

# Mass for Knights of Columbus State Chaplains

## Introduction

Poor old Moses. Not only did he have to confront Pharaoh and led his people out of Egypt, he was stuck in the desert with them for forty years and had to listen endlessly to their complaints. Today's first reading could be summed up in a few words: "The food is bad."

Never mind that the food they were complaining about was heaven-sent. Never mind that it was sent in answer to their previous complaints. The fact is, the food which they had as slaves in Egypt was better. You can almost sense the people drooling as they reminisce about the fish, the cucumbers, the melons they enjoyed free of charge in Egypt. Now, marooned the desert, they're looking for a Ruth's Chris steak house. By the end of the reading Moses is at wit's end. He's done everything and more for this people and they're still not satisfied. He's ready to cash in his chips.

## Moses and Us

And so a word to my dear brother priests and fellow chaplains: We love our priesthood and we love our people but sometimes, we have to admit, we find ourselves at wit's end, just like Moses. We've all had the experience of laboring over a homily: you prayed over it, you wrote it out, you rehearsed it, & delivered it with all you got, - only to have someone complain about it ... That's happened to me more than once. As a young priest I worked really hard on a homily for Christ the King. I based it on the readings and on the special preface for that feast and rooted it in real life examples from history. As I was greeting people after Mass, a man walked up to me and said, "That's the worst homily I ever heard in my life." It shouldn't have thrown me for a loop but it did.

Let's face it, we might pray more, preach better, improve the quality of music, reach out to the sick, hire the best DRE and youth minister available, only to see Mass attendance continue to go down, only to have people tell us, 'We don't get anything out of Mass', or 'We don't see the need to come every Sunday, we're so busy.' To put matters another way, they don't really appreciate what we're offering, namely, the

Bread of Life and the Cup of Eternal Salvation. They feel they are being fed better “in Egypt” – where they are held captive by a godless secularity. I don’t know about you but when I see empty pews on Sunday there’s a kind of hole in my heart. When parishioners are missing in action, a part of me is also missing. Sometimes we may find ourselves remonstrating with God and with ourselves.

### **People Are Hungry**

That is why I am glad that the rather discouraging reading from the Book of Numbers is twinned with the delightful reading from the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus multiplied the loaves and the fish so as to feed the 5,000 in the desert. Here Jesus gives us good reasons to be encouraged, and if you don’t mind, I’d like to share just a few of them.

The first reason to be encouraged is that people are hungry. That’s what causes people to open up restaurants every day. But as pastors, we know people in their ennui have a deeper hunger: the only thing that satisfies the human spirit is the infinite love God has for us. Not only our people, sometimes we try to satisfy that hunger with unsatisfying food: money, power, possessions, illicit pleasures ... we can fill in the blanks. And while people may think they are in the center of things, in fact some many people live their lives in that desolate place devoid of God. So let’s take heart, the market is vast.

A second reason to take encouragement from the Gospel is that Jesus made do with just a little. Sometime we think that we are successful to the degree that we are elaborate. Five loaves and two fish—all that the disciples could muster—was enough for Jesus. To be sure the liturgy should be celebrated fittingly but the accoutrements should not overshadow the miracle of his presence. Sometimes it’s during the simplest Mass that the overpowering truth and beauty of the Eucharist shines forth most clearly.

A third reason for encouragement is that, while we confect the sacrificial banquet, we set before ourselves and the people we serve a food more wondrous than that which Jesus served the 5,000. Not everyone appreciates the gift and mystery of the Eucharist but we who preside at liturgy can signal whether or not we are all lost in wonder over the mystery of faith that we are privileged to celebrate. If we take this

mystery for granted, many others will do so as well.

And let me add one further thought. As we labor in the vineyard, how prone we are to impatience. Fidelity to priestly ministry means resisting the temptation to insist on finding great and immediate success. It means not falling into the trap of believing that new and refined methods will attract large numbers of those who have distanced themselves from Christ and the Church, who no longer appear to have an appetite for the heavenly mysteries. Our zeal must be tempered by humility and our humility by zeal.

### **St. John Neumann**

How blessed we are to celebrate this Mass at the shrine honoring St. John Neumann. He was ordained a bishop at St. Alphonsus Parish in Baltimore only steps from the Basilica of the Assumption and he was a guest in the residence of the Archbishop, where I now live. Like George Washington, he really got around; he was a true missionary. Along the way he encountered many obstacles and much resistance – including his years as Bishop of Philadelphia. He writes of how he would be better suited for a less sophisticated place, perhaps a diocese where there are farms and coal mines. Yet the work that St. John Neumann accomplished was prodigious and lasting.

I know the secret of his success. It's in the little chapel in my residence above the altar. It is a gilt-wood sunburst with the image of the Trinity and a tabor stand on which now the tabernacle rests. The sunburst & tabor stand were used St. John Neumann and Archbp. Francis Kenrick to promote the forty hours devotion in the still young Church in the United States. St. John Neumann succeeded in his ministry because he was among the multitudes whom the Lord fed not with five loaves and two fish but rather with his very self.

As we look to a new fraternal year and our ministry as Chaplains of our Order, perhaps we could set one hugely important overarching goal for ourselves & it's this: to labor with the humility and zeal of a St. John Neumann or a Venerable Father Michael McGivney to see to it that as many Knights and the families as possible never miss Mass on Sunday. As simple as that: each Knight and his family in Church on Sunday, *every* Sunday. How simple yet how powerful!

Vivat Jesus!