

Golden Jubilee for Fr. James Lehrberger

22 February 2026

First Sunday of Lent

Fr. Joseph Van House

On this day the Church throughout the world celebrates the victory of Christ over the ancient serpent.

This is indeed a celebration, as all draw strength from the way the God-man has opened up a path in the desert for enslaved humanity to reenter the free and loving communion of the Holy Trinity.

*But the gift is not like the transgression.  
For if by the transgression of the one, the many died,  
how much more did the grace of God  
and the gracious gift of the one man Jesus Christ  
overflow for the many. (Romans 5, Second Reading)*

And the great joy of our local Church today, as we celebrate 50<sup>th</sup> ordination anniversary of one of our own priests, is not unrelated to the journey to redemption -- to how Christ, the new Adam, opens for us all the way of God's grace.

One of the best Biblical figures of the Priest also comes from the desert, and this is John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Lord, who described himself "the friend of the bridegroom."

I am not the messiah, and the Church does not belong to me; rather, they have called me to a responsibility in the service of their union. John's own words: "The one who has the bride is the bridegroom; the [friend of the bridegroom] who stands and listens to him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase; I must decrease."

Christ makes his Church beautiful through the service of his friends, and among them, especially those he has charged with the humbling service of holy orders. [In this, the vocation of the priest, like the vocation of the apostle is not radically different from all other friends and ambassadors of Christ. But it does have a special leadership and responsibility and clarity.] He sends friends into the world in order to make more friends for himself, to win over those who resist him and deepen those who love him -- to be ambassadors of his love.

It is essential to consider the great symbols, such as “the friend of the bridegroom,” and, as part of this, it is also essential to consider what they mean concretely. As I have been preparing for today, I have been thinking of a long passage that Fr. Henri de Lubac put in his 1953 book *Splendor of the Church*. There, towards the end of the chapter *Mater Ecclesia* (“mother Church”, on the fruitful bride of Christ), the [then unjustly censured] de Lubac gives a remarkable thirty-page portrait of what it means to be what he calls a “Vir Ecclesiasticus”: a Churchman. Or, more freely: a man of Christian communion. I would like to share with you just a handful of sentences for the occasion.

Anyone who is possessed by a desire [to be a Christian in the full sense] will not find it enough to be loyal and obedient, to perform exactly everything demanded by his profession of the Catholic faith. Such a man will have fallen in love with the beauty of the House of God; the Church will have stolen his heart. She is his spiritual native country, his “mother and his brethren”, and nothing that concerns her will leave him indifferent or detached; he will root himself in her soil, form himself in her likeness, and make himself one with her experience. He will feel himself rich with her wealth; he will be aware that through her and her alone he participates in the unshakeableness of God. It will be from her that he learns how to live and die. Far from passing judgment on her, he will allow her to judge him, and he will agree gladly to all the sacrifices demanded by her unity.

Being a man of the Church, he will love the Church’s past. He will meditate over her history, holding her tradition in reverence and exploring deep into it. Granted, the last thing he will do will be to devote himself to a cult of nostalgia, either in order to escape into an antiquity he can reshape as he likes or in order to condemn the Church of his own day, as if she were already grown decrepit and her Bridegroom had cast her off. Any attitude of that kind will repel him spontaneously...<sup>1</sup>

Since he is a man of the Church, he will not acquire ... culture ... just for interest’s sake, taking pleasure in it “as one who tours the monuments of a great city.” On the contrary, he will be wholly at the service of the great community, sharing its happiness and its trials and taking part in its battles.<sup>2</sup>

Since he is a member of a body, he will be responsive to what affects the other members, whatever his own place and function may be. Anything that bears hard upon the body as a whole, or paralyzes it, or damages it affects him, too...<sup>3</sup>

A man of the Church will always remain open to hope; for him, the horizon is never closed. Like St. Paul, he will want to be full of rejoicing in his sufferings and will go so far as to believe himself called, in this manner—as all are called—to “fill up those things that are

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<sup>1</sup> 241-242

<sup>2</sup> 247

<sup>3</sup> 254

wanting in the sufferings of Christ... for his body, which is the Church”, knowing that in Christ he has “the hope of glory”.<sup>4</sup>

Like just about anyone else who is in this Church, I have many stories I could tell about how Christ has saved me from sin and isolation through the ambassadorial role of priests. About how many ways he has done me the astonishing honor of claiming me not a slave, but a friend, and of reuniting my soul to his, through the leadership of wonderful *viri ecclesiastici*.

One such story involves the time I first moved from my native Georgia to the state that would become my lasting lone-star home. At the age of 18 I had spent a grand total of three days in the metroplex before I committed to coming here as an undergraduate at the University of Dallas. I came to the University of Dallas because I knew that I wanted a university that would educate me in wisdom, and so I named my major as philosophy from the very beginning, and the university (Sybil Novinski, let us hypothesize) assigned me to a philosophy prof as my academic advisor: Lehrberger.

And so it happened that even before my first day of classes I found myself climbing to the third floor of the old Braniff building, and standing in front of a closed office door. Now there were three things about that door to notice. The first is that the keys were in the lock – I would later come to understand, as a welcoming sign that the doctor was in. There was a medieval-style art print on the door of the three founding abbots of the Cistercian order, gathered in adoration around the Madonna, who held the Christ child in utero. And there was also a bumper sticker with the Statue of Liberty on it, and the bumper sticker said: COGITO ERGO SUM ... PRO VITA! “I think therefore I am... pro-life!” And I thought “This should be interesting!” And I lifted my hand and knocked on the door. And, holy smokes! How little did I know what I was in for.

