

Opening Mass, St. Mary's Seminary

I. Introduction

We open this new formation year here at St. Mary's Seminary by celebrating together the Memorial of St. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine. St. Monica is remembered for the many tears she shed. Perhaps one goal not only for this new formation year but indeed for our lives - is not make St. Monica cry again - on our account! So let us turn to St. Monica for insight into the year ahead as well as for the company of her prayers in the celebration of this Eucharistic liturgy.

II. Finding Good Women

The reading from the Book of Sirach may not get us off on the right foot. It's all about a husband finding a good wife. I presume none of you are here for that particular purpose! But as priests and seminarians, we need to have good women in our lives. St. Monica tells us why.

St. Monica was a good and faithful wife to her husband, Patricius. By all accounts, was not an easy man to get along with. Two things to know about him: he was not a Christian when Monica married him; and he had a pretty bad temper. Monica strategically turned things around, not only by her prayers and her tears, but also by winning over her mother-in-law to the Faith. By and by, Patricius settled down and became a Christian.

All of us know about her role in the conversion of her son, Augustine. Without Monica's strong and determined faith, without her prayers and her suffering, it is entirely possible we would never have known Augustine of Hippo. Monica was not only a good wife but also a good mother who loved her family so much that she ardently desired her husband and sons to be converted to Christ, to live as his disciples in the Church, and to have the joy of everlasting life.

Formation Is Not Solitary

What else does Monica teach us? For sure, she teaches us is how much we depend upon the prayers and sacrifices of others. Our discernment and formation for the priesthood relies in large measure on those who promise to pray for us and go out of their way to assist us. This includes family members, classmates and friends, parishioners, priests, women and men in consecrated life, and those wonderful souls who spend much of the day praying for priestly vocations.

If you take a minute to think about those who promised you their prayers as you enter or return to the seminary, you may find a disproportionate number of women. It might include your mothers, your aunts and cousins, religious sisters, and parishioners who attend daily Mass and those who volunteer. My hunch, of course, is completely unscientific and is based on my own experience. One thing we can count on it this: there are indeed many holy women who are praying for us just as Monica prayed for her son, Augustine.

We shouldn't take these prayers and sacrifices for granted. We learn from St. Monica that they count for something in God's eyes. And while our conversion story may not be as dramatic or intense as St. Augustine's, nonetheless, you and I must daily undergo conversion of mind and heart, especially if we hope to be those missionary disciples the Church truly needs. When we enter into prayer, we should remember those who praying for us. We should not only thank God for their kindness but also we should open our hearts to graces God wants to give us in response to their prayers and sacrifices. This is especially true if there is something in our lives that truly needs to change. Taking my cue from tonight's Gospel reading from St. Luke, I would say that in answer to Monica's persistent prayers and tears, Augustine was raised from the death of sin and was given the new life of grace. It is as if the Lord raised up Augustine and handed him back to Monica just as he did in the Gospel episode of the widow of Nain. Those who pray for us sense that we need

to undergo continual conversion. Let us make their prayers an investment, so to speak, in our formation.

Formation for Pastoral Zeal

Here's another lesson we learn from St. Monica: her intense zeal for the Faith. It was no mean feat to win over a cantankerous husband and two sons. The odds of her doing so, frankly, weren't very good. She could have just thrown up her hands or deluded herself into thinking that the husband and sons were good enough as they were. Monica did not elect to do that; no, she poured out her heart intensely.

By her example, Monica is teaching us something about priestly ministry. As you prepare to serve the Church as priests, I imagine you'd come across the phrase, "from maintenance to mission". This means we have to move away from merely maintaining our institutions and ministries but instead become disciples who are deeply in love with the Lord and who have a sense of urgency about the mission the Lord has given us and a sense of joy and trust rooted in our intimacy with him. We must become those priests who are willing to bring the Gospel to the margins - including the poorest as well as those who are the most resistant. And following Monica's example, we will not approach the ministry in a merely clinical or professional way, in a way that is detached and cool, heedless of where those we serve are headed. On the contrary, it must be written all of over us that we must care deeply about the well-being and salvation of those whose lives we will touch by our priestly ministry.

Conclusion

As we enter more deeply into this Eucharistic liturgy, aided by the prayers of St. Monica, may we draw strength and unity from our living contact with Christ and invite him during the year ahead to be our principal formator. so that we become an answer to the prayers of many, that is to say, the priests whom the Church needs and wants.

May God bless you in the year ahead and keep you always in his love.