old man, his former landlord, lay dying; bitter, all alone and without faith. St. Ignatius Loyola walked 90 miles to Rome, fasting and praying, and when he arrived, he moved in with the man and cared for him and loved him until he died.

Isn't it wonderful to be a Christian? To live this superior life called Christianity? Isn't it wonderful to spend our lives trying to become like Jesus? **St. Alphonsus Liguori** said, *“If you add up all the goodness of every good person who ever lived, it would not equal the goodness of Jesus.”* **What an amazing statement.** Just look in this room. There is tremendous goodness here; men who love the Lord and spend themselves everyday for Christ and our Holy Catholic Faith. But if we put all of your goodness together, it would not equal the goodness of Christ.

Dietrich Von Hildebrand: *“The goodness of Christ is only faintly seen in the goodness of all the saints.”* **St. Bonaventure:** *“If we learn everything except Christ, we learn nothing. And if we learn nothing except Christ, we learn everything.”*

Jesus is the only teacher. Jesus is the only lesson. **The only success recognized by God is “Christ-likeness.”** My brother priests, we have the privilege, not only of following Jesus and trying to become like Him...but we also have the privilege of preaching and teaching about Him!

I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that your retreat master this week is a country boy raised on a tobacco farm in southern Georgia. The good news is that a good retreat does not depend on the retreat master. It depends on the Holy Spirit and you.

Introduce myself:

Grew up in GA on a farm
Dad is Baptist; mom a Catholic from N.O.
Graduated from UGA; MSM Seminary
Left the seminary; worked as a commodity broker
Returned; ordained in 1991
VD for 10 year; pastor for 13 (at the same time)
African-American parish/ Hispanic ministry
Mt. St. Mary’s Seminary as VR in 2006;
19 years a priest; 48 years old.

I have no terminal degree; I do not have a doctorate in moral or systematic theology, like my confreres in the seminary. When people ask me why, I reply *“Because I obeyed my bishop and went where he sent me.”* I am not an academician. I am a simple parish priest whom God has called to work in priestly formation, at least for now.

A retreat does not depend on the retreat master. I have worked very hard on this retreat, prayed about it a lot. I have prayed for you everyday for the last two months, and I have had the **children in my life praying for you also. That Jesus will give you the grace you need most in your life at this time.**

What is my job as retreat master? 1. To pray for you. 2. To give you a series of conferences. 3. To be available to speak with you for spiritual direction or confession.

Every retreat master is charged with giving his retreatants **two pats on the back:** One up high with the hand and the other down low with the foot. Are you with me? You need to be commended. You have done and are doing great work as a priest! Jesus wants to tell you thank you! He is grateful and Jesus is never outdone in generosity. But every priest also needs to be exhorted and challenged to improve. Right? We all need both pats on the back side!

Quote from Cardinal Newman; *“The human mind is a marvelous thing. It first becomes active in the womb and remains so...until one is called upon to speak in public.”*

Feel free to use anything I say this week that you think you might find useful in your homilies or retreats **with one condition**...that you don't say I said it... because I got it from someone else! Greatest tricks of the trade: Steal everything you can! I don't have many original thoughts but I am pretty good about remembering what others have said and putting it all together.

Coffee Cup image: like going into a restaurant; the cup is upside down. You put it upright to signal the server to bring you some coffee. Just turn the cup of your soul up to signal the Holy Spirit that you need to be filled. He knows what graces you need more than you do.

We all have expectations. My motto is KISS: Keep it simple stupid. **Story:** Mother Teresa of Calcutta speaking with the Muslims. She showed them a crucifix and explained the Lord's passion, death and resurrection. She held up her hands with the five fingers extended: *“He did this for me. I do what for Him.”*

Story: My godfather, Uncle Tommy, who attends Mass every day and receives Holy Communion. He says one prayer, *“Jesus, no matter what else happens in this world to me, my wife and children, please just let us all one day live with you in Heaven.”* This is clear thinking, isn't it!

Story: St. Thomas More in the Tower of London; *“What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his eternal soul.”* So often in things spiritual, people make it too complicated: **“paralysis by analysis!”**

7 Objectives that I always wanted in our Savannah priest's retreats:

1. I wanted to get away from the daily grind of parish life. I wanted to visit with my brother priests, because many of us were so isolated in our distant assignments. This is a **social retreat in some ways**. I always found that I needed to attend this retreat but also to make my own silent 5 day retreat later in the year.
2. I wanted to laugh and have some fun, just feel good that I was on a retreat with my brothers.

Story: the bishop doing the Confirmation; everything went wrong; he was yelling at his MC in the sacristy after the Mass, right in front of the pastor. Finally, the MC, a very large priest, smiled, stretched out his arms and said, *“Somebody needs a hug!”* And the bishop kept fussing and the priest walked towards him with his arms extended; the bishop started hitting him with the rolled up program but the priest kept walking towards him! *I think sometimes we all just need to chill out a little bit!* It is very important to belly laugh on a regular basis.

George Santanyana: *“It is easier to make a saint out of a libertine than out of a prig.”*

You cannot be in this business unless you can laugh! Bl. **Mother Teresa of Calcutta:** *“Joy is a net of love by which we can catch souls for God.”* **Laughter means that we are flourishing! God did not put us here simply to survive; he put us here to flourish!**

3. I always wanted to have some time to just pray; be quiet with the Lord; maybe do some spiritual reading. The Holy Spirit is truly our spiritual director and our retreat master always! Please give Jesus His time on this retreat, time in silence. Spend some time with your brothers but give Jesus His time also.

When I was Vocation Director and I would visit the NAC in Rome, they would say: *“It’s against the rules to take a nap in the morning around here.”* I said, *“Really. Why is that?”* *“You’ll toss and turn all afternoon!”* I hope that you will get a chance to rest, and yes, take a nap. Taking a long sleep is one of the first things we need to do on a retreat; REST!

4. I wanted to hear some good stories and insights; real *pearls* that inspired me to be a better priest and better Christian and that I could use myself in my homilies and retreats.
5. I wanted to be challenged in very practical ways to be a better priest (nothing super-intellectual or theoretical) but **“meat and potatoes Catholic priesthood.”** Parish priests need practical suggestions! Even though statistics show that priests are some of the most intelligent and well-educated...our life in the parish is a life of interruptions. It is easy to get off track with so many demands on us. I wanted to go home with just a few resolutions that I could really keep.

I would like to ask you to consider making **two primary resolutions on this retreat:**

- 1) To start doing one thing that you are not doing, that Jesus wants you to do.
- 2) To stop doing one thing you are doing, that Jesus does not want you to do.

Maybe one of those resolutions will be about changing your perspective: Story about **Diogenes** was once sitting by the roadside, eating a bowl of gruel. One of his rich young friends rode up on his white horse clothed in beautiful garments and rings on his fingers. He looked at Diogenes with disgust and said, *“Diogenes, if only you would learn to flatter the king, you would not have to eat that gruel.”* But Diogenes replied, *“But you have it all wrong. If only you would learn to eat this gruel, you would not have to flatter the king.”*

We have to be willing to change our way of thinking on just about everything! You will recall the idea from your philosophy studies:

Nature determines when I eat
 The cook determines what I eat
 But I determine why I eat.

Do I eat to live or do I live to eat? My brothers, the question is not just “*Are we doing the right things? Are we doing what we do for the right reasons?*” **Meister Eckhart** wrote: “*What we desire to possess will possess our desires.*” We all walk around being led by our last dominant thought. If Jesus is not our **Consuming Concern**, then something else will be. We need to correct our motivation for the things we do. A retreat is to purify and redirect our intentions.

Archbishop Sean O’Malley: “*Holiness is less easily acquired than theological fluency.*” *Holiness is about a change of perspective.*

Socrates: “*The unexamined life is not worth living.*” Priesthood gets so busy that it is hard to find time to look at ourselves and take stock. **This is the purpose of a retreat, to see where I have been, where I am now and where I am going.** **Chinese Proverb:** “*If you do not change your direction, you will very likely end up where you are heading.*”

It is my job in the seminary to make sure the men set goals. We ask them to set 1-2 goals in each of the four areas of priestly formation: **intellectual, spiritual, pastoral, human.** We then evaluate them in part based on whether they are improving and send a report to their bishops. We all need to set goals constantly in our lives because we cannot hit a target that we cannot see or make a goal that we have not set. “*Good, better, best. Never let it rest, till your good is better and your better best.*” The spiritual life is not likened to downhill snow skiing. It is likened rather to mountain climbing; constant EFFORT!

6. I wanted to go to confession and receive counsel from a brother priest or from the retreat master. I make myself available to you for this.
7. And finally, and I think most importantly, **I wanted to leave the retreat both with solid resolutions and feeling happy and excited about my faith, excited about my life as a priest, feeling truly appreciated by Jesus for all that I do, so that I could go back and love the people in my parish more than ever.** I have to say honestly that, in all the priests’ retreats I attended in Savannah, this is the one that was rarely fulfilled.

This is what I always wanted in a priest retreat. And this is what I have endeavored to prepare for you. Thank God that a good retreat does not depend on the retreat master! The children have been praying for you so that guarantees grace will flow.

Hebrews 12:1-2 “...persevere in running the race that lies ahead. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.” A lead dog’s eyes are on the rabbit.

St. Teresa of Avila: “*The only mistake we ever make is taking our eyes off of Jesus.*” He is our Consuming Concern.

Pope John Paul II: World Youth Day: *“Jesus is the answer to which every human heart is the question.”* We started all this, going to seminary, studying, being ordained, because of Jesus. We believe He is the answer to which every human heart is the question.

Bp. Robert Carlson: *“I am constantly amazed at the number of men who are priests who did everything in their power that they would not be.”* I am one of those. I ran from my vocation and almost threw it away several times. We all have a story of how God called us and they are as different as night and day. Some of them are fascinating! But we made it. We all made it. We went through those years of college studies, philosophy studies, and theology. Some of you are lifers! Some like me left the seminary and worked for awhile, others had jobs and careers; some had been married, etc. Some struggled incredibly saying yes to this call; for others, it seemed more natural. **“The mill of God grinds slowly, but exceedingly fine.”** We have been through the mill of God!

Archbishop Sheen used to speak of the four ways of following Christ: Like... 1) St. Peter 2) St. John 3) St. Mary Magdalene 4) Judas.

We all made it to the Cathedral, we all prostrated ourselves on the floor for the litany of saints, the bishop laid his hands on our heads, said the prayer of consecration...and we were priests! Everyone of us had our hands anointed with Sacred Chrism and we rose priests of Jesus Christ. **But do you remember, right after we placed our hands in between the hands of the bishop and made the promise of obedience, the bishop said, “May God who has begun this good work in you bring it to fulfillment.”** That is the title of this retreat.

Did you forget? You made it! From the perspective of a seminary vice rector, I want to remind you that *you made it*. What I mean by that is that seminarians are constantly chafing to get out of seminary and to be ordained. They think about it and talk about it daily. But once we have been out a while and doing the daily work of a parish priest, it is difficult to remember ever being in a seminary. And the **mystery** of the priesthood that we dreamed about and talked about; hearing confessions and truly being the instrument of Jesus in washing away people’s sins; celebrating Holy Mass...does not seem so mysterious anymore, now that we have done it about 10,000 times!

God does not call the best to be his priests. Despite what we might have thought in the seminary, God does not call the best to be His priests. *“I have finally reached the age where I can recall, how little I knew when I knew it all!”*

God does not always call the best, but He does expect the best of those He calls. He expects us to give our all.

I am aware that the priests in any given presbyterate are at very different places spiritually, physically, psychologically and emotionally. I invite you to place yourself in one or more of these categories:

- Some are so excited about being priests; life is great!
- Others are barely hanging on and really looking for reasons to stay.
- I think most are somewhere in between. Things are not great; not horrible...but life is mighty daily and keeping one's **enthusiasm** up is difficult. (the word means "possessed by God").
- Many priests feel "**over and under.**" Overworked and underpaid; overstressed and under-appreciated.
- Others are many years in the Lord's service and trying to prepare for their death.
- Some are angry and bitter about what the Church has done and where the Church seems to be heading. There is a polarization in most presbyterates these days, which can be a cause of anxiety and frustration.

Pope JPII in Vita Consecrata uses the image of the Transfiguration: like the 3 chosen apostles, you have all gone up with Him on the mountain and witnessed amazing things. Your heart is joyful! "*It is good that we are here.*" "*This is my beloved son. Listen to Him.*" But then we are left all alone *with just Jesus*. This is a great image for prayer. We have to come down the mountain and turn towards Jerusalem with him. We have to do the hard work of the Cross; dying to self so as to live for Jesus. But always remembering that the Resurrection is coming. "*Remember how he shone on the mountain...*" This is a parable of religious life! Some of you are still up on that mountain and very excited. Others are on the Cross and suffering terribly. Some are in-between...

I will try to speak to each of these possible places during this retreat. This is a retreat that I have tried to prepare for all of you.

I used to say to young men; "**Are you called to marriage or to priesthood?**" But after studying the Theology of the Body of Pope JPII, I say, "*To which marriage are you called?*" A man would not marry a woman because he likes cutting the grass, fixing the toilet, and keeping up the physical plant. That would be madness. He marries **because he is in love with the bride**. (He does the other things b/c they are his duty; but if the love goes...)

Married couples will sometimes tell us: "**Father, we really haven't had a marriage for 20 years but we just stayed together for the sake of the kids.**" You have heard that before, haven't you? But is that the right thing to do? **The right thing to do is to work on the marriage!!** I think priests fall into the same category; they stay in because they promised; they committed; it is their duty; so they serve the children of the church...but sometimes without love.

T.S. Eliot: "*The last temptation is the greatest treason; to do the right thing for the wrong reason!*"

This retreat, I want to invite you to work on your marriage. Beg the Holy Spirit for the grace to improve your intimacy with Jesus Christ and his bride. Don't just stay together for the sake of the kids.

Bumper sticker: The best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother.

Question: Do you really love the people in your parish...*or do you just endure them?*
 One priest told me: **“No, I don't love them. I'm the kind of priest-Father that, if I were the father of a family, my children would have father wounds.”** What did he mean? He meant that he was absent (whether physically or emotionally, or both); he was angry and abusive. He said to me: *“I get angry and irritated when people ask me to just do my job.”*

Blessed Cardinal Newman's motto: *“Sentire cum ecclesia”* It is not enough to just think with the Church and to do our duty; we want to feel with the Church.

Let's pray on this retreat: *“Jesus, I need a more intimate relationship with you! I need to feel and experience your love. I want to feel and desire love for you and for your bride; the people. I want to do it out of love; not just duty!”*

Prayer of Moses: *“God I can't, you can, you promised.”*

Just turn the coffee cup up and ask that the Lord fill it.

Story: Irish priest and the train wreck. An Irish priest, though born in this country, was sitting at his rectory desk late one Saturday night, trying to finish off his homily for Sunday Mass. It was a terrible, stormy night and he could hear the thunder and the pouring rain being blown against the rectory roof. At about 11:30 p.m., the phone rang. He cringed, suspecting that it was some type of emergency. Sure enough, it was the hospital and they had a man who was seriously in danger of death. He was dying of cancer and had been there for several weeks, but had only tonight asked to see a priest. The nurse, a Catholic, realizing that his time was probably short, apologized to the priest but she felt it was the best thing to call him at this late hour. Somewhat reluctantly, the priest put on his hat and coat, and then went over to the church to place the Blessed Sacrament, a single consecrated host, into his pyx. He ran to his car in the driving rain and began the painfully slow drive to the hospital. Though it was only a ten minute drive, tonight it took closer to thirty minutes. The storm was getting worse by the minute, limbs had fallen from trees and were in the middle of the road and police sirens were seen in the distance. Several times, it seemed, the police arrived to close off an intersection because either a power line was down or there was some other danger. But each time, the priest passed through just before. As he realized this, he prayed, *“Lord, this must be important. What is going on here?”*

He finally arrived at the hospital and walked up to the indicated room. There was an emaciated looking man lying in the bed with his eyes closed. The priest immediately introduced himself and said, *“I was called because you asked to see a priest.”* The man

opened his eyes and replied, *“Yes, I did but I changed my mind. I don’t want to talk to a priest now. Sorry for the inconvenience.”* The priest began to gently encourage the man, saying, *“The nurse said that you are very sick and dying of cancer. Don’t you think it would be a good idea if you went to confession, received the sacrament of anointing and received Jesus in Holy Communion....before you meet him face to face?”* The man was silent and refused to answer. So the priest sighed and said, *“Well, I have come all the way over here to see you and I know you need prayers so I think I will just sit over here and pray my beads for you and ask the Lord to bless you.”*

And the priest sat down and began to pray the rosary. He was about halfway finished and suddenly the sick man said, *“Oh alright! I might as well tell you. I know God can’t forgive me. I know that I am going to Hell but I might as well tell you before I die.”* And the sick man related this story:

“Father, I am an alcoholic. I have always been an alcoholic since I was a very young man and it has caused me many problems. I was a train engineer. I drove a train for a living. One night, many years ago, on a stormy night just like this one, I was driving the train...and I was drunk. I was very drunk. And the train was coming through a small town about this time of night. Up in front of me, I saw a station wagon pulling towards the track to cross it but it would mean stopping the train and then starting it back up, a considerable effort. I was properly trained. I knew what to do. I was supposed to put on the brakes, blow the horn, slow down or stop the train because the car was moving towards the track. But I was drunk. So I decided instead to try to beat that car so I would not have to stop. I accelerated the train and the car did not see me. I ran over that station wagon and I killed an entire family; a mother and a father and two little girls. I know that God can’t forgive me. I know that I am going to Hell. But I just wanted to tell someone about it before I died.”

The priest looked intently at the sick man and he said, *“Please tell me in what town that happened.”* The man did. The priest said, *“In what year did that happen?”* The man told him. With tears in his eyes, the priest said, *“If I can forgive you, God can forgive you. That was my mother and father and my two little sisters in that car. I forgive you and I release you to the mercy of God.”*

The sick man stared in silence and disbelief. He was so moved by the magnanimity of this priest...he came to know the goodness and mercy of Jesus. The sick man made his confession and received the sacraments...and then he died.

Everything that happens in my life can make me better or bitter...and I choose.

Which will it be? Better or bitter? Our lives often do not work out the way we had hoped or envisioned? God is orchestrating everything for my salvation and the salvation of others! God makes no mistakes! Look at the story of St. Ignatius.

To whom do we preach when we give a homily in our parish? To the strongest member present or the weakest? The answer is both! It's not easy to preach a retreat to a group of priests because you are in so many different places. **I will endeavor to speak to each of these different places that some of you might be in at this point in your priesthood.**

Closing Story: There was a young 12 year old boy who died at the Bowling alley in front of his mom and dad. He had had three previous heart surgeries. He was an only child. I was at a kind of low time in my life. I did not really want to be doing the funeral of a child. I asked the BVM to pray for me, to help me get through it. I made it through the rosary and the funeral Mass, holding it all together.

At the cemetery, after the final rites, the parents asked for the casket to be opened. And they just went to pieces. They were screaming and crying and hugging the casket. And emotionally, I just could not take it. I was crying and I just turned and started walking through the graves and **my heart was so heavy**. And suddenly, I heard Jesus speak to me. No, I did not hear an audible voice or see any vision but Christ communicated with me unmistakably. I have never been surer of anything in my life!

And He said one word, *"Thank you."* But I understood in that one word that he was saying: *"Thank you for burying this child for me and for ministering to his parents. Thank you for being my priest."*

I know it was Jesus because **one word from the Master** brought me from the lowest place emotionally I had ever been in my life to the highest. He said one word to me! *"Thank you."*

And now my heart was so full, I immediately wanted to start saying: *"No, Lord I want to thank you. You died for me..."* And it was like the Lord said, *"Stop. I don't want you thanking me right now. I want you to let me thank you."*

I walked through the cemetery saying, *"You're welcome Lord. You're welcome. I am so glad you let me become a priest when I did all in my power to throw it away. I am so happy that I am a priest."*

I believe and I heard in my prayer and preparation that Jesus did not call you to this retreat so that He can fuss at you for not being a better priest. This first conference, I believe that Jesus wants to tell all of you priests "thank you."

And I know the Gospel says **"You're only doing your duty."** I chose this gospel on purpose. **Is Jesus grateful to that servant because he did what was commanded?" YES! I think the answer is yes. Jesus is grateful for all that you do!** You don't need a tongue lashing on how you should have done more, been better. Jesus is so gracious. He is appreciative. **Jesus is never outdone in generosity.**

As you get in bed tonight to go to sleep, or during your prayer this afternoon, I want you to do this exercise. Just close your eyes and picture Jesus standing above you,

looking at you. He is pleased with you. He is saying thank you, and He is listing all the things you have done during your priesthood, for which he is grateful.

Thank you for all the Masses you have celebrated.

Thank you for all the homilies you have prepared and preached.

Thank you for all the confessions.

