

Fr. John Homily for October 16, 2022. The 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

CHS JMJ. Redemption

I really would have liked to have preached last week as I came back from my convocation but Fr. Selvaraj was here so I had to defer to him. And again, you were all quite generous. On his behalf, thank you for your great support of his mission. This week, Deacon Jerry was scheduled to preach but I asked him if he would defer to me, to trade, again because I have some things to say.

I always tease about the priest's convocation. I say it's really a con-vacation where the brothers get together and eat and drink too much. Well, we do. But there are other aspects of it that are very important and beneficial to our personal growth and the spiritual health of our presbyterate. And frankly it's important to you as well. Because what we learned there becomes part of our very being and we, of course, will sooner or later want to share that with you – and I wanted to start sharing today.

Our guest speaker was Bishop Jerry Vincke. Up until a few years ago, Bishop Jerry was one of us – he was Fr. Jerry, of our diocese. A very down-to-earth easy-going, soft-spoken priest who was chosen by Pope Francis to be the bishop of Salina, Kansas. On that first day I had occasion to speak with Bishop Jerry as we waited for an elevator. I told him that I once heard a famous Franciscan say, with his native Brooklyn accent, that “*a bishop is nothing more than a priest who was unlucky.*” We both laughed out loud.

In his talks, Bishop Jerry warned us, right upfront, that he's not a good preacher. And his singing is even worse. But he said that he likes to tell stories, and so that's what he did. He told many stories and I would like to share some of them with you.

This first one clearly demonstrates the unluckiness of the poor priest who gets chosen to be a successor to the apostles. They have to administrate. They have to make difficult choices. Bishop Jerry's ultimate claim to fame, I'm sure, will be a very unpopular decision that he made a few years ago. He decided to allow Cardinal Theodore McCarrick to retire in the Salina diocese. The cardinal, just in case you don't know, was a notorious abuser. His target was older boys, seminarians. And when he ultimately was brought to justice and censured by the Church, the problem was, what to do with him. A local capuchin monastery was prepared to take him in. But they had to ask the Bishop for permission.

Bishop Jerry looked deep within his conscience and reflected on the various passages from the Bible: *Love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Forgive and your heavenly Father will forgive you. The Lord is rich in mercy and filled with compassion. He who is without sin, let him cast the first stone.*

Well, if you put it that way, I guess you could say he didn't have much of a choice! The Bishop decided to let the Cardinal in. And of course, he paid the price. He got lots of very bad publicity and it took a great physical, emotional, and mental toll on him. But he spoke specifically about one phone call he got from a Catholic of his diocese. It was hate-filled, peppered with many four-letter words. The bishop took it all calmly, not returning insult for insult. Several days later that same man called back, but this time to repent and apologize.

After enduring all that suffering, Bishop Jerry had been redeemed.

Redemption. Again, a definition might help. “*The action of saving or being saved from sin, error, or evil.*” Or: *The action of gaining or re-gaining possession of something in exchange for payment, or clearing a debt.* This would be the central theme of his talks. He said that the ultimate act of redemption took place on the cross. Christ's death repaired our relationship with the Father. It became the atonement for all the collective sins of mankind, which had their origins in the Garden of Eden. His emphasis, however, was on redemptions that take place in the lives of individuals, like you and me. And he began by giving a few examples from the gospels.

How about Martha and Mary? We first meet them at their Bethany house when they and their brother Lazarus are having Jesus over for dinner. You know the story. Martha was rebuked by Jesus for not having her priorities straight. She was too busy, and too worried about too many things. Well, understandably, Martha's feelings were hurt that day. And perhaps her relationship with the Lord suffered a bit as a result.

But, when Lazarus died, Martha, again taking care of business, ran out to meet Jesus, while Mary stayed at home, presumably overcome with grief. And it was then and there that we have that incredible encounter where Jesus says to Martha, "*I am the resurrection and the life.*" And so she was there to witness her brother Lazarus being raised from the dead, while Mary stayed at home. Martha had been redeemed.

Another example. Peter denied Jesus three times. He sees his sin and goes out weeping bitterly. But later Jesus asks him three times, Peter, do you love me? If so, feed my lambs, feed my sheep. Simon Peter would then strengthen his brothers as the first high priest of Christ's Church. He would be our first pope. Peter had been redeemed.

The Bishop then went on to tell a personal story of redemption in his own life. He came from a very large Polish family up in the Saginaw Diocese. They were farmers. One day, at about age 10, young Jerry mouthed off to his mother. His father would have none of it. Father and son got into a shouting match that soon got out of control. They ended up wrestling with each other and eventually Jerry broke loose and ran outside to play with his brothers, while dad stayed inside and proceeded to have a heart attack. He was in the hospital for 10 days. And Jerry did not go to visit him. He was too angry, he was too afraid, he was too humiliated. His siblings really came down hard on him and his guilt was great and it plagued him for many years.

