

[Readings: Acts 5:27-32, 40b-41; Psalm 30; Rev. 5:11-14; John 21:1-19]

“Follow me.” These are the first words the disciples of Jesus ever heard Him address to them. They’re also the last two words of today’s Gospel. But so much has happened since the first time those words were spoken to them!

At the shore of Galilee, “follow me” must have sounded like a lark, a young man’s game, an adventure with all sorts of wonderful possible outcomes. This Teacher might become famous, and they would have been the first graduates of His school. This Preacher might wind up being a great leader, and they could assume powerful positions in His coming regime. This Healer might be a holy person in God’s plan, and who doesn’t want to be at the side of the next Moses?

But that was before miracles that rocked the senses; deep clashes with powerful authorities; terrible signs that made lips quiver and legs wobble. It was before the supper, the arrest, the trial, the cross. Before horrible days and nights spent in hiding. Before the dawn of Easter, whispers of an empty tomb, and the searing ache of hope. “Follow me” didn’t sound so innocent now. It wasn’t a game, no mere adventure. It was for keeps. And it would cost everything.

I heard Jesus Christ say to me, “Follow me” when I was praying inside Sweetest Heart of Mary Church in Detroit on the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, August 15, 1974. Jesus Christ said, “Follow me” this morning as I woke up to celebrate the 40th anniversary of my priesthood ordination on May 1, 1982. Jesus asks me daily for a devotion that translates into specific deeds of leadership, ministry, service, and care. He asks for the absolute surrender Peter thought he was giving -- before he read the fine print on the contract.

It was only half-way through the process of the parish staff planning for my 40th, that I realized it was my 40th – not my 25th or 30th, but my 40th. A significant number in the Bible. The Jews wandered for 40 years before they found the Promised Land. Probably because they were too proud to ask someone for directions! The infant Jesus was presented in the Temple 40 days after His birth.

Jesus fasted and prayed for 40 days in the desert before beginning His public ministry. After His Resurrection, Jesus walked the earth for 40 days before ascending into Heaven and sending the Holy Spirit upon Mary and the Apostles nine days later. 40 years is a long time to be a priest, and it’s a wonderful life! It has been all that I thought it would be, and much more than I thought it could never be!

I repeat the words found in today's Second Reading: "To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor, glory and might forever and ever! AMEN!"

What did I think priesthood would be? The two highlights of celebrating mass with a homily that would touch hearts and touch lives. Hearing confessions and providing in the person of Jesus Christ consoling words of forgiveness and healing. I have not been disappointed. Both have been tremendous blessings.

But those forty years have also provided struggle, difficulties and pain. Not unlike what the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles and disciples had to endure in their public ministry. But like the apostles in today's First Reading, I rejoice that I have been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ, for His Church, and my ministry and service.

For strength, I turn to the three moments when I experienced the closeness of Jesus in my heart. The first was when I was 19 years old, and God called me to priesthood by turning on all the lights inside Sweetest Heart of Mary Church when I asked Him if He wanted me. The second was during my diaconal retreat in Rome, when I experienced directly, intensely and personally the passion of Jesus Christ and heard Him say to me as we sunk into the depths of death, "I am with you. I am with you." Those words are inscribed on my chalice so that as I raise it up during the Offertory and the Consecration, I remember His promise to be with me always.

The third moment was on the very day of my priesthood ordination. Before leaving Rome to be ordained in our home dioceses, my seminary classmates and I were reminded by the rector not to expect high drama on the day of our ordination, and not to expect "warm fuzzies" during the ceremony.

So what happened at the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Detroit on May 1, 1982? During the entrance procession, the roof opened up in its center, and I heard and saw angels joining in the Opening Hymn of the Mass.

As Cardinal John Dearden began the Rite of Ordination following the Gospel, I had a vision that it went completely black in the Cathedral. A spotlight appeared on me, on Fr. Joe Esper, who was ordained with me, and on Cardinal Dearden. When I came up to him to kneel before him and receive my chalice and paten, the Cardinal prayed: "imitate what they contain."

But I heard the Lord say the literal translation of the Latin prayer: "Become these. Become these." Become bread that is broken. Become wine that is poured out

in ministry and service.” I have given my body, my life to you as a priest. For the Archdiocese and for six parishes. Many years ago, I was asked to summarize in one sentence my experience at each parish, and what each pastor taught me. Here we go! One sentence or more! I ask those here present to stand as I say the name of your parish.

I was a one-year intern and Associate Pastor at St. Mary, Our Lady of the Snows in Milford. The pastor there kindly told the people there to encourage me, even if made mistakes. He taught me to learn from my mistakes and then move on.

Then, I went to Holy Cross Parish, now Our Lady on the River Parish, in Marine City. It was a traditional parish that struggled with the changes of Vatican Two. The pastor had arrived only nine months prior to mine. There, I and the pastor were told in no uncertain terms by a small, vocal minority that we were not welcome, and to take our Vatican Two changes with us. Then I witnessed a conversion of the parish community. I was later told, that this happened because of the love which the pastor and I that had for community which healed many wounds, and created a couple new ones. The pastor there taught me to keep studying and to keep learning.

Next was Our Lady Queen of Apostles Parish in Hamtramck. The one phrase that was repeated often was, “Yes, Father, whatever you want, Father.” I liked it a lot at Queen of Apostles! It was also great to reconnect with my Polish roots, language and liturgies learned from my days at Orchard Lake St. Mary’s College. The pastor there taught me to be grateful and to express my gratitude often to the parishioners. That is why I call myself, “Your Grateful Pastor.”

Next was St. Hugo of the Hills Parish in Bloomfield Hills. There I was told, “Show us your resources, and we will accept what you say in your homilies.” It forced me to abandon tired religious and homiletic clichés and to document my homilies, and from that day forward, I write out my homilies to be consistent in my message and content. The pastor there told me to never be ashamed to ask for money. Because it is for the glory of God and for the Church, not you.

Then, I became a pastor at St. Mary Queen of Creation Parish in New Baltimore. I learned to surround myself with staff and parishioners more qualified than I in their areas of expertise as I was in mine. When I left there after twenty-one years, I told the priest coming in as their new pastor these words of advice: “Love the people, and let them teach you.” I learned so much at St. Mary’s. Thank you for the education. And thank you for your loving support.

On July 1, 2014, I arrived here as the new pastor of St. Martin de Porres. There is something unique here at St. Martin's. A true sense of community and mutual respect that goes back three generations. There were some who were suspicious of me and shared that feeling with a bank teller in Warren who handled most of the accounts of these parishioners. In time, they came around and now they support my pastorate. As Sr. Pat would say, "for the most part!"

The bank teller came around, too. When she started coming every Sunday for the 8:30 AM Mass, her customers came up to her and asked, "What are you doing here?" She proudly said, "I'm here to see my brother, your pastor!" The bank teller was my sister Kathy, who in the four years she was a member of this parish, said to me, "I have never felt as loved and accepted as I have here." Kathy died of cancer two days after the Beatification of Fr. Solanus Casey in November of 2017. My parents and all three of my siblings now are all gone.

In today's Gospel, when Jesus asks Simon Peter three times, "Do you love me?" You have to know the Greek words in order to really understand what is happening here. I don't know much Greek, so I will paraphrase in English:

"Simon, do you love Me with God's kind of love?" "Yes, indeed, most certainly, Lord. I love you with a friendship kind of love." "Simon, do you love Me with God's kind of love?" "Yes, indeed, most certainly Lord. I love you like a brother." "Simon, do you love Me with a brotherly love?"

"Lord, you know all things; you know I love you as a brother."

Listen to what happens here. Jesