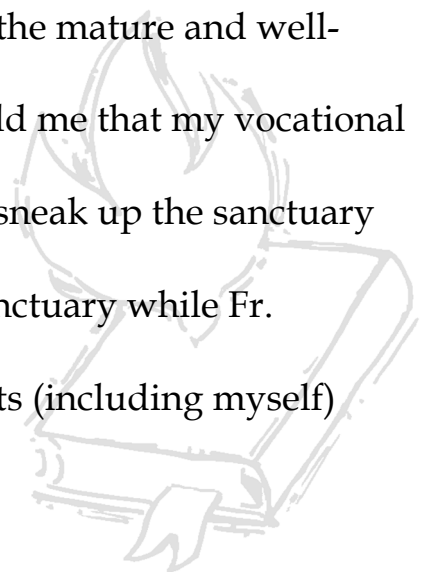


Homily
5th Sunday OT - B
Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
February 06-07, 2021

Jb 7: 1-4, 6-7
Ps 147: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6
1 Cor 9: 16-19, 22-23
Mk : 29-39

In the course of my RCIA classes this semester, one of the faithful who has been getting active at the parish asked me about the way by which I was called to the priesthood. The person who asked told me that he was very involved with the adult conversion program at his parish (the Church calls this “The RCIA Process”) and has lately been invested in hearing about this vocational calling from those in the area where he lives.

As I began to reflect on my own vocation story, I took myself back to the early 1970s at St. Dominic’s Parish in Bolingbrook, Illinois. I was a precocious young lad at that time (nothing like the mature and well-raised grown-up of today...) and my parents told me that my vocational calling began at the age of four, when I used to sneak up the sanctuary steps during Mass and sat on the edge of the sanctuary while Fr. Gregory was celebrating Mass. Now most priests (including myself)



might balk at such a gesture, but Fr. Gregory welcomed it and often would invite me to sit next to him on one of the priest's chairs next to him during Mass. It was because of that gesture on his part that I became hooked to God on my part.

As I grew a little older (now I was six), I wanted to say Mass just like the priest did. Fr. Gregory did not want to discourage me because he was always seeking vocations, so every so often, he would give me an old bag of hosts to take home, so that I could play Mass with my family. I really didn't know how to celebrate Mass but I really loved the communion part, so I pretty much skipped the readings and went straight for the communion. And when communion time came, my brother Ben would sneak into the room, grab a couple hosts, and leave the room just as quickly. Even at six years old, I was driving people crazy about leaving Mass early...

When I was ten, I moved to a small town about 60 miles southeast of Chicago called "Sandwich, Illinois," with a population of about 5,400 people (in 30 years, the town's population has grown almost 100 people and has become a booming metropolis). In Sandwich, I attended Mass at

St. Paul's Church downtown, about three blocks away from a diner made from the engine of a train car. At this parish, I met another priest named Fr. Tom Kane who took one look at me and assigned me to serve as lector at the 7:30 Sunday morning Mass each week. In addition to my duties as lector, Fr. Kane hired me for small jobs at the parish (painting, mowing the lawn and such) in order that I could earn enough money to attend high school seminary. With his help, I was able to attend a boarding school high school seminary at a cost of \$1300 a year, half of which was paid by the pastor, the rest by my father and my earnings on the job. It was from my high school seminary experience that I realized that this type of lifestyle was the calling that God called me to live, a lifestyle that brings me this week to this fine cruise ship and all of you wonderful folk.

As I reflected on today's homily I thought to myself that Fr. Gregory and Fr. Kane probably will not be recognized for any major theological advancements in the world, nor will you probably ever hear of these two men again in your lives, but in my mind it was the little moments that I shared with each respective priest that made all the difference to

me and made my road to the priesthood a special one. I think to myself that if I could give a chance to other the same opportunity to understand the joys of ordained ministry that priests like Fr. Gregory and Fr. Kane gave to me, then maybe that is the role that I am supposed to play in the world. Maybe that is the role all of us play.

In relation to today's gospel, we are all shepherds and we all are sheep. We all serve in the baptized faith (or the "common priesthood"), commissioned to live as shepherds the ways of the faith to the sheep of the next generation through our teachings and through our example of living the faith. When we spend time with the kids, when we teach them and each other the ways of God through our thoughts, words, and actions, then others can see the example of Christ and the vocation of faith passes on.

I also see us playing the role of sheep as well. We are all sheep, seeking our shepherd, the Lamb of God who takes away our sins. We look at a gospel today of a Christ who healed a mother-in-law and the people who were possessed by demons. We read of a Savior who cared for those who were weak and in need of a shepherd. And as soon as we

realize that we are just as much in need of this shepherd as the people who sought him in our readings, then we, too, have an opportunity to be welcomed into the fold and to be treated with love, like the love of a parent to a child.

I sense, however, that people in our society might unfairly disparage the life of the priest or the religious. In our first reading today, Job certainly lamented the life that God had set before him. I thought to myself how many saints and sinners have endured the sufferings of Job in their respective ministries, feeling as if their good deeds have gone unnoticed.

I also sense that, like today's gospel, the same people who might disparage the priesthood might seek out priests if a member of their family is ill, if they need to be anointed, if they are suffering or celebrating and need to services of a priest to guide them through their good times and bad. It seems to me, to quote another section of Mark's gospel, that the faithful in our community are sheep in need of a shepherd to guide them in the right direction.

In the role of the shepherd, the ambassador for God in the area that I have served, I have experienced my own joys and struggles in the priesthood. Over the last year in my service as a priest, I have traveled from one end of the continental United States to the other, celebrating funeral and wedding Masses for members of our community who were in need of a priest. I have ruined the transmission of several cars during the years as a priest, reaching all seven counties of the diocese in which I live. In the last few years, I have been blessed to travel to different parts of the world to celebrate Masses in honor of family members who live in those countries. I have had the opportunity to serve as a missionary in Mexico and Bolivia with some of the poorest (and probably holiest) members of the faith.

In my last almost twenty-five years as a priest, I have presided at more than 300 weddings, well over 300 funerals, at a time was baptizing at least a couple dozen kids a month and have celebrated Masses in Spanish at most Spanish-speaking parishes in the diocese. I have been involved with helping over 200 adults convert to Roman Catholicism to

a point where I have been able to read the *Catechism* at least a couple times through.

And through all my trials and tribulations that go along with the ministry, especially in light of the media's perception of the priesthood, I would never wish to choose another vocation in this world for myself. For it is through this ministry that we become the window of Christ, that we *see* the image of Christ through the people to whom we minister.

Let us never take our relationship with the Lamb of God for granted. Let us pray for the children and adults of the world who set the example for us. And let us become the trendsetters of the next generation by becoming the examples of faith to the people that we meet. Let us continue to serve as both pastors who lead and sheep who are vulnerable and humble in whatever vocation we are called to live for the sake of those we love and serve. This is our prayer.