

## Meeting the Spiritual Challenges of Diocesan Priesthood Today.

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- I. This morning we talked about the great danger for the priesthood of building my own kingdom.
  - A. We talked about how God uses our weaknesses to empty us of ourselves.
    1. To make us dependent.
    2. And to make us true priests, that is, both priest and victim.
  - B. The key for the priest to avoid the temptation to self reliance, which is the death nail of the enemy for our priesthood, is allowing ourselves to stay near the cross in order to be purified.
    1. I must be willing to stand at the Cross with faith and vulnerability.
    2. Vulnerability because I must open up the deepest places of sin in my life.
    3. Faith because I must believe that Christ can save me.
  - C. I chose specifically that word vulnerable because it comes from the Latin root – *vulnus* which means wound.
    1. To be vulnerable is to come to Christ with my open wounds – so that he may heal them.
    2. Healing comes precisely here – When I experience that I am loved in my woundedness.
  - D. This is the real key to my holiness.
    1. I must see clearly my own weakness – I must be vulnerable (this is so hard for us).
    2. Yet when I see my weakness I must not draw back from the Lord – In faith and trust I must allow him to heal me.
  - E. Speak about 4 tools to help us in this sustained vulnerability.
    1. First prayer.
    2. Second the evangelical counsels: poverty, chastity, obedience.
    3. Third fraternity.
    4. Our Lady.
- II. One time I was praying on my 30 day retreat... finished the hour “I love my wounds why do you hate yours.”
  - A. I realized after some more prayer and reflection that my wounds were something I tried to ignore or hide.
    1. I tried to pretend I did not have them.
    2. I would try to pretend they do not affect me.
    3. But of course this was impossible – they were and still are affecting me.
    4. If I ignore them or hide them, then they are affecting me in negative ways.
  - B. Of course we all know from our own lives and our spiritual direction the way sin works in us.
    1. All of us are wounded by sin... of course by original sin and by personal sin, my sin others sins against me.
    2. These wounds if not present to Christ and healed, become places in my life of sin.
    3. Like an infection in the wound.
  - C. We know how it works, we explain this all the time to people in the confessional.
    1. Sins come from sinfulness.

2. Sinfulness... is a set of thoughts, attitudes and behaviors that consistently lead me to sin.
  3. Sinfulness comes from wounds.
  4. Because of my own experience of life, I develop thoughts, habits and behaviors that lead to sin.
- D. If you want a great summary of this reality in your life read Fr. Thomas Dubay's book *Deep Conversion, Deep Prayer*.
1. He talks in that book about the need for deep conversion.
    - a. Not just dealing with our actions but getting to the roots of our actions.
    - b. Exposing our sinfulness, the lies we have come to believe about ourself.
    - c. Seeking deep healing from the heart and mind of Christ
    - d. Which is the only thing that can heal us.
  2. Fr. Dubay says, "the healing of our deepest wounds comes from contemplative intimacy with the indwelling Trinity, and the deep conversion that makes such intimacy possible" (Dubay, p.77).
    - a. He is talking about a sustained encounter with the love of God for us.
    - b. He is talking about sustained vulnerability before God.
- E. Deep conversion and healing normally does not come to us all at once – although it can come in large graces received all at once.
1. But even these graces come from sustained openness before Christ himself – who gradually purifies and heals my heart.
  2. It happens through regular consistent confession of my sin and ongoing struggle.
  3. It happens through daily times of intimacy with the Lord in adoration.
  4. It happens through the daily celebration of the Eucharist.
  5. Here you see the connection between true healing and contemplative prayer – the kind of deep healing I'm talking about cannot happen without a sustained life of contemplative prayer.
- F. By "contemplative," I mean allowing myself to encounter the Lord at the deepest level – a prayer life that enters into the deepest conversations with him.
1. A prayer that allows him to speak to what is most central to me.
  2. A living deep relationship of love.
  3. This kind of prayer life requires the deepest vulnerability before God.
  4. A willingness to stand naked before him.
- G. Here is the place of deep healing in my life when I make myself deeply vulnerable to the heart of Christ.
1. This is what happened to each of the people in the scriptures who were healed.
  2. They became vulnerable to the heart of Christ.
- H. What we see from the scriptures is that many people heard Christ speak, saw him perform miracles, but not everyone was changed by this encounter.
1. Many people encountered Jesus of Nazareth, a preacher, a miracle worker.
  2. Only a few people encountered the heart of Christ.
  3. They met the love of God for them in Jesus.
  4. But whenever someone encountered the heart of Christ – they were healed.
    - a. There are numerous examples.
      - i. The man who was lowered in from the roof by his friends and had his sins forgiven (Mk 2:2-12).