Thank you for all the hospital visitations, funerals, rosaries, weddings, counseling, the caring for people day in and day out, the aggravation, the exhaustion, the committees and meetings, etc.

Let Jesus thank you tonight. And just say *“You’re welcome Lord. I love you.”* And sleep this first night of your retreat in peace.

May God who has begun this good work in you bring it to fulfillment!

Conference 2: The Hero of the Modern Age is the Parish Priest

Gospel: Mt. 28:16-20

Sometimes a busy priest in a parish can feel like a mule pulling a plow, the drudgery of daily work. It takes a poet to penetrate the truth in a confused world. The great poet, **Walker Percy** wrote *“The hero of the modern age is the parish priest.”* What a strange thing to say in *this* day and age, with the devastating sexual abuse scandal, the priest shortage, closing of parishes, etc. One young priest in the diocese of Savannah told me during the summer of the sex abuse crisis, he said, *“You know, wearing the Roman collar around the city of Savannah these days, on a scale of 1-10 is a .5! We have been through a lot and some of our brothers have become discouraged and sad. Are we heroes? We don’t feel like it. And yet I think the answer is “yes.”*

John Cardinal Krol: *“The Church asks people to believe what they cannot see; to do what they do not want to do; not to do what they want to do...and then, to pay for it all!”* It is not easy being a priest!

Fr. Manochio: *“The purpose of a priest is to bring people to Jesus and Jesus to people.”* And if we believe that Jesus is the answer to which every human heart is the question and if we believe that the purpose of a priest is to bring people to Jesus and Jesus to people, then we are heroes! Because no one, no other vocation in the world can come close to accomplishing this in the way a priest accomplishes it everyday. And this is not ugly clericalism or elitism. It is the Catholic Truth. I hate Clericalism! I see it for the proud, self-centered, filthy heresy it is.

Story: There was a young idealistic man named Steven at the Mount back in the 70’s. He very much wanted to wear his cassock for everything. Fr. Flynn (the future Archbishop Flynn) told him to *“Wear that cassock every minute.”* Today that young

man, Steven Rohlf, is the rector of Mount St. Mary's Seminary...and he does not wear his cassock around unless it is a special liturgical occasion.

Clericalism is so far from what Jesus intended for priesthood and I hate it. Maybe that is why the Lord has me working in a seminary.

But a priest is a hero! Jesus said, *Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Whosoever sins you forgive are forgiven. He who hears you hears me. My flesh is real food. Do this in memory of me. I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. Make disciples of all nations. Baptize them. Teach them everything that I have commanded you. Anyone who obeys these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven!* **Did I just describe your life?**

Hero (Definition): a legendary man with superhuman powers; a remarkably brave person; somebody greatly admired.

We are humbled by this Truth. We know that we are not worthy to be priests. We are conscious of our own sins, and we downplay it. But the People of God know it is true. They tell us, *"I am praying for you everyday. I know this scandal is such a minute number of priests. Our priests are by and large great, sincere, humble...and they are bringing us Jesus."* It is the "sensus fidelium!" Jesus is our "raison d'être" and **the people understand it better than we do!** **Most heroes don't think they are heroes, just as most saints don't think they are saints.**

Story: There was a young college aged girl who came to confession many years ago. I can only say that she had been away from the Church for ten years and that she had been into everything. We have all heard many of these confessions. She was sick and tired of living in sin. She wanted Jesus. She wanted to live that superior life we call Christianity. And after her confession, she said to me, *"Father thank you so much. I feel so clean. I feel wonderful. Thank you so much."* And I said *"Well you're welcome but you know, Jesus is really the one you need to thank. He died for you so that you could be forgiven."* The girl was thoughtful for a moment and she said, *"Father, I know that's true and I love Jesus. But right now, I can't see Jesus. I can just see you."* **I thought to myself, "That is the best explanation of "in persona Christi capitis ecclesia" that I have ever heard!"**

We have all done this so many times. We are heroes because we are there, we are at our battle stations, doing our duty, trying to love and console these good people in their sufferings and their sins. **Trying to do our duty with love.**

A dear friend called me this weekend. She had been down in Florida for the last week, sitting with her sister and brother in law (who was dying of cancer.) He was a young man and the cancer was fast moving and malignant. My friend called to tell me how proud she was of that parish priest. She said, *"Father, he came over everyday. And he made us all laugh which we really needed to do. He prayed with us. He played with the kids. He cut up with everyone. He gave Gary the sacraments of the church. He was wonderful. He came back in the middle of the night when he died. My sister lost her*

husband when he was only 50 years old. I will never forget that priest who brought Jesus into that home as long as I live.” I don’t know who that priest is but I am proud of him.

We live in a mean world full of suffering, evil and death. And these people are starving for love. **They so want their priest to be a “Padrecito,”** that wonderful Spanish word, the diminutive, best translated “little loving Father,” in a world where many, many people have no loving father or no father at all. And because of that, they suffer terribly and they struggle to understand the most fundamental principle of Christianity...the **“unconditional infinite love of God the Father.”** We can better endure our sufferings if we believe that we are loved.

Fascinating statistic:

A recent European study revealed some startling findings regarding the critical role of fathers in their children's practice of the faith. The study found that fathers chiefly determine the church habits of grown children. If a father doesn't go to church, no matter how faithful his wife's attendance, **only one child in 50 (2%) will become a regular worshipper.** Yet, if a father does go regularly, and the mother doesn't, 44% of their children will become churchgoers." (Source: Thomas W. Karras, *The Truth About Men and the Church*, Orthodox News Service, Inc.)

Msgr. Richard McGuinness: *“God loves me. God loves you. God loves us no matter what we do.”* It was many years in the priesthood before I realized what a profound thing Msgr. McGuinness was trying to teach us. We can’t bring Jesus to others unless and until we have understood (not just in our intellects but in our hearts) how much God loves us! **Nemo dat quod non habet.** One cannot give what one does not have.

A former spiritual director once told me: *“In every daily Holy Hour of prayer you make, spend 30 minutes meditating on how much God loves you.”* When he told me that, I thought it was a little extreme. I don’t anymore.

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote: *“God does not love you because you’re good. He loves you because He’s good!”* Sometimes we’re good and sometimes we’re not so good.

Prayer taught to some of our young people by Mother Teresa of Calcutta: *“Jesus in my heart. I believe in your tender love for me. I love you.”* This is a great prayer to say after receiving Holy Communion.

The Salvation Syllogism:

- A.** People who do great things for God are those who really love God.
- B.** The people who really love God are those who truly realize how much God loves them.
- C.** The people who truly realize how much God loves them are those who meditate on the passion of Jesus or who have lived through their own passion **(and they have chosen that their sufferings make them better and not bitter!)**

Story: There was a priest who came to make a retreat at my seminary because he was thinking of leaving the priesthood. His bishop asked that I meet with him each day and try to work with him. I asked him one day, *“Please tell me about a time when you really experienced the Lord’s love for you, your most powerful Jesus experience.”* He replied, *“Never. I can never remember a time when I felt the Lord’s great love for me. I knew it intellectually but I never really felt it. I always suspected something was wrong.”*

Example: There was a Vietnamese seminarian at the Mount. When he was younger, he watched as Thai pirates killed his uncle trying to defend some poor women on the high seas. On the second attempt, he escaped. He spent 2 years in a refugee camp and finally immigrated to Canada. Eventually, he and his parents were able to get into the U.S. Now he is in his 40’s and studying for the priesthood. When I read that file, I thought to myself, *“If I had lived through what this man has lived through, I would be in therapy for the rest of my life!”* He says, *“Father, I just offer it up to Jesus.”* We have all been through different things in our lives.

I want to tell you about **three priests** whose lives were powerfully changed by a grace received many years after their ordination:

1) St. Vincent de Paul: story about how he denied his father; *“I do not know him.”* Then after ordination, while celebrating Mass, he heard the words, *“I tell you, I do not know you!”* He was trained in the seminary to be an ecclesiastic; not a priest. This experience was the beginning of a great crisis of faith. He went away; captured by pirates? He suffered greatly and when he came back, he was transformed. He first went to beg forgiveness of his father. After receiving it, he returned to Paris and began to take care of the poor. He began to live his priesthood as God intended it to be lived. He also became very influential in the establishment and improvement of seminaries and priestly formation...since he had not been formed into a good priest.

2) St. Josemaria Escriva: A certain saint riding on a bus in Spain. *“I am a child of God. I am a child of God. He loves me no matter what!”* He was screaming it out loud and people were moving away from him thinking he was crazy! He had already been a priest for many years (like many of you) and he knew this intellectually (like many of you) but God showed it to him in his heart. As a direct result of this experience, this saint went on to found an organization that has done tremendous work in the church. He was canonized by Pope John Paul II. This saint is named Josemaria Escriva; the founder of Opus Dei. Whatever you might think about Opus Dei is not my point here. **My point is that a man who had been a priest for many years (like us) received a grace that changed his life and that grace could not be more basic and simple:** *“God loves me, God loves you. God loves us no matter what we do.”*

3) Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa: Preacher to the papal household; he gave our week long retreat at the Mount a few years back (around 2008). He was the head of the theology department of a prestigious Italian Catholic university and he was invited to come to the U.S. to give a talk on the gifts of the Holy Spirit at a Charismatic Conference. He had never before been to a Charismatic conference or prayer meeting. Something happened

inside of him at that conference that changed his life. Some call it Baptism in the Holy Spirit. On the plane on the way home, he was reading his breviary and the Psalms were jumping off of the page at him! He was seeing and realizing things that he had never before seen. His Franciscan brothers noticed immediately that he was changed. They said, “*We sent away Saul and comes back Paul!*” This grace changed his life. Then he heard the Holy Spirit tell him to resign his position as head of the Theology Dept, though he had no other assignment. He did so. Two weeks later, he was named Preacher to the Papal Household. You may have heard the story of how he had gone down to St. Peter’s Basilica to pray for the new Pope. Afterward, he looked up at the window to the papal apartment and he began to scream, “*Couragio JP II. Couragio.*”

St. Teresa of Avila: “*For if at some time the Lord should grant us the grace of impressing his love on our hearts, all will become easy for us and we shall accomplish great things quickly and without effort.*” **This is the grace I want us to ask for on this retreat!**

“It’s easier to raise a child than to fix an adult.” We spend a lot of our time as priests trying to fix adults. But often we need to be fixed also. God loves me, God loves you, God loves us no matter what we do. As priests we will never be able to consistently treat ourselves or other people well until we understand this Truth. Once a person understands this, he feels incredible indescribable gratitude; gratitude to God for his underserved love and forgiveness. And then he wants to offer that same love and forgiveness to others in his priesthood. **I believe God wants to give us that grace.** *Nemo dat, quod non habet.*

Article on Priestly Loneliness: meditating on God’s love for us at the different times in our lives when we were suffering. Until we recognize it, we cannot be joyful, we cannot be fulfilled, we cannot really work as we ought for the Kingdom.

Fr. Anthony Manochio story about loneliness: “*You belong completely to me.*”

Simon, Son of John, do you love me more than these? Is Jesus our Consuming Concern or has something else taken His place?

Why does God love me so much? It makes no sense. I am just not that loveable. It is a mystery and **in the Catholic Faith, mysteries are meant to be pondered; not solved.**

“*Family, become what you are.*” These words were written in *Familiaris Consortio*, the encyclical on the human family by Pope John Paul II. He described the family as an intimate community of life and love and he was saying that our families need to understand what they are and become more and more what they are. I think the same can be said about priests. **Priests, become what you are.** We must try to see better just how awesome the priesthood (not the men who are priests; God does not call the best to be his priests) how awesome the priesthood is. In many ways, our eyes are not able to see just what God is accomplishing in us. **This is why we think we are not heroes.**

The parish is the oasis for the people in a world that is so cruel, so much suffering, difficulties, problems. All week long, they go to work, they care for their children, they deal with their own dark sides, their depressions, and their loneliness. To cope, they watch television 20-30 hours per week, surf the internet, and medicate themselves with alcohol, drugs and pornography...they receive all of this information that is not the Gospel Truth. The world is so full of lies. And then on Sunday, please God, they come down to their parish. They come to hear about Jesus. They come to be filled with his teaching and with his grace and with His forgiveness. **They desperately need to hear how much God loves them.** And in that one hour per week, in large part because of an incredible partnership between Almighty God and a priest, God's grace pours into them (His Word, the Eucharist, the singing, prayers, fellowship). **90% of 90%! (90% of Catholics who go to Mass receive 90% of their information/inspiration from Sunday Mass)** In that one hour, God uses you to keep loving His people and to keep them on the road to Heaven. This is why Walker Percy, the great poet, said, *"The hero of the modern age is the parish priest."*

St. Paul tells us in Galatians: *"Let us not grow weary of doing what is good. If we do not relax our efforts, in due time, we shall reap our harvest."* But sometimes, we do grow weary of doing what is good.

So a retreat is a time to look back and see where we have been, to look at ourselves now and see where we are and then decide where we are going. Let's look back for a few minutes.

Priesthood is a vocation, thus it is a way of salvation primarily for others. According to the CCC, Holy Priesthood and Holy Marriage are the two sacraments specifically designed (C.C.C.) to save others. We are saved ourselves in the process of living out our respective vocations. Like marriage, it is not easy. **For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.** *I would like to use the marriage vows for a minute to help us reflect on the past years of our priesthood.*

Story: Cardinal Pecchi, the future Pope Leo XIII, responding to the famous Msgr. Lacordaire at the beatification of Frederick Antoine Ozanam, founder of the St. Vincent de Paul Society: *"Frederick Ozanam was such a holy man. What a pity that he fell into the trap of marriage. "Aah," said Cardinal Pecchi, "I did not know that Our Lord had established six sacraments and a trap."*

For better or for worse: So on this retreat, perhaps today, please try to spend some time remembering **the good times and the bad.** Some assignments have been better than others, some years have been better, some seasons and some days. We have all had our share of successes: death bed confessions, converts, fantastic homilies, building the kingdom of God in so many ways, people patting us on the back, loving us because we bring Jesus to them. Many of us are pastors, some are Monsignors, vicars general, vocation directors, vice rectors...so what! With all due respect, big deal. **We are priests! That's what we are proud of.** People call us Father. We bring people to Jesus and Jesus to people.

In prayer today, please try to remember the best and worst times you experienced as a priest...everything that happens in my life can make me better or bitter, and I choose.

We have also had our share of successes. **Analogy:** I love the meditation on humility for priests when people are really patting you on the back. We have all received accolades from time to time. **Fr. Andrew Apostoli. Palm Sunday:** *“The stupid Jackass on which Jesus is riding thinks they are clapping for him.”* Jesus is the one they want.

Advice: *When you are looking for a spiritual director, a mentor or someone to impress you, do not be impressed with any priest no matter how smart he is, no matter how great a preacher, no matter how great a teacher...do **not be impressed unless he is humble.*** Two times in my life, I have been very impressed with a priest because he was a great preacher, teacher or motivator. They both ended badly. They were famous, and then they crashed and burned, because they were not humble. Never again will I be impressed with anyone unless they are humble.

Humility is gracefully accepting one's place in the plan of God.

Msgr. Richard McGuinness: *“What we're looking for in the priesthood is a few relatively well-adjusted neurotics.”*

For better or for worse, we are priests. As Mother Teresa says, **“Faithfulness, not success.”**

For richer and for poorer. This applies to us too. There are some mighty rich parishes in this country and there are some which are very poor. I have been in both. So have many of you. We have one parish where the offertory is \$50,000 per week and others where it is less than \$100. The Holy Father says that we priests should never live above the level of our people. Even in the poor parishes, that's pretty good living in this country.

Jesus said: *“The foxes have lairs, the birds of the sky have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”* **Follow me.** Go where I send you, stay there, stay faithful at your battle station, love the people. For richer or for poorer. We want our riches in heaven anyway.

In sickness and in health. Frank Sheed, in his book **“The Church and I”** relays a story from the life of Cardinal Newman. As an Anglican, he once witnessed a scene where a Catholic priest had had a stroke or was in some way incapacitated. He was bedridden and was being cared for in some type of hospital. This priest was so known for holiness that people would come and line up down the hall of the hospital to go to confession to him as he lay in the bed. When Cardinal Newman saw this he said, *“Now this is a religion.”* In sickness and in health. Still doing the work of a priest! Faithful to the end.

Msgr. McGuinness was dying of cancer. On the day he died, Fr. Kochs visited him and Msgr. could hardly speak, he was so weak. Fr. Kochs said, *“Dick, what am I going to do without you. You have been my best friend for 40 years. How often have you heard my confessions. What am I going to do?”* Dick was moving his lips trying to speak. Fr. Kochs put his ear very close and he heard him say, *“I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”*

We have all had our aches and pains. Suffering can be physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual. We priests deal with sickness, in others and in ourselves. We are priests, for better or for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health. By and large, souls are saved one at a time, generally through one on one interaction. The majority of God’s work is not done at the track but in the field with our hands at the plow.

Fr. Tim McKeown: holding that little baby’s hand in the neonatal ICU unit. **The Holy Spirit told him** *“There is nothing you will do today that is more important than sitting here and holding this baby’s hand and praying with her as she prepares for her baptism... and death.”*

Story: Pope John XXIII; audience; then priests in line to greet the Holy Father and this priest from St. Louis was the last in line. The first said, *“Holy Father, I am Msgr. X and I am president of X Catholic University; the second said, “I am Rector of Y seminary.”* The priest was feeling pretty small listening to all of this; he was not a Rector or a Vicar General or a President or a Msgr. When the Pope finally got to him, he said in a very timid face, *“Holy Father, all I am is a parish priest.”* The Holy Father knelt down before him, kissed the palms of his hands and said, *“That’s the greatest priestly work of all.”*

Mother Teresa: Three steps in the Spiritual Life: Loving trust, total surrender, and joy. Speaking to priests she said: “You have said yes to Jesus and He has taken you at your word. This terrible loneliness you feel cannot be removed until you empty yourself. God cannot fill what is already full.”

What are the reasons that some people/including some priests are so unhappy? 1. Lack of the knowledge of God’s love for them. 2. Their Consuming Concern is not Jesus. Perhaps it is triggered by a neurosis of some kind. Maybe they have abandoned prayer. Or they have allowed something or someone to try to fill that God-shaped hole that only God can fill.

Meister Eckhart: *“The spiritual life is more about subtraction than addition.”*
Kenosis: was a buzz word among the early Christians; it means *“emptying oneself.”*

St. Augustine: *“God wants to give us so many gifts but when He tries, our hands are so full, we cannot accept them.”* God wants to give us the gifts that really matter but we have to surrender other things so that there will be room for them.

As a retreat master once said, **most people do not really want to do the will of God. Most people really want to do their own will without seriously offending God.** And they put a lot of energy into figuring out how to do this. **Total surrender.** So few people really do it and that is why so few have great joy in this life.

St. Therese: *“Yes, God does whatever I ask Him because I do whatever He asks me.”*

Bl. Cardinal Newman: *“The sin of good people is that they will not allow God to command new commitment or greater service.”*

Totally Catholic and totally kind. St. Augustine: *“Orthodoxy without charity is not Christianity.”* Charity sits in the dead center of the Baptismal font.

Charity starts at home. Loving our brother priests. **Resolution idea:** Write down the name of the priest whom you dislike the most in this world, put it in your breviary and pray for him by name everyday. Why is it so hard for us to speak kindly of our brother priests...especially those with whom we disagree? Charity starts at home. **St. John Chrysostom** said, *“You love God only as much as you love your least favorite neighbor.”*

Pope John Paul II: story in the biography; **Tad Schulz:** *“He has the ability to sit and listen patiently and kindly to another person with whom he completely disagrees. And he lets the person finish and then he speaks.”* Totally Catholic and totally kind.

Is there someone in your life whom you have not forgiven? We preach it all the time to our people but many priests carry around an anger, a bitterness; they will not let it go. And it is robbing us of joy.

Southern Expression: *“The biggest troublemaker you’re ever gonna have to deal with watches you from the mirror every morning.”*

Story: I was having a really bad week. I was not joyful. Every parish has a *Job Family*. Do you know what I mean? There is a new crisis every week. I had come back from preaching a vocation retreat; got back late Sunday night and there was a message on my machine; *“My daughter has run off with a trucker and she is in his truck going up I-95. Call me at once when you get back. This is urgent.”* I did not call that night. The next day at noon Mass, he came up to me afterward and started to scream. I lost my peace and fussed at the parishioner; *“You are out of line. I am doing my best.”* Jesus told me that I needed to go and ask his forgiveness. When he saw me coming he looked scared. He thought I was going to blast him again. I asked him if he would forgive me for not being there for him and for getting angry with him. He began to tear up, a big strapping man. He did forgive me. He so wanted me to be like Jesus! But it changed me.

Resolution Idea: Think of any parishioner or any person in your life that there is some tension or bad feeling; go and humbly ask their forgiveness. And watch what God does in you. If you are one of those priests who is struggling right now, *if you are angry or*

*bitter or if things are not going well, do something to show God that you want things to be different. Don't let it control you anymore! **Maybe God can't give you the grace you need until you humble yourself and ask forgiveness.***

I think that humility has to be present before the infusion of love. And when God infuses His love, He infuses His joy. So if you are not joyful, this is one of the things that I would recommend.

