

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 10, 2019
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore St.
Scranton, PA 18508
Luke 5:1-11

The Catholic system of assigning pastors to parishes is a lot more biblical than the way I became a pastor in the Episcopal church. Twenty years ago this month, I began thinking about leaving my position as an assistant pastor at St. Luke's downtown and becoming the pastor of a parish somewhere else. So I went to see my bishop, and he told me to prepare a resume and begin thinking about the kind of place to which I'd like to go. He even began to suggest places I might think about.

One of the places he mentioned was Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in Green Ridge. When I decided to apply, I sent the search committee an application. A few days or weeks later, they called me for an interview, and I met with the search committee in the vestry of the church. A few days later, they telephoned me to tell me they'd like to have me as their rector, the term Episcopalians use for pastor.

The entire process was predicated upon my demonstrating my worthiness for the job at hand. I had to tell them about my education, my accomplishments, even why I thought I'd make a good pastor to them. We had to talk about money, too—how much I thought I should get paid—and whether I'd be willing to move closer to the church, as at the time my wife and I lived in West Side. One of my peers at the time described the process as “a dog and pony show,” and I do remember being put on display, eager to prove myself worthy.

If we look at all three of our lessons from Scripture today, we see precisely the opposite sentiment expressed by Isaiah, St. Paul, and St. Peter. Isaiah says, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips.” St. Paul writes to the Corinthian church: “I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle.” St. Peter exclaims, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” As each call to ministry is recounted, the recipient of the call does not explain why he is worthy, with resumes and glamor shots, but instead references why he is not worthy. Explaining his worthiness would have been a disqualification in each instance.

In the Catholic Church, pastors of parishes are simply assigned. There is no resume-crafting, photograph session, or interview process. The bishop simply says, “I'd like to send you to such and such a place to such and such a parish.” And unless there is some grave objection, one that is clear to Bishop, Vicar General, and future pastor alike, the priest goes. He is chosen not because of his worthiness to be a shepherd of souls, but despite his unworthiness. He is able with Isaiah, St. Paul, and St. Peter to fall at the Lord's feet and confess in all earnestness, “I'm not the man for the job.”

I admit such thoughts myself. I can remember preaching homilies and teaching catechism classes in which I explained why I was not a Catholic. I officiated at attempted marriages in which one of the parties was a divorced Catholic with no declaration of nullity. I contradicted the Pope about his objections to the U.S. led invasion of Iraq in 2003. None of this rises perhaps to the level of “[persecuting] the Church of God,” as St. Paul explained his own disqualification, but it does show that I worked against the Lord's purpose and actively dissuaded people from adhering to the one, holy, Catholic

and Apostolic church. Truly, I am unworthy to be the pastor of a Catholic parish. Truly, I am unworthy to be your Pastor.

The Church, however, in her infinite wisdom, has still made me your pastor. We should marvel that I even got ordained. I have nevertheless been given this incredible responsibility. Why? Well, for the same reason St. Peter and St. Paul received their calls. I am here, not because I am worthy, but precisely because I recognize my own unworthiness. And in that recognition, I must rely all the more wholly upon the grace of Jesus Christ, on His light shining through me, to make it through just one day. After all, it is not Eric Bergman who touched your heart and drew you into the life of the Trinity. It was Jesus, and that is who you want to see, whom you have the right to see, when you come to assist at Mass; and I, God's unworthy servant, am in a sense to disappear. "He must increase, but I must decrease."

In modeling my ministry after the saints who have gone before, I must also note that their unworthiness did not paralyze them, prevent them from doing anything at all. Instead, their receptivity to God's grace, their cooperation with His will led them to become powerful instruments of God's grace, conduits by which countless souls have been saved. We must get over ourselves and never imagine for a moment that our sin could somehow be more powerful than God's capacity for forgiveness and restoration. "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" must be the motto of anyone who feebly attempts to answer God's call to work in the vineyard. We go, trusting that the strength to harvest souls will indeed come.

I know that there are objections raised to the work we're trying to do here in Providence. They run along the lines of "What do they know?" According to this narrative, the fact that so many of us are converts disqualifies us from any meaningful contribution to the life of the Church. We are suspect either because it took us so long in our lives to embrace the Truth or, on the other side of the spectrum, that we in our zeal have embraced the fullness of the Faith so wholeheartedly. This is not an argument we can win. Whatever tack we take in answering, we lose. All we can do is embrace both realities. Yes, we knew nothing and needed the Church to show us the Way. This being the case, why would we do anything other than allow ourselves to be led by Him in whom we have finally found peace? We've already done the dog and pony show, trying to prove ourselves worthy. In our old age, we're happy to take instruction and also give it, as long as everything we say accords with what is found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. As converts, our ministry is as legitimate as the ministry of St. Peter and St. Paul, both of whom embraced the true Faith as adults, had to take instruction to learn the fullness of the Truth and then zealously proclaimed what they had learned. They did so well, because they knew they needed the help.

The message for us is that we can never deem ourselves worthy, never forget the help we needed to get where we are. If we are to go further, to fill these pews with those who right now still are living in darkness, it must be in the same spirit of humility and unworthiness that allowed us to get started in the first place.