- ii. The woman who comes into the house of Simon the Pharisee and washes Jesus feet with her tears (Lk 7:36-50).
- iii. The woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:1-11).
- b. I love the example of the hemorrhaging woman in Mark's Gospel.
  - i. **Mark 5:25-34** <sup>25</sup> And there was a woman who had had a flow of blood for twelve years, <sup>26</sup> and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. <sup>27</sup> She had heard the reports about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. <sup>28</sup> For she said, "If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well."<sup>29</sup> And immediately the hemorrhage ceased; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. <sup>30</sup> And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone forth from him, immediately turned about in the crowd, and said, "Who touched my garments?" <sup>31</sup> And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, `Who touched me?'" <sup>32</sup> And he looked around to see who had done it. <sup>33</sup> But the woman, knowing what had been done to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. <sup>34</sup> And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."
  - c. Notice lots of people touched Jesus that day. What made this woman different – her need and her faith.
- 5. These two characteristics are the key for healing in the scriptures.
- 6. One of the great examples of this encounter with the heart of Christ is Zacchaeus: Luke 19:1-10.
  - a. Again a large crowd has turned out to see Jesus.
  - b. But Jesus who knows the hearts of men, knows that not all are the same in this crowd.
  - c. He sees one man who is disposed to really encounter Him.
  - d. We might say Zacchaeus was vulnerable to real conversion.
  - e. Out of all the people that day Jesus goes up to one man and says –“Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5).
    - i. What was the look in Jesus eyes when he stopped beneath that tree and looked into the eyes of Zachaeus.
    - ii. What did Zacchaeus see in those eyes that was so different than anything he had ever seen before?
    - iii. What was revealed by the heart of Christ for Zacchaeus?
  - f. We know what Zacchaeus experienced –
    - i. He experienced that he was loved with a special love,
    - ii. that he was forgiven despite his dishonesty,
    - iii. that he, though a great sinner, was called to intimacy with the very heart of God.
    - iv. “I want to stay at your house.”
    - v. Jesus opened up his heart to Zacchaeus and he was changed.
  - g. What allowed Zacchaeus to experience this healing of Christ?
    - i. St. Augustine said it was Zacchaeus’ humility: “Zacchaeus was humble, the crowd was proud.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Sermones* 174.3.3; PL 38, 942.

- ii. St. Augustine said that the proud found fault with Jesus entering the house of Zacchaeus – “that was the same as to find fault with the Physician entering the house of the sick man.”<sup>2</sup>
    - iii. Zacchaeus was disposed by his humility to be healed.
- I. There is an analogy here with the sacramental encounter with Christ.
  - 1. We know that the sacraments are effective *ex opere operato*, simply by having been done validly.
  - 2. Whenever that happens Christ himself, St. Thomas would say the passion of Christ, is operative in this sacrament.
  - 3. His real, life-saving, healing, power is made present.
  - 4. The same power that was operative in the humanity of Jesus by virtue of the incarnation.
  - 5. But why is it that some people are not changed?
    - a. Some people are changed by the sacraments, others are not affected in the least.
    - b. Of course this has to do with the disposition of the person.
    - c. Some people come with faith and humility.
    - d. St. Thomas said that even Christ could not change the heart of one person by his words if the Holy Spirit was not already working in that person’s heart.
- J. Here is where the disposition of the priest can make a big difference.
  - 1. The priest by his own disposition before Christ can open the people up to this life changing encounter.
  - 2. The disposition of the priest affects the people – the disposition of the people affects the priest.
    - a. *Ex opere operantis* – by the work of the one working.
    - b. Perhaps you have experienced this – when I celebrate Mass for the Missionaries of charity – faith and humility opens me up.
  - 3. If I am who I should be then the people who who encounter me, in confession, in the celebration of Holy Mass – will encounter this heart of Christ.
  - 4. The only way they will is if I have made myself vulnerable to this heart of Christ.
    - a. If my disposition before him is one of sustained vulnerability.
    - b. If I am able to consistently open myself before Christ with humility and faith.
    - c. I know my need for God and I live in that need.
- K. This is the key to the healing power of the Eucharist.
  - 1. How is that so many of us – and I speak of myself!
  - 2. Can celebrate the Eucharist every day and not really by changed.
  - 3. Because I don’t make myself vulnerable to the love of Christ for me in the Eucharist.
- L. Where else do I experience more powerfully the love of Christ than at the Eucharist?
  - 1. The Mass is the sacrament of the heart of Christ.
    - a. It makes present Christ’s love poured out for us.
    - b. It makes present Christ’s heart pierced for us.
    - c. In the Mass the open heart of Christ is given to us.
    - d. If I am vulnerable here at this altar. If I come with my open wound to be loved – I cannot help but be healed.
    - e. I love the quote by Cardinal Ratzinger, given at the ordination of priests in his Archdiocese of Munich:

