

***"God Is the Only Treasure People
Desire to Find in a Priest."
St. Patrick's College, Maynooth
May 27, 2010***

Praise be Jesus Christ!

Now and forever!

My brother bishops, priests and deacons; seminarians, students, religious women and men;

Pastoral leaders, Monsignor Connolly and community of this historic college at Maynooth, friends one and all in Christ Jesus:

Thank you for your gracious invitation and warm welcome. It is an honor and a joy to be with you.

I To converse with you about such an exhilarating topic -- *God is the only treasure people desire to find in a priest* -- is a challenge and a delight. To do so during this *Year for Priests*, before a group I admire very much, adds to that thrill.

I stand before you no guru or expert, no acclaimed theologian or renowned mystic; I am hardly some "know-it-all-Yankee" here to lecture you on how-you-got-into-or-how-to-get-out-of-the current crisis you are in, 'cause I don't know.

No, I stand before you simply as a man who loves being a priest, and who loves to talk about this love of his life with others kind enough to ask him about it; I'm here because a man for whom I have much admiration, affection, and appreciation, Cardinal Sean Brady, asked me to come;

And I'm here to repay a debt. Simply put, I owe -- from a human point of view, anyway -- my most important "pearls of great price" -- my Catholic faith and my priestly vocation -- to you, beloved Ireland.

My great-great-grandparents came from Cavan and Leitrim in the mid-nineteenth century, desperately joining hundreds of thousands of other emaciated Irish fleeing the anguish of the famine -- an event we reverently recalled just last Sunday at 10:15 Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral where we were honored to host your president, Mary McAleese. These starving, one-step-away-from cadavers arrived in America with nothing, nothing of earthly value, but with a heavenly treasure to-be-sure: a glimmer of faith, a sparkle of hope, the whisper of a prayer. And they built the Catholic Church in the United States.

And this boy, thanks to Dolans, Sheerins, Murrays, Troys, and Hogans, was brought to a baptismal font in Maplewood, Missouri, in the winter of 1950, and was raised by parents who had the faith in their DNA, traceable to turf in Cavan and Leitrim, and who, while far from "shite Catholics," took that faith sincerely and seriously, and taught me to do likewise.

And this boy, while only seven, had the additional good fortune of being educated by brave Sisters of Mercy who came to Holy Infant Parish in Ballwin, Missouri, from Drogheda, who lovingly and effectively formed me and mightily encouraged my nascent priestly vocation, one of whom, Sister Mary Bosco Daly, is here this afternoon. I understand it to be somewhat politically incorrect to say so in Ireland today, but, so what? I say, God bless the Sisters of Mercy!

So, folks, I am in your debt. Why in the world you would think I have anything of value to add to your valuable deliberations today is beyond me. All I know is that I'm glad to pay back some of the debt.

II Not long after Pope John Paul II appointed me Archbishop of Milwaukee in the summer of 2002, I was chatting with one of our many splendid priests.

Keep in mind, now, that 2002 was a high crisis period in our own history, very similar to what you are going through right now. It was even worse in Milwaukee, because my predecessor had sadly resigned in ignominy after revelations that he had paid an adult male partner \$450,000 of archdiocesan funds.

Thus I asked this priest, holding my breath, "How are you doing?"

"Thanks for asking," he replied, rather, to my surprise, upbeat and chipper. "Actually, considering all the fodder" -- he actually used another word but we're in mixed company -- "we've been through, I think, thank God, I'm doing pretty good. I find myself more *grounded* than ever.

Hmmm ... I was fascinated by that phrase, "more *grounded* than ever ..." and asked him to elaborate.

"Well, for one," he began, "I'm *grounded* because the trauma of these months has literally dropped me to my knees, to the ground, in more and better prayer."

"Two, I'm *grounded* because I have grown in my humility, which comes from the Latin word for soil, earth, ground."

"And finally," he went on, "I'm *grounded* because I've had to rediscover the foundation, the base, the ground of my very life: my faith in and love for God, my very identity as a child of God, saved by His Son, reconfigured to Jesus at the very grounding of my being as a priest."

And then, in a finale I'll never forget, he concluded, "So, my new archbishop, thanks for asking. To answer your question as to how I am? Lightning has struck me these recent months, but, don't worry, I'm fine! I'm *grounded*!"

