

Homily

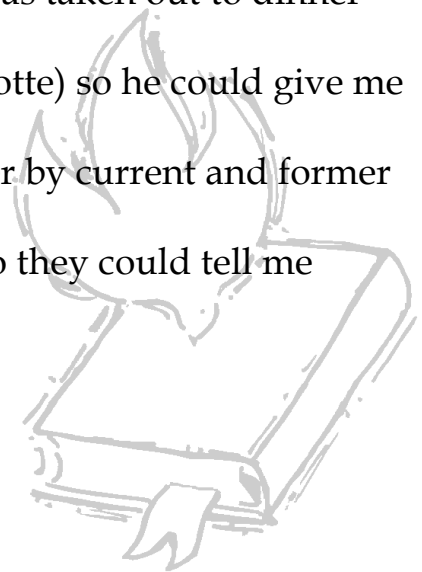
25th Sunday OT – A

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
September 23-24, 2023

Is 55: 6-9
Ps 145: 2-3, 8-9, 17-18
Phil 1: 20-24, 27
Mt 20: 1-16a

After I had finished my forced sabbatical in 2019, I was asked to come out to serve three parishes that made up the “Border Town” communities – St. Anne’s Church in St. Anne, IL, St. Patrick’s Church in Momence, IL and Sacred Heart Church in Hopkins Park. In this part of the diocese, for about thirty-five years, what happened in these churches and the condition of these buildings were so bad that they should have been condemned.

Two weeks before I arrived at Sacred Heart Church in Hopkins Park, I found out that two of the buildings were condemned and torn down... and I was not even told about the buildings! I was taken out to dinner by of the major donors at St. Patrick’s (Jim LaMotte) so he could give me the lay of the land. I also was taken out to dinner by current and former secretaries Mary Tolmer and Joanne Herman, so they could tell me



about the challenges I would face at the parishes I would serve.

The situation was bleak with St. Patrick's Academy being demolished. The bills for the academy were increasing the parish's debt, reaching over \$350,000. Four houses on the campuses were littered with animal "things" that cannot be mentioned in public; in one case, I could not lift my foot off the floor of the one the buildings, the shoe stuck on the floor with substances not fit to discuss. Most of the properties under my care were on the brink of being condemned and destroyed... and these were the buildings I inherited!!!

What were we supposed to do? I have this strong belief that the way that things get done is not necessarily by traditional fundraising. You can get a couple dollars that way and you can use conventional help to upgrade some areas that need to be addressed. In my experience, the best way actually of upgrading facilities and of upgrading faith is to build relationships – to “do unto others” and to “love thy neighbor,” to tell you sincerely that I love you in God's name. I want to take care of you. I am gonna give everything I have to you. That's what I've done for each of the parishes I serve. The way I do things is unconventional and

it often is castigated, marginalized and often shut off.

In my twenty-seven years as a priest, I have come to realize how some people live their lives, both the good and the bad. Those who love their Church in the right way try to do what is necessary to allow it to grow. Those who are unwelcoming and unkind are well on their way to losing the Church that they have. I have encountered both types of people in my priesthood, especially in the manner I am able to get a parish to grow.

That all said, I honestly believe that a priest who lovingly serves parishioners is like a parent who tries to take care of the kids – even if the kids do not appreciate what the parent is doing, a spiritual father still cares for these communities, nevertheless. Kids sometimes do not see the importance of what their fathers do or their mothers are doing until the kids get older and have kids of their own; maybe the kids will never recognize their parents' sacrifice at all.

As I have now served these communities for more than four years, realizing what needed to be done, I started building relationships with our “potato chip guys,” with former parishioners and with people from

the outside who are willing to help. As all these good souls realize that we are trying to preserve a faith life that has weaved itself in this city for over a hundred fifty years, when you tell people you truly love them and sincerely mean it... I may come into this area a foreigner and outsider, but so many of you have accepted me and what I am trying to offer with the talents that God has given me and then great things can be accomplished when we work together as members of the Body of Christ.