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 5.6; PL 38, 943)

- i. “Ultimately the Church draws her life from the Eucharist, from this real, self-giving presence of the Lord. Without this ever-new encounter with him, she would necessarily wither. That is why our priesthood, too, draws life from the Eucharistic community with the Lord, from the way that the Eucharist is the constant heart and strength of our life. Anyone who repeatedly exposes himself to it and confides in it will be changed. You cannot walk constantly with the Lord, cannot ever anew pronounce these tremendous words, *This is my Body and my Blood*, you cannot touch the Body of the Lord again and again, without being changed and being led by him. We may of course lag behind, but in the long run there are only really two possibilities: either to shake off the Eucharist, with the enormous demands and power it sets up in life, or to surrender to it, to hold fast to it. Anyone who holds fast to the Lord will not be abandoned by him. Anyone who grapples with him calmly and patiently, humbly and sincerely, will be led by him; he will never be denied his light” (Joseph Ratzinger, *God is Near*, 126).
- f. Sustained, reverent vulnerability... or shake off the demands...
- 2. Excellent article on this by James Keating on “The Eucharist and the Healing of Affection for Sin” – “If the Church’s vulnerability before this gift is real, then participation in the Eucharist changes her moral character over time.”<sup>3</sup>
- 3. The secret then to healing being healed through Confession and the Eucharist is the vulnerability with which I approach these sacraments.
  - a. This vulnerability could also be called the virtue of humility.
  - b. It is what the scriptures call being “poor in spirit” (Mt 5:3).
  - c. Someone who knows deeply their need for God and comes to him with trust.
  - d. As Dr. Keating says, “Trust, vulnerability, rapt listening, integrity all precede the fullness of healing... We must present ourself in such a way that Christ can enter our heart with truth. And such a way of presenting ourself is encapsulated in the virtue of humility.”
  - e. This kenosis is his expropriation – his gift of himself.
- M. This is really the first key to overcoming the temptation to self-reliance – a sustained deep prayer life.
  - 1. Only if I have this will Christ be able to work through me in my sacramental ministry.
    - a. Ex opere operantis not just ex opere operato.
  - 2. Through my sustained vulnerable encounter with the Lord, I am being converted.
  - 3. Not that I don’t have my wounds.
    - a. But in my weakness and my deep woundedness I am meeting the Lord.
    - b. Therefore these wounds do not control me.
    - c. I am not so vulnerable to being drawn away from the Lord into the need to control things (self-reliance).
  - 4. Ignatius 14<sup>th</sup> rule of discernment.
    - a. The fourteenth: likewise he conducts himself as a leader, intent upon conquering and robbing what he desires. For, just as a captain and leader of an army in the

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<sup>3</sup> Keating points out well the danger of the Eucharist approached extrinsically as mere formalism with now real encounter with Christ: “It is said that the Eucharist is the place where salvation is offered, and so it is; but is the reception of such salvation by priest and people a conscious appropriation of its healing power or simply a rubrically correct executed act of worship?”