Not bad, huh! And what I propose is that those three groundings this priest mentioned -- prayer, humility, and a rediscovery of identity -- can provide a response to the statement of faith inherent in my assigned topic: *God is the only treasure people desire to find in a priest.*

1. I admired the late, lamented Cardinal Cahal Daly very much, but did not count prophecy one of his many talents. But listen to what he remarked to us bishops in America when he preached to us a day of recollection six-years ago: "The Church is *on her knees*, knocked to the ground in confusion, scandal, sin, anger, and shame. But, as long as she from her knees clings to the cross and does not fall on her face, on her knees is where she ought to be."

So, Cardinal Daly agrees with my priest-friend in Milwaukee: we are grounded because we have fallen to our knees in prayer. What both are exhorting is that we priests *recapture holiness.*

God is the only treasure people desire to find in a priest.

Well, as the philosophers remind us, *Nemo dat quod non habet* -- no one gives what one does not have.

If priests are expected to give God, we better have Him -- and that's sanctity, holiness.

Eight days after the cataclysmic earthquake in Haiti, I visited leveled Port au Prince in my role as chair of the board of Catholic Relief Services, the American cousin of your excellent Trocaire. The misery and devastation was beyond belief. We spent Saturday evening with our 300 CRS workers who resided in Haiti, who had all been there that dreadful day, and who were physically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted after nine days of intense relief and

rescue. They cried, worried, told us their obstacles, dreamed of rebuilding. As I left, I asked them, "Is there anything personally I can do for you?"

One young woman raised her hand. I expected her request to be for more supplies, medicine, tents, food, or to go home and shout from the skyscrapers of New York the towering needs of Port au Prince.

Instead, she simply said to me, "Father, tomorrow is Sunday. Will you say Mass for us?"

Was she the one who supplied the topic you assigned me? *God is the only treasure people desire to find in a priest.* What she wanted from me was not money, supplies, or earthly goods - she wanted the Lord, and she presumed I had that treasure to share with her in the Eucharist.

Sometimes I wonder if we are being invited back to the Church of the *Acts of the Apostles*. Sometimes I wonder if we priests, bishops -- indeed the entire Church -- have been reduced to the utterly basic reply of Peter and John to the crippled beggar in Temple Square in Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 3: "Silver and Gold I have not, but what I do have, I sure give you: In the name of Jesus Christ, stand up and walk!"

Pizzazz, glitter, gold, clout, prestige, power, property, wealth -- we ain't got! All we got is Jesus -- and that's the greatest treasure of all. That's what people want! And we can't give Him unless we got Him. And that's called holiness.

Asked to account for his lifelong fascination with priests, the acclaimed novelist J. F. Powers replied that he was hypnotized by those who had to have one foot in this world, and the other in the world to come. That described the priest, he claimed.

Call that the eschatological dimension of the priesthood, the iconic, the transcendent -- I don't care what two-bit world you use -- we're talking about *holy* priests.

As the psychologist Morton Kelsey observes, "The priest is the one who is mediator of a vast realm of reality, which relates to the very spirit of things, rather than to the outer, visible, physical world."

Or, in the words of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, "The priest is the one who leads the people of God into an ever more intimate contact with Jesus Christ. It is in carrying out this sacred task that one is most authentically a priest. They don't want us to be politicians, business managers, or social workers. They want us to bring them into contact with the transcendent, with holiness."

Remember the homily at the Mass when Pope Benedict XVI inaugurated his ministry as successor of St. Peter?

The pundits speculated: would this cerebral, esoteric professor give us a profound theological discourse? Would this reforming enforcer of orthodoxy lay down the law? On and on the experts went.

And the Holy Father simply stated: "I call you to holiness, which means, friendship with Jesus."

As his predecessor already called "the great" had written in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, "The priest must be a man of God, the one who belongs exclusively to God and inspires people to think of God. So, the priest must have a deep intimacy with Jesus."

Might I propose that what sparks and sustains sanctity is the Holy Eucharist. The daily celebration of the Eucharist, with proper preparation, joyfully, sincerely, reverently offered, the anchor of a day then laced with prayer, from our morning offering to our *Salve Regina*, especially that prayer that is such a constant of our life that we priests call it our *office*, is the key to intimacy with Jesus, which is *holiness*.

