

Coming home through great silence

By Laura D. Johnston

Father Patrick Peach left St. John's Parish, Westminster, Maryland, for monastic life in Lake Elmo, Minnesota, during the cold waning days of December 2008. He returned to St. John's this past Sunday, on a sun-drenched June morning — now, Father Peter of Jesus, wearing the brown tunic of a Hermit of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel.

Safe to say, it was a pretty exceptional and unconventional homecoming. The 35-year old former St. John's associate pastor had spent the last six years in communal solitude and prayerful silence. He returned to St. John's to celebrate the ordination of his former high school classmate and friend, Father James Boric—and to deliver the homily at Father Boric's first Mass.

As Father Peter stepped forward to speak, the congregation had to wonder: What great wisdom and grace would follow from a man who spent the last six years cloistered from the world in constant prayer and reflection?

Likely, everyone in the pews had felt a similar pull to get away from it all; to just have time apart to think and to reflect—maybe, head off to Montana ... or some out-of-the-way fishing hole or just anywhere, as long as you could find relief from your worries and problems. But most of us, tasked with the gravitational responsibilities of life, never budge; we simply turn the channel.

There's a poignant scene in the movie, "Forrest Gump," where the hero comes to the end of a long, cross-country run. Forrest ran for three years, two months, 14 days, and 16 hours trying to put the past behind him. And yet, at the end of his journey—in that famous scene in the desert — Forrest concluded, "I'm pretty tired. I think I'll go home now." The crowd who had followed him into the middle of nowhere was incredulous: "Now what are we supposed to do?"

On Sunday, Father Peter of Jesus answered that question. In fact, he spoke with the soulful gravitas of a man who had not turned from the world, but rather turned toward a supernatural union with Christ through prayerful silence. With great clarity, Father Peter implored the congregation to embrace the silence from which he had come; to reach into the "depths of your heart and the silence of your souls."

To pray.

Father Peter had returned, both as Carmelite Hermit — crying out with a spiritual grace forged in the wilderness of Lake Elmo — and pastoral shepherd, offering hope and a north arrow away from the noisy, perplexing chaos which is the world. "Pray for faith," he said. Pray for your mind to open broadly enough to contemplate the "mysteries of the priesthood and the Eucharist."

Father Peter of Jesus quoted St. John Mary Vianney, Curé of Ars — the patron saint of priests — to explain the dignity and mystery of the priesthood: “The priest will not understand the greatness of his office till he is in Heaven. If he understood it on earth, he would die, not of fear, but of love.”

In reflecting on the mysteries of the Eucharist, Father Peter reminded us that the Eucharist is no metaphor; that Christ wants us to be united to him. “There is no other way to become whole,” he said, “to grow in virtue ... it is our life. The Eucharist is not metaphor; it is not symbolism ... it is real. It is the truth of our faith. It makes us what we are.”

Heavenly food, Father Peter said, is unlike any other food ... it transforms us. It takes what we are and makes us into itself.” “Real and true life” only comes from this gift, which “gives Divine life; heavenly life, changing us like nothing else.”

Father Peter of Jesus attended daily mass as a child, and recognized at the age of seven how the Eucharist had changed him. “Without it,” he said, “he felt empty; that there was less life in his soul.”

“Sometimes, we may have in our mind to ... or we often make resolutions to change this or that aspect of our life. We wish certain situations would go away, that somehow our life could be different. But these aren’t the answers. The answer is in our Lord ... the understanding that Christ is present and gives himself to us in the Eucharist. That’s what changes things in this world.”

On Aug. 6, Father Peter of Jesus will make his solemn profession of vows; the final milestone in his Carmelite formation, whereupon he begins, in his words, “a life fully immersed in the prayer and work of our monastery.” Outside the hermitage, his prayer and challenge for us remain: To live in the silence from which he had come; a place from which we will seek our home in heaven.

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