I very much realize that as an outsider, what I am doing might cause people to wonder if I am being sincere or not; time needs to pass for good souls to understand this outsider's intentions. When I came into this parish, I brought another outsider named Wally Martin to help renovate these four buildings under my care in the same way he did at the last parish I served. I brought in a potato chip guy, another outsider who blessed us with hundreds of cases of indigestible junk food, 5,000 pounds of Carl Buddig salami and a roofer who was able to complete a \$60,000 roof renovation for around \$25,000 and a plumber who, with Joe Kraus, completed a \$75,000 bathroom gym project for under \$10,000. I

started celebrating online Masses during COVID and those parishioners who are homebound started welcoming this outsider into their lives and asked me to continue celebrating these online Masses; these homebound parishioners have donated tens of thousands of dollars to our parish so that we can persevere. I look at how longtime parishioners Jim LaMotte, Joanne Herman and Mary Tomer helped guide me to understand the needs of this community and doing the best I could to serve all of you. I learned how they, like so many in this community, very love this church.

I have learned the same about the St. Anne Community as well. I have learned that at St. Anne's, good souls like Jim Sparenberg, David O'Connell, Cookie Schrader, Sue Bonvallet and so many others get invested in the life of the parish because they love their Church... and they love you!!!

That said, it is not just good enough to take care of the property under our care. Our salvation has to start with our accepting and living the faith; our salvation has to start with encountering the presence of God within our hearts and souls and seeing that presence of God within

the hearts and souls of our neighbor. Our salvation has to start with offering this welcome and offering this hospitality, no matter who the other person is.

We also know that this method of offering welcome and hospitality is never easy – scriptures illustrate how communities rejected the prophets and the saints... and paid a price because they did not wish to follow God's direction. Look what happens when we *do* follow this direction. Look what has happened at St. Patrick's Church in Momence. When I arrived in Momence on a permanent basis, Jim LaMotte, Mary Tolmer, Joanne Hermann and so many demanded that I allow this ministry to grow beyond those that were sitting in the pews and start ministering to everyone else, including 70% of our workforce in this area that were (and are) Black and Hispanic.

I was told that many small-time farmers had sold their businesses to the larger corporations like Van Drunen Farms, Silva Farms and even Momence Packing (some of whose pork products are made into Johnsonville brats). I was told that so many good people were moving into the area but no one welcomed them into a spiritual home. Th

members of Alcoholics Anonymous had an ever-growing base but had no place to hold their meetings. Because we have offered this hospitality and welcome, now many of these lost souls are coming to us, seeking a light to pull them from the darkness of life, especially in today's age when darkness seems to have covered most of what we do.

As a result, I went to visit Ana and Eileen Rivas at the *Camino y Esperanza Retreat House*, who were rejected by many churches in the area but were welcomed by the good souls at St. Patrick's. I made a deal with Ana and Eileen – I would come to celebrate whatever Masses they wanted to hold at their retreat house (and during COVID, we celebrated a lot of outdoor masses over there). I told Ana and Eileen that I would celebrate their Masses and not seek any money from them but, in return, I asked them to invite their community over St. Patrick's and St. Anne's. I told them that we would take care of them while others did not.

Now all of a sudden, we celebrate Spanish Mass every Friday night at 7:00 p.m. at St. Anne's, and on Sunday at 12:00 noon at St. Patrick's. We pray the rosary in Spanish every Friday night at 6:30 p.m. at St. Patrick's and on the 12th day of every month in honor of our Lady of Guadalupe.

After four years of offering this ministry, the Hispanic community now is the largest group of faithful that we serve at our parishes and the parishes have a stability to continue for generations to come. (I made a joke one week concerning how this community is trying to “kill” me, now that I have so many meetings for sacraments in the parish – I may be alone out in the middle of nowhere but I constantly am busy in the ministry I offer).

