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Golden Anniversary of Priesthood

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The phrase “Golden Anniversary” conjures up a host of ideas. One priest I know insisted that he saw no merit in “mere survival,” a concept which may be dismissive of those whose years were less than golden and perhaps a little at variance with God’s purposes.

Some months ago I visited my seminary in Ireland to plan the upcoming July jubilee celebrations to be held there for the various classes marking significant anniversaries in 2007.

One rather elderly priest (which means he was older than I am!), obviously somewhat bemused by this annual ritual, summed it up with the quaint observation that those who are ordained 25 years talk about reaching milestones, those 40 years ordained complain about gallstones and the group to which I belong, the fifty year men, are concerned about tombstones!

Be that as it may, I want to assure you that I am very grateful to God for my fifty years as one of the many who, over the centuries, has been called to participate in the one, and only one, great priesthood of Jesus Christ. Why me? Frankly, I don’t know. There are no words to express the mysteriousness of a vocation to the priesthood, God’s unique selection process. We should be mindful of the words of one of our Weekday Prefaces addressed to the Lord,

You have no need of our praise, yet our desire to thank you is itself your gift. Our prayer of thanksgiving adds nothing to your greatness. (Preface 40)

There are no sentiments, lofty or otherwise, adequate enough to give voice to my thanksgiving for so many graces received and especially for those which were not always fully appreciated. Regretfully, we priests are not always profitable servants! Am I glad for these 50 years? Certainly! After all, in human terms, the alternative is not too attractive and a few extra years, here and there, do not lessen eternity one whit! And that observation, my dear friends, is theologically correct. You may consult Thomas Aquinas.

Indeed I have been so fortunate and so blessed that my nature, streaked with that innate sense of Irish pessimism, sometimes wonders if everything is too good to be true. That curious belief in Murphy’s Law is articulated by the poet who maintained that we “Irish have an abiding sense of tragedy which sustains us through temporary periods of joy.” In that vein, let me say that in 1957, the year I was ordained, it was not a very good year for many people.

- Our President Eisenhower had a mild stroke
- A little beeping sputnik appeared in the sky indicating that the Soviet Union had taken the lead in the race for space

- There was moaning and weeping in the Big Apple as the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants moved to Los Angeles
 - A hurricane made landfall at Lake Charles, Louisiana which killed 500 people and The Ford Motor Company, after spending millions of dollars behind closed doors launched a new car with great fanfare. It was called the EDSEL!
- This was the first of my unbelievable 50 years as a priest. Thirty-one of us were ordained in a crowded sanctuary in All Hallows College, Dublin, and within a few months all of us, in true imitation of the old Celtic missionary tradition "peregrinatio pro Christo" – roughly translated as "wayfaring for Christ" – headed for New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Canada, England and Scotland. Eighteen of us, somewhat battle-scarred and perhaps weary but hopefully wiser, will next month, God willing, gather in that same sanctuary to reminisce and give thanks to Him in whose name we went forth. *Euntes Docete Omnes Gentes* – "Go Make Disciples of all Nations, the mandate institutionalized by All Hallows Missionary Seminary and flanking the main door of this church, was readily adopted by me as my personal episcopal motto.

Mine has been an eventful priesthood full of blessings and not without surprises. If truth is stranger than fiction then I am a candidate for serious consideration in that category. How can there be any greater privilege or experience than being given the grace to link the aspirations of God's people to the generous blessings of his loving providence? The priest, that anointed creature with feet of clay, speaks with the words of the Nazarene in the first person, *Hoc est enim Corpus meum* (This is my Body), *Ego te absolvo*, (I absolve you). Recall that for the first twelve years of my priesthood Latin was the liturgical language.

If I should dare to ask you for a gift to mark my anniversary, then I would ask you to pray for priests, to nurture their vocations, to encourage them, to bolster their confidence, to remind them that God's grace is always more than sufficient to strengthen their resolve and reinforce their faltering footsteps. 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 reside on our side of the equation! I have always liked the words of the Jesuit Karl Rahner in his meditation on the role of the priest: "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 eternal life, about the majesty of grace in our sanctified being? Must not some one of us speak of sin, the judgment and mercy of God? So my dear friends pray for him. Carry him so that he might be able to sustain others by bringing them to the mystery of God's love revealed in Christ Jesus."

