

First Mass of Fr. John Bayer
St. Maria Goretti, Arlington TX
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“Do not be afraid,” John Paul II thundered during the three decades of his pontificate, including the turn of the Millennium. But speaking to millions of people he rarely could have thought to add the words Jesus himself liked to add, “Little Flock” (cf. Luke 12:32). And yet I think we are well advised not to forget this context. History and statistics are usually deceptive. And even more tortuous is the human heart which often reveals the naked truth while trying to veil it. Man thirsts for God but becomes inebriated on many other things. Some of them make us forgetful, some of them deviate, and some of them poison us.

“Do not be afraid, little flock.” My memory is crystal clear when I remember Fr. John the first time Fr. John understood this verse with the organ of his heart, when he understood that he belongs to Christ – and specifically to a *little flock* of Christ; and that to belong to this little flock was not only attractive and beautiful, but encouraging and promising. Do not be afraid because God the Father takes great pleasure to assign his reign – his kingdom – to such who are small, who belong to his small flock. The Kingdom of God is like a precious pearl that a man discovers. The pearl is small; and even its precious character, its rare and extraordinary value, may remain hidden from the eyes that did not learn to look for it in the right way. Most pearls get easily discounted as fake, because all fake pearls try to look like precious and authentic, as if they were more valuable than all the rest. But only someone whose eyes the Lord has opened can distinguish between false and true beauty, and can tell which pearl is genuine.

Genuine pearls are born in the unfathomable depth of the oceans, amidst untold perils and unexplored dangers; it takes a courageous diver, with lungs of great volume and long-lasting perseverance to make their journey into suffocating depth and scary darkness to bring up the authentic pearl, even if it sat for long centuries at the bottom of the sea before it is discovered and reveals a beauty that cannot be imitated by anything artificial.

“Do not be afraid, little flock.” In some sense this metaphor applies to all priestly vocations because, in some sense, all who follow Christ must pay the high cost of discipleship: the treacherous human heart is its own trap, because it constantly tries to go out after fake values, empty promises that lead to big losses.

Where your treasure is, there will be your heart. If your treasure, your ideal, the uppermost value which you pursue is everlasting, non-perishing, not of this world, not of the kind that today flourishes and tomorrow becomes obsolete and the third day is forgotten, as if it had never existed; if your value is permanent, because it is spiritual and as solid as God himself – if such are the values that you seek, your heart will find a permanent home, will belong to God’s non-perishing world.

Life remains a struggle. You cannot say: “I made my choice, I discovered my vocation, I persevered six long years, I explored the depths of many oceans and therefore I have invested my whole self into religious life, the monastery is my home, the priesthood is at the center of my identity, there is nothing to disturb me.” When Jesus leads you out of many silly and fallacious dreams and vain hopes, you might not realize that even on the peak to which Jesus has led you, you are still on this earth. You are still within a context of choices, temptations and future commitments that will require continued perseverance.

In the life of Jesus and the disciples the mountain peaks are of various kinds. It is scary to realize that the first mountain peak in Jesus’ life is that of temptation:

“Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence, and he said to him, ‘All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me’” (Matthew 4:8-9). This mountain looked exactly like the mountain of transfiguration, except that on this one, it was the magnificence of the world, the fulfillment of a merely human existence, the worship of man-made and devil-made values that stood at the center. The priesthood is something very different. It may be called a peak or a mountain, maybe only a hill. But it must be called Golgotha, the place where Jesus gave away his young life for the sake of the life of the world. Finding Christ and following him felt and feels like finding a pearl for which you are ready to sell everything. And yet, time and again it will feel like having been given the life style of a seed, of a grain of wheat which must die: “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me” (John 12:24-26).

If I wanted to write just one scriptural quote as a motto for a newly ordained priestly life, on the back of a holy card, I would probably write this quotation. Wherever I am, there will be my servant: he will follow me on to the mountain of temptation, the mountain of the transfiguration, the hill of Calvary. And he will stand with me even on that last hill in Galilee, where the Eleven received their mission: “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... teaching them... all that I taught you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

I recently read somewhere that this is the scriptural passage that conveys, expresses with perfection what it stands for; you cannot add or subtract from it. Like a time capsule it contains all that the Lord can tell his priests: “God and be for others

what I am for you. And in fulfilling this call, become like I am for you: go, call, teach, baptize – in all these actions I will be going, teaching, baptizing and even transforming you into what I want you to become. Do not be afraid of the immensity of the task, or the power of the Enemy, the size or near impossibility of the task – I will be with you. That means that I will be there also to transform you so that you be and live according to my heart. I want to express myself through you and so I will make you fully you and still you will authentically transmit who I am, and what I say, by using you all the way to transmit my presence as food and drink, my body and blood offered for the life of the world.”

Fr. John, after seven years of discerning you find yourself with Jesus on the mountain who tells you: “In your hands I want to be food and drink for my people. On your lips I want to be word by which they can live. In your life I want to be present in this world. Do not be afraid. I created you; I created your priesthood. I want you to be my self-expression.”