Story: Big Daddy asking forgiveness of his old girlfriends before he was ordained.

Story of Junipero Serra: *“Yes, I did remember her and up until now, I had really wondered if I had truly forgiven her. Now I feel much more sure that I have.”*

Story: French Revolution... *“God saved me so that I could save you.”* This is why we are priests. We are priests to save others, and God has saved us, again and again, not only because he loves us but because he loves his people and wants to use us to save them!

Concrete Thing to Do Today: I want to invite you to pray your rosary today for the priests in your life:

- First decade: for the priest who baptized you
- Second: for the priest who heard your first confession and first Communion
- Third: for the bishop who confirmed you
- Fourth: for the bishop who ordained you
- Fifth: for the priest who will bury you when you die

(Converts to the Faith may have to adjust this assignment; if you were baptized by your minister, for example)

These men are heroes to us. They brought us Jesus. They set us off on this course of life.

Every presbyterate is a motley crew but God uses us, doesn't He! We're different and we're eccentric, I know. We are, please God, relatively well-adjusted neurotics! But we are priests. God does not call the best to be His priests. We know that by now. Oh no, He calls sinners and weak men like you and me. And when people see what God does with us, they say, “There must be a God. It couldn't be that priest!” **God does not call the best to be His priests...but He does expect the best of those He calls.**

Priest, become what you are. Acknowledge the Truth that you are a powerful instrument to bring Divine Life to the world!

I think that Satan is saying to his demons: *“We must get these priests down. Make them believe that their work is not important or that it is ineffective. We must get them discouraged, dismayed, depressed...and finally in despair (what I call the 4 D's of*

the Devil), because if they ever realize what they are, what priesthood is...our cause is lost."

St. John Vianney: Satan allegedly said to him: *"If there were only two men like you in the world, my kingdom would fall."* Why? Because **St. John Vianney** totally surrendered to God and because he realized what priesthood is. *"If you realized what the priesthood is, you would die of love."*

Does that sound triumphalistic? Does that sound clerical? Please understand, my brothers, that I am not downing the laity. I have read *"Christifidelis Laici"* and I believe it. Lay people must be encouraged to take their rightful place in the Church. **But my brothers, we're not going to help the laity take their rightful place in the Church by denying ours!!**

You stand in the place of Christ. You bring people to Jesus and Jesus to people in ways that no one else can. And you do it for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health. And despite what you might think of yourself, despite what you might think of your sins, where you are spiritually or emotionally, despite your successes and failures...though it might make you uncomfortable to consider it; Walker Percy was right, you are a hero, not until death do you part; *you are a priest forever, according to the Order of Melchizedek.* You bring the world what the world needs. You bring them Jesus. The hero of the modern world is the parish priest. (a legendary man with superhuman powers; a remarkably brave person; someone greatly admired.)

May God who has begun this good work in you bring it to fulfillment.

Conference 3: The ABC's of Mercy

Gospel: John 8:1-11 Woman caught in adultery; in the very act; she is pulling on her clothes; where was the man? Injustice. Jesus kneels down in front of her. Normally the judge stands or sits while the person being judged kneels and begs. Jesus kneels and leaves her standing. He draws in the sand. The Pharisees hated him because He was merciful.

St. Alphonsus Liguori: *"If you add up all the goodness of every good person who ever lived, that goodness does not equal the goodness of Christ."*

St. Paul lamented: *"Why do I do that which I do not wish to do?"*

One of the hardest things to accept in the priesthood is the realization that I am an average priest and that I am a sinful priest. The truth is that we are sinners and we have to deal with that like everybody else. **St. Augustine** says that we are *"peccatoris en rei; sanctis in spes."* (Sinners in reality; saints in hope.)

You sometimes read the biography of a saint and you just keep shaking your head; this all does not ring true to me. **St. Alphonsus Liguori** said: *"If the biographies of the saints*

included their vices as well as their virtues, they would be double in length!” **God save us from saccharine hagiographies.**

All priests have their dark side and it is hard to wrestle with ourselves in this because people expect so much from us. **Archbishop Sheen** used to ask: *“Why do people think that we priests are so much better than we really are?”* And we desperately want to be **authentic**. Why do the people think that we are so much better than we are? Because they understand at some level that a priest is an *alter Christus*.

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen: *“You will have peace of soul when the person you are is the person you want to be is the person other people think you are”*. **St. Augustine** calls it the *tranquilitas ordinis*. It is the peace that comes from having things well ordered inside. We want things to be well-ordered within us, because we have studied this and we know how things ought to be. But the truth is: they are often not well-ordered!

Pope John Paul II, writing to the priests of the world on Holy Thursday a few years back, said *“We priests must convert ourselves anew everyday.”* We are not fundamentalists (once saved, always saved). We have way too much experience to believe that. The truth is that we Catholics, including us priests, are backsliders. We have to fight the good fight everyday, examine our consciences and repent like everybody else.

Please allow me to review with you the **four enemies in the spiritual life**. There are two enemies from within and two from without. The two from within are the double wounds of original sin and our own personal history of sin. The two from without are the world (with all of its pagan ideas and false philosophies) and the Devil, the liar and murderer from the beginning. **It behooves us to examine our spiritual lives as priests from the perspective of our enemies.**

1. **Woundedness of original sin** (weakening of my will and the clouding of my mind; concupiscence). St. Paul: “Why do I do that which I do not wish to do?”
2. **Our own personal history of sin**, especially habitual sin. **I think that the most difficult thing that I ever have to do as a priest is trying to get people to forgive themselves.** Have you experienced that also? People torture themselves for years over mistakes they made long before. They have already repented, been to confession, received absolution, and done their penance. God has forgiven them. It’s over. But they continue to torture themselves. I think Satan has a hand in it for sure. Priests do it too, sometimes worse than anyone. **Admit it, confess it and forget it!**
3. The world; this confusing world in which we live. **(Definition of secularism: a mode of life which takes no account of where I came from nor where I am going.)**
4. The devil, a liar and a murderer from the beginning.

We are outnumbered 4-1. But we have Jesus and His grace. That is all we need to succeed!

As we begin to look at our sins on this retreat and to know our **Dominant Defect**, it is good to begin with Jesus in the desert. **Temptations in the desert:** Analogy of a baseball pitcher with Sammy Sosa at the plate. You are going to throw the best you have at him, or he will hit it out of the park! Satan suspected that this might be the Son of God so he threw Jesus his best stuff: Remember he kept asking: “*If you are the Son of God...*” The three sins with which he tempted the Lord were **sensuality, vanity and pride**. We who are not God’s Incarnate Son are in great danger from these three sins.

Sensuality: comfort; AC, never fasting or denying ourselves anything!

Vanity: Emptiness; Vanity is often the most dangerous sin of the priest; we want people to like us so much that we don’t preach and teach as we ought. Or we make decisions based on the opinions of certain people whom we like and respect the most.

Pride: comparing oneself to others; pride is in competition with every other person’s pride...

Fr. John Hardon’s four ways that we are called to use creatures:

- 1) To enjoy: *like a nice big steak!*
- 2) To endure: *one’s husband might fit into this category; or a certain parishioner*
- 3) To give up: *a relationship with a certain person or thing that causes you to sin; it must be given up.*
- 4) To sacrifice: *something which is not bad in itself nor is it causing you to sin, but God is calling you to sacrifice it for a higher good (Ex: priest who loved beer; never got drunk and never wanted more than 2; but he felt the Holy Spirit asking him again and again to sacrifice that and offer it for the holiness and purity of the youth in his parish!)*

Principle and Foundation of the S.E. “*Man is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord and by this means to save his soul. All creatures should be used to the extent that they help him attain that goal; they are to be gotten rid of to the extent that they inhibit it.*”

In his book “Testimony of Hope” Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan: preaching to the papal household; he was explaining that he was not seemingly able to convert his guards. Then he started to tell the guards about how much he loved *the imperfections or defects of Jesus* and they began to convert to Christianity! The pope and some of the Cardinals raised their eyebrows. “*What heresy is this we are hearing?*” Card Francis Xavier said, “*Before you declare me heretical, let me explain what I mean by the defects in Jesus.*”

- 1) **I love Jesus for His terrible memory.** Good Thief: Jesus, remember me when... Today you will be with me in Paradise. Jesus forgot all his sins! I would have said, “*I won’t forget you but your crimes must be expiated by 20 years in Purgatory.*” Jesus did the same with the sinful woman who anointed his feet with

perfume. He does not ask her about her scandalous past. He said, *“Her many sins are forgiven because she has loved much.”* The Cardinal wrote: *“Jesus does not have a memory like mine. He not only pardons every person. He forgets that He has pardoned!”*

2) I love Jesus because He does not know math. (Parable of the Lost Sheep; the Good Shepherd leaves 99 sheep in the field to go search for 1. This makes sense to Jesus!) For Jesus, 1 is equal to 99. When it is a matter of saving lost sheep, he is never discouraged by risk or effort.

3) I love Jesus because He does not know logic. The parable of the woman with the lost coin; lighted a lamp and spent the entire day looking for it. She calls her neighbors and says *“Rejoice with me. I have found the silver piece that I lost.”* This is truly illogical. To disturb your friends over one silver piece and then plan a feast to celebrate which will cost more than all 10 silver pieces. As the French philosopher **Blaise Pascal** wrote: *“The heart has its reasons that reason does not know.”*

4) I love Jesus because He is not good at Public Relations. *“Come follow me and you will have nowhere to sleep, little to eat, men will hate you and persecute you. You will be homeless, poor and persecuted!”* This is like saying, *“Come eat at McDonalds and you will get fat, your arteries will clog, you will have a heart attack and you will die!”* For 2000 years, people have left everything (**just like you**) to follow Jesus with no promise except to share in His own way of life.

5) I love Jesus because He does not know business, finances or economics. The parable of the workers in the vineyard; paid them all the same! You can't run a business that way. Is Jesus' accounting wrong? No. He does it on purpose. He said, *“Can I not do what I want with what is mine? Or are you jealous because I am generous?”*

These alleged defects in Jesus show His great mercy and this is what finally converted his hard hearted guards. The Cardinal said to the Holy Father and other Cardinals: *“I hope at the end of my life, the Lord will receive me as He did the smallest workers in His vineyard. I will sing of His mercy for all eternity. I will be happy to see Jesus with all of His incorrigible defects.”*

Whatever sins we might be struggling with at this point in our lives, we can certainly be merciful and kind to others. We had a holy Msgr. who gave a seminary retreat when I was in the seminary; I remember one thing he said: **“The three most important qualities of a priest are: Be kind, be kind, be kind.”**

Story: that has happened to me and I am sure you also, many times as a priest. I will be at a wedding reception or something and someone comes up to me, usually quite intoxicated, and begins, *“Father, I used to be a Catholic but...”* Quite often the story ends with something like this: *“then the priest yelled at me and I have never been back*

since.” Self-mastery is very important for a priest. **Wisdom is knowing when to speak your mind and when to mind your speech.**

St. Clement Hoffbrauer: In Vienna, he began orphanages to care for the children on the street. He had to beg money for food for the children. He entered a saloon where there were some godless ruffians playing poker and drinking liquor. He went up to a poker table where a huge stack of money lay and he took off his hat and begged, “*May I please have something for my orphans?*” One of the men turned and spat right in his face. He calmly took out his handkerchief, wiped his face and said, “*That was for me. Now may I please have something for my orphans?*” The man did not know how to respond to this kind of self-control. He had never seen this before. He laughed nervously, looked around and then gave the priest a huge stack of money.

People can be unreasonable, we priests know that, and you can’t reason with unreasonable people. So don’t try. But still try to be patient and kind.

Story: My friend Renee; senior in high school; last day of exams. The bell rang and she came rushing in all disheveled. She was a very pretty girl but today, it was clear what had happened. She had stayed up late studying, overslept and she did not have time to shower, fix her hair and put on her make-up. When she walked in, everyone was already sitting down, as roll was being called. A boy in the front row said the cruelest thing; out loud, so everyone could hear, he said, “*Dang Renee. You look like a witch today!*” It hurt her so badly; you could just see a sword go through her soul; she was already so self-conscious and to do that in front of the whole class was so mean. Then another boy in the class got up, walked over to her and said out loud (while hugging her), “*Renee, you are always beautiful to me.*” And you could just see the healing go back into her face. And I sat in the back of the room marveling at how cruel and how kind the human person can be. What is it that makes a person kind? It is Jesus.

Resolution Idea: **Pray for the gift of kindness, self mastery and mercy.** Change whatever you need to change so that when you die, your people will say, “*He was so kind. That priest was so kind.*”

Book: “*Ite, Missa Est*” It was written by Genie Summers of Family Missions Company. Frank and Genie run a Catholic lay missionary organization that trains and sends out lay missionaries, entire families, all over the world to work for Christ. They are headquartered in Abbeville, La. Genie tells the story that when she was a freshman in college at LSU, she became pregnant. And her parents took her to see a priest so that they could make plans for where she would go for the next nine months to have her baby (and so that she could confess her sin.) During the interview with her parents, she wrote that the priest never once looked at her even once. He never looked her in the eyes with compassion, conscious that she was hurting because of what she had done. *As if she was not worthy of kindness.* Genie wrote that, because of that especially, she left the Catholic Church as fast as she could.

St. Alphonsus Liguori: *“Because of His great tenderness, Jesus mystically suffers every individual suffering we know until the end of time.”*

The Pharisees hated Jesus because he was so kind and merciful. Like that woman caught in adultery in the gospel I read. The book goes on to say how, many years later, she and her husband, on the brink of divorce, converted to Christ through the charismatic renewal. They sold everything they had, gave it to the poor and went off to a foreign country as missionaries for Jesus.

There is a big confusion these days between the understanding of Justice and Mercy. **Many people have this idea that God ceases to be just in order to be merciful.** This is heresy. God never ceases to be just. **Analogy of teaching a class;** a child speaks out of turn and so I tell her to go sit in the corner. She says, *“Father, please have mercy. Don’t make me go stand in the corner.”* So I don’t make her. Is that mercy? No, it is imperfect justice. Justice is to render to someone what is their due. **The Council of Trent** said 500 years ago, *“All sin falls under the absolute Justice of God.”* Well then, what is mercy? Look at a crucifix! Look at the Lord Jesus, the innocent Lamb of God with blood pouring from his hands and feet and side. That is mercy! We preach Christ crucified.

Riddle for the Ascension: What are the only man-made things in Heaven? Answer: the five wounds of Christ. Jesus bled so that I could have mercy.

Every priest must deal with his own sins and receive the mercy of Jesus himself so that he can be the dispenser of this mercy in the sacrament of confession. **Fr. Anthony Manochio:** *“You can’t be a good confessor unless you first become a good penitent.”* **Blessed Cardinal Newman:** *“We learn to do right by having done wrong.”*

Story: St. Margaret Mary; Sacred Heart of Jesus; St. Claude de Colombiere; *“I no longer remember his sins.”*

I hear Jesus say, *“I really love the priest anawim.”* I especially love those priests who barely made it through the seminary, who struggle with many different things; **they have their demons.** They have addictions, they suffer from depression, some have to fight a battle against anger, they have wounds...and then they come into the church (like the publican not daring to raise his eyes to heaven, ashamed of his sins, shaking his head, I should be so much better). **And then he says,** *“Lord, I have to celebrate Mass because I’m the only priest here.”* And then he offers Holy Mass for his people...God accepts the sacrifice of Jesus Christ offered by this priest for the people because it was offered by a humble priest. *“There is nothing worse than a proud priest.”* **Fr. Anthony Manochio**

Spanish Proverb: *“Prosperity is the most dangerous situation of man.”* This is why a young priest who is suddenly very *successful* pastorally can be in great danger.

There is such a thing as the **“providential purpose of sin.”** (I once heard Fr. John Hardon speak of this). Often times, we learn to do good from having done bad. Sin makes us

humble, dependent, kind and merciful to others. Isn't this a great mystery? We learn to be merciful by having received mercy ourselves! Seminarians will say to me, *"Father, when will God take this sin, this weakness away from me? I'm praying. I'm trying."* Usually they are talking about masturbation or something to do with purity. Of course God does not want us to sin but He knows that we must stay dependent on Him. If we quickly overcame our dark side, we would quickly begin to think that we don't need Jesus. And then we would be lost.

Seminarians often ask me, *"Why can't I stop doing this sin? Why won't God help me?"* Perhaps because God is trying to protect you from a worse sin; the sin of pride! Pride goes before the fall. Humble people don't have far to fall.

Story: a priest that I knew well who fell hard. He was suffering from serious depression, he was by himself in an isolated parish way out in the country and he did not get help. He became involved with pornography, prostitution, alcohol and drugs. Anything to stop the pain. And he was so angry. He was raging (defined as when a person is hurting incredibly bad and can see no way to make it stop).

When are we going to learn that depression is a disease; not a weakness! If we had cancer we would go to an oncologist but we won't get help when we are depressed. If you want to be ashamed of something, be ashamed when you're too damn proud to go get the help you need; there is no shame in depression, or cancer or any other disease. There is shame in pride; that's the sin. Check your Scriptures and you will see pride mentioned on every page as a sin. Depression; never. And Satan is using this pride to hurt many priests...and because the priests feel so low, they then sometimes, though they don't mean to, take it out on their people. (Those D's of the Devil; discouragement, dismay, depression, despair). *Statistics show that depression is one of the most common mental illnesses yet less than 1/2 of depression sufferers seek treatment.* New treatments and medications come out all the time. Please, if this is you, go and get an evaluation. If you walk around with a 100 lb weight around your neck, don't you think it would help a lot to get it reduced to 50 lbs!

I knew this priest was down but I did not know how bad it was. He finally had to get help and we discovered it when one day, he called my mother and told her he was going to kill himself. And I wasn't there for him and I should have been. I was very young, idealistic and proud. Thank God he did get help and he is a fine priest today.

St. John Chrysostom: *"If I were a general leading troops into battle and some of my men got frightened and they ran away from the battle line. They deserted. But after they ran, they realized what they had done and they felt terrible and they came running back and fought harder than ever before...I would rather have these than the ones who never left but who never really fought either."*

Like everybody else, we must deal with our sins and our sinfulness is humbling and embarrassing. We are ashamed of our dark side and yet it constantly reminds us of the words of Jesus: *"Sine mei, nihil potestis facie."* Without me, you can do nothing. It was

difficult for me as a proud, young priest when I finally came to the realization that there was no sin of which I was not capable. Under the right circumstances, the right time and place, we are all ticking time bombs. **St. Philip Neri**, as he watched the murderer mount the scaffold: *“There but for the grace of God go I.”* We used to always say, *“Whenever a priest falls, it’s either punch or Judy.”* You know what I mean...alcohol or a woman. Nowadays, I am sorry to say, there are so many other ways in which priests fall.

And when a priest falls, in whatever way, especially if it reaches the external forum, that priest suffers greatly. And Satan attacks. And the **“stinking thinking”** begins. And it goes like this: *“Well, I’ve blown it now. The bishop thinks I’m weak and incapable. I’ve caused a scandal. I can forget about ever being a bishop now. It’s in my file. What do my brother priests think?”* Oh, we don’t say anything and we whisper a prayer for that priest. But deep down, there is this thought...*“at least I haven’t done that; at least I’m not like that.”*

But you see I am like that! I am exactly like that. We are all exactly like that. If there is any sin that we have not yet committed as a priest, it is for one of two reasons: I have not yet had the opportunity to commit that sin...or because the grace of God has saved me. Or a combination of the two. If there is any sin that you have not committed as a priest, it is not because you are good but because God is good to you!

Scripture says that *“the just man falls seven times per day.”* And *“the just man is his own accuser.”*

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote: *“Mercy is love shown to the absolutely unworthy.”* Mercy is even more comprehensive than forgiveness. Mercy has more to offer; it is more comprehensive even than love. Mercy has nothing to do with agreement. It has everything to do with understanding the individuality of every person with whom we are dealing.

This is why **St. Bernard of Clairvaux** wrote: *“When looking at the sins of others, if you cannot excuse the action then excuse the intention.”* *“Poor man, the temptation must have been so strong for him.”*

I think the most difficult thing that I do as a priest is **trying to get people to forgive themselves.** God forgives them, they come to the sacrament, do their penance but they won’t let it go. They torture themselves, they beat themselves, they see every misfortune as God’s punishment because of that mistake. **And priests do it too.** Dealing with our own dark side is very difficult.

In his book, *Testimony of Hope*: The Cardinal is preaching from **Matthew; the Book of the Genealogy of Jesus Christ.** Anybody who can preach a sermon based on the genealogy of Matthew is certainly a saint!

He reminds us that in salvation history, there have been a lot of failures. Before the exile, only two of the 14 listed were faithful to God; **Hezekiah and Josiah.** After the exile,

only two of 14 were faithful to God: **Shealtiel and Zerubabel**. All the others were idolators, assassins, and pagans. And then **King David**, the most famous King, from whom the Messiah received his human origins; sin and sanctity are mixed. Adultery followed by murder; and then the most beautiful penitential psalm in the Bible: Ps. 51.

Then he says that of the women who are mentioned; **Tamar** is a sinner, **Rahab** is a prostitute, **Ruth** is a foreigner and **Bathsheba** (her name is not even mentioned; just says the wife of Uriah because we all know about her.). And then Jesus chose **Peter** who denied Him and **Paul** who persecuted Him and they are pillars of the Church! Their statues stand proudly in St. Peter's square. So if you are sitting there thinking about your sins, I say, *"Welcome to the Church. Your past sins are not an obstacle to your greatness!"* **My brothers, whatever you have done, whatever your dark side, please forgive yourself and move on. Admit it, confess it and forget it. Jesus still wants to use you to do great things for His Kingdom!**

Story: Archbishop Dolan's retreat at the Mount: He told the story of a pastor, around 50 years old, who was one of the most respected and "successful" pastors in his diocese. He was pastor of a very large, affluent parish with a big school, etc. One day, his secretary buzzed him that there was a woman in the parlor who wished to see him. *"Don't you remember me?" You and I had an affair 30 years ago when you were in your first assignment and I had your child."* *"I do remember you know, but I had no idea that you had a baby. I wish you had told me."* *"Well I am telling you now and I want a check for \$250,000 by tomorrow or I am going to tell the press as well."* He immediately went to the bishop to ask what to do and the bishop was very kind and understanding. He said, *"It is true, then."* *"Yes, it is true."* *"Ok, then we have to beat her to the punch."* So the pastor wrote a letter to his parish and told them the whole story, asked their forgiveness and resigned as pastor. He suffered intensely. He went on a retreat, spent some time away and then returned. His bishop and he discussed it and he decided to go to another diocese which needed priests very badly. He is a great priest today, though pastor of a much smaller parish, and he is doing great work for the Kingdom. And once a year, he gives a priest retreat. And it is a very powerful retreat!

Judging our brother priests: Story of the woman I met who told me about a certain Fr. X. *"He is the most wonderful priest in the world."* I was inwardly thinking that she must not know this priest very well. I personally did not care for him. I was a much more traditional priest than he. He and I had disagreed before. Etc. I think she saw by my silence that I might not be agreeing with her and she said, *"Father Brett, Fr. X may have his problems but when my husband was dying of cancer, he came to visit him in our home every single day. He brought Jesus to us."* And I was ashamed of myself and my thoughts. Here was a priest, one of my brother priests in my diocese that I had judged harshly and yet this simple lady (this child of God) called him the most wonderful priest in the world!

So I want to invite you today to practice **the ABC's of Mercy: Ask for mercy, Be merciful and have Complete trust.** We just have to have mercy on each other. That doesn't mean you have to agree with each other.

You know the expression that comes to us. There is so much good in the worst of us and there is so much bad in the best of us that it behooves none of us to talk about the rest of us.

We must be men of the Church. **Totally Catholic and Totally Kind.**

The water in the baptismal font is only deep in the middle. If we get out too far to the right, it gets shallow quickly; if we get out too far to the left, it gets shallow quickly. But I think there is an acceptable degree of deep middle water in the font. What that degree **is** really differs in people's opinions and it often divides presbyterates. When a priest gets so far right or left that they are out of the font altogether, then it is the bishop's duty to get them back in.

Mike Firmin: Mike has a son who was ordained a priest for Savannah two years ago. He is the father of 6 children and has spent his life as part of the Alleluia Community in Augusta, Ga. Mike loves the poor and has always had a *preferential option for the poor*. He began and has built the Augusta Food Bank into a multimillion dollar enterprise. He said to me one day, "*Fr. Brett, what do our seminaries do to teach our future priests to love the poor? Because if our priests do not love the poor when they are ordained, then they are not like Jesus in a very important way!*" The Truth of his question almost knocked me over. And I had to admit with sadness that the PPF does not require a specific course. Our men study this in mystical theology, they have apostolates with the poor, but there is no directed program to make sure this happens.

Most seminarians today are more interested in studying Latin than Spanish. I love Latin also but the Church is not hemorrhaging from both nostrils losing souls from the Faith because priests do not know Latin. The face of the Church of the 21st century is certainly Hispanic. "*But Father, I realize this does not sound good, but if I learn Spanish, I may have to work with the poor Mexicans all my life as a priest!*"

James Cardinal Hickey: "*We don't love and care for the poor because they are Catholic. We love and care for the poor because we are Catholic.*"

My point is that very often a presbyterate is divided between those priests who float a little left of center in the water of the Baptismal font and those who float a little right of center. And typically, the priests who float to the left are very passionate about the Church's Social teaching; they love the poor and they work for peace. God bless them. We need champions of this Social Teaching. This is orthodox Roman Catholic Teaching.

And typically, the priests who float a little to the right are very passionate about human life and the Church's sexual teaching. God bless them. We need champions of human life and Church teaching on human sexuality.

Seminarians at Mount St. Mary's and at other seminaries where I have done retreats will sometimes say, "*Father, I can't wait to get out there and preach the hard teachings of*

*the Church: Abortion, birth control, homosexual activity.” Fr. Dan Mindling, a Franciscan and our academic dean replied: “Wait a minute. What about the Church’s social teaching! The Social teaching of the Catholic Church is equally as challenging, if not more. Look, if you are going to be a Catholic priest, **totally Catholic and totally kind**, then you must preach “Populorum Progresso” as well as “Humane Vitae.” You must teach “Sollicitudo Rei Socialis” as well as “Evangelium Vitae.” We have got to teach it all!*

In my opinion, these are the two most difficult areas of Catholic teaching. I know that our respective theological positions are a lot more developed and sophisticated than two areas of Church teaching. But these are the two main emphasis of these “seemingly” divergent positions. But they should not be divergent because they are both Orthodox Roman Catholic Church teaching!

And in the presbyterates all across the U.S. and the world, Satan is using this to divide us. I ask you, my brother priests, to make this one of your **resolutions**. If you tend to float a little to the right, then make it your resolution this year to study, learn and teach the Social Teaching of the Church to the people in your parish. To commit yourself to a preferential option for the poor; to mobilize your parish to work for peace; have classes on the Social encyclicals. And if you tend to float a little to the left, then make it your resolution this year to study, learn and teach the teachings on human life and human sexuality. Mobilize your parish to understand and embrace this great new Theology of the Body. By doing this, we are reaching across the deep water of the Baptismal font to become a more united force. And the deep water is love. It is charity. Satan does not want us to do this.

It is sometimes ok to have champions or specialists of one or the other. To use the medical analogy, we need super-specialists like **Orthopedic surgeons**. When I need my knee replaced, it makes me feel good to know that this particular surgeon has done this procedure about 250 times! But most priests are not super-specialists. We are family practitioners. And family practitioners have to teach it all. And we will become totally Catholic and totally kind. I often say to our seminarians, “*If you don’t like cafeteria Catholics, then don’t be a Cafeteria priest!*” *If it bothers you that people pick and choose which teachings they will accept and obey, then don’t pick and choose which teachings you will preach and teach.* The people of God deserve the whole Truth!

Like the Missionaries of Charity; Mother Teresa’s sisters: their authenticity shines because they believe, they teach and they live all the teachings of the Church. To radically serve the poorest of the poor while faithfully teaching everything Christ taught.

My points are these: 1. We want to be men of the Church (Totally Catholic and totally kind). 2. We must recognize and appreciate that God is using all of us to accomplish His purposes, whether we like it or not!

Satan knows how proud we priests are...and how convinced we are that we are right in these matters of Faith which mean so much to us. **St. Augustine** said: *“In things essential, orthodoxy; in things non-essential, liberty; but in all things, charity!”*

We all want to believe that we have the *recta ratio agibilium*, the right way of doing things. The longer I am a priest, the more convinced I am that the **“Depositum Fidei,”** the official teachings of the Catholic Church on faith and morals is absolutely true. And the less convinced I am that my personal opinions about how things ought to be done are necessarily correct. The reason for that is that I have seen so many priests who do things very differently than I would, and God uses them powerfully to bring people to Jesus and Jesus to people.

Resolution Ideas: Write down the name or names of the priests that you dislike or with whom you disagree most in this diocese and pray for them by name every day.

Marriage Counseling analogy: when a couple in my parish are having marital problems, they come in to see me. This is how I do it. I know many of you have much more experience than I; some of you are professional marriage counselors; I first meet with them and before they can tell me anything about the problems, I make them pray together in their own words and promise me that they will do this every day (or I won't work with them). Secondly, I divide them up and speak to each one privately for 15 minutes; they tell me what they think is the problem without the other interrupting and getting irritated. Then I bring them back together and I tell them what I have heard each of them say.

In a week or two, they come back and I ask them two questions: **1.** Have you been praying together as you promised? If they say yes, I ask them the second question: **2. Are you still fighting?** They often say, *“Yes, but our fights are nicer.”* The point is that when we pray for people or when we pray with people, it is hard to speak unkindly to them or about them. **This is why it is so important that we try to pray with our brother priests, in our rectories, our deaneries and in our presbyterates!** There is a good resolution for this retreat.

I know many priests who have fallen in different ways. I know priests who have fallen in love. There is an old expression: *“There are seven locks on the human heart and the first always opens silently.”* As priests we have to be very careful because we are men. Men love to charm women and women love to be charmed by men. *“Between a man saint and woman saint, brick and mortar.”* Virtue in a pretty package is very attractive! You know what I mean, that lady who comes to daily Mass, loves Jesus with all her heart, works for the poor and unfortunate...and besides all that, **she's cute as a speckled pup!**

The bottom line is that Jesus has to be our **Consuming Concern.** I know priests who have struggled with this divided heart, falling in love. The heart does not just obey you when you command it to unattach. The prophet **Jeremiah:** *“There is nothing more*

tortuous than the human heart.” If a priest falls in love with a woman, he suffers. We always want to possess the object of our love.

The **vocation director of a certain diocese in South America** told me recently that over 50% of the priests in his diocese have a mistress and a family on the side. We just can’t live with this duplicity. Maybe this is the resolution that God is asking you to make.

Closing Story: Msgr. James Mulligan; final comprehensive oral exams; a student went in for the one hour exam before four faculty members; Msgr. Mulligan told him to open up this particular book; dog-eared and well used.; turn to this paragraph and read and translate the Latin and then comment on it. When the student looked down, he saw a copy of **Denzinger’s Enchiridion Symbolorum** (an extensive manual of Catholic doctrine containing all the major definitions and declarations on faith and morals from the 1st century!) He opened to that particular page and paragraph; he saw *to his joy* that someone had written an English translation of the very passage he was being asked to translate. He checked it quickly and it looked pretty correct though his Latin was not good. So he read the translation and then commented on it. At the end of the exam, Msgr. asked if any of the examiners had any more questions for the student. No one did. As the student stood up to go, Msgr. Mulligan said, *“Oh, just one more thing. I was very impressed with your Latin translation of that difficult passage. Your Latin is very good.”* And the student said, *“Msgr. Mulligan, my Latin is not good. I was just lucky. Someone had written in pen an English translation in the margin and I just read that.”* Msgr. Mulligan said, *“I wrote that translation before you came in. I already knew that you knew your theology but I just wanted to know if you were a man of integrity before I sent you out to take care of people’s souls. Now I know that you are.”*

That seminarian was Msgr. Joe Luca; he is my spiritual director today.

Resolution idea: Define the one thing in your life that makes you feel like you are not completely authentic; perhaps it is a lack of prayer; perhaps a lack of kindness; lack of faith; something in your dark side; maybe it is a relationship with another person. Whatever it is, **resolve on this retreat to change it.**

My mother used to always say: *“It is the greatest blessing of life to be able to go to bed every night with a clean conscience.”* You will have peace of soul when the person you are, is the person you want to be, is the person other people think you are.

Let me end by saying: Whatever you have done, forgive yourself and receive the mercy of Jesus. May your **“dark-side”** help make you more kind, gentle and humble so that when people come to you in confession or counseling, *you will look them in the eyes* and tell them how much Jesus loves them. And they will leave saying, *“That priest was so kind. That priest was so good. Jesus must be so good.”*

Indeed, if you add up all the goodness of every good person who ever lived, it would not equal the goodness of Jesus.

May God who has begun this good work in you bring it to fulfillment.

Conference 4: The Power of Prayer and Preaching

Scripture: Mt. 9:35-ff Jesus retired to pray throughout the night; people came to him; like sheep without a shepherd! He taught them and healed their sick. He always prayed before He preached.

St. Bonaventure: *“If we learn everything except Christ, we learn nothing. And if we learn nothing except Christ, we learn everything.”* **Dietrich Von Hildebrand:** *“The goodness of Christ is only faintly seen in the goodness of all the saints.”*

Jesus is the only teacher. Jesus is the only lesson. *“Christ-likeness is the only success recognized by God.”* **My brother priests, we have the privilege, not only of following Jesus and trying to become like Him...but we also have the privilege of preaching and teaching about Him!** Jesus said, *“He who obeys these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.”*

And that is why I would like to speak in this conference about prayer (coming to know Jesus and becoming like Him) and preaching, the primary duty of the priest! Jesus always prayed before He preached.

Story: My confirmation retreat when I was in 8th grade. A blind 95 year old monk: *“The secret to happiness is everyday, for 15 minutes, go down deep into your soul and speak with the Holy Spirit who lives there.”*

A seminarian has a tremendous opportunity; the opportunity to **pray and study**. I always remind them to please take advantage of it now. After ordination, as you all know, it is amazing the amount of work that is asked of you. **To bring people to Jesus and Jesus to people.** And if we do not pray, we will not survive! The priesthood is a life of interruptions! A priest friend of mine always points to the white tab collar and says, *“You see this. It means “interrupt me.”*”

Southern expression: *“Most of man’s troubles stem from too much time on his hands and not enough time on his knees.”*

Story: When I used to hear confessions in the school on Friday. Then I would go sit in the balcony of the Church and watch the children come to do their penance. To visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and to say, *“I love you.”* **KISS!** This is not rocket science. This is another one of my presbyteral mottos: **Bring people to Jesus and get out of the way!**

Give examples of the work to come: mountains of phone calls to return; everyone wants an appointment. Children have to be taught; the youth need attention; administration of the parish, weddings, funerals, homilies to prepare,...**overwhelming!** Gentlemen, how do you deal with stress, because let me tell you, it is coming. **The priesthood is a life of interruptions.** And we meet sin on the front line of the battle field. And it comes to us

most often in suffering. People are not going to call to say: “*Oh Father, everything is just going great and I just wanted to call to tell you that.*” No, they call to say, “*Father my husband just walked out on me and the kids. We have no money. What are we going to do?*” “We” because you’re our father in Christ.

Prayer gives us the power to bring Jesus to others. Here are two great questions I would invite you to ponder today:

1. When you feel down and out/over and under, how do you make yourself feel better? How do you medicate yourself? Addictions are plentiful. If we do not pray, we will be lost!
2. When you get really good news...or really bad news, with whom do you share it first? Do you go straight to Jesus or do you pick up the phone and call a friend?

The first duty of a priest is not to work; the first duty of a priest is to pray.

Of all the work that we do as priests, we feel most like a priest in times of tragedy and death! The priest represents Jesus and Jesus has overcome death.

St. Augustine: “*God has deemed it better to bring good out of evil than not to permit evil at all.*” This is a great mystery and one which we as priests are asked to help people understand. There are only two things that will soften and stretch a man’s heart; mental prayer and suffering. **Magnanimity**; greatness of soul, happens because of these two things.

St. Augustine: “*God wants to give us so many gifts but our hearts are too small; they must be stretched.*”

The greatest sacrifice that a diocesan priest can make **is to be available to his people.** While this is true, you also must survive. Take care of yourself. Priesthood is a marathon, not a 100 yard dash! Everyday must begin with prayer. I teach our seminarians that **in a priest’s day, there are 3 parts: morning, afternoon and night.** Make sure you work 2 of the 3 but not all 3 all the time! **St. John Chrysostom:** “*the bowstring cannot be strung tight all the time.*”

Some men need the priesthood more than the priesthood needs them.

Story—(Msgr. Tim Moran; St. John’s Seminary) a certain religious order in the northeast accepted a clean cut young man. He was a model brother. First at prayers, considerate of others, intelligent and funny, a very attractive personality. *America’s Most Wanted* came on one night. Two weeks later, the F.B.I. rushed in during morning prayers. He was wanted for armed robbery in several states. Can you imagine a man like that unleashed upon the people of God?

We need healthy priests but we also need to stay on the cutting edge. We need to live a little bit radically. **We need a spiritual director who will hold us accountable. Is it not incredible that there are so few parish priests who are canonized saints?** We have such an unaccountable life and this is why so many parish priests can get off the track. This means now and once we become priests. There are too many things to become addicted to, to use to make ourselves feel better when we are stressed.

St. John Vianney, patron saint of parish priests: Why do we never hear about St. John Vianney in our priests retreats? It is true that **St. Francis de Sales** said: *“Some saints are better admired than imitated.”*

I hear priests say things like: *“Oh, he was too hard-core. He only ate potatoes and he scourged himself. That’s outdated and not healthy.”* And while I certainly agree that we should eat healthily and not scourge ourselves, why was St. John Vianney chosen as our patron saint? It seems to me that the two things he did as a priest so effectively were that **he prayed and he preached**. And yes, we all know that he heard confessions for most of every day and he denied himself and he gave small penances and did the big penances himself and he still found time to visit the sick and teach catechism to the children. But mostly, he prayed and he preached Jesus Christ (in that order). And the world around him changed. **“The priest is above all a man of prayer.”**

St. John Vianney wrote: ***The first duty of the priest is to pray.*** At Mount St. Mary’s, we have a beautiful monument and statue of St. John Vianney with this inscription. “The first duty of the priest is to pray.” Now we are a little bit embarrassed by this statue, not because of the great St. John Vianney but because the statue was purchased with “ill gotten gain.” What I mean is, the money for that statue was left to us in the will of a priest, an alumnus who recently died. I think \$20,000. After we had purchased and installed the statue, it was discovered that the priest had embezzled money from his parish. What do we do? So I always say a prayer for that priest when I pass the statue. And anyway, ***“De Mortuis, nil nisi bonum.”*** *About the dead, nothing but good should be said.*

Bp. Robert Carlson: *“The biggest problem or source of division in my diocese is not between priests who are liberal and priests who are conservative. It is between priests who pray and those who do not.”*

What is prayer? **Prayer is a timed exposure of the soul to God.**

Fr. Mark Link; S.J. – The 3 minute drill; 60 seconds giving praise and worship to God the Father; then thank the Father for one thing; 60 seconds giving praise and worship to God the Son; to Jesus; then tell Jesus you are sorry for one thing; 60 seconds giving praise and worship to God the Holy Spirit; then make one resolution to the Holy Spirit for the rest of the day. **I have found this to be a very effective way to begin a prayer time!**

Yes, there are a lot of stresses being a diocesan priest. So many people to call back, so many people who need fixing, **finding time to prepare that homily, ...the first thing**

to go is prayer, ignoring the God of the people for the people of God. The **second thing to go is the priest**. And we have all seen this **destructive pattern** repeated many times. Because we priests are conscientious and we work hard. When a priest says “*My work is my prayer.*” No! All ex-priests say this!

Blaise Pascal wrote: “*All of man's problems stem from his inability to sit alone, quiet in a room.*”

(**Nemo dat quod non habet**); **we can't give what we don't have**. A priest must know Him of whom he speaks. I don't want to offend anyone here, but I think we all know it is true; many priests know their theology but they don't know Jesus...because they don't pray.

Archbishop Sean O'Malley: “*Holiness is less easily acquired than theological fluency.*”

St. Augustine: “*The pious soul prays not to inform God but to be conformed to His will.*” God does not need to be informed. Prayer does not change God. He is immutable. Prayer changes us. **Charity is the litmus test of whether our prayer is working or not**. Am I more patient, **more kind**, more loving, quicker to forgive, etc. Or am I mean as a snake?

There are different ways to pray that feed different people. I recognize and respect that. I have done a good deal of spiritual direction. At Mount St. Mary's, we stress the daily Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament. **We ask our men to spend 1/24th of their day in conversation with Jesus**, outside of Mass and required morning prayer and evening prayer. Is it too much to ask that a priest spend 1 hour out of 24 when that one hour basically defines the other 23?

There are many ways to pray besides kneeling in front of the enthroned Blessed Sacrament and I understand and respect that. We each have to find the way that fits us best. But what I often see in priests (including myself) is that **we do everything else that is required of us...but pray**, because prayer is hard. It is an effort and one which often does not seem to be accomplishing anything.

