

3rd Thursday of Easter/Cycle I
May 12, 2011
Fr. Joe Bambenek
O'Hare Airport Interfaith Chapel, Chicago, IL

Acts 8:26-40

Psalm 66

John 6:44-51

Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.

In today's first reading we hear a story that is incredibly fitting to be proclaimed at an airport chapel. It features an Ethiopian eunuch on a *business [sic]* trip. We hear him described as essentially the CFO or the Treasury Secretary of Ethiopia, a man who obviously [as a eunuch] has made a huge sacrifice in his life for his job. He is using the time that can easily be wasted in travel to learn more about God. Then there is the Apostle Philip, who, at the prompting of an angel, a messenger of God, makes a huge act of faith and goes on a trip himself [with an uncertain purpose] as he seeks to evangelize the eunuch. In many ways, airport chaplaincy at its best is the 21st Century living out of today's first reading.

My name is Fr. Joe Bambenek and I was ordained just under a year ago, last May, as a priest of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. One of the traditions of being a new priest is that during our first year of priesthood we are able to go back to places that have been important along our journey to the priesthood to celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving. Which is why I am here this morning. 14 years ago today I began a job in the electric power industry that, like the Ethiopian eunuch in today's reading, led me to travel often. At the peak of my travels in 2002, I rode on 230 airplane flights. Along the way, I would often stop at airport chapels to take a few minutes to connect with God. And while there are a number of chapels at which I prayed during those years, a time of my life during which I came to discern the vocation of priesthood, I chose the O'Hare Chapel for the Mass of Thanksgiving because it was here that I had the most powerful spiritual experience in an airport chapel; one of interior healing, one that helped me experience new joys and to bring joy to others. And before I forget, one other tradition of being ordained is to print ordination prayer cards; hence, I have left some of mine near the chapel entrances. The ones here have an image of St. Philomena, whose intercession I sought for the interior healing. Feel free to take one on your way out. Getting back to the story; by taking time to pray with God, I ultimately came to have the courage to follow the example of Philip from today's reading; to follow where God called me to go in faith with the uncertainties involved; even though that meant leaving a successful career for the priesthood.

So as we gather for the Eucharist, a word that means thanksgiving, I come here in a special way to thank God for my vocation to the priesthood, one which I came to accept while making my way through airports. I also come to say thank you to those who make airport chapels possible: most especially their benefactors, faithful chaplains and priests, and dedicated staff such as Susan. It is also my hope that my presence will encourage all here at Mass today to continue to follow the Ethiopian eunuch's example of continuing to seek the Lord in the midst of all the challenges and joys of the travel world. We can do this by reading the Bible and spiritual books during those moments when the delays of frequent travel afford us the chance to grow in the virtue of patience or when sitting on a plane gives us reading time. And perhaps most importantly, there is something we are all already doing, coming to Mass in the midst of a busy day, to be fed by Jesus in the Eucharist, the Bread of Life to use the words of today's gospel, to eat the eternal manna that feeds us on our journey to heaven. And as God and His will become ever clearer in our lives, as we are strengthened by Him, let us follow the example of Philip: let us follow wherever God leads us... so that as we travel literally around the world, we can be instruments in fulfilling today's Psalm response: *Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.*