After Hurricane Katrina, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee adopted a parish that had been decimated, helping rebuild the homes, neighborhood, the church, the school. The pastor there, in one of his frequent messages of gratitude, recalled for us his horror the day after the storm:

“For the first time in my life, I could not say Mass! I had no table, no bread, no wine, no missal, no chalice, or paten, or vestments. All was gone. I felt lost, helpless. For the first time in my life I realized how much I depended upon the Eucharist, how I needed it, how empty, lost, and scared I was without it, and how my people were so disappointed that I could not provide it.”

That priest had been dropped to his knees by a crisis. That priest had discovered that his grounding was in holiness, daily intimacy with Jesus in the Eucharist.

As the retired Archbishop of San Francisco, John Quinn, just observed to a national gathering of American Priests in Houston during Easter Week:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled!”

These words of Jesus are spoken to a troubled church and to very troubled and confused disciples. They were at the breaking point. Everything they knew was changing. They had an ominous sense of disintegration and loss. It was dark and they were in a dark night themselves. In many ways, we are those disciples and we are that Church now.

But the Lord Jesus shows to them and to the Church a path in the time of darkness and of crisis. He begins by giving them a forthright commandment: “You are not to let your hearts be troubled.” This is not an exhortation. It is a command. As the Lord unfolds his message, he explains that in the trouble and the crisis they confront, where disaster seems inevitable and there is no solution, with the Father and the Spirit, he will be with them. The basis of their trust is not that everything will turn out well. The basis of their

trust and their power to persevere will be the unshakable truth that the Spirit will be in them, and will be another Paraclete. This means that He will be near them, close to them. He will be in them.

This is perseverance coming from deep inner springs of living water found only in a life of serious and faithful prayer. Perseverance comes from a deepening interior communion of persons – of the priest with Jesus Christ crucified and risen. Perseverance comes from the deepening experience and conviction that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are giving themselves to me in eternal and infinite love.

And so, I come back again to the question, “Why would a modern man want to become or to remain a priest today? The deepest and most enduring reason why a modern man would want to become and to remain a priest is the person of Jesus Christ. In the depths of every authentic priest echoes the word, “Do you love me more than these?”

2. A holy priesthood ... a *humble* priesthood.

A thoughtful priest from Ireland who wrote me in anticipation of my address here remarked, “We priests in Ireland are terribly wounded and broken.”

“Wounded and broken” -- are those other words for *humbled*?

In Von Balthazar’s meditation on St. Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, he concentrates the words Paul uses to describe the Last Supper: “Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it ...”

The great theologian then proposes that this is precisely a paradigm of the priesthood itself: Jesus, takes us, blesses us, *breaks* us, and *gives* us.

Taking and blessing we can live with! Breaking and giving? Well, that’s another matter!

What we’re talking about here is *humility*. What we’re talking about is the *oblative* dimension of the priesthood.

Stephen Rossetti, the priest psychologist who has devoted a good chunk of his life working with struggling, fallen priests, wonders if all the emphasis on fulfillment, self-actualization, having our needs met, etc, in the decades following the council are now taking

their toll, not only on the priesthood, but on marriage, religious life, on any type of commitment. Where, Father Rossetti inquires, is the talk of sacrifice, oblation, or pouring out? And can the priesthood be renewed until we rediscover this *humility*?

When I visit a dying priest I whisper into his ear, "Father, we love you, we thank you, we need you. Right now you are a more effective priest than ever, because you are helplessly on the cross with Jesus."

As a priest we are called to be configured to Christ as priest, head, and shepherd of His Church. Never was Jesus more priest, head, and shepherd of the Church than when He was on the cross. We priests don't whine with the thief on the left, "Get down off your cross and get me down off mine." Nope. We're like Dismas who tells the Lord, "I'm happy to be next to you on Calvary."

That's humility ... that's an oblation.

The "Country Priest" in the renowned *Diary* of Georges Bernanos ponders the vocation of the parish priest to take on, to absorb, the agony, the suffering of his people. Listen:

Really it isn't a cry, but a chant, a hymn. Oh, not a church hymn, nothing that could be called a prayer. There's some of everything in it, as they say. The howling of a servant under the rods, the screaming of a beaten wife, the hiccup of a drunkard, and the growlings of animal joy, that wild sigh from the loins. No doubt I should turn from all this in disgust. And yet I feel that such distress, distress that has forgotten even its name, that has ceased to reason or to hope, that lays its tortured head at random, will awaken one day on the shoulder of Jesus Christ.

When I was in Rome I often would stop to make a visit at the Chapel of the *Venerabile*, the English college, off the Piazza Farnese. You perhaps have seen the altar: a *butcher block*! Underneath are relics of the English martyrs, the priests ordained from that college who returned to England to almost certain martyrdom, to the butcher block, to be hanged, drawn, and quartered.

The saint whose feast we celebrated yesterday, St. Philip Neri, would greet them, "*Salvete flores martyrum!*" "Hail, flowers of martyrdom!"

No conferences hardly needed to be given to them on the oblation dimension of the priesthood!

We're not priests for what we can get, but for what we can *give*, and anyone who's in it for power, authority, privilege, or entitlement should not be. That's clericalism, and it is a vice, a sin.

Five years ago the world watched John Paul II die. For a couple of years prior we had seen him lose the use of his legs, his facial motions, his hearing, his movement. But he kept pouring out. And he inspired perhaps more in that condition of utter humility, of frailty, of *kenosis* -- pouring out -- than he did in the first two decades of hyperkinetic activity and vigor.

His last Easter Sunday, he was unable to offer public Mass in the Square. At his window he attempted to greet the throng in the square and, like Peter, announce the resurrection. He could not speak. His faithful secretary tried to move him away from the window, but he fought him off. He tried to bless but his arms would not move. He had been poured out like a libation. And he died six days later.

Jesus takes us, blesses us, breaks us, and gives us . . .

That takes being grounded in *humility*.

3. Holy priests . . . humble priests . . . and, finally, *priests aware of their identity*.

When the Nazi commandant of Auschwitz snickered, "Who is the Polish swine," at the prisoner who had raised his hand asking to take the place of the married man and father who had been chosen at random to be executed, the "Polish swine" did not reply, "I am Maximilian Kolbe," nor "I am prisoner number 1408," nor "I am a friend and would like to take his place in execution." No. He simply replied, "I *am* a Catholic priest."

In answer to a literal life-or-death question, Maximilian Kolbe identified himself as a *priest*.

Priesthood is not, first and foremost, something we *do*, but *someone we are*.

While ministry -- what we do -- is very, very critical, *identity* -- *who we are* -- is even more so. The professors of philosophy among us would recall the maxim, *agere sequitur esse* -- "act flows from being" -- and this applies mightily to the sacrament of Holy Orders.

The late, great John Paul II went hoarse teaching us that the priesthood is a dramatic, radical reordering of a man's very life, his soul, his heart, his identity, and that we're much better off looking at fathers and husbands for metaphors of priesthood than we are at professions.

Thus, the priesthood is a *call*, not a career; a *redefinition* of self, not just a ministry; a *way of life*, not a job; a *state of being*, not a function; a permanent, lifelong *commitment*, not a temporary style of service; an *identity*, not a role.

(By the way, the loss of this, what we call "ontological" appreciation of priesthood applies as well to marriage, religious life, and, for that matter, to Christian, ecclesial identity conferred in baptism, but you didn't ask me to speak on that.)

If the very value of my priestly vocation depends on *what I do*, where I'm assigned, how the people affirm me, how my bishop treats me, what the newspapers report about us, what horrible sins brother priests may have committed, what negligence was shown by their bishops, how much I get out of it, or how high or low morale may be at a given time -- if the very value of our priesthood depends upon those external forces, however dominant they may be; if, in a word, my value depends on what I *do*, sooner or later we'll get frustrated, cynical, exhausted, crabby, bored, and tempted. Our value must come from *who we are*.

Pope John Paul II was onto this when he commented in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* that the towering temptation we face today is to prefer *having* and *doing* to *being*.

When you think about it, Jesus much preferred the *being* words to the *do* words, didn't He?

Did He summon us to plan with Him? To organize with Him? To write strategic plans with Him? To draw up mission statements with Him? To work out with Him? To write job descriptions with Him?

Nope!

He did invite us to *remain* with Him, to *abide* with Him, to *rest* with Him, to *come* away with Him, to *stay* with Him, to *keep vigil* with Him.

Jesus preferred *being* to *having* and *doing*. Not, to be sure, because doing, actions, ministry, service were not important, but because, unless what we do flows from who we are, we're shallow, empty functionaries.

I do not know about Ireland, but in America, the Church might as well be speaking Ugaritic when it talks like this.