Though I like to pray my beads while jogging or driving, there is a problem with only praying while doing something else. There is something profoundly different about sitting with Jesus and giving Him your undivided attention. We call this **wasting time with Jesus!**

Dry times in prayer; At a priest retreat in Savannah a few years ago, **Bp. Curlin** told us that he was in Calcutta giving a retreat to the M.C. Mother Teresa sent a note across the room to this bishop; “*Where is Jesus?*” He saved that note and keeps it in his breviary.

When the affective dimension of prayer dries up, it does not mean that I don't love God or that God doesn't love me. It just means that we are used to one another. It is a duller love but not a lesser one. It is a more profound love.

“There is nothing remarkable about love at first sight. It is when people have been looking at each other for years that it becomes remarkable!”

St. Teresa of Avila: *“To remain in prayer without gathering anything from it, is not a loss of time but a great gain, for we are toiling without self-interest solely for the honor and glory of our Lord.”*

A very honest priest friend of mine once said: *“People are always asking me to pray for them.”* I said, *“Do you do it?”* He said, *“I tell them I will but I usually forget.”* I said, *“Well you pray for them in the Liturgy of the Hours.”* And he said, *“Yes, but I think it is understood by them and me that I will pray for them more specifically than that.”*

I really believe that, as a priest, I should pray for people by name. I keep a list. When someone asks me to pray for them, I say *“Please write it down.”* When I see them, I remember to ask about that intention because I have been praying. You might say, *“Well, so many people have intentions. How do you do that?”* It does take 15 minutes of my Holy Hour to go through my list.

Recently, I had to have an emergency **laparoscopic appendectomy**. The surgeon on call was a very kind man (for 1:30 a.m.) and he was a Muslim. Because he knew I was a priest, I could see that he was nervous. As they were rolling me into surgery, I asked him, *“Doc, is there anything I can pray for you for, maybe for your family?”* He was very nervous. He finally said, *“Please pray that I do a good job on this surgical procedure.”* I said, *“Well, I will certainly be praying for that!”* Then he said, *“Would you please pray for my daughter? She is having a hard time right now. And he told me her name.”* When I went back for my post op checkup, I asked him about his daughter. I told him I had been praying. He told me some more about his family. A relationship was built that was more than doctor-patient, all because I asked him what intentions I could pray for.

St. John Chrysostom: *“The soul that does not pray is sick and emits an offensive odor.”*

St. Teresa of Avila: *“To lose one’s way is nothing more than the giving up of prayer. Whoever does not pray does not need the devil to lead him off the path. He will throw himself into Hell.”*

St. Augustine wrote: *“God does not grow rich on our payments but makes those who pay him grow rich in him.”*

The only mistake we ever make is taking our eyes off of Jesus. Prayer is keeping our eyes fixed on the prize, to desire the Pearl of Great Price beyond everything else. I heard it described once: ***We must desire holiness the way a drowning man desires oxygen!*** When I heard it put that way, I had to say, *“I don’t desire holiness like that.”*

I think that every priest needs to make **at least one resolution on prayer** every year. We need to believe that prayer is more important than food...more important than work! **The priest is above all a man of prayer.**

Let's be honest and admit that very often, we don't want our prayer to work. We don't want to change. We are comfortable and very attached to our little foibles. As I heard a **retreat master** say: *"Most people don't really want to do the will of God. Most people really want to do their own will without seriously offending God!"*

This is why **Blessed John Cardinal Newman** wrote: *"The sin of good people is that they will not allow God to command new commitment or better service."* Sometimes we don't want to pray because we don't want to change!

Archabbot Lambert Reilly: *"What good is it if the bread and wine change, but you don't!"*

Resolution ideas:

- Have a fixed place and time when you will pray every day. **(specificity increases accountability).**

Have a plan before you get there. Tell **the Lord:** *"I really want this prayer time to go well."*

Praying in the morning is best for a priest. I used to always say that if you are a rooster, pray in the morning and if you are an owl, pray at night. But in parish life, it just does not really work. Prayer in the morning: **1.** concretizes your belief that prayer comes first and Jesus comes first in your life. **2.** If you don't pray in the morning, the amount of work and the crisis of your parishioners will often outrank your afternoon prayer! You don't get to it. Or you are just too tired. **We read in the lives of all the saints that if we put prayer first, everything else that needs to get done will get done and with less effort.** It is our experience as well, when we have done it.

St. Augustine wrote: *"Bene curret, sed extra viam."* *He runs well, but off the road.* I think this would be a **good license plate for many priests these days.** They are running all the time, but because they have not begun each day in prayer, they may not be running in the right direction, doing what God really wants them to do. If we have not prayed first, we might not be running on the right road. Like a hamster on a wheel. Ask Martha and Mary.

To say, *"I am going to try to pray more."* This is not specific enough. **Specificity increases accountability.** To say, *"I'm going to pray for one hour from 7-8 am while sitting in the church, third pew, right side, keeping all the doors of the church locked until 8."* And it is a measurable goal. You clearly know when you do or do not do it. And you can give that report to your spiritual director each month when you meet with him.

More resolution ideas:

- Keep a prayer list in your breviary with the names and intentions of those who ask you to pray for them. By name! The father of a family prays for his wife and each of his children daily. (but he does not have 4,000 people; I understand that)
- Beg God for the gift of prayer on this retreat. Tell Him that you need to feel and experience intimacy with Him. Ask others to pray that you will receive this gift. Do a novena. Make a pilgrimage. Do something drastic. Beg for this gift!!! I remember doing a **30 day silent Ignatian retreat in Sedalia, Co. specifically to beg God for the gift of prayer!**

St. Teresa of Avila: *“To remain in prayer without gathering anything from it is not a loss of time but a great gain, for we are toiling without self interest, solely for the honor and glory of our Lord.”* We are wasting time with Jesus.

Fr. Tom Acklin: He told us once that he was the spiritual director for a heart surgeon in the Pittsburgh area. The surgeon was lamenting that, because he was often on call all night, he had sometimes fallen asleep during his prayer time and he felt badly about this. Then it occurred to him, *“Every day, I put people to sleep in order to repair their hearts. Maybe that is what the Holy Spirit is doing to me?”* This is an interesting idea, though I don’t want to encourage you to bring your blanket and pillow to your Holy Hour!

- Get a spiritual director. Is it hard to find the perfect S.D. in a rural diocese; in any diocese? Of course, so what do we do? Often, we don’t get anyone. Because we cannot find the perfect spiritual director, we get no one, and we accept the bad spiritual results that come from that!

When I was newly ordained, I knew the priest who I wanted for a spiritual director. The problem was that it was a four hour drive across the state of Georgia! It was not realistic. So instead, I had a few different priests with whom I would exchange the **“professional courtesy.”** Do you know what that is? Well, professional courtesy is, for example, when a doctor sees the children of a dentist and the dentist sees the children of the doctor and neither sends the other a bill. In our world, professional courtesy is when one priest says to another: *“Father, how about hearing a quick confession?”* *“Sure I will.”* So you confess your sins very quickly and **with no details.** *“Now, you are a good priest, just redouble your efforts, say a Memorare for your penance, Act of Contrition, God the Father of mercies...”* And then he goes to confession to you. And in professional courtesy, **no questions are asked!** God help you if you ask a question about something that was confessed! *“Well now, you say you have been drinking too much; are you*

drinking everyday? Getting drunk? You say you have been impure; is that with yourself, with others, internet?" I call this the C.W.Q. — Confessions without Questions.

Methodist minister: I once heard a talk where a minister was describing sexual intimacy with one's spouse being like a 7 course meal. 1. Kissing the wife good morning and telling her that you love her. 2. Helping to get the house in order before you leave for work. 3. Calling her at lunch to tell her you are thinking about her. 4. Emailing her in the afternoon to ask if she needs anything on your way home. 5. Kissing her and hugging her when you arrive home from work. 6. Helping with the dishes and the children tenderly. 7. When you approach the marriage bed after a day like this, she is very open to sexual intimacy. Then the minister said: *"Now don't get me wrong. Once in a while, fast food tastes pretty good! But in the long run, it is not good for your health."* The same can be said about confession and SD. Professional courtesy is fine from time to time but it is not SD. We need the accountability of SD for the long term health of our priesthood.

I certainly avail myself of this **professional courtesy** from time to time with my priest friends and it is a blessing. It is a valid absolution and it is filled with grace. But it is not spiritual direction! And because accountability is not required in professional courtesy, you don't grow as much as you could.

From my experience visiting different presbyterates and speaking with priests from around the country, and it is limited experience, **I would wager that more than 50% of all diocesan priests in the U.S. do not have a spiritual director with whom they meet regularly and to whom they tell everything!** **St. Bernard of Clairvaux:** *"He who is his own master is the disciple of a fool."* I made this statement once on a priest retreat and the bishop came up afterward and said: *"Father, I agree with your thesis, but I disagree with your statistics. I think it is more like 75%."*

And then we wonder why there are so few diocesan priests who are canonized saints! I am very fortunate right now to be living in a seminary which is close to both Washington D.C. and Baltimore. I have many priests close enough to me, and I was able to find a wonderful Baltimore priest who is my spiritual director now.

St. Philip Neri: *"Jesus, if you want me, cut the fetters that keep me from you."*

Please, I ask you if you do nothing else as a result of this retreat, **make a resolution to get a S.D.** This is something we stress so much in the seminary. Have someone to talk to who will hold you accountable. With that spiritual director, I recommend 1) that you set concrete goals so that you will grow. And 2) set an appointment once per month for a year at a time and put these dates and times on your calendar! Have every appointment set for the year when the year begins. *I know diocesan priesthood. If you do that, you may make half of them. If you don't do it,...* (I told you I was going to try to give you practical advice on this retreat)

If it's not the perfect S.D., then get an imperfect one. There is no such thing as a perfect S.D. The Holy Spirit is the real S.D. anyway! It's better than not having anyone and it will render us no longer *the disciple of a fool*.

Msgr. Joseph Luca: pastor in Baltimore gave our 4th year workshop recently to our deacons. He told the story of a 15 year old girl who was dying of Leukemia. One day, he asked her, "*Mary, do you ever pray?*" And the child thought for a moment and she said, "*Father, sometimes I pray and sometimes I just say my prayers.*"

Part II

The **Second Vatican Council** wrote: The "*primum officium*", the primary duty of the priest is to preach. When I first studied this, it surprised me greatly. I had thought saying Mass was the most important, or primary duty. **Why is it primary?**

Scripture: praying scripture; **Pastoro Dabo Vobis:** "*An essential element of spiritual formation is the prayerful and meditative reading of the Word of God.*" #47 Priests must develop life-long habits of meditation on the scriptures.

Resolution Idea: read the Mass readings for the next day every night, the absolute last thing, before going off to sleep...especially the Gospel. Think about them; dream about them. **Lectio Divina.** Sociologists say that this time, just before going to sleep, is a very important time for small children; parents can often teach their children very important lessons which they remember (a very little at a time). **I want to suggest that the last hour before you go to sleep at night is an important time and it should be used very cautiously.**

So often many priests very destructively watch television late into the night, filling their minds with rubbish and disturbing their spirits. Some priests take a long time to wind down so they can sleep. I have a great gift of being able to go to sleep immediately when I hit the bed, and I realize that this is a great gift. We need to go to rest with God's Word, not with graphic sensuality and violence in our minds. If we read the Gospel last thing, then when we wake up in the night at nature's call think about it. "*What are the words of Jesus for tomorrow?*" Wake up in the morning, and the first thing to pop into your mind is the Gospel. **Now if the Gospel is the Gerasene Demoniac, I am not sure you want to be dreaming about that...**but you get my point.

I keep two books on my bedside. One is a spiritual book or a hagiography; the other is something which makes me laugh. I want to go to bed laughing. I know a priest who bought all the old TV shows of Mayberry RFD; Andy Griffith. He watches one every night just before bed so that he can go to bed laughing. I think there is great wisdom there.

Praying the Liturgy of the Hours- The purpose is to keep us focused on God, not on His work. There is a huge temptation **to work and not to pray**. Some priests love to pray the breviary; it really fits their personality and spirituality. I enjoy praying the

office. I know one young priest who told me that he has not missed a single hour of the office, including daytime, office of readings and night prayer, in several years! *“I cannot say that.”*

Ordination rite: The Church will never accept a promise of apostolic celibacy without first requiring a promise to pray the Liturgy of the Hours! This is the wisdom of Holy Mother Church.

Another practical suggestion: A great tool which I learned at I.P.F.: Read each psalm in the office, looking for a single line that really strikes you. At the end of the psalm, before you recite the Glory Be, go back and read that one line again. This tool has helped me greatly to keep my attention fixed on the psalms as I pray the LOH. **If the LOH is an area in which you need improvement, please consider making one of your resolutions here.**

The truth is that we all pray, but none of us prays as we ought to. None of us prays as much as we ought to or as well as we ought to. None of us really knows how to pray (the Holy Spirit must intercede for us). When it comes to prayer, we are all beginners, no matter how long we have been praying. (*Specificity increases accountability.*)

Joke: The bishop, the priest and the deacon about to be shot for their faith. Last requests. Deacon asked for food; bishop asked for opportunity to preach one last sermon tying together all his thoughts of the last 40 years. The priest: *“I would like to be shot before the bishop begins his sermon.”*

Preaching: The *“primum officium”* of the priest is to preach! Prayer and preaching are topics for every priest retreat. And one does not go well without the other. Here are some basic principles:

- a. **90% of Catholics get 90% of their inspiration/information from Sunday Mass.** Most Catholics (who go to Mass) don’t read Catholic papers, don’t watch Catholic TV, they don’t attend your wonderful Bible studies and adult education classes. *Most* Catholics who go to Mass...just go to Mass. Good preaching is essential if we are to keep people moving forward in their faith.
- b. **We should preach because we have something to say, not because we have to say something?** If we have an interior life, we will always have something to say.
- c. **The purpose of a preacher is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.** When we preach, do we preach to the strongest member in our congregation or the weakest? The answer is “yes.” We have to speak to both.

- d. **We do not want to become a conspicuous preacher.** You know what I mean; a preacher who promotes himself while praising God. He talks about God but you get the idea that he wants the real glory himself.
- e. **Preaching is most effectively done, or is best described as “Contemplating and then giving others the fruit of that contemplation.”** Every time we prepare a homily, we really are giving ourselves a retreat.
- f. **“Don’t be a sheep beater.”** Msgr. Steve Rohlf, Rector of the Mount, has an uncanny ability to incisively notice something important about the Church or the priesthood and then to attach a metaphor to it which illustrates that truth and is also funny. So you don’t forget it. I look back at my homily files from the early years of my priesthood, and I say, *“How could I have preached that homily to the poor people? It was way too harsh, too strong, and it was not effective.”* So after a homily is prepared, look back over it and ask yourself, *“Am I a sheep beater?”*

Story: *“Sometimes when you preach, it almost sounds like you want us to go to Hell.”*

- g. **On the other hand, the purpose of preaching is conversion. And conversion happens only when people are challenged.** Are your homilies sufficiently challenging people to grow into the image of Jesus? Remember that if people like every homily you give, you are not doing your job.

I always love to hear how other priests prepare their homilies. This is the basic way I prepare my homilies: 1. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, I read the Scriptures and do Lectio Divina during my holy hour and write down what I hear the Lord saying to me; what He wants me to preach. **I always bring a pad and pencil to my prayer time and I take a lot of notes.** 2. On Wednesday, I look at commentaries, old homilies and websites and add to my notes. I will not look at commentaries until Wednesday b/c I want the Holy Spirit to speak to me. 3. Thursday is my day off and I try to spend it with other priests. I might think about it some while driving and will often ask my brother priests for their ideas or general direction. 4. I try to include some aspect of catechesis (90% of 90%) and I try to include **one concrete, practical thing for the people to do** (Ex: if the homily is on forgiveness, I ask the people to go ask the forgiveness of one person this week, either in person, on the phone or in writing.) 5. On Saturday morning, I usually type up all the notes into a detailed outline. **At the end, I ask myself, “Am I a sheep beater?”**

Dominicans taught us in the seminary. Of course, they are known for preaching. They always gave us this good advice: *“If you are ever called upon to stand up and preach at a moment’s notice with not time to prepare, just preach about God’s mercy. You can never go wrong there!”*

Let's talk more about preaching too harshly or too softly; *virtus en medio stat.*

I was a priest for about five years when I finally realized why I did not like CCD as a child. I read a quote from **St. Edith Stein** (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross); she was the philosopher who became a Carmelite nun and ultimately died in a Nazi concentration camp: *"Tell me nothing about truth if it is without love. Tell me nothing about love if it is without truth. One without the other becomes a destructive lie."*

I realized why I disliked the way the Faith was presented to me as I grew up in the 70's; love, love, love was all I ever heard. I grew to hate the sound of that word. When I was newly ordained, I resolved to give the people the thing that I felt I was so deprived of: truth, truth, truth. And my homilies were too harsh as a young priest. **Love without truth is sentimentality; truth without love is brutality.** And one without the other becomes a destructive lie. So prior to Vatican II, perhaps it was too much truth and not enough love; and after Vatican II, too much love and not enough truth: *virtus en medio stat.*

Teaching and preaching the Truth with Love. Often we find priests who over-stress one at the expense of the other.

The Church is Mater et Magistra. She is mother and teacher. In the natural order, parents love their children before they teach them; they build a strong bond of love and trust. This is why the Church teaches that parents are the primary educators of their children. They have *earned the right to teach* by their love and sacrifices! We speak of that same principle in **Youth Ministry**: Earning the right to be heard. A good youth minister (or a priest who is good at ministering to youth), spends time with them, goes to their ballgames, visits them in their classrooms, eats lunch with them at school, etc. And then on Sunday, the young people listen to this priest. **Zig Ziglar**: *"People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care...about them."*

It is the same principle with us priests. We must first love our people; the church is first Mother. Care for them, visit them when they are sick, etc. Then we can teach even the hard teachings of Christianity and they will listen because they know you love them. *"Don't change anything for the first year."* Have you ever heard that before? *It is the rule of thumb in the Church for new pastors that everyone quotes and almost no one obeys.* People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Story: Cardinal Cooke in Boston, received a letter from a young priest, saying that he had some things to discuss and asked for an appointment. You know how these extremely large dioceses work; this holy Cardinal probably had more than a thousand priests at that time! So an auxiliary bishop called the priest and said that he would be happy to meet. But the priest said, *"Thank you Bishop but I would really like to meet with the Cardinal himself."* So the priest wrote another letter asking for an appointment. A different auxiliary bishop called him. After this, the priest wrote a final letter to the Cardinal: *"Your Eminence, I do respect that you are extremely busy and your time is valuable. One of the things for which I admire you the most is that you never miss the*

funeral of one of your priests. Whatever is on your schedule, you change it to be present at the funeral of your priests. Your Eminence, may I please have my one hour with you while I am still alive?"

I always say to our seminarians: "A priest must be totally Catholic and totally kind."

St. Augustine: "Orthodoxy without charity is not Christianity."

St. Augustine: "In things essential, orthodoxy, in things non-essential, liberty; in all things, charity." And never back down from the Truth. The people want it. They know it when they hear it. It resonates in their hearts!

I think we have all had the experience of preaching a terrible homily. We were not really very prepared and it was clear to us that we had bombed. And then someone comes up after the Mass and tells you that that was the best homily they had ever heard you preach. It really touched their heart when you said *such and such*. And often, you didn't say that at all! But that is what they heard. The Holy Spirit reminds us who is in charge.

I want to quote His Holiness, **Pope Benedict XVI**, from his book *God and the World*:

"Being able to preach is a gift, a special grace, and St. Augustine always had great respect for the simple pastors who need a book in order to work out what to say in a sermon. He said: It is not originality that is important, but humble service. If another person's book helps someone to preach the Word to men, that's very good. We will be thankful when God raises up a great preacher, but we should also learn to be humble enough to listen to a lesser preacher. Recently a parish priest in a large German city told me that he had come to his vocation by the particular agency of a priest who was actually bereft of all exterior gifts. He was a hopeless preacher, a dreadful singer, and so on, and yet under his care, the parish really blossomed. In the end, four or five priestly vocations were awakened in the city parish, something that happened neither under his predecessor nor under his successor, both of whom were far more capable. We can see here how the humble witness of someone who does not have the gift of persuasive speech can itself become a sermon, and how we should thank God for the variety of gifts."

(Joseph Ratzinger, God and the World, San Francisco: Ignatius, 202, 432-433)

St. John Vianney had no natural talent in preaching...but he prayed. And because he prayed, he was extremely effective. He became the patron saint of parish priests and now of all priests! People can tell if their priest prays by the way he preaches.

When my priest directees say to me, "I have a hard time preparing homilies. I cannot think of anything new to say." I ask them, "What did you read this week?" Are you praying deeply each day? contemplating? Are you doing "lectio divina" in your daily prayer?"