The first priest I met in this city, the first monk I ever met, became one of the most pivotal relationships of my life. Over the following years Christ used this friend of his to feed my enthusiasm for the life of the mind, and then through the trust and esteem built there, to feed me with preaching and spiritual direction and liturgy and the Eucharist, and to restore me through absolution. And, with the uniqueness of his own personality, to convince me deeply that the truth had nothing to fear from questions. What at that age my soul desperately needed to know: that Socrates the gadfly had a true and important place in the service of Christ the Lord.

And so, like so many of you, I came to know and be uplifted by a man with an unyieldingly patient smile. A fatherly spirit of kindness and inquiry mixed with fierce protection of what

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<sup>4</sup> 255-6

is good. And one who introduced me to great friends and teachers of his own, thinkers like Augustine, and Aquinas, and Newman, and, in our own century, Henri de Lubac and John Paul II. And even to the composers and performers of Renaissance polyphony and Gregorian chant.

Already at the age of 18 I was conscious of cultural wars that were raging both inside and outside the church, and that consciousness alone did not liberate me from many of its slaveries. God used the witness of this priest to point me, like countless others, beyond all of that partisanship, to find our true motives in an appreciation and love for truth and beauty, the beauty ever ancient, ever new, of Christ and the Church.

And he introduced me to Our Lady of Dallas – who drew me in for many of the same reasons she drew him in three decades before: stability of service in the context of a familial, Christ-centered community. The beauty of a monastic priestly ministry, where the groomsmen can have the great help of the lived fellowship of his brothers and be less exposed to the confusion of thinking himself as the center of the church.

From the point of view of the trials and temptations of the priesthood, it must be said that 1976 was not an easy or auspicious time to be ordained a priest. It meant having to bear the burden of the day and its heat at a unique stage in the drama of atheist humanism. And this, too, was part of the special gift of the vocation that God has given here, and that has so blessed the abbey and the University of Dallas.

And as we think of the ever-present challenge and greatness of being a true *Vir Ecclesiasticus*, and the gift of the communions to which he has given his life, we consider gratefully all the priests who have blessed him along his path and have made it possible for him, and so for us, in a great chain of succession going back even to the apostles. Among these, worthy of special mention are two great Hungarian-ordained priest professors and holy spiritual fathers of this abbey, who showed Fr. James the way of the *vir ecclesiasticus* with special efficacy in his years as a young monk. One was Fr. Christopher Rabay, a theology professor whose *Candlelights* book of meditations we still cherish. And the other was Fr. Gilbert Hardy, a humble expert in modern French philosophy who served at the abbey for more than three decades, and, even more than an exemplary scholar and educator, became Fr. James's own novice master and junior master and great mentor, a decisive father in both faith and monastic life.

And as we give thanks for all of these gifts of the past, we also open our hearts to the great hope for the future that comes from promising young vocations.

An especially beautiful custom at a modern wedding banquet is the anniversary dance, when all the married couples celebrate the institution of marriage by taking to the dance floor, and slowly peeling away generation by generation, such that the newly married can be strengthened by celebrating those who have been married the longest, and considering what is involved on their being on the dance floor today.

And so, clergy and laity together, as a community of a monastery and its friends, we ask ourselves with love and wonder, in 50 years, how great is the gift God has given?

How many times, and in how many different ways, has God used this voice to teach students in a classroom or in an office hour or anyone else in a pew or on a sidewalk, that *The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.*”?

How many people have heard from this one human voice, “may God grant you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins...”?

How many times in fifty years does God use one pair of hands to deliver infants from the ancient curse through the waters of baptism? To anoint and console the sick? To bless and break and distribute the supersubstantial bread of life?

Thank you, dear Father James, for embracing Christ’s call. And thank you, Lord Jesus, for this good priest.

And lastly, as in the name of the Church I have given voice to thanks to God for this priest and for all the goodness of the clergy, I also turn to you as the Church, and in the name of all priests I thank you. Thank you, Church, for your love for Christ’s priests. For praying for us. For listening to us. For collaborating with us in Christ’s service. For holding us to his high standards. For showing us his face when we succeed and when we fail. For helping us appreciate the height and the depth and the length and the breadth of what it is to live the gospel with which we are charged.

Let us present to the father the petitions of this Church:

- For all of humanity in our journey towards redemption in Christ, that we may receive well this acceptable time to be restored in the true freedom of unfallen Adam to love God and neighbor
- For all Christians, all ministers of the gospel throughout the world, especially those in holy orders, that Christ's love for them and for the church may be their strength
- For devotion to the faith and for the unity and flourishing life of the Church in all of its dimensions,
- For our own deepening gratitude to God for all of the ways he draws us into his friendship
- For all who suffer and need to see the face of the Church, and especially for those who suffer from the sins and failures of Christ's ministers, that Christ's love may overflow for them grace and truth
- For good and holy vocations to the priesthood and the monastic life, and especially for the faithful flourishing of the Abbey of Our Lady of Dallas, and for the well-being of all of her members
- For our dear Father James Lehrberger, for all of his needs and intentions, and especially that in these years of his life his joy in the Lord's harvest may be full

Heavenly Father, we make these petitions trusting in your love; please grant them as they be good for us. Through Christ, Our Lord.