Today is the feast of St. John the Baptist and, although he was not a priest, his brief but intense life embodied all the qualities of priestly service. Touched by the power of the Spirit from before his actual birth, his austere life style, his fearless preaching, his impassioned calls to repentance, his brutal honesty relative to his own role in the unfolding tapestry of salvation, even his needless martyrdom instigated by the vengeful whim of a jealous woman and the cowardice of a weak-kneed tyrant all proclaimed that Christ was, is and ever will be the Redeemer, or, as we repeat his words in every Mass – "Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world." Let me paraphrase some of the words I shared with Serra Members at their International Convention here in Kansas City seven years ago.

We need priests who are men of prayer to teach us how to pray as Jesus did.

We need men of sacrifice to nourish us through the Eucharist as Jesus did.

We need men of compassion to forgive our sins as Jesus did.

We need brave men who are not afraid to speak out against the injustices of our time, as Jesus did in his.

We need men of insight who can fill the spiritual vacuum of our overpowering technological age.

We need collaborative priests who are desirous to multiply their effectiveness by working side by side with dedicated lay people and religious whose proper role in the unfolding of salvation has been so clearly enhanced by the Church and all our recent Popes.

We need men of courage to stand tall and be counted when their vocation is ridiculed by the self-appointed sophisticates of a rudderless society.

And we need men of conviction who can proclaim and stand up for Jesus Christ as John the Baptist did.

If I was asked to nominate three words which could summarize my 50 years in the priesthood they would be transition, tension and change, mostly generated by the history-making Second 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.

Personally, I also have, like icing on the cake, happy recollections of my participation in the planning of the state and pastoral visit of John Paul II to our nation's capital, working for peace in Northern Ireland with our Presbyterian brothers, gently reminding the members of our Supreme Court at Washington's Red Mass that citizens who are people of faith should not have their civic rights diluted vis-à-vis their secular brothers and sisters. These and similar events, not to mention the episcopal guidance of two wonderful dioceses, are subjects best left for my eulogy, should I deserve one, because the remarkable thing about an eulogy is that the eulogee, if there is such a word, is not in a position to be embarrassed or chagrined by its contents.

Priests, and especially bishops, receive a lot of underserved praise. Allow me to adopt the evasive tactics of John the Baptist for a moment. He was so popular, we are told, that crowds thronged to him in the desert. He had no illusions about his role or identity "— there is one who is coming who is more important than I am, one whose sandal straps I am not worthy to unfasten. He must increase: I must decrease." I, too, have no illusions. I can take responsibility for my shortcomings and failures but the many manifestations of God's blessings among us are, more often than not, the results of much prayer and the unrelenting work of priests, deacons, religious and members of the laity, just like yourselves. Church historians have never solved the challenge of giving credit to those who really deserve it. God, I'm sure, will do a better job in this regard.

As my years tumble on I can more readily identify with the words of William Butler Yeats — When you are old and grey and full of sleep and nodding by the fire, take down this book and slowly read, and dream....

As a conclusion, my dream, which I would presume to share with you on this unique occasion, is that we live in God's Church and he is always present. Despite our current troubles, and they are many and undeniable, we must not lose HOPE. We have the Book, the gospels, the good news, we have the EUCHARIST, we have Mary the mother of the Priest, we have hundreds of God's people alive in the Spirit and ready to be latter-day John the Baptists, heralds of Christ and his message. Now is not the time to lose faith – now is not the time for mere maintenance, for standing still or marking time. We may have reasons to be downhearted but such excuses are not worthy of our call to be Christians. Let me leave you with that image of a certain morning on the shores of the Sea of Galilee . Peter and his fellow disciples had toiled all night. They had caught no fish. They were tired, frustrated, probably cold, wet and despondent. Christ came along the shoreline and asked them to try again. "Duc in altum," he directed them, "Launch out into the deep." They did and you know the results. In God's world the time to act is not always when we are ready but when we need him most!