

Fr. Joe Bambenek
Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus
Regina Memorial Hospital Chapel, Hastings
June 11, 2010

Ezekiel 34:11-16 Psalm 23 Romans 5:5b-11 Luke 15:3-7

Sing: I am the good shepherd, I pastor my sheep. For them I lay down my life, Alleluia.

On this Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus we, I return to this chapel for the first time as a priest. I am here to celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving for my ordination, and in the process, recognize the important role that this chapel community had in my vocation. We come here today joining with the universal Church, which is celebrating the culmination of the Year for Priests. As you can see, we are celebrating in grand style with 4 priests here in the chapel to celebrate Mass and a full house in the pews. That I chose today for celebrating my Mass of Thanksgiving at the Regina Chapel was no coincidence. It seemed especially fitting that I would give thanks for my ordination on a day especially devoted to the priesthood here, in a chapel where I have been to daily Mass so many times the past several decades. For as I come here in thanksgiving for the gift of priesthood, and for this community's nourishment of my vocation, I do so with gratitude for the priests who have served this hospital & residence community so well over the past half century: Fr. Dunne, Fr. Marley and now Fr. Altier. In fact, when I first approached the vocations office expressing an initial interest in the priesthood, it was Fr. Dunne who served as my reference.

When Pope Benedict established this year of the priest last June, the Pope referenced a quote of St. John Vianney, the Curé of Ars, the patron saint of parish priests. "The Priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus," the saintly Curé often said. It was, in fact, the 150th anniversary of St. John Vianney's death which was the occasion that the Pope used to pick this year for the celebration of priesthood. In part because of the special year, this winter when my seminary class was in Italy, many of my classmates and I made a side trip up to France to visit the little town of Ars where St. John Vianney served. A few weeks later I made a personal pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint Padre Pio, a 5 ½ hour bus trip from Rome. As I was kneeling before the tomb of Padre Pio, what struck me about both of these saintly priests, the modern examples that God through the Church gives to us on how to live out the priesthood, was that they devoted their lives to spending time in the confessional and celebrating Mass with great reverence. The many hours in the confessional and time spent reverently saying Mass was how they were shepherds who laid down their lives for their flock. The Eucharist, which poured forth from the pierced heart of Jesus on the Cross. And the sacrament of Reconciliation... which reminds us of the forgiving heart that Jesus had even as he was brutally and unjustly murdered. We can in see Jesus' self-giving example most clearly on the cross, but also throughout His ministry, that His love and with it mercy were at the core of His mission. For a priest to follow the example of Jesus, he too must be a man of great love for the People of God, as well as an instrument of mercy and reconciliation. The time Sts John Vianney and Pio spent in the confessional and at Mass were their ways of living out today's readings on being a good shepherd. Priests today must follow their example as we seek to feed & protect our flock through the Eucharist and our preaching and as we seek to bring back and restore the lost sheep in the confessional.

But our work, especially during this time of a New Evangelization, cannot end at the church door. There are now many among us in Hastings who have never heard the gospel, and many who have left the Church due to hurts or disbelief. A priest cannot be satisfied to serve only the 99 who come to Him; he must also seek out that 100th sheep. This seeking out requires insight into the hearts of men and women. Insight that is gained through prayer and through attentiveness to those around us.

While my brother priests and I are ordained ministers of Christ's priesthood, who are called upon to be ministers in a special way through the administration of the sacraments, we are not the only people in this chapel who are to conform our hearts and our lives to His. Although the Year for Priests has been specifically focused on the ordained priesthood it is worth noting that one of the deepened understandings of the Second Vatican Council is that all Christians participate in the priesthood of Christ. Thus, all of us are to follow the example of Jesus. Each one of us has been given a mission to seek out the lost, to be reconcilers, to express love and mercy to those who we meet.

Acting in imitation of Christ, so often counter to our fallen human inclinations, does not happen by chance. To have the strength to do so, we must feed our hearts with Jesus in the Eucharist. We must remove what is not of Jesus through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and we must make deliberate choices to seek out the 100th rather than to spend all of our time hanging out with the more comfortable 99. If we are truly to follow in the footsteps of Christ the Good Shepherd, each one of us should have a deliberate ministry of some sort in which we seek out lost sheep. This ministry does not have to be elaborate, it does not have to fully consume all of our time, but if we are not in some way or another reaching out to the lost, today's feast should serve as a wake up call to conform our lives ever more to that of Christ. As I make this appeal, I know that many here who are very involved in the Church, doing great things to build it up from the inside. Such work is important, I don't suggest you stop. In fact, if Jesus kept a calendar, and we were to look at Jesus' time schedule, we would see that He spent most of His time teaching and being with the Apostles. And when He was not with them, He was praying with His Father. So we should not spend all of our time on seeking the lost. Christian fraternity and encouragement is essential to our own faith.

Then what could this mean in our lives? For some here in the Regina Residence, it may mean offering up our sufferings, whether they be physical pain, loneliness, or the pain of not being able to do what we once could for the intention of a relative, perhaps a child or grandchild, who is currently astray from the Church. For others it may mean making a point to reach out to a person or group of people; not in a threatening way, but in the way that Jesus seeks out the lost sheep: with love and mercy. We can do this by taking time to be interested in them, patiently listening to their struggles, and gently inviting them to bring God more into their lives. For others it may mean financially supporting someone who is struggling to make ends meet, and doing so in a way that respects their dignity as a beloved daughter or son of God. And for some, perhaps it is a mission of encouraging the next young man from Hastings to become a priest. When it comes to seeking out vocations I cannot help but think of Sr. Rosemary, who sought out after me all the way to Michigan. Those of you who might feel prompted by the Holy Spirit to be more active in such a vocations seeking ministry might benefit from paying the good sister a visit sometime. Prior to my ordination, it had been 10 years since the previous priest came from Hastings, Fr. Scott Carl... And while we have an adopted son in Rich Dolan who is well into his

seminary training, let us not wait another decade for the next ordination celebration. While writing this homily, it particularly struck me that Scott, Rich and I all have had a significant connection to this chapel; which is a tremendous witness to the faithfulness of this community and to its influence on the lives of potential priests.

So as I celebrate my ordination to the priesthood with gratitude, today is not just a day to say thank you to God and to the ordained priests who have served here in the Regina Chapel, I also come to say thank you and to recognize the many non-priests here who have nourished my vocation. Many of those special people are here today, yet there are also many others who have gone on to eternal life. The witness of faith here in this chapel has been tremendous, as have the power of your prayers. It is very moving to think about how many prayers have been said for me as I was discerning my vocation and then suffering my way, as Fr. Altier described, with God's help, through the seminary. So Thank you.

On this Feast of the Sacred Heart, let us pray to God for the gifts we need to be Shepherds in Jesus' image: the gifts of insight, reconciliation, and compassion; of love and mercy. Now, as we prepare to eat Jesus' body and drink His blood, let us consciously prepare ourselves to conform our hearts ever more closely to His Sacred Heart.

Sing: I am the good shepherd, I pastor my sheep. For them I lay down my life, Alleluia.