Archbishop Sheen used to say, “*You can tell the year a priest was ordained by looking at his library. Many have not bought a new book since.*”

The average reader in the US today reads at 252 words per minute. The average college student, business executive or professional must read 1 million words per week just to remain current. At 252 words per minute, that would require 66 hours of reading per week just to remain current. Did you know that there are 1000 new books published everyday in the US? Granted, many of them are trash but I think we have to read as priests; and we have to read faster than the average and we have to know how to read different things differently. **If we do not read, we will not grow.**

Personally, I do not think the answer to better and more effective preaching is reading more homily helps or commentaries. I think better preaching comes from praying the Scriptures every day, asking the Holy Spirit to tell you what He wants you to say and writing it down. Secondly, we have to read. We have to take time to read something helpful each day. And if you hate to read, you hated it in the seminary and it has only gotten worse, then listen to tapes of retreats. I-pods are great! **Every good preacher is first a good thief.** Steal every idea you can. I believe that prayer and preaching are the two most important things that we do, because everything else flows from these two.

Please consider making a resolution about prayer and preaching. They go together.

The people want you to preach from the Faith that is deep in your heart. And the people can tell if you pray by the way you preach. When people hear you preach, they can tell if you pray. And please, don't be a sheep beater!

May God who has begun this good work in you bring it to fulfillment.

Conference 5: We are here for God, not for His work.

Luke 9:12-17 5 loaves and 2 fish

Cardinal Bevilacqua story: The newly appointed bishop of a Midwestern diocese who made a rule: Everytime that I arrive in a parish to do a Confirmation, after the supper, I want the pastor to have five young men sitting in the parlor, high school or college aged, to whom I can speak for about 10 minutes just to invite them to become a priest... **The bishop ordained three of those five!**

If you are reluctant to personally invite young men in your parish to become priests, I want you to ask yourself *why*. Is it because of the scandals? Is it because of the way you are living your priesthood or the way you understand it? Studies show that nearly every young man in the seminary today says that they were personally invited to consider it, most of them by a priest. **Please consider making a resolution to do this in your**

parish. If you will, the Holy Spirit will work in the hearts of these young men and we will have an increase in priestly ordinations!

Exercise for today: I want to ask you to pray your rosary today and to do it in this way:

First Decade: For the priest who baptized you

Second Decade: For the priest who heard your first confession and gave you your first Holy Communion (often but not always the same priest)

Third Decade: For the bishop who confirmed you.

Fourth Decade: For the bishop who ordained you.

Fifth Decade: For the priest or bishop who will bury you when you die!

Obviously if you are a convert or if you were raised in another church, then you will need to adjust this exercise accordingly; to pray for the minister who baptized you, for example.

Story: A friend of mine who is a bishop once showed me a letter from a priest. The letter simply said, thank you for being our bishop and trying so hard to serve the Church. He told me that this was the only letter of affirmation that he had received from a priest in his 22 years as bishop. He had received hundreds of letters from priests complaining about this or that. Bishops are people too and they also need our mercy. **I would like to speak in this conference about a bishop, a Cardinal of the Church.**

God is always orchestrating our lives to save us and to build the kingdom! He always has blessings waiting for us, even when we are on the cross.

Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan; tell the story of the book: “**Five Loaves and Two Fish**”; For 8 years, he was bishop of Nha Trang, a diocese in central Vietnam. He was an incredibly successful bishop! He had un-ending energy and everything he touched turned to gold. He increased the number of seminarians in his major seminary from 42 to 147 in eight years. He increased the number of college seminarians in his college seminary from 200 to 500 in four different seminaries! He was doing all kinds of youth work, evangelization, etc. He loved his work so much and he truly loved the people in his diocese. Then the worst thing happened. In 1975, Pope Paul VI named him coadjutor archbishop of Saigon. Three months after arriving there, he was arrested by the Communists on the Feast of the Assumption.

In the back seat of a car, between two policemen, he was driven through the night. He was taken back to a prison in his own first diocese which he loved so much! He could hear his Cathedral bells ringing out the angelus each day in his prison cell just a few miles away but no one even knew that he was there. At night, he could hear the waves of the sea. He wanted so much to be with his people. They were suffering. The churches had been closed. The libraries confiscated.

He spent 13 years in prison, 9 of those in solitary confinement. He only saw two guards per day. There was no work to do. Sometimes the lights were always on, 24 hours a day, for months. Sometimes they were always off. He could not really track time. **It was so hot and humid in his cell that he could not breathe. Sometimes he would lie with his mouth at the crack under the door of his cell for hours just trying to draw in a few breaths of clean air.** During the day, he would walk back and forth in his cell in the darkness, trying to keep his muscles limber and arthritis from setting in. Vermin and insects were in the cell and after a while, he said that he did not have the energy to brush them away. They were trying to break his spirit and make him deny his faith.

People would later say to him, *“You must have had a lot of time to pray all those years in prison.”* And he replied, *“Often it was hard to pray.”* Sometimes all he could say was the Hail Mary over and over again or this prayer: *“Good Jesus, glorify yourself. The rest is not important.”* It is hard to pray on the cross. **No matter how badly you and I might have it in our current assignment, it is a lot better than this!**

One day, he was lying on the floor very sick! He was hurting so badly and he heard a guard walk by outside. He cried out, *“For goodness sake. Can’t you see that I am terribly sick. Please help me.”* And the guard said, *“There is no goodness here. There is just the government.”* When he had been there for so long, he just could not take it anymore. He cried out to God; he had despaired. He could not go on anymore. We priests also have felt that way at times, haven’t we! And if you have not yet, you will before it is over.

I would like to quote directly from the book:

“My morale was at its lowest. I was almost in despair. In the darkness of my cell, cut off from my diocese, from God’s people, from any human contact, I could not do a thing for anyone; I could not even talk to anyone. I felt completely useless. I prayed, but God did not seem to hear. Then all of a sudden I saw, as if in a vision, Christ on the Cross, crucified and dying. He was completely helpless...certainly worse off than me in my prison cell. I heard a voice: “At this precise moment on the cross, I redeemed all the sins of the world.” That vision strengthened him to survive.

Cardinal Francis Xavier began to think, *“If I spend my time waiting, perhaps the things I look forward to will never happen. The only thing certain to come is death. I will not wait. I will live the present moment, filling it to the brim with love.”*

He learned two very important things that I would like for us to reflect upon in this conference: 1. He understood that he had to choose God over God’s works. 2. He had to offer all he had to God...and let God decide how He would use it to nourish others...like the little boy with the five loaves and the two fish; Jesus used it to feed over 5000 people.

I am here for God; not for His work! In spite of the title of this retreat which was specifically chosen with Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan in mind; **May God**

who has begun this good work in you bring it to completion. The Cardinal loved his work so much and one of the reasons was because he was so “successful!” I believe this man is a great saint but it is important to note that when we are very successful in what we do, we begin to love the work more and more...and we are here for God; not for His work. **Spanish proverb:** Prosperity is the most dangerous situation of man. His suffering in that prison was intensified **precisely because** he had been so good at pastoral work for the Kingdom.

Pope John Paul II: *“Christ-likeness is the only success recognized by God.”*

God is omnipotent! He has infinite power. The CCC stresses that this is the only specific attribute of God which is directly mentioned in the Creed: **We believe in God the Father Almighty!** He does not need us for His work. He is infinite in power. He needs us for Himself, because He loves us. No matter what your assignment might be. No matter how important the work you are doing.

Cardinal Francis Xavier... survived by living every moment for God, not for God’s work because he could not do any work! *“Why did you send me here? I should be back in my diocese where great things were happening for the Kingdom. Why did you take me away from the diocese that I loved, where I was serving You so well?”*

Please understand, my brothers, **it is God’s business** if He wants you to begin a certain work and it is His business if He wants you to finish it. He might and He might not. He might send someone new to be pastor of this or head of that...to build this church, to finish up this project or that. He might not. But it is His business.

We are here for God, not for his work. I often say to our seminarians: *“We who are priests must learn something very important. We must learn to fail gracefully.”*

We men have a gift from God that is also a terrible curse. God made us to get things done. Women are much better at just being; we men have to be doing. **We are better human-doings; they are better human-beings.** This can be a blessing in that we work hard and we help others and we build the Kingdom. **But it is a curse in that we men often gain or lose our self-confidence and self-esteem, based on whether or not we have been “successful!”** Success is not a gospel word! Success is deceptive. And we men, especially when proud, can become suicidal when we fail! This is why you have had to minister to men who have lost their jobs and have entered a dark depression because of it.

Mother Teresa: *“Faithfulness; not success! God is not calling me to be successful. He is calling me to be faithful.”* Jesus has already won the victory.

(“Season of Life,” Jeffrey Marx) Coach Joe Ehrman, used to play for the Baltimore Colts. How he was mistreated by his father, a former boxer and ship captain. As a professional athlete, he drank and partied hard. His conversion was occasioned when his little brother contracted leukemia. He has become famous as a high school football coach

in Maryland. On the first day of practice, he says to the boys while pointing at the coaching staff: “*What is our job?*” The boys yell “*To love us.*” Then he points at the boys and says: “*What is your job?*” They yell back: “*To love one another.*” No one is ever cut from the team. No boy is ever allowed to be shamed, because of his lack of ability or error. He calls the program: **Building Men for Others.**

Let’s think about **the leukemia of masculinity**, the trap we as men and especially as priests are in for a moment. We men have our masculinity erroneously defined by society in these terms. These are the **3 false Gods of masculinity: 1: Athletic prowess. 2. Financial or professional success. 3. Sexual conquest.** How many notches are in your belt? Where does that leave us, who are priests! These are three false gods that we don’t worship! According to the teaching of Jesus (the Beatitudes) we’re not supposed to be doing any of those three. **Our Magna Carta is the Beatitudes!** And our self-esteem can suffer because the whole world is bombarding us with this heretical message about what it means to be a man.

2Kgs: “*Stand up and be a man!*” What does this mean? To really be a man is to put God first. To live for what really matters. To develop and live healthy, loving relationships, first with God and then with others. To be a man is to be a hero! To bring people to Jesus and Jesus to people. **We cannot fall for the heresy of machismo.**

I am a child of God and He loves me. I am here for God, not for his work! When we make this Truth our guiding principle, no one can take the joy from us. When we are not joyful, we often want to look out there for the reason (celibacy, my assignment, the weather, the people). Look in here. I am here for God. Not for His work. **Everything that happens in my life can make me better or bitter...and I choose.**

Archabbot Lambert Reilly: “*You gotta be somewhere and you gotta do something until this artificial invention called time comes to an end. It might as well be here and it might as well be this.*”

Your assignment does not really matter. **God has placed you there not so much to do certain things as to learn certain things and to grow in certain ways.** But that is not usually the way we think, is it? “*Father, I don’t know why the bishop won’t move me. I have told him that I have done the work God sent me here to do. They have heard all my homilies and I have done what I can do.*” If you want to be moved, then learn what God put you there to learn and grow in the way he put you there to grow! Then the Holy Spirit will move you through your bishop.

This is similar to Dr. Peter Kreeft’s analogy of Purgatory as a “*soul incubator.*” It is not so much a place of doing something but a place of growing and learning.” (Book “Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Heaven”)

Catechism of the Catholic Church: *God created the world in a state of journeying.* This was a truth that I missed in my seminary Protology class. What does this mean? It means that God created the world incomplete. He wants us to complete it. Kind of like

buying some furniture that says, “*Some assembly required.*” **Analogy:** a little child helping her mom bake a cake. The mom could have made the cake a lot quicker and a lot better and with a lot less mess without the help of the little child (all she is going to do is lick the batter off the spoon, make a mess and stomp around in front of the oven while it is baking!). But when daddy comes home from work, the little girl runs to her daddy screaming, “*Daddy, Daddy, I helped Mommy make the cake.*” And the dad looks knowingly at the mom and smiles. He picks up his little daughter and kisses her and says, “*I am so proud of you.*” This is how parents raise the self-esteem of their children. **God is giving us a chance to Demonstrate our Dignity by being a part of his work, but that does not mean that He needs us for the work.** He only needs us because we are his children and He loves us.

God does not need us! He is omnipotent and Jesus Christ has risen. He can make the cake a lot better, and a lot more efficiently without us. But He won’t because he wants our joy to be full when the new heavens and new earth arrive. ***We must stop under-estimating how wonderful and glorious Jesus Christ is!*** The victory has been won and He is coming in glory on the clouds of Heaven. Every knee must bend, every head must bow, every tongue must proclaim that He is Lord. **God has been re-creating the world in the image of Jesus ever since the Pascal Mystery was complete.** We will need all eternity to adore Him as He deserves. *Good Jesus, glorify yourself. The rest is not important.* He does not need us. He is infinite in Power. We are here for God; not for His work. **God does not love you because you’re good or because you work or even because you are good at pastoral work. He loves you because He is good.** And He would not dream of denying us the privilege of helping Him make this cake called the Kingdom of God. He loves us and He wants to raise our self-esteem.

And yet, the Church teaches that we must do our part. St. Augustine wrote: “*God who made you without you will not save you without you.*” **I always ponder that our salvation is 99.9% God’s grace and .1% our effort.** And I am probably over-estimating our part.

God is infinite in power! Jesus has already secured the victory in His Resurrection. The ultimate success has already been attained with these words: “**It is finished. Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit.**” We are here for God; not for His work. And God loves us not because we’re good but because He is good. *Loving Trust, total surrender, Joy!*

So whatever your assignment is and whatever your work is right now, whether you like it or not, God is there!! **St. Augustine:** “*God will never send me where His grace cannot sustain me.*” And **St. John Chrysostom said to the empress Theodora** as she was preparing to exile him, “*My venerable lady, you could frighten me only if you could banish me to a place where God is not.*” And so this is the first point for our meditation today: We must choose God over God’s work. So when a seminarian or priest says, “*My work is my prayer.*” No! **All ex-priests once said that!** This is a terrible and dangerous misunderstanding. Prayer makes us realize our identity.

The second point for our meditation today: We must offer all we have to God...and let God decide how He would use it to nourish others...like the little boy with the five loaves and the two fish; Jesus used it to feed over 5000 people. All he asks is that you give your all. Total surrender. It may be very little and it may be a lot. It doesn't matter. God can take it and do anything and everything. That's what omnipotence means.

In the afore referenced book, "Season of Life," he talks about the Sovereignty of God: He uses the parable of the talents. In this book, the coach, Joe Ehrman, used this parable to give a chalk-talk to the men. He never cuts anyone from the team. And every boy that comes out not only stays on the team but plays in every game! It may only be one play but every boy plays. They contribute. So many men in this world, perhaps you and I, have suffered the pain of rejection or feeling inferior because we were not strong athletes. Perhaps you were made fun of and called sissy. In Coach Ehrman's football program, ridiculing is not permitted. It is for the purpose of building men up, not tearing them down.

He describes it like this, using the **parable of the talents**; he says to the boys on his team, *"If one of you has only 2 talents, I want you to bring those 2 talents to every practice and to every game we play. God gave them to you and He expects you to use them. And if you have 50 talents, and every college in the country is recruiting you, I want you to bring those 50 to every practice and to every game. The world says that the boy with the 50 talents of football is superior to the boy with 2. That's a lie. The one who brings everything he has to everything he does is superior."* This is why, I think, **Jesus** reminded us that *"the first shall be last and the last shall be first."*

This is the sovereignty of God! The purpose of this football program is not to win championships. The purpose is first of all to teach you all to be real men for others...and secondly, it is to have fun. If we can do that, and you really learn **empathy** and love for each other, we will win because we will be playing as a team. And they did win and they are still winning. **As priests, we simply are asked to bring every gift we have to everything we do, and trust in God's sovereignty for the "success."**

Story: missionary in S. America. Five entire villages, thousands of people, were baptized Catholic Christians all because of a priest who died, thinking himself a failure. Just give you five loaves and two fish; just give your all to Jesus and let Him worry about the rest.

Encyclical on Penance and Reconciliation, Pope John Paul II wrote about the **Law of ascent/law of descent:** Cosmic consequences of sin and love. It means that when a person commits a sin, let's say that they tell a lie to their friend, that sin is like a rock thrown into a pond; ripple effect. Because we are one body in Christ, that sin, as small as it was, has cosmic consequences. **Child of an alcoholic parent; do the sins and the virtues of parents travel down the generations?**

Your work as a priest, your faithfulness, your willingness to remain at your battle station will be bearing fruit long after you are dead. And you will still be receiving the rewards in Heaven of your priestly work! **It's kind of like a spiritual Amway program!**

Scrooge: The Ghost of Christmas past showed him how his selfishness caused pain to others. Scrooge said: *“Take me away. I can’t stand it.”* And the ghost said: *“What, the Truth? You can’t stand the truth?”* **12 Step programs:** places where Truth is told and no one will permit lies!

My brothers, you cannot evaluate the effectiveness of your work! In two hundred years, maybe you can do it better. In a thousand years, even better. You are unbelievably successful: more so than in your wildest dreams, because you are a priest. You function *in persona Christi Capitus ecclesiae*. And part of your joy in Heaven will be finally being able to see just how successful you were in helping make this cake called the Kingdom of God.

Work Horses vs. Race Horses: Distinction in seminarians and priests. Work horses go where they are sent, they eat what is placed before them, they sleep in whatever is provided...and they work. They care for God’s people; they love them and they bring them Jesus. They put their hands to the plow and they don’t look back. Now the other kind is a race horse, a high-blooded thoroughbred. They require a lot of TLC. They need special food, a special stable, a special blanket, a special trailer. They get upset very easily. They are neurotic horses. Now don’t get me wrong. Once the race begins, they are marvelous to behold! They can really run! **But glory be to God! What you have to do to get them to the track!** We have to have both kinds in the Church but we need mostly work horses.

At Mount St. Mary’s Seminary, we are trying to provide work horses for the Church. And the race horses...well, we try to humble them. We try to show them that ambition is not why you are here. **Some seminarians these days think they are studying for the transitional presbyterate!** We have a saying: *“Anybody that prays to become a bishop deserves to have their prayer answered.”*

St. Philip Neri: He was once called into the Cardinal’s office. There was a miter sitting on the Cardinal’s desk. The Cardinal smiled, pointed to it and motioned for St. Philip Neri to pick it up. He was offering him the opportunity to become a bishop. He picked it up and then dropped it and kicked it. He caught it and then he dropped it again and kicked it. He walked around the room doing this as the Cardinal stared in shock. Finally he put it back on the desk and said: *“No thank you.”*

Don’t compare yourselves to other priests. God expects different things from different men. Just give your all. Like we spoke about in the parable of the talents; if you only have 2, bring your 2 with you everyday. If you have 25....give your 5 loaves and 2 fish. Maybe you don’t have the gifts that some other priests have. Don’t worry about it. God does not need any of us! Give what you have and watch Jesus use your small gifts to do anything He chooses! **This is the sovereignty of God.**

Cardinal Francis Xavier...: after he had converted his guards, he began to write. Children would bring him small pieces of paper torn from paper bags and the like and he

would write his thoughts on these scraps of paper. Then the children would pick up what he had written and their mother's would save these writings. They copied them and smuggled them out of the country.

He had gone to Vatican II whereas many bishops in Vietnam were not allowed to go. These bishops would come to his cell at night and he would teach them about Vatican II and what the council had decided. The other bishops were not able to keep their seminaries open, so they trained their priests clandestinely. In secret, these men were schooled and then sent by night to the prison where the Cardinal ordained them. The bishops knew that if they ordained a priest, they would be arrested but what could they do to the Cardinal? He was already in prison.

Remember in the earlier days, he was so devastated by what had happened, his imprisonment, leaving his diocese, his inability to do any work. Now he began to see that God was orchestrating all of this for the good of the Church.

Because He was in prison, the Vietnamese bishops and priests could learn about Vatican II.

Because He was in prison, priests and bishops could continue to be ordained in a Communist realm.

Because He was in prison, his books and talks have helped millions of people all over the world.

Had he remained happily, a bishop, in his original diocese of Nha Trang, working on his projects, he could never have hoped to accomplish so much for the Kingdom! We have to remember the words of Jesus that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. We are all cogs on a wheel in a huge piece of machinery with many, many wheels and millions of cogs.

You may be in the smallest, seemingly most insignificant parish in the diocese, yet God is preparing to use your faithfulness to do great things. I really believe this. I know this is true! And this is why I tell our seminarians, *“Don't try to write out your own career. Don't try to choose your own assignments. Just go where the bishop tells you and let God worry about how He will use you.”* On ordination day, you will place your hands in the hands of the bishop and he will say, *“Do you promise respect and obedience to me and my successors.”* *“I do.”* Do you remember what the bishop replies. He says the words with which I end every conference: *“May God who has begun this good work in you bring it to fulfillment.”*

St. John Chrysostom: *“The bishop may err and even sin in commanding, but the priest never errs or sins in obeying.”*

Story: I was at Holy Spirit Church; made a pastor and Vocation Director at the same time; there was a scandal at SPC; the bishop called and asked me to go there. My heart

sank. He told me to pray and to send him my thoughts. I did and I emailed him a long list of reasons I should not go there and a few salient points about why I should go. But I told him that I would go. I would never say no after I promised to obey. He read my list and called me back and agreed that it would not be the place for me. He would find someone else. Three weeks later, he called me back: “*Fr. Brett, I need a favor.*” I said, “*You want me to go to SPC.*” He said, “*Yes, I do.*” I said, “*OK, it is the will of God.*”

My brothers, that assignment was the greatest experience of my life! Not because of what I did, but because of how much I grew and how much I learned. It was hard but I am convinced that I would not be here right now, speaking to you, if I had not gone. I am convinced that I would not be working in a seminary, if I had not gone. **But I never would have chosen to go there on my own. God will bless us if we pray and if we obey.**

God is about the business of saving us. When good things happen, God is about the business of saving us. When bad things happen, God is about the business of saving us.

