

Holy Week 2008

The Catholic Review

Chrism Mass message is food for the soul.

The last several years, as each very special Chrism Mass approaches, I have found food for the soul in a 2002 Chrism Mass homily offered by Baltimore's proud native son Bishop Victor Galeone of St. Augustine. I thought I should share it with you and am grateful to my good friend, the Bishop of St. Augustine, for permission to do so:

"I'd like you to come back with me to the spring of 1974 - back to the town of Andahuaylas, high in the Andes Mountains. At the time, I was serving as a missionary in Peru. This particular Sunday afternoon, I was visiting our sick parishioners in the town hospital. In the men's ward, I came across Oswaldo - a Lutheran minister who was visiting from Lima. He had taken ill a few days before. At this point, I'd like to quote directly from a journal that I sometimes keep:

"On the night table next to Oswaldo's bed was a pocket-size New Testament. 'May I?' I asked, as I picked it up. Thumbing through the small volume, I noticed that he had underlined some pertinent verses, but only a very few. It was then that I saw it. Verse 12 of Matthew 19 was very deliberately underlined: '... and there are eunuchs who have made themselves so for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let the one who can accept this teaching, do so.'

"Setting the small volume down, I inquire, 'Oswaldo, may I ask how old you are?' - 'Twenty-four,' he replies. - 'Are you married?' - 'No, I'm not.' - I start to smile, knowingly - 'Why are you smiling?' he asks me. - 'I think that I've just discovered a beautiful secret.' - Now he's the one that smiles, and his innocent, manly eyes look away, as he says: 'Yes, Victor, for as long as the Lord gives me the grace to do so. And I pray that it will be to my dying breath.'"

In my journal, I concluded with this observation: "Lord, what a sad contrast! So many of my brother priests becoming bitter over this 'burden, forced on them by an outdated, medieval Church' - and here we have a separated brother, unassumingly

and joyfully accepting this beautiful gift from your hands.'

My brothers in the Lord, in these days when fresh allegations of clergy misconduct are surfacing almost daily, when the media seems bent on painting the priesthood in the worst possible light, when we priests find ourselves under a dark cloud of suspicion, it is essential that we never lose sight of the One we are serving and why we are serving him.

Most of us can relate to the idealism of young Oswaldo, because years ago, the Lord looked out and fixed his eyes on us, too. Whether we were still in our youth, or middle age, or close to our senior years, Jesus looked at each one of us here and said: "My son, give me your heart!"

In those heady days of our first calling, we replied with self-assured confidence: "Lord, my heart is yours. You alone are worthy of all my love.

If our sacrifice entailed one generous, outpouring of blood as in the case of the early martyrs, most of us would rise to the challenge. Instead, the Lord is asking us to endure a dry martyrdom: To repeat with him, day after day, especially in troubling moments of temptation: "Lord, this is my body, now given for you! This is my life, poured out for all..."

Puzzled, the skeptic asks: "Why this lifelong fast from one of nature's noblest drives? Why such a waste? And for what purpose?"

I quote the answer that the French philosopher Jean Guitton gave years ago: "In an age so steeped in sex and pleasure-seeking materialism, should there not be somewhere on this planet those who joyously and generously offer their bodies as concrete proof of their conviction of the supremacy of the spiritual over the material, and as a sign of their love for Him who did not spare even His own Son for love of us?"

Amused, the skeptic continues: "But doesn't your vow debase the elevated state of marriage?"

Far from demeaning marriage, the Church considers the love embrace between husband and wife as God's most precious gift to us on the natural level. So precious,

indeed, that she insists that her priests, brothers and sisters offer it to God as the finest natural gift that we possess. After all, isn't God worthy of the very best?

"Ah," retorts the skeptic, "Fine sounding words to conceal what, at root, is an aberration!"

David Hartman, a minister of the Church of the Nazarene, and himself married, made this comment some 10 years ago: "Of course celibacy is an aberration - an aberration because of the normal human drive to mate and procreate. It is, in its own way, as much of an aberration as a soldier throwing himself on a grenade to save the life of his buddies, or God dying on a cross."

"In other words," Hartman continues, "celibates who are celibate for the sake of the Kingdom are engaged in a lifelong act of self-denial. One might even say that those who are celibate for the sake of their priestly vocation are heroic; for is there not something heroic in one who surrenders his life in such an extraordinary way for such invisible, transcendent ends?"

"But what of all the failures?" - objects the skeptic - "Aren't they a counter-witness?"

Sad to say, they are. They only prove what St. Paul said to the Ephesians: "Our struggle is not with flesh and blood, but with the powers of darkness and with the spiritual forces of evil." (Eph. 6:12). Yes, we're engaged in real warfare! And real warfare produces real casualties. But let's take heart in King David and Simon Peter. Repentant, they returned to serve the Lord as wounded healers - more committed than ever.

This year, in his Letter to Priests, Our Holy Father expressed his profound sorrow over the betrayal of the grace of Ordination by some of our brothers. Then he goes on to say, and I quote: "All of us - conscious of our human weakness, but trusting in the healing power of God's grace -are called to embrace the mystery of the Cross and to commit ourselves more fully to the search for holiness."

Brothers, in a few moments we'll all be standing to renew our commitment to the Lord as we repeat the vow we made years ago. As we do so, let's "commit ourselves

more fully to the search for holiness," that John Paul speaks of.