

Guest column: Message of Cardinal O'Connor resonates

For many years I had the opportunity to serve closely with my Archbishop, Cardinal John O'Connor of New York, in my opinion one of the greatest Church leaders of our era.

Having listened to his homilies, especially those at priests' ordinations, it is still my hope that one day they will be gathered and published. The themes and messages of the excerpt that follows, of his homily delivered at the Mass of Ordination of 18 men to the priesthood for the Archdiocese of New York on May 12, 1990, are relevant still today, not only for those who have been ordained priests, but also for the people we are blessed to serve.

I look at you as my 18 sons. I look at you as 18 bridegrooms whom I am about to give in marriage to your bride, the Church. You have spent many years in preparation. You have prayed, you have prepared yourselves as well as any bridegroom could to enter into your marriage. Now let us speak of this bride whom you take this day.

She's younger than springtime, but she counts her years in centuries. She's a startlingly beautiful bride, but she is deformed, disfigured with the wounds, with the scars of Christ Himself. She is weary with the centuries, ugly to those who do not know her as you know her.

She will be to you a gentle, patient and loving bride but she can be to you stubborn, unyielding even harsh. She will be faithful to you and yet at times, she will seem to turn away from you, even to betray you. She will be a consoling and a comforting bride, but she will be an extraordinarily demanding bride. She will lay down her life for you, but she will demand your life in return.

For this bride that you marry today is not the Church triumphant. This is the Church of this world, the Church of God's people. God's people who are strong and holy, God's people who are weak and sinful. God's people who are good and generous. God's people who are selfish and demanding. God's people who will love you beyond

any love you ever imagined, but God's people who, at times, will seem to you to hate you and to be resentful of you and to be spiteful toward you. God's people, your bride, will give you indescribable pleasure and immense pain, unutterable joy and profound sorrow. These are God's people, not yet a fully risen people, not yet a perfect people. And these are the people that you take unto your own as their bridegroom, as their priest.

As your bishop, I give you but one mandate: love our Church, love God's people. Love them for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. Love them until death, after which both you and they will be transfigured in glory.

You will share intimacies with your people, but the intimacies will be your administering to them the Holy Sacraments of the Divine Bridegroom. You will heal, you will reconcile, you will pour out love upon them. You will baptize their children, you will gently anoint the pained, the suffering, the dying. You will bury the dead, and above all you will enter into that most intimate of intimacies with your bride, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. In the Mass you will lay down your life as Christ laid down His. Your body will be broken, as His body was broken. Your blood will be poured out as His blood was poured out. "Greater love than this no one has," and truly you will lay down your life for your bride, the Church, God's people. And never, never will you find God's people wanting in generosity, wanting in sacrifice, refusing to lay down their lives for you.

Love God's people, be kind to them and gentle. Urge them to be what God wants them to be but forgive them when they fail to become what God wants them to become, as they, your bride, will forgive you for your sins, for your weaknesses. And if you love your bride, if you lay down your life for your bride each day, then you will find that your love will grow deeper and stronger as the years go on, just as we are told at the marriage feast at Cana, the bridegroom has saved the best wine until last. In the silver and the golden years of your priesthood, despite the sufferings you may have endured, the temptations you may have experienced, the pressures, the conflicts, the loneliness, the solitude, despite the fact that there will be days that you will ask, "Is this really what God wants of me?"- despite all of that, you will find that indeed, your love of God's people and your priesthood will be richer, sweeter than even on this day of ordination.

My final word to you my brother priests: preach the truth always. God's people deserve nothing less. There are ears itching for new teachings, as St. Paul tells us, but we have the teachings of Christ, of the gospel, of our Holy Father, of the bishops. Preach and teach courageously. Serve God's people truly as their servants, never as their masters. Above all, love the Church which today you have taken as your bride.