I hope that your priesthood is not shipwrecked right now. But even if it is, I want you to know that you are a tremendous success. You are at your battle station; day in and day out; faithfully making the effort; enduring so many difficulties; over and under (over worked and underpaid; over stressed and underappreciated). The last shall be first and the first shall be last. The victory is won. Christ has risen! God will never send you where His grace cannot sustain you. Your “*work*” is not out there; it’s in here. And the time is coming soon; so soon for all of us when the Father will say, glancing at the Lord Jesus in glory, he will look at you and say “*I am so proud of you. Well-done, good and faithful servant.*”

May God who has begun this good work in you bring it to fulfillment!

Conference 6: Wednesday at 3:45 pm Eucharistic Amazement!

Scripture: Jn 6:52-ff

In the first conference I spoke about different “categories” or “places” that a priest might be in their lives. I said some might be young and excited; some so frustrated **that they** are looking for a reason to continue...and I said that some might be on this retreat to prepare for their death. During the closing Mass homily, I will speak to this last category of priests who are many years in the Lord’s service and perhaps trying to come to terms with meeting the Lord face to face. I know that some priests slip out the last day of the retreat; parish duties calling and all but I did want you to know that I will be treating this topic as I end the retreat.

There is an ancient Chinese curse that goes like this: **May you live in interesting times!**

The last forty years have been very interesting times in the Church and in the world. There has been one **crisis** after another. And this word “crisis” means a “*crossroads*.” It means that a decision has to be made to go one way or the other. A crisis is a time both of danger *and of opportunity*. **It is an interesting time to be a priest! I will try to demonstrate this.**

The U.S. is arguably the most disordered society in the world. Americans live in a land of **perpetual adolescence**. They don't want to grow up. Playing games with the Teacher (the Church). No wonder William F. Buckley called this the “*silly season of the Catholic Church*.” America does everything *quickly*. We founded our nation *quickly*. We gained our independence *quickly*. We rose to international prominence, superpower *quickly*. And now we are destroying ourselves *quickly*! We have to grow up as a nation before we die and I believe that we priests must be instrumental in this process.

Alistair Cook, writing from Great Britain, recognizes several symptoms which indicate that America is in a steep decline. These five symptoms were enumerated by **Edward Gibbon** in his mammoth work, “*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*,” an empire which fell, not from external enemies, but from within the country itself. The Great Roman Empire **imploded**. It destroyed itself!

George Santanyana wrote: “Those who do not read history are doomed to repeat it, and where experience is not retained, infancy is perpetual.” See if you recognize these five symptoms in our beloved USA: **1. A mounting love of luxury** (long processions of wagons bringing in the booty and tribute into Rome while the emperor feasted; here in the U.S. the car wash business is a multi-million dollar enterprise; more and more gadgets to make life more and more easy) **2. A widening gap between the very rich and the very poor** (Ancient Rome, the emperors accumulated more and more while people were starving all over the city). In the U.S., we don't even count the millionaires anymore when the Forbe's richest people list comes out. There are far too many millionaires to count. We just count the Billionaires. And yet there is great poverty still and people who are hungry. **3. An obsession with sex** (Roman baths; homosexual orgies; here in the U.S.; auto-sexuality everywhere you look) **4. Freakishness in the arts masquerading as originality** (a picture of our Blessed Mother with dung all over her) **Pope John Paul II when he first visited the U.S. “How is the Church doing here in the U.S.?” Oh great. He said, “Don't tell me that. Where is the beautiful art and the beautiful music that come from a culture immersed in their Faith?”** **5. A developing moral numbness to vulgarity, violence, and the assault on the simplest of human decencies.** (In Rome, people were tortured and killed at the whim of the emperor; horrible atrocities; A few years ago, an abortionist who failed and delivered live twins; he held them under water until they were dead.)

Sir Alex Fraser Tytler was a Scottish historian and professor of universal history at Edinburgh University. In 1801, he wrote: “*The average age of the world's greatest civilizations has been two hundred years. These nations have progressed through this sequence: from bondage to spiritual faith; from spiritual faith to great courage; from great courage to liberty; from liberty to abundance; from abundance to selfishness; from*

selfishness to complacency; from complacency to apathy; from apathy to dependence; from dependency back again to bondage.”

“A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover that they can vote themselves largess from the public treasury. From that time on the majority always votes for the candidates promising the most benefits from the public treasury, with the results that a democracy always collapses over loose fiscal policy, always followed by a dictatorship....”

Prosperity is the most dangerous situation of man. With prosperity, often comes depravity. Moral depravity in a culture or within a nation destroys the soul of that culture and nation. **And just as a body without a soul is the definition of a corpse, a nation without a soul is dead.** And for this reason, I fear for our country. I love the USA but I fear for her because she is trying to live without God.

The priesthood of the 21st century is not for the weak of spirit. We need all hands on deck and at their battle stations. **And in all of this horror, confusion and disorder, we have Jesus.** He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the Alpha and the Omega. As the Holy Father wrote: *“Jesus is the answer to which every human heart is the question.”* It is no mistake; it is providence that Our Lord Jesus was born into a depraved culture... **to show us that only He can elevate a people, a culture and a nation to be what they should be...a people of God!**

The Church

And while our nation has serious issues, our beloved Church has had her problems as well. We all know that the enemies of the Church have made many predictions of her imminent demise through the years.

Story: Hitler and Goebel; the propaganda chief for the Nazis. Goebel was at a fancy cocktail party and he held up a crystal champagne glass and made a toast: *“The Nazis will crush the Catholic Church just as I crush this champagne glass”*, and he turned and threw it as hard as he could against a concrete wall. The glass bounced four times and never broke. The silence in the room was deafening. Hitler is gone, Goebel is gone, and so is the Nazi regime, but the Catholic Church is still here.

Story of the theologian, **Karl Rahner**, who wrote a letter to Pope John XXIII; *“Your Holiness, please give us ten years of preparation or we shall have 100 years of confusion.”* That was prophetic. Now Pope John XXIII did not heed that advice, and that was his prerogative. He was the Vicar of Christ. But there have been many years of confusion. We are still living in it. The 2nd Vatican Council was a tremendous work of the Holy Spirit. And I am not questioning the wisdom of the Holy Father, only making the point that these are interesting times.

I admire you priests who lived through those days. They were glorious days in some ways but also confusing in some ways. No one seemed to know exactly where the Church was really going. I was a child during the aftermath. I am a Vatican II baby, born in 1962.

When I was a seminarian, **Msgr. John Tracy Ellis** came to the seminary to speak to us, two years before he died. I will never forget one point that he made: There have been 3 major cultural revolutions in the Church in the last five hundred years: **the Reformation, French Revolution and the Second Vatican Council**. Each one of these was a revolution in that it brought about tremendous and tremendously painful changes.

Counter-reformation, and the establishment of seminaries. French Revolution; huge immigrations to this country; Mount St. Mary's Seminary was founded because of the French Revolution; Fr. John Dubois came here fleeing persecution. And the Second Vatican Council; huge, dramatic changes that you and I have grown up in. Some of you have been priests through these exciting and yet painful times. **The Chinese curse: May you live in interesting times. They have been interesting alright!**

And Msgr. Ellis told us that in the immediate aftermath of all three of these revolutions, there were defections from the priesthood and religious life, no vocations, little Mass attendance, and **everyone said the Church is going to die**. That would mean that the Church would no longer have a soul. That would mean that the Holy Spirit would leave the Body of Christ. Impossible! **But within 50 years after the Reformation**, all of these things returned. Vocations flourished, people returned to Mass, religiosity resumed. And people discovered that the Church was not dead. **And 50 years after the French Revolution**, all of these things returned; vocations flourished, people returned to Mass, religiosity resumed. **Within 50 years, the Church had emerged stronger than ever.**

Vatican II only ended in the 1960's. It closed under Pope Paul VI on December 8, 1965. **On December 8, 2015, it will be exactly 50 years!** We are still waiting for the II Vatican Council counter revolution! And in a comment that made me very sad, Msgr. John Tracy Ellis said to the seminarians: *"I won't live to see it, but you will."* And he didn't. He died only two years later, on Oct 16, 1992.

And the Holy Father Pope John Paul II, towards the end of his pontificate, was speaking to us about *"a New springtime of Christianity and the urgency of a new evangelization."* He wrote: *"The time has come for the church to expend all of her energies and resources on the New Evangelization. We must send out missionaries. We must preach and we must teach. We must bring Jesus to this world where the huge majority do not recognize Him as Lord."* These are interesting times. It is a great season to be a priest.

Side note: You have heard the expression that *"the only two things needed to set the Church on fire are a good war and a good depression."* These are both misnomers; there is no such thing as a good war or a good depression, but it is true that these things bring people back to Faith. These are interesting times; the U.S. is currently involved in a war and in a depression.

And I believe that the answer to this crisis is **the Eucharistic Lord**. Because when Jesus comes into us, we become a people, united, holy and powerful. If I receive Jesus in Maryland and become one with him and you receive Jesus down here in Alabama or Indiana or Texas, and become one with Him, then I am one with you. And the Body of Christ, ensouled with the Holy Spirit, grows and becomes more and more powerful to evangelize our very culture.

Cardinal Francis Xavier: Stomach medicine; The children would bring him **stomach medicine** in a little jar labeled that way. Inside was wine. He would save the bread they gave him to eat. He would celebrate Mass from memory each day. He would say Mass using his hand for a chalice with three drops of wine and one drop of water. Using a gum wrapper as a pyx, he would bring Communion to the other prisoners and always keep a tiny host which he would put into a crack in the wall for adoration; his tabernacle. He would make his Holy Hour; many hours with Jesus.

Story: visit of Pope John Paul to Baltimore; St. Mary's Seminary. The Holy Father decided at the last minute that he wanted to stop in the chapel to pray. But his team said to him that there was no time. Nonetheless, they stopped the Pope mobile and the team sprang into action. Immediately they sent in police with dogs trained to find people who were covered up in earthquakes. They went through the chapel looking for a place anyone might be hiding, who wanted to hurt the Holy Father. When they got to the tabernacle, which was cemented into the marble altar, the dog laid down and began to whine. This lower creature was saying, "*There is a person here.*" They tried to drag the dog away but he kept clawing back to the spot, faithful to his training. Jesus is not hiding and He is not trapped, except by His love for us.

Altar Calls: As I said, I grew up in a heavy Protestant area. All of my friends were Baptist and they would often ask: "*Why do you Catholics not have altar calls like we do? To come down and accept Jesus as Lord and Savior.*" Tell them we have an altar call every single day. It is called daily Mass! Catholics come down front professing their belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and their belief in His real presence in the Holy Eucharist. Catholics then eat His body and drink His blood as the Lord commanded. It's not just a personal decision. It is a communal decision; receiving communion makes us a people; God's people. If we are to survive, we must become more and more the People of God. The Bible has been saying this since the conquest of Canaan! And every time the Israelites got off the track, they were destroyed. They were conquered! **He who does not read history is doomed to repeat it.**

Humans want to love physically as well as spiritually. And if you are praying, as I talked about in the second conference, that God would show you how much He really loves you, He will show you this most profoundly when you receive the Blessed Eucharist!

Nuptial Meaning of the Eucharist: There is a concept of the Eucharist which I have been meditating on that has had a great impact on my spiritual life. It does require a certain degree of maturity to understand and process; that is the **nuptial meaning of the**

Eucharist. St. Teresa of Avila taught this to her sisters and they became very embarrassed!

When we receive Holy Communion, it is like the Bridegroom making love to His bride. To receive holy communion means to be female; it is **the priority of receptivity**, to become one flesh with Christ. The bride of Christ receives her spouse. We are Christians before we are priests. We are part of the Bride of Christ and we must open ourselves and let Jesus come in and ravage us as a bridegroom enters his bride. To receive Jesus into our own bodies and souls. His body enters our body; his fluid, his blood enters us. We become pregnant with Christ; *I live, no not I. It is Christ who lives within me.*

The word “enthusiasm” means “to be possessed by God.” When we receive Holy Communion, this is the time we should be most enthusiastic, the most possessed by God!

We even use the same words: **Consummatum est.** It is finished. We call the marriage act the consummation of marriage. Jesus gives Himself to us totally in His sacrifice and He is asking us to give ourselves totally to Him. Total surrender.

We are men first, members of the Body of Christ, and we have to wrestle with this priority of receptivity. We have to let Jesus come into us and possess us.

But we are also priests. We function in *persona Christe capitis ecclesia*, as we stand and celebrate the Mass. **St. Augustine** said: *“With you I am a Christian; for you, I am a bishop.”*

Story: Monks in Medjugorje; stomp on this crucifix. One by one, they knelt down and kissed the broken corpus on the cross. And they were dragged out of the monastery and they were taken to a certain spot where I stood and they were shot in the head. I think it was 30-40 monks. Consummatum est. Total surrender.

A good holy Christian marriage is the closest thing to Heaven on earth. Because God made us for unity; ultimately with Him. Marriage is a practice union. There is no marriage in Heaven except with God. And deep in their souls, a husband and wife can recognize that their self-less union, their sacrifices for one another, and the beautiful little fruit that results; a child...is much more significant than this world because it points to Heaven. And St. Paul says that. Marriage is about Christ’s love for his church! And this is why a bad marriage, a selfish, Godless marriage is Hell on earth. And the poor people know deep in their souls that something is horribly wrong. It was not meant to be this way. And they can’t understand it and they tell us: *“All I know is that I am so unhappy.”*

My marriage counseling: 1. Pray together in your own words in my office and make a promise that you will do this every day (if you want me to help you) 2. Separate them and speak with each privately for 10 minutes. 3. Bring them back together and tell them what I heard them say. 4. Two weeks later: *“Well, we’re still fighting Father but our fights are nicer.”*

I recommend that you try to use this idea of the nuptial meaning of the Eucharist when you receive Holy Communion and when you pray. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand it.

Machismo: where are the men? Women do most of the work in the Church, don't they? I think, at least at some level, men understand that receiving Holy Communion is about receptivity, about being female and letting the Bride Groom come into us. **But we are priests so that means we must also function as the Bridegroom.** This can be confusing in a world that is confused anyway about manhood. We are first part of the Bride of Christ, the Church, so we must be receptive. And then we must stand in persona Christi Capitus, we must represent Jesus, the Bridegroom, for our people...as we celebrate Mass. I highly recommend that you start a course in your parish on Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body. You know the expression "*Discimus docendo*" (we learn from teaching).

You might never read it unless you teach it and it is very profound. I believe that once the Church catches on and begins to preach and teach this, the New Springtime of Christianity will begin to flower and the New Evangelization will explode! I believe that these millions of dear holy Protestants that I love so much and who love Jesus so much and are spending themselves to build His Kingdom **will go ballistic** when they understand that the Holy Eucharist makes us a People of God, the Body of Christ, ensouled with the Holy Spirit! **And it will save our nation; it will save our culture and it will save our world. Jesus is irresistible.** Who would say no to the opportunity to consummate their life with Jesus!

Story: little old lady in Macon who was deaf in both ears. Came to Mass very early, made the Stations of the Cross, and prayed. As a young priest, I came into the church one morning and knelt in the pew right behind her to make my preparation for Mass. She did not know that I was there and she was praying. Have you ever noticed how people who are hearing impaired will often speak out loud and not know it? This lady was praying out loud (in a whisper) and I could hear her. And she was praying for me. "Jesus, please help Fr. Brett to be a good priest. He is so young." I was very moved by her goodness. The Body of Christ really is very beautiful.

Good resolution: Try to love the "*holy women of Jerusalem.*" These are the sweet ladies that walk into the church every time you unlock the door. They come to daily mass, funerals, holy hours, etc.

Eucharistic amazement! Does Jesus not say, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise them up on the last day. My flesh is real food..." We hold this Jesus every day between our fingers (hold fingers up as if holding the Sacred Host). Have we lost **that sense of mystery** that we had in our first Mass?

Remember that it was a pagan who gave us one of the most beautiful lines in our Sacred Liturgy: “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you but only say the word, and I shall be healed.”

Humility: has been defined as gracefully accepting one’s place in the plan of God.

A hypothetical story: The local bishop has been named a cardinal; the diocese has a very nice testimonial dinner to honor him. But “*because he is so humble,*” he decides to eat with the kitchen help in the kitchen. Is he being humble? **No, he is being a jackass!**

Story: Mother Teresa of Calcutta had finally opened a home for people dying of Aids in one of the formerly communist countries. It took many years and much prayer for the government to finally give permission. This priest said to her, “*Congratulations on this great accomplishment.*” She took the priest’s hands in her own and she said with great earnestness and sincerity: “*Father I am the greatest obstacle to God’s grace in this world. Anything good that happens happens not because of me but in spite of me. Please pray for me.*”

How can we not talk about the Eucharist on a priest retreat? We are a Eucharistic people, a Eucharistic Church, the Body of Christ. We become what we eat.

Story: lady in Albany who saw the angels at Mass! I know that every parish has at least one person who sees the BVM about once a week but this lady was not our parish visionary! She had a massive stroke and died the next Tuesday. The doctor: “*That’s the most amazing thing I have ever seen.*” And I wanted to say to that doctor, “*It is amazing. It is amazing. Jesus said: He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood, even if they die, they will live forever. My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.*”

Eucharistic Amazement. This is what we believe. And when we die, when the scales are finally removed from our eyes, **when we have our consummation with Christ**, we will no longer see as in a mirror but face to face. And we will experience the joy and pleasure of the nuptial meaning of the Eucharist and nothing in human sexual relations can come close to describe it. And we will say, “*How could I have received Holy Communion over and over again and never understood; and never realized that this is what I was made for...the Bride groom has become one with the bride. Eye has not seen, ear has not heard...We become one with Almighty God...and with one another. And the kingdom of God, the Body of Christ will be at its fulfillment.*”

And we wonder why the Church instructs us to give the Blessed Sacrament to the dying in Holy Viaticum.

A retreat is a time to renew our faith in the Eucharist. *Do I really believe that behind that appearance of bread and wine is God, who will give me unimaginable happiness for all eternity?* The people desperately want you to believe. They want to see it on your face as you celebrate Holy Mass. They want to hear you talk about it. They want you to be a man of faith. **Believe me; I know that it is difficult to celebrate that last Mass on Sunday with reverence and devotion when it is your fourth Mass that day and you**

have driven back and forth from one mission to another and you are so tired, you can hardly stand! But this is our life. This is what we do. **It is profoundly priestly to offer the sacrifice of Jesus and to feed His people.**

A possible resolution: Examine how you offer Holy Mass, how you celebrate these Sacred Mysteries and how you can make them more meaningful for the people.

Story: There is so much to be said for being at our Battle Station! I remember a young man who came up to me one Sunday after Mass: *“Father I knew you would be here.”* I was confused, thinking *“I am a priest. Where else would I be on a Sunday morning?”* He said, *“Father you have not seen me in a while, have you? I have not been to Church for 6 months and I’ve been partying a lot. But this morning, I woke up sad and I immediately thought of you. I said to myself, ‘I should go to mass. Fr. Brannen will be there. And here you are. You’re here!’”*

Even though his faith was weak. He was in and out of the church, like so many of our people. But he was still confident that my faith was strong! He was not confident in his own faith but he was confident in the faith of the Church! I remember praying, *“Jesus, help me to always be here for these people. Happy or sad, sinful or clean, help me to be at my battle station every Sunday. So that when they come I can welcome them.”*

Story: Pope John Paul I: Do you leave your mother when she is sick or do you stay with her until she is well? The Church is your mother. Never leave her, even if she is sick.

As I close, I guess I must say that someone has cursed us. The Chinese curse: May you live in interesting times. These are interesting times. He who does not read history is doomed to repeat it. Our nation is sick and I think dying. A nation without a soul is dead. Our church has been sick in the last few years with many crisis. Even though our nation might die, even soon (all nations do), our church can never die, because she is ensouled with the Holy Spirit. The Gates of Hell will not prevail against her. She is the Body of Christ, the Bride of the Lamb and She brings Jesus in the Holy Eucharist to all the people of the world so that they can become one people, **the people of God.**

The Body of Christ is beautiful...