The young lad grew up and was eventually ordained to the priesthood and, by Divine Providence, the Lord allowed Fr. Jerry to be with his dad for the last 10 days of his life. Father and son reconciled, and I'm sure Fr. Jerry gave him the anointing, the last rites, with the Apostolic Pardon. Jesus, in his great mercy, redeemed his young priest.

After that talk we were all invited to have a session at our tables and talk about redemptions in our own lives. Our bishop, Earl, who sat to my left, went first. He told his story and, yes, it was about him and his dad.

I was the next person to tell my story. Back in the early 70s, my dad and I were at each other's throats. I don't know why. I think it might have been *guilt by association*. I thought I was a pretty good kid, but I was young and maybe my hair was a little bit long. I don't know. But I think my dad thought I was some kinda hippie and it got pretty rough there for a while. Then one day, in early October, 51 years ago this month, I ended up in the hospital diagnosed with a tumor. My dad came to visit me only a few moments after the doctor gave me the bad news. So when I told him, he couldn't cry because, well, he's Eastern European. But his face did turn the ugliest shade of red I have ever seen in my life. And I think I knew at that moment that my dad loved me, but that he just couldn't show it. It wasn't in the Slovak genes.

So began a redemption that would take another five years before it was completed. That was the day we both were able to say, out loud, "I love you dad." "I love you son". We had both finally been redeemed.

As a result of Bishop Jerry's many stories, I think we all came away with a better understanding of how God operates. God is love. Jesus is love. And he manifests that love in so many ways throughout our lives. We can be the worst sinners, the biggest screw-ups, throughout our lives, and yet Jesus wants to redeem us. And he will do whatever he can to accomplish his goal.

I'd like to close with one final story. It actually came in the form of serious advice to his priestly brothers. He said that every priest should have a *Spiritual Director*. Someone he can talk to and discuss serious issues that lurk in the very depths of his soul. First, the *directee* should have the

wisdom, and the courage, and the humility, to share with the *director*, what's going on, deep inside. And every Spiritual Director should be bold, ask tough questions. He ought to start off the session with this question. "*Well, what don't you wanna talk about today?*"

But Bishop Jerry admitted that in his earlier days as a priest, he was once tempted to violate his vows. He had led a group of young people on a pilgrimage and he found himself well, "hitting it off" with a nice young lady. They began to text each other, and email, and, use your imagination. The young father was soon beginning to look for loopholes. How can I find a way to allow this relationship to continue? There's got to be a way. Now he did have the courage to address his dilemma with his spiritual director, but the answer was not what he wanted to hear. So, that was Bishop Jerry's advice to all of us, his brother Priests. If you value your vocation, be prepared to make some very difficult decisions. Recognizing at the same time that the devil wants you to fail. Be strong. Be courageous, be firm and presume that if you are wise, if you make the right decision, there is a redemption that awaits you.

Certainly good advice for Priest, but as is always the case, good advice for you as well.

~Fr. John

P.s. One final, final story. Actually my favorite. I told several times already to different groups here at the church.

Bishop Jerry recently attended the installation of another Bishop, Chad Zelinski, who is the new shepherd of The Diocese Of New Ulm, Minnesota. At his ordination he told this story. He was an army chaplain back in the early 1990s and was deployed to Iraq, to *Desert Storm*. He was asked by a special forces captain to say mass for his soldiers. As father Chad said mass in a large tent, they could hear bombs going off in the distance. No big deal. That was normal. But during the mass those bombs got closer and closer. Father Chad began to get unnerved and wondered what he should do. Finally, it seems as if the bombs were right outside the tent. He yelled at the captain, "Shouldn't we be doing something?" The captain replied calmly. "Press on, father". And so he did. Fr. Chad completed his mission. He finished the Mass. If a bomb had hit the tent, you would not have heard this story. Later I asked Bishop Jerry if there was any significance to that term, '*Press On*'. He didn't know. So when I got home from the convocation I did an extensive Google search and sure enuf, *Press On* was the motto of the *159th Aviation Battalion* and those words were on the patch they wear on their arm.

Good advice for all of us. There are bombs going on out there and they are getting closer. What better attitude could we have than to *Be Calm and Carry On*, To keep the faith. To fight the good fight. To finish the race. To Press On?

Thank you Bishop Jerry Vincke for saying yes to the priesthood. And then to accept the challenges of being chosen to be an unlucky bishop.