Identity, being , ontology, identity . . . press the delete key. Our rampant functionalism and utilitarianism defines our worth by what we get done, what we accomplish, what we earn, how useful we are, what we produce.

Any priest who has tried to stick his oiled thumb through a crowd of medical professionals to anoint a sick patient, trying to navigate around wires, tubes, and monitors, knows what I mean.

If our value comes from what we accomplish or how useful we might be, look out. But, when we recapture a sense of who we are, our identity, gratefully, humbly, joyfully aware that our value is within, that it comes from who we are -- a child of God, created in His image, passionately and personally loved by our Father, destined for eternity with Him, redeemed by the precious blood of His own Son, reconfigured to that same Son at the "ground zero" of our being -- well, to borrow a phrase from Father Michael Heher's excellent book on the contemporary priesthood, "we can walk on water."

As nebulous as all this sounds, our people sense it and know it intuitively. *God is the only treasure people desire to find in a priest*, so our theme goes, right?

After decades of scholarly research, the controversial and colorful priest sociologist Andrew Greeley -- hardly some nostalgic, pious clericist -- concluded that what people most want in their priest is a "hopeful, holy man who smiles."

Not many years ago, the London *Tablet* carried a reflection on the priesthood by one of you, an Irish parish priest just arrived in his new assignment. He quickly organized the village with a parish council, liturgy committee, and engaged in a strategic plan to set goals and visions . . . all good things. He kept asking his new people, "What role do I have? What do you expect from me, your parish priest? What most effective can I do?" He admitted frustration that, after months he could not pin them down.

Finally, at the conclusion of a parish council meeting, he challenged them. "We will not adjourn until you give me a job description." One of the village elders looked at him after a long silence. "Father, we just want you to *be* with us."

The *sensus fidelium*.

III Yes, the priesthood has been struck by lightning, but, not to worry, we are okay; we are *grounded*: fallen to the ground, on our knees, thirsting for holiness; back to the soil, the ground, the *humus*, as *humble* priests; *grounded* in our joyful, confident *identity* as priests at the very core of our being.

I told you not to expect anything profound or novel. Rather basic stuff, this, a reflection on the priesthood which would be appropriate in any moment in our history.

Yet, I propose it has a special urgency now, in a moment of crisis. At such times of emergency, the Church can go one of two routes: we can become frantic, losing focus, hope, and trust, tempted to impetuous actions and rudderless going around in circles; or, we can return to basics and rediscover our identity, purpose, and confidence.

Such a recovery is not so much of a plan, proposal, project, or pastoral strategy, but of a *Person*, who happens to be the second Person of the Most Blessed Trinity, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, the way, the truth, and the life. To us tossed wildly on the waves in the midst of a dark, destructive storm, He simply proclaims, "Courage, it is I, do not be afraid."

He promised He would be with the Church until the end of time, and that not even the gates of hell would prevail against us. He did not promise they would not try.

Ah, but I am just a kid from a baby Church looking out with love and admiration at a Church that has been through it all before, at a people who have weathered much worse, and

who have taught the world the power of the paschal mystery, that for every hill of Calvary there is a hill of Tara, Slain, and Croagh Patrick; that for every rock of oppression rolled in front of the sepulcher there's a morn' of resurrection, a rock of Cashel, a Mass rock.

To those who may think my reflections overly pious and simplistic, to those who think being *grounded* in *holiness* not enough in an emergency so desperate, I claim it is no more simplistic than the exhortation given us by the Master Himself, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of heaven and all else will be given thee."

To those who claim the problem is that, as a matter of fact, Church teaching is too holy, too aloof, too distant, too out of touch, I say the problem is hardly Church teaching but lack of fidelity to it.

To those who wonder if holiness, humility and identity are a pollyannaish ignoring of deep psychological turmoil in the priesthood, I say with Adrian van Kaam, no, as a matter of fact, *holiness* means wholeness, and wholeness means integrity, and a man of integrity hardly abuses our youth or overlooks the crimes of those who do.

Last Sunday, in the cathedral named after the patron saint of the country you proudly call home, the president of Ireland, knowing I would be with you today, coached me. "Tell our priests we need them to be men of joy and hope."

Maybe she suggested our theme? *God is the only treasure people desire to find in a priest.*

Priests of Ireland, faithful of Ireland: I have found God in you, and I am in your debt.