Prior to my arrival, there were few baptisms and even fewer weddings taking place at our churches. Now, we are overloaded with baptisms, weddings, First Communions and Quinceañeras. DRE John Rehmer tells me we have so many children in Religious Education that we need more catechists. Our ministries have gone crazy with so much going on because we have opened our hearts to the people of the area and the people have responded. Good souls are returning to the parishes and now we see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Personally, I am very thankful for the clerics of St. Viator, the Viatorians who have come to help us out, both at St. Patrick’s and at St. Anne’s. Because of the Viatorians, many southern parishes in the

diocese were able to sustain themselves; now that the Viatorians have the same vocation situation as diocesan bishops, diocesan priests like me have to take on these parishes given up by the Viatorians so that the ministry can continue. Fr. John Peeters, Fr. Moises Mesh, Fr. Jason Nesbit, Deacon John Eustice, Brother Jhobani Orduz and so many other Clerics of St. Viator have helped us out when they are able (at the parish picnic on September 24, I was diagnosed with COVID so Fr. Nesbit and Deacon Eustice had to cover for me at the outdoor Mass). We are so grateful for their help... and yours as well!

The reason we began to celebrate outdoor Masses after a two-decade hiatus was because you loved this grotto dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes and you asked me to celebrate Masses out at the grotto. Whereas we had no special events outside of Masses at these parishes (and often the Masses were replaced by communion services), now we offer expositions of relics. We offer adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. We have been offering days of prayer and benediction. We reinstituted the Divine Mercy Novena and chaplet, with the recently departed Jean Gibson helping us purchase the Divine Mercy image for our

community. We give thanks to good souls like June Downey, Joanne Hermann and Gene Rademacher, who bring communion to the homebound on behalf of our parishes at St. Patrick's.

We have so many volunteers at both parishes who bring this hope of God to the homebound; we have continued to offer online Masses to our community. We have referenced one parishioner after another at St. Patrick's and in St. Anne's who have made a huge difference at our parishes. During the St. Anne Novena, I referenced ten grandmothers who have made a difference in my priesthood; so many have made a difference in your lives as well. *You* who watch these online Masses and attend our services in-church have made a difference.

Because of all of you, in the last four years, we have reduced our debt at St. Patrick's by a factor of 50% and that is absolutely spectacular. That said, we need to show God and our bishop that we really do care about these facilities and this community of faith. The only way this change and change of heart (= *metanoia*) can happen is if we continue to welcome people into our community and to love them no matter who they are. Once they are here in Church, we are all obligated to follow

God's rules because this is God's house. If we learn God's rules, if we love and serve each other in God's name, we then pave the way to allowing God to keep us in this house for the rest of our existence.

Our challenge is not to stop this welcoming, hospitable atmosphere and to tell people that we care. At this parish picnic, Ema Elvir, Silvia Tejada and a whole bunch of people have established a vendor fair, a rummage sale, kids' games, musical acts and various raffles and auctions that will take place. If you are watching this mass online, I invite you to come join us in the 24th of September to celebrate with us all things that are St. Patrick's and St. Anne's, to give thanks for God's presence in this part of the diocese, which is often neglected and forgotten.

We have not forgotten about you. We love you. We want to help you and we ask you to do the same for this community, not for my sake but for God's and the gift of the people that God created around us. We invite you to bring along your family and friends. Invite those in the neighborhood. Let us show this community that they are not forgotten that *we* are not forgotten, that no one is outcast in God's eyes and that

the only way a person is deprived heaven is if people choose to deprive themselves of this gift by the lives they lead. God loves you; WE love you. May God bless you and keep you. As is state in the traditional Irish blessing, *May the road rise up to meet you, may the wind be on your backs, may the sun shine warmly on your face and the rain fall gently on your fields and until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of his hands. Erin go bragh!* This is our prayer.