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Despite the fact that those of cynical bent see no merit in mere survival, convention demands that we celebrate significant anniversaries. Whatever our score cards read 25-40-50 or higher, I doubt if there is any priest present who is not grateful to be alive and celebrating here in All Hallows for these few special days. In each of our classes we are mindful of those whose priestly anniversaries were few in number. As the liturgy proclaims – “they have gone before us and they sleep the sleep of peace.” They too, in God’s providence, are part of the All Hallows family, so appropriately akin to the more common designation as the Communion of Saints. In our thanksgiving for priesthood we also remember them in prayer and we shamelessly recall their quirks and misadventures which, be they fact or fiction, made them both lovable and memorable. It constitutes a friendly form of canonization without the need for miracles!

In returning to those of us who once again occupy these pews of unrelenting durability I would draw your attention to our first reading, Paul’s long and grammatically complicated introduction to the letter he wrote to his newly-baptized in Ephesus.

Paul insists that his converts already possess the full blessing promised by God.

But, by the same token, all present blessings are but a foretaste of blessings yet to come.

For God’s work is not yet over, his revelation not yet exhausted.

As God himself was present when he poured out his grace in Christ, so he is and will be present when we, his priests, young and not so young, of today and tomorrow, continue to carry out and crown his work of liberation for all peoples. All our debilitating troubles on the way are but a hiccup in the pilgrim march of God’s Church.

And if, as Paul states, the blessings bestowed on the newly-baptized are so wondrous, how much more so are those associated with the mysterious call to the priesthood. Here there is a deeper intimacy initiated by Christ at his last earthly meal with his disciples and articulated in the sacrament of Holy Orders. This intimacy morphs into identity because we share in his, the only priesthood, and we dare to speak in his name – “*this is my body,*” “*I absolve you.*” It is for this we give thanks this day. It is for this PRIVILEGED SERVANTHOOD that we were prepared, no place bet-

ter than within these walls – not so much by academic programs, which, by and large, were more than adequate, but by absorption into the spirit of All Hallows carved in stone over the Mansion House doorway and imprinted on the hearts of those anointed within this sanctuary, EUNTES DOCETE OMNES GENTES, an admonition more gently stated at the end of every Mass.

We have a tendency to bemoan the scarcity of priests at the present time. Are we forgetting the fact that most of us grew up in a country which for generations was essentially priestless and yet the faith prevailed? I do not fear for the future of the priesthood. God will always provide us with an adequacy of priests but the difference between the call and the response may sometimes depend upon us. A kind word of encouragement and a smile will reassure a potential seminarian far more than the joyless demeanor of a self-inflicted martyrdom. Nobody wants to follow an unhappy leader with a long face.

I have always liked the words of the Jesuit Karl Rahner in his meditation on the role of the priest. (and I quote.)

“The priest is not an angel sent from heaven. He is a man chosen from among men, a member of the Church, a Christian. Remaining man and Christian he begins to speak the Word of God; this word is not his own.

No, he comes to you because God has told him to proclaim God’s Word, perhaps he has not entirely understood it himself.

Perhaps he adulterates it. But he believes and despite his fears, he knows he must communicate God’s word to you, for must not some one of us say something about God, about external life, about the majesty of grace in our sanctified being? Must not some one of us speak about sin, the judgment and mercy of God?”

Seven years ago I was invited to address the International Serra Convention being held that year in Kansas City. (For the uninitiated, Serra, named after the Franciscan missionary, Junipero Serra, is a lay organization dedicated to the promotion of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life.)

Although written for the American scene I would submit that our needs are the same worldwide. During the past half century our Church has been buffeted by transition, tension and change, mostly generated by the history-making Vatican Council and its mandated aftermath. It swept over the Church like a great tsunami, and the waters, as of yet, have not fully receded. Added to this, ugly scandals have compromised our credibility. And so, today we need priests who are

MEN OF SACRIFICE to nourish us through the Eucharist as Jesus did
MEN OF COMPASSION to forgive our sins as Jesus did
BRAVE MEN who are not afraid to speak out against the injustices of our time as
Jesus did in his

MEN OF INSIGHT who can fill the spiritual vacuum of our overwhelming technological age

MEN OF COURAGE to stand tall and be counted when their vocations are ridiculed by the self-appointed sophisticates of a rudderless society.

And here is where our gospel reading and our modern All Hallows comes in – we need

COLLABORATIVE PRIESTS who are desirous to multiply their effectiveness by working side by side with dedicated lay people, deacons and religious whose proper role in the unfolding of salvation has been so clearly proclaimed by the Church and all our recent Popes.

Clearly dismissing the unending multiplicity of confusing and legalistic requirements demanded for ministry in his own day, Jesus issues a gentle and loving invitation, “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened and I will give you rest My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

I know that these words may sound hollow to the priest who, for many good reasons, is always exhausted. But Christ, who is God, did not try to do everything – he delegated, he empowered, he enabled others to be his coworkers in the task of redemption. Not to imitate him may be a gesture of presumption. And when all else fails, recall the Ballad of Father Gilligan, the famine priest, immortalized by Yeats, who fell asleep in his chair despite his determination to respond to one more dying parishioner. The Lord took his place – a reminder that we are God’s instruments, not his Master – and the good priest realized in his surprise that –

“He who hath made the night of stars
For souls who tire and bleed,
Sent one of his great angels down
To help me in my need.”

A word of caution, however, I wouldn’t expect a miracle every weekend!

As the years go flitting by I can more readily identify with the words of the same poet, William Butler Yeats, when he wrote:

“When you are old and grey and full of sleep and nodding by the fire, take down this book and dream.... “

Let us hope that these few days together will entice us to stir up the embers of that fire and renew the dream. We look to the future, Now is not the time to rediscover times past, to be smothered by nostalgia, to recreate an age which is gone forever. Now is not the time to go into a maintenance mode, for marking time or putting up the shutters. Historically every crisis in our beloved Church, the body of Christ, was resolved by new initiatives and, in God’s name, we must dare to think “outside the box” once again. Some initiatives may fail, but so what? Some will succeed beyond our

awareness of Christ's promise. I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly. Let's not limit this promise in a selfish manner. When Bernadette left Lourdes she entered a convent in Nevers where she spent the remainder of her life, a great deal of it in ill-health. A newspaper reporter tracked her down wondering what the visionary was doing every day in the convent. Her response was a simple one, "my business is to be sick."