- in that elderly lady with two hearing aids who was praying for me; the Body of Christ is beautiful...
- in that family with six stair-step children who sit in the front pew; the Body of Christ is beautiful...
- in those elderly men who always stand outside, talking about the weather; greeting and ushering;

- She is beautiful in those blessed, poor Latino people, who so often arrive 20 minutes late;
- The Church is the Body of Christ. She is the Bride of the Lamb! And She is very beautiful. **And she is your bride, my brothers, and mine!**

Jesus is the answer to which every human heart is the question. **Jesus in the Amazing Eucharist is the only medicine that can save our nation, our culture and our world.** The New Springtime of Christianity is upon us. The Holy Father has called for a New Evangelization. It is a great time to be a priest!

May God who has begun this good work in you bring it to fulfillment!

Closing Mass Homily: It's All True!

Gospel: Resurrection of Jesus (John 20:1-18)

Fictitious Story told by Cardinal Hickey: After the Resurrection and Ascension, Jesus was standing on a cloud looking down at the earth and speaking with an angel. *“Lord, I notice that the whole world is pitch black dark, except...what are those 12 tiny lights down there?”* Jesus said: *“Those are my 11 disciples and my mother? It is my plan that those 12 little lights will spread to every man, woman and child in the world, through all generations, that they will light up the entire world with my love and my teaching.”* And the angel slowly shook his head and said, *“There sure is a lot of darkness down there. What if it doesn't work? What's Plan B?”* And Jesus said, *“There's no Plan B.”*

As priests of Jesus Christ, we are part of this plan. We are an important part of this and the Lord is grateful. **But the road is difficult.**

St. Teresa of Avila: The Lord said to her: *“How can I give you great rewards if I do not first give you great trials!”*

Review my 7 original objectives of the retreat here:

1. Get away and socialize
2. Laugh
3. Take time to pray
4. Hear some good stories; ideas that I can use in my own preaching
5. Make practical resolutions; meat and potatoes Catholic priesthood
6. Confession or spiritual direction
7. Leave the retreat feeling very excited/happy that I am a priest; refreshed and ready to go back to my parish and love the people.

This is what I hoped the Holy Spirit would accomplish for you this week, because you so deserve to be lifted up. To be filled with hope and joy.

Bl. Mother Teresa: (documentary in Guatemala) *“Somebody make that sister laugh!”*

Benjamin Franklin: *“I might have become a clergyman had not so many clergy men I knew looked and acted so much like undertakers!”*

Review of Quotes, one-liners, pearls:

1. The purpose of a priest is to bring people to Jesus and Jesus to people.
2. KISS
3. A good retreat master gives his retreatants two pats on the back: one up high with the hand and the other down low with the foot.
4. Jesus is the answer to which every human heart is the question.
5. If you learn everything except Christ, you learn nothing. If you learn nothing except Christ, you learn everything.
6. He did this for me; I do what for Him.
7. Orthodoxy without charity is not Christianity.
8. Be kind, be kind, be kind.
9. *Virtus in medio stat* (virtue stands in the middle).
10. Holiness is less easily acquired than theological fluency.
11. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care... about them.
12. I am constantly amazed at the number of men who are priests who did everything in their power that they would not be.
13. Everything that happens in my life can make me better or bitter...and I choose.
14. Take everything that Jesus gives and give everything that Jesus takes, always with a smile.
15. Jesus is never outdone in generosity.
16. The unexamined life is not worth living.
17. God who created you without you will not save you without you.
18. If you don't change your direction, you will likely end up where you are heading.
19. He who does not read history is doomed to repeat it, and where experience is not retained, infancy is perpetual.
20. The mill of God grinds slowly but exceedingly fine.
21. What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?
22. There is nothing worse than a proud priest.
23. Prosperity is the most dangerous situation of man.
24. The Church asks people to believe what they cannot see, to do what they do not want to do, not to do what they want to do, and then to pay for it all.
25. God loves me; God loves you; God loves us no matter what we do.
26. God does not love me because I'm good. He loves me because He's good!
27. Totally Catholic and totally kind.

28. The ABC's of mercy: Ask for mercy; Be merciful; Complete Trust.
29. Bring people to Jesus and get out of the way.
30. *Sine mei, nihil potestis facie* (without me, you can do nothing).
31. If the biographies of the saints included their vices as well as their virtues, they would be double in length!
32. We learn to do good by having done bad.
33. We don't love the poor because they are Catholic. We love them because we are Catholic.
34. *Nemo dat quod non habet.* (one cannot give what one does not have).
35. Loving trust, total surrender, joy.
36. If you add up all the goodness of every good person who ever lived, it would not equal the goodness of Jesus.
37. The only success recognized by God is Christ-likeness.
38. The last temptation is the greatest treason; to do the right thing for the wrong reason.
39. Joy is a net of love by which we can catch souls for God.
40. The whole world revolves back and forth between two mysteries: How can God love me so much that he would send His only Son to die for me? How can I go on sinning, knowing of that love?
41. The water in the baptismal font is only deep in the middle.
42. *"Yes, God always does whatever I ask Him, because I always do whatever He asks me."*
43. In things essential, orthodoxy. In things nonessential, liberty. In all things, charity.
44. With regard to your sins: Admit it, confess it and forget it!
45. God does not cease to be just in order to be merciful.
46. When looking at the sins of another, if you cannot excuse the action then excuse the intention.
47. If you don't like cafeteria Catholics, then don't be a cafeteria priest.
48. You only love God as much as you love your least favorite neighbor.
49. Tell me nothing about truth if it is without love. Tell me nothing about love if it is without truth. One without the other becomes a destructive lie.
50. The priest is above all a man of prayer.
51. The pious soul prays not to inform God but to be conformed to His will.
52. To remain in prayer without gathering anything from it, is not a loss of time but a great gain, for we are toiling without self-interest, solely for the honor and glory of God.
53. God wrote the law on tablets of stone because we could no longer read them in our stony hearts.
54. God has deemed it better to permit evil and to bring good from it rather than to abolish evil altogether.
55. When a task is once begun, you leave it not until it's done, and be a matter great or small, you do it well or not at all.
56. You know the expression that comes to us. There's so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us, that it behooves none of us to talk about the rest of us.

57. Good, better, best; never let it rest; till your good is better and your better best!
58. What good is it if the bread and wine change...but you don't?
59. The sin of good people is that they will not allow God to command new commitment or greater service.
60. The prayer of Moses: God, I can't, you can and you promised!
61. To lose one's way is nothing more than the giving up of prayer.
62. The biggest problem in my diocese is not between priests who are liberal and priests who are conservative; it is between priests who pray and those who do not.
63. The *primum officium* of the priest is to preach.
64. The soul that does not pray is sick, and emits an offensive odor.
65. God will never send me where his grace cannot sustain me.
66. Don't be a sheep beater.
67. 90% of 90%
68. Some people have become so open minded, their brains have fallen out.
69. The purpose of a preacher is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.
70. Homiletics: to contemplate and then to give others the fruit of that contemplation.
71. The Church needs work horses more than race horses, because most of the work is done in the field with our hands at the plow, not looking back. It is not done at the track.
72. He who is constantly counting the cost is really asking if it is worthy of the price.
73. God does not call the best to be His priests, but He expects the best of those He calls.
74. The greatest priest is not the priest with the greatest gifts, but the priest who does the most with the gifts he has received.
75. You are here for God; not for His work.
76. As long as the U.S. is the land of perpetual adolescence, she will be the land of perpetual sadness.
77. Most Christians do not really want to do the will of God. Most Christians really want to do their own will without seriously offending God.
78. There are seven locks on the human heart and the first always opens silently.
79. Between a man saint and a woman saint, brick and mortar.
80. You will have peace of soul when the person you are is the person you want to be is the person other people think you are.
81. The peace of Christ is nothing more than the ability to carry our crosses well.
82. The devil is like a great chained dog; he makes a lot of noise, but he only bites those who come too close.
83. It's easier to raise a child than to fix an adult.
84. Humility is gracefully accepting one's place in the plan of God.
85. What we are looking for in the priesthood is a few, relatively well-adjusted neurotics.
86. We have to be somewhere and we have to do something until this artificial invention called time comes to an end. It might as well be here and it might as well be this.
87. Good Jesus, glorify yourself. The rest is not important.

88. God teaches us courage in the prayer of agony because we will need even more courage in the prayer of ecstasy!
89. Our Consuming Concern is Jesus.
90. Oh well, I still have Jesus!
91. Do not be afraid! (366 x's)
92. Christ is Risen. The victory is won.
93. The hero of the modern age is the parish priest.

If I talk about Theology of the Body:

94. The problem with pornography is not that it shows too much, but that it shows too little.
95. TOB is like a theological time bomb, set to go off sometime in the 3rd millennium of the Church.
96. The Catholic faith is to be proposed; not imposed.
97. She is a child of God. She is a temple of the Holy Spirit. She is made in the image and likeness of God for her own sake. She can never be used. She can never be discarded. The only acceptable response is love.
98. Every sexual sin is an attempt to divorce love from suffering.
99. The opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is to use another person as a means to an end.
100. The difference between the bride of Christ and the whore of Babylon is that the Bride of Christ chooses life.
101. All analogies are inadequate to describe our eschatological union with God in the Kingdom of Heaven, but of all analogies, the marital embrace is the least inadequate.

Deep down, we believe that it's all true. Jesus is the answer to which every human heart is the question. There is no more worthwhile way to give your life than the way you have chosen! Actually, God chose you but you said "yes." In spite of what the world tells you, the media, the devil, even your own people...you are a priest.

Deep down, when we lie in our bed at night and there is no one else around. When there is no one to impress, no one except you and God...**we believe that it's all true.** Jesus is the Answer. And he is worth everything we have given up; we do without a wife and children, we combat loneliness and overwork, it is why we became priests in the first place. We believe that it's true.

A religious sister I know was asked why she became a Sister. She replied, "*Don't ask me why I came? Ask me why I stayed.*"

And if you're looking for a reason to continue, Jesus is the reason. He is our "*raison d'etre.*" **The only mistake we ever make is taking our eyes off of Jesus.** And the

mystery is there! Even when it does not seem so mysterious, God has used you and God is using you to do great things for His kingdom.

And Jesus is grateful and Jesus is faithful and Jesus is never outdone in generosity.

And He is going to reward us one day with unimaginable happiness. I can't wait to get to Heaven!

Story: little town in Russia after the Communists first took over. Rounded up the towns people at gunpoint for a propaganda session. The speaker was a handsome young Soviet officer who was very articulate. He spoke for three hours on why there was no God, religion was *the opiate of the Masses*, Communism was for the best. The people just listened in dead silence. So convinced was he that his talk had been efficacious, he invited anyone to come up who would like to give a rebuttal, thinking no one would dare! One old priest, with white hair, limping from his arthritis, walked up to the podium. He was greatly loved and respected in that town. The officer glared at him and said, "*You have five minutes.*" The priest said, "*Oh, I don't think I will need that long.*" And the priest looked out at the great Mass of people silently for about 30 seconds. Then he threw up his hands and in a great booming voice, cried out: "*Jesus Christ has risen!*" And the entire town shouted, "*Jesus Christ has risen indeed!*"

As we end this retreat, I would like to remind you of something very important. In the end, we win! Look at the last book of the Bible; **Revelation 22**. We won! It's over. We are with Christ and Jesus Christ has risen! He will come again in glory and there will be new heavens and new earth and he will give you unimaginable joy!

Negro Spiritual:

There's a king and captain high and he's coming by and by
And he'll find me hoeing cotton when He comes.
You can hear his legions charging cross the regions of the sky
And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.
There's a man they thrust aside who was tortured till he died
And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.
He was beaten and rejected; he was scorned and crucified,
And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.

When he comes, O when he comes,
He'll be flanked by saints and angels when he comes.
They'll be shouting out Hosanna to the man that men denied,
And I'll kneel among my cotton when He comes.

"Oh well, I still have Jesus." My favorite prayer. It has only 6 words and it comes from Romans 8. You have a flat tire on the way home. *Oh well, I still have Jesus.* You are having a rotten week and nothing is going right in the parish. *Oh well, I still have Jesus.* The doctor says that you have malignant cancer and to get your affairs in order. *Oh well,*

I still have Jesus. Oh well, I still have Jesus. St. Paul said it beautifully: *“What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness or peril or the sword? No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us... Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* St. Paul says it so eloquently. I don’t have that gift. I just say, *“Oh well, I still have Jesus.”*

As we end this retreat, let’s be grateful to God for our years of priesthood, whether they be many or few. Priesthood is a great gift, a great grace, and we are so blessed to have received it.

And if you are a senior priest, if you are older and thinking about or preparing for death, **(I said that I would talk about that, didn’t I?)** I say to you the words of Jesus: *“Do not be afraid!”*

Those words are found 366 times in the Bible. **Do not be afraid!** That is once for every day of the year, plus leap year! Forget about your sins. You have confessed them. Admit it, confess it and forget it. Forgive yourself and move on. Jesus is infinite in mercy. **You have preached that all of your life. Why do you doubt that this mercy will be applied to you?** Jesus said, *“Philip, have you been with me all this time and still you do not know me?”*

1 John 4:

“Our love is brought to perfection in this, that we should have confidence on the Day of Judgment. Love has no room for fear. Perfect love casts out all fear.”

Like the gospel story of the man who went off to another country to be crowned king. Some sent a delegation asking that he not be made the king. But he came back crowned king nonetheless, and he punished those who did not want him.

- Well, my brothers, Jesus has gone off to be crowned and he is coming again. And you have given your life to prepare the way, to build the kingdom. **He is coming with great glory and you will rule over nations and kingdoms!**
- **Jesus** said *“He who obeys these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.”* That is you, my brothers. You have given your lives to obey these commandments and to teach them to others.
- **Jesus** said *“He who has given up mother and father, lands and properties, for the sake of the Kingdom will receive a thousand times all of that and so much more.”* That is you. Jesus is never outdone in generosity.
- And if you are thinking about your sins, then just admit it, confess it and forget it. I mean, if I were God, and a brother priest came before me, with all of his

demons, with his darkside and difficulties, but he loved me and he did give his life to serve me in answer to my call... I would show that priest mercy and give that priest unimaginable happiness in Heaven. Wouldn't you do that for me? But Jesus is 100 million times more good, more kind, and more merciful than we are!

The Apostle says, *"Eye has not seen and ear has not heard nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love Him."* So do not be afraid. **Good Jesus, glorify yourself, the rest is not important.**

Blessed Julian of Norwich: *"The greatest honor and glory you can give to almighty God, greater than all your sacrifices and offerings, is to live gladly, joyfully, because of the knowledge of his love."*

As Catholics, when we come to the end of whatever we do, whether it be the end of a retreat or the end of our lives, we turn to our Blessed Mother Mary.

I thank God that I am a priest. And I thank God that you are priests. The time is coming very soon, very soon for all of us, when we will hear those words: *"Well done good and faithful servant. Muy Bien Hecho! Enter now into your glory!"*

And may God who has begun this good work in you bring it to fulfillment!

Let's pray together: Hail Holy Queen...

Things to incorporate somewhere:

Story: Dr. Jay Dallas; permanent deacon; broke his leg; "I really wanted the entire earth to just open up and swallow me. I wanted to die." Here I was in the lowest point of my entire life and here was God preparing to give me the greatest blessing of my entire life; my wife. I believe that God wants to give you great blessings and I have been praying that He will do so on this retreat.

Resolution to learn Spanish: Do not say "I am too old. Can't teach an old dog new tricks. I'm not good at languages." If Jesus is calling you to do it, he will help you. His grace will not be lacking. The Latinos are lonely, poor, scared foreigners and Jesus loves them so much! He will help you so that you can help them!

Story: St. John Vianney; The Providence. Why did he start this orphanage? Illegitimate children were on the street! This is why he railed against dancing. The people would get drunk, hook up and then there were more children on the street. He saw people suffering and he took the initiative. He used his own inheritance from his father to start the orphanage and he loved those children. He went there every day! Then the bishop took it away from him and gave it to some Religious Sisters to run. This broke his heart; he really suffered over this. He said, “The bishop sees this as the will of God but I sure cannot see it as God’s will.” But he obeyed.

Pope Benedict XVI: *“We must be inspired by a holy restlessness, restlessness to bring to everyone the gift of friendship with Jesus Christ.”*

Blessed Mother Teresa: *“Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself into the hands of God, at His disposition, and listening to His voice in the depths of our hearts.”*

An increasing number of the JP II generation of priests are leaving the priesthood. Orthodoxy is not enough. Our relationship with Jesus must be real and intimate.

Some people have such a sweet temperament! They are always positive and joyful. I mean, it can be raining burning sulfur outside and they exclaim: “Praised be Jesus Christ! What a beautiful day the Lord has made.” And they mean it sincerely! Others of us do not have that same sweet spirit. Every day, we must do violence to ourselves, with the grace of Christ, to **Tame our Temperament!** To whom much has been given, much will be expected. The second person must put out a lot more effort to achieve the same things: an external smile, a gentle voice and a peaceful looking countenance.

Priesthood is not a part-time job. It is total. **Story:** pig and chicken who saw a starving beggar. The chicken said, “Look at that poor starving man. I feel so sorry for him. Let’s give him some food. Let’s give him some bacon and eggs.” The pig said, “That’s easy for you to say. You just have to make a small contribution. For me, it’s a total commitment.”

M.C. Retreat: Pope JP II in Vita Consecrata; uses the image of the Transfiguration; like the 3 chosen apostles, you have all gone up with Him on the mountain and witnessed amazing things; your heart is joyful! “It is good that we are here.” “This is my beloved son. Listen to Him.” But then we are left all alone *with just Jesus*. This is a great image for prayer. We have to come down the mountain and turn towards Jerusalem with him. We have to do the hard work of the Cross, dying to self so as to live for Jesus, but always remembering that the Resurrection is coming. “Remember how he shone on the mountain...” This is a parable of religious life! Some of you are still up on that mountain and very excited. Others are on the Cross and suffering terribly. Some are in-between...

Jesus was always trying to get his disciples (and us) to understand the Kingdom of God. *“Do you not yet understand or comprehend? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and not see? Ears and not hear? Don’t you remember the five loaves for the five*

thousand with twelve baskets left over?" Jesus is calling his disciples, and us, into an inner circle. He explains the parables to us so that we can teach others.

Fr. John Hardon, S.J. made a vow as a young priest to use all the time that God had given him well, not to waste time but to work for souls.

Make a profound act of Thanksgiving. This exercise was first given to me as a penance in confession. I was up at Pope John XXIII Seminary visiting our seminarians there and I went to confession to the rector, Msgr. Francis Kelly. This was the penance he gave me and I have given it myself many times as a penance.

Fr. Miller's book *The Grace of Ars*: "there are three temptations that priests need to recognize and fight against in their lives. Each is a temptation to put some object in the place that only Christ should have in the life of his priest. Each of these temptations builds upon the other:

- 1) The first temptation is a fixation on "stuff." Because the US diocesan priest has more than enough money, he can live as a gentleman of the upper middle class, a comfortable bachelor. The foundation for this is "clerical entitlement", which can be described in this attitude: "For all my sacrifices, I deserve a fine car, the best restaurants, expensive vacations, a house in the country or at the shore, all the latest electronic devices, a stout portfolio of stocks and bonds, a television in every room, a well stocked liquor cabinet, a pet or pets, a steady round of golf at fancy clubs and a lavish rectory. Some priests do not realize how scandalized the people can be by clerical worldliness.
- 2) The second is the clerical temptation to put honors at the center of everything. It seems that some priests would rather be recognized publicly and loudly applauded for their achievements by the bishop, civic leaders, organizations, and parishioners rather than accumulate stuff. More likely, stuff and this quest for honors, live in the same house! A particularly lethal form of this temptation is lust for the episcopacy.
- 3) Finally, there is the temptation to create a personality cult. All priests are leaders of God's people, we might even say *alpha males*, men wired to lead. While this is how it should be, it is possible for a pastor or priest to enjoy his leadership position a bit too much. Here are some danger signs that might indicate a priest is promoting himself and not His Lord. Does he draw most of his energy from the adulation of the people rather than from preaching the Gospel and leading people to Christ in the sacraments? Does he obsessively demand the undivided attention and love of his parishioners? Does he feel jealous and threatened when he is not the center of attention (For example, when a very likeable and holy young associate or seminarian comes to work in the parish?). When this priest has a microphone in his hands, is he his favorite topic? So when a priest falls for this temptation, his personal tastes, his eccentricities, hobbies, consuming interests,

style of humor, even his pet, are easily enlarged and forced on the entire parish. This is the general idea.

So we do not want to be priests who try to draw people to ourselves but rather through ourselves, to Jesus. *“To deliberately draw people to oneself and to stop there is perhaps the most serious violation of priestly poverty possible.”*

Bottom line for all of these temptations is this question: “Why isn’t Jesus Christ enough?” What have I made my Consuming Concern in place of Jesus?

What is it about Jesus that attracts you the most: the Good, the True or the Beautiful? These are the three transcendentals. For many women, it is the beautiful (like my mother; story of when we were at the beach). For my confreres in the seminary, for many of them it is the Truth. For me, it is the Goodness of Jesus. When I finally tasted it just a little, I said *“I want to be like that!”*