field, pitching his camp and exploring the fortifications and defenses of a stronghold, attacks it at the weakest point, in the same way the enemy of human nature, roving about, looks in turn at all our theological, cardinal and moral virtues; and where he finds us weakest and most in need for our eternal salvation, there he attacks us and attempts to take us. (327)

- b. Read Fr. Timothy Gallagher's Book *The Discernment of Spirits*.
  - c. So important for us to know where the enemy attacks us – almost always in that place where we are wounded.
  - d. If I know that place, and there I meet the Lord – those areas of struggle in my life become a place of mercy not a place of sin.
  - e. From those places I am able to love with Christ's own love.
5. We see this so often in spiritual direction and confession as we get to know souls.
- a. See it in our own life.
  - b. When I experience in those places in my heart that have been deeply wounded that I am loved.
  - c. From those places I can now love.
  - d. If I don't experience that – then in those moments when I am alone, or frustrated, deep down there will be an insatiable seeking for love!
  - e. This is the difference between the priest who is able to come home to his rectory after a long day and pray, even though he is tired seek deep communion!
    - i. He knows he is loved.
  - f. Verses the priest who comes home to his rectory, and feeling tired and alone, seeks false communion... the television, the internet.
  - g. The enemy knows where to attack.
- N. Can you see how all this flows from my contemplative prayer life – sustained vulnerability before the heart of Christ.
- III. I want to just briefly touch on the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, because these two are means to this sustained vulnerability before the heart of Christ.
- A. Could give a whole theology of the Counsels – doctorate.
- 1. St. Thomas says the evangelical counsels are the way a person makes a holocaust – a total offering—of one's life.
  - 2. The three counsels offer everything I have to God.
  - 3. Counter the three-fold lust – **1 John 2:16** the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.
  - 4. They are required for heaven... all are poor, chaste and obedient in heaven.
  - 5. These are the three areas of my life that I make myself vulnerable.
- B. I will start with obedience since this is the key for the priest.
- 1. Obedience, people immediately think of their bishop.
    - a. This is often true and sometimes difficult.
    - b. But it is usually rare –
    - c. Unless you work in the chancery like me – you might have very little contact with the bishop.
  - 2. There is another level at which obedience must be operative in us.
  - 3. Daily obedience to the will of God.
    - a. Key to all obedience
    - b. Cantalamessa Spider web.

4. Question: Do I love God's will more than my own will.
    - a. Most of us don't know the answer to this question.
    - b. Answer that comes in prayer.
    - c. Most of us have an experience when we can see that we do not.
  5. Only if I am seeking God's will above my own – will I become this living image of Christ.
    - a. This requires again sustained vulnerability.
    - b. A real active prayer life, where I am actually listening for God's will.
    - c. Daily seeking him in obedience.
  6. Only if this happens will I be able to receive the difficult call from the bishop when it comes.
  7. Only then will I be able to be obedient and be sure that I am building God's kingdom and not my own.
- C. Chastity is the virtue by which I order my love.
1. We all know that this is one of the ways we get attacked consistently.
  2. It is one of the ways in which failure really bothers us – and it should.
  3. We must see this as an invitation to vulnerability before God.
  4. Freedom for intimacy, not freedom from intimacy.
  5. If my intimacy needs are not met through my relationship with God – I will seek them to be met in unhealthy ways.
  6. Lived rightly this becomes one of the main ways I live a sustained vulnerability before God.
- D. Poverty is the place where I fill up my life with things.
1. We all should be aware of the temptation to numb my life with things.
    - a. Doesn't have to be material possessions – often is.
    - b. Can be entertainment, can be work – I constantly keep myself busy with emails, phone-calls, because I am resistant (consciously or unconsciously) to the deeper encounter of prayer.
    - c. Poverty of silence – is one of the huge poverties in our age!
    - d. No real prayer without real silence.
  2. The main thing we hate is poverty of spirit.
    - a. This is what material poverty is meant to lead to.
    - b. Material wealth can prevent my poverty of spirit – my experience of real need – and God's provision.

#### IV. Fraternity.

- A. Sustained vulnerability comes from vulnerability before my brothers.

V. Mary.

A. Her feminine love has a way of disarming us.