

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Knights of Columbus Chaplains' Mass

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Saint John Vianney

Minneapolis, MN

August 5, 2019

Recalling the Pilgrimage to Rome

Some of you may remember the K of C Chaplains' pilgrimage to Rome in 2009, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of St. John Vianney's death. The Order supplied some nice blue shirts for our pilgrimage, to keep us together and to help find any chaplain who happened to wander away. While we were standing near the departure gate at the airport someone asked what group we represented. "A soccer team," one of our number replied, as he struggled with his luggage. Well, we're not a soccer team, but we are a team, united in priestly fraternity, in the service of Knights of Columbus and its mission of charity, unity, and fraternity. Our "permanent coach" is, of course, the Venerable Fr. Michael J. McGivney; but our "visiting" coach is St. John Vianney, the patron of parish priests, and indeed the relic of his uncorrupted heart has visited many of our dioceses. What does St. John Vianney teach us in our role as Chaplains of the Order, both with regard to the spirit of our ministry and specific ways we might fulfill it?

What St. John Vianney Found

Let's begin with this: If you've been assigned by your bishop to a tough parish, then you appreciate what Father John Vianney found when he got to Ars. To be sure, the future saint knew that Ars wasn't a plum assignment; he wasn't expecting a beautiful church, a nice rectory, and a flourishing school. But what he did find might have discouraged anyone else. The place was in ruins. What's more, the physical deterioration of the parish buildings epitomized its dilapidated spiritual condition. Holy Mass hadn't been offered for quite a while & the villagers didn't seem to miss it. At best they were apathetic about their faith; at worst, they were hostile. For a

rural setting Ars was quite secular; many there lived as if there were no God.

Fr. John Vianney could have reacted with anger against his bishop, as if to say, “How could that scoundrel send me to such a God-forsaken place?” But instead, he went there willingly and cheerfully. Or, he could have said to himself, “Well, I’m here to manage the decline. I’ll come up with a plan to close this place and then move on to something better.” But John Vianney did just the opposite; he more than turned it around. Or, maybe this: “Ars isn’t a great parish but at least it’s far away from the Chancery. I’ll ingratiate myself and live comfortably here at ‘Our Lady of Minimal Obligation’ – Fortunately, the Cure of Ars did nothing of the kind. But what did he do? Three things come to mind.

Sheep Who Found a Shepherd

First, as a pastor of souls he looked upon the people neither with anger nor dismay. Like the Lord, the Cure of Ars had compassion for the people he was sent to serve. He recognized that they hadn’t become virtually godless solely on their own, but rather because they lacked a shepherd to lead them in truth and serve them in love. In the grace of the Holy Spirit, Fr. John Vianney resolved to be that shepherd, a zealous worker to help the Lord gather his harvest.

Second, he was an inspired and prophetic teacher of his people. Like Ezekiel, the Cure of Ars could also be compared to a watchman in a tower, for, before he spoke, he watched and prayed before the Blessed Sacrament. There he drew close to Christ the Teacher and absorbed the Gospel he was to preach. And so, with simplicity and love, he instructed his parishioners in truth and virtue. He shared with them the truth, goodness, and beauty of the Church’s teaching. He spoke to them, not in the abstract, but from the fullness of his heart.

Third, he was devoted to the ministry of reconciliation, to the Sacrament of Mercy. But to be a minister of the Good Shepherd’s forgiveness and compassion, the confessor, like the Lord himself, must grapple with Satan and the forces of evil. St. John Vianney had the courage and holiness to do just that. For that reason, many from near and far waited for hours to go to confession to him.

Lessons for Us

By now, it's pretty clear what St. John Vianney is saying to us as Chaplains, first with regard to the spirit of our ministry to the Order and then with respect to three specific ways we might fulfill that ministry.

As regards the spirit of our ministry to the Order: Like John Vianney, we often encounter headwinds in our role as chaplain: fraternal disputes, moribund councils, council chaplains missing in action; resistance to initiatives like Faith in Action...the list goes on.... And this, as we struggle to do our day job, our principal pastoral assignment. When the challenges are steep, we may feel upset or overwhelmed; or, we may conclude that there's not much to do except help manage decline; or, we may decide that being chaplain isn't a bad ride, so we might as well enjoy it! Not what the Cure of Ars would do and not what Fr. McGivney would do! Like both of those holy priests, we need to approach our chaplaincy cheerfully, with deep trust in the Holy Spirit who unites us to Christ and to one another. And in the power of the Holy Spirit, we need to do the same three things that were characteristic of St. John Vianney's ministry:

First we should see ourselves, not so much as officers in our jurisdictions, but rather as shepherds, as pastors, who love and care for our brother knights, shepherds whose pastoral charity supports that life of charity which each knight of Columbus is expected to lead. As shepherds, our principal concern is the mission of the Knights of Columbus to help our fellow knights and their families and loved ones grow in faith and holiness. Whether we are encouraging Faith in Action or helping to settle a dispute or playing an important role in growing membership, we should bring to our ministry the heart of a shepherd, the heart of Christ. As St. John Vianney himself said, "The priesthood is the love of the Heart of Christ."

Second, in our role as chaplain, we are called upon to preach and to speak at meetings. It is easy for us to keep on our computers a "K of C" file of sermons and talks but as we all know, something more than that is required of us. Like St. John Vianney, we are to watch and pray in the presence of the Eucharistic Lord. There we gain the wisdom and love needed to preach well and wisely and to speak in ways that will build up the Order and the spiritual lives of our brothers. Like the Cure of Ars, we too must speak from the fullness of our heart.

Third, we are to extend our ministry of reconciliation by being ministers and sources of unity in our respective jurisdictions. And by that I do not mean to say that we are mere arbitrators or facilitators, but rather we have the wisdom and courage to help our fellow knights overcome the inevitable resistance of Satan and forces of evil against the mission of the Order. This requires us to deal with those same evil forces in our own lives so that we can indeed be ministers of reconciliation in our parishes and in the Order. This includes ensuring that fellow knights avail themselves of the Sacrament of Mercy!

Conclusion

Over the years, I've gotten to know many state and council chaplains and I regard it as a privilege to serve you and to serve the Order as chaplain. Together with our Supreme Knight, I thank you for your service to the K of C. Please know that you are in my prayers every day and do remember me in yours. United in pastoral love, may we serve the Order in the spirit and after the example of St. John Vianney and the Venerable Father Michael J. McGivney, and may God bless us and keep us always in his love! Vivat Jesus!