

**First Mass of Fr. Stephen Gregg
Our Lady of Dallas
September 16, 2012
Fr. Denis Farkasfalvy
Mark 8:27-35**

Reverend Fathers, Brothers and Sisters, Fr. Stephen, his Family, Friends and Classmates,

At times, especially when a great feast or mystery is celebrated, such as at Easter or Corpus Christi or Christmas, I wonder what the role of the sermon is. Today I am faced with an impossible task: to explain the mystery of a priestly vocation that began, grew and developed before my eyes, but – as I realized a long time ago – remains a mystery. It can be admired and applauded; I can be grateful for it; but I cannot explain it, not even describe it. In recent years, when we were blessed in the monastery with new beginnings, I have been asked, interviewed, even cornered to explain how this happened or happens. Being a teacher, I do not like to say that I do not know something, and so I am usually lured into a conversation. I make remarks that sound very deep, and I build up something that sounds like an explanation. I coin simple one-liners, and if there is enough time I come up with a complex system: I include history, sociology, and psychology, semi-mystical theology just to appear erudite and well informed. My interviewer is usually well entertained: if he wants to write an article for the Texas Catholic or for the Student newspaper, he takes notes, asks me to repeat the sentences that are a bit too long, usually those which I myself do not understand; but at the end I am always embarrassed because I attempted to explain something that remains a mystery for me, just as well.

Today I will use one of the shortest stories in the Gospels to try and express this mystery: the story about the tax collector of Capernaum. He is in the toll booth; Jesus comes along on the road; he looks at the young tax collector and tells him: “Follow me!” And the man stands up and follows him. End of the story. Maybe I should do something similar to explain Fr. Stephen’s vocation: there was a Prep School Student, Andrew Gregg; Jesus came along his way, looked at him and said “Follow me.” And he did. End of the story. Let us be stunned. Let us sit down and meditate in amazement and in silence and then break out in applause.

Obviously, that is not my task. I must somehow give a testimony, some sort of witnessing so that you would really get involved in his story. Because the real mystery is not that Fr. Stephen discovered his vocation and – boom! – followed it. (Or maybe it was without the “boom!”) For he followed it in ways that you did not notice: you, his family, his best friends, his daily companions in school for 8 years might not have taken notice when the real story took place.

The real story, the one about which I really should talk is that this miracle of a vocation happens every day; it is happening to each one of you with a high number of frequency. We are called, we are inspired, we discover the unspeakable greatness of God’s presence in our life and then, well, no “boom!” happens; rather just the contrary: we turn on the TV, grab our cell phone and talk to somebody about something thoroughly unimportant, or we distract ourselves in thousands of ways so that we would not get up from our seat and go and follow him. And yes, at times, probably more often than we notice it, it happens that people really do follow their call; but the great deeds of God and man, the ways in which he is present in life, usually go unnoticed.

So maybe I would do best if I simply tell you not about Fr. Stephen’s vocation but about that other, even greater mystery to which he was called. He stands in front

of you dressed as a priest to celebrate mass: he will lead us in a few minutes to celebrate the Eucharist. He is among us as an instrument of God's grace, called to bring about the divine presence which became incarnate in Jesus. This presence was achieved by an unfathomable divine decision to be part of our human life in the form of food and drink and to make himself available in the same unobtrusive and unspeakably humble way in which Jesus walked up to the toll gate of Capernaum and said: "Follow me!" Jesus is going to repeat by means of Stephen's mortal, eloquent but – let's face it – not very exceptional Anglo-Saxon-American lips, the words that bring about his Eucharistic presence. Jesus wants to say today and every day, as the world turns, and as this planet runs closer and closer to various disasters, in the context of one more human life: **THIS IS MY BODY / THIS IS MY BLOOD**. And as this happens we are not only reminded, we are meant to be grabbed at the deepest level of human awareness: that this body is being offered to be given away for our sake; his blood is to be shed for us. This not just about God's presence coming about through Stephen's hand and lips; it is not only about Jesus everlasting sacrifice on the cross. It also says – not only Stephen says it, but God says it on his lips – that we are worth dying for; that we are worth being rescued by the Incarnate Son, lifted up from the mess of our lives, **this life we are stubbornly ruining is being redeemed and lifted up**, because of a love that exceeds all understanding, because of the Love that brought the Son from the bosom of the Father into a concrete human destiny not only one time long ago in the Middle-East, but in one act that continues is still with us, because of priest like Stephen. Because guys like Stephen are available to follow their call.

So, my friends, brothers and sisters, some 8-10 years ago, while everything looked normal and usual and mostly pointless in the hallways of the Cistercian Prep School, in one of the classes, noisy and boring as usual, Jesus walked between those

uncomfortable desks and chairs and looked at this precocious little boy, maybe not little boy anymore, but definitely still short and said to him: FOLLOW ME. And in his heart, Andrew Gregg, began to look for some excuse, tried to pretend he did not hear his call or maybe used one of his excuses, the one that usually worked, because Fr. Roch always said that he does not want to proselytize: he was just about to say I am not even the Catholic. He almost said it but he knew that it would have been ridiculous. So, instead, in his heart he stood up and followed Christ. But, of course, I just made this up. I told you in advance that I don't know what happened.

But, on the other hand, you know just as well that what I was telling you has indeed happened. You think that I know what happened, and I must know it better than anybody else. OK, I give up. Yes, I can assure you that he stood up and followed Him. Otherwise we would not have this celebration today.

As you may notice, I did not even start my sermon as yet. But do not worry, it will not take me long to finish. Our Gospel reading helps a lot. It is about another of those mysterious moments: Jesus turns to Peter: who do you think I am? And Peter says: you are the Christ, the Son of God! And in reply, Jesus keeps on talking about the Son of man: that he must suffer many things, and be rejected and be killed, and after three days rise again (Mar 8:31). And, as can be expected, Peter protests: none of these things should happen, but then Jesus reveals the road on which Peter and all his disciples must travel: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mar 8:34-35). And Peter knows and all the others know that they will be introduced into the ultimate mystery: the mystery of the cross.

So the call is a **call to follow Jesus**, walk behind him, **carrying a portion of his cross** – not all of it, rather only that portion we are capable of and are called to carry.

You sit at the toll booth of your life, at your desk or in your class room, in Capernaum or Dallas, or wherever. Jesus comes and says: “FOLLOW ME.” And then he asks: “Do you know who I am? The Messiah, the Son of God. And this ‘following me’ means helping to carry my cross, right here, near to me, right after me. Stay amazed and grateful as you have been on the first day on which I have called you. I want to have you share my divine life, you and all to whom you distribute the bread and the wine, my body and my blood: that life for which I have created you.”

The story is short, and regardless of who you are you are expected to discover that Jesus wants you to share his life and therefore follow him, not necessarily at the altar; maybe it is by having the courage to have your family, spouse and kids to whom you distribute the life of Christ, always under the shadow of the cross. You can pretend that your life is of no particular value, you can keep on distracting yourself. But your call will reach you at some unexpected time and you will know that the only way to peace and happiness is to stand up and follow.

At this mass today we must look at Fr. Stephen as somebody who represents the life of all of us. Jesus called, he managed to follow, he stands at the altar to re-live and transmit the Lord’s life sacrificed for our sake. This day comes with a message: your happiness will be commensurate, proportional to the generosity with which you give away yourself in response to the call you receive at the big turns of your life. May God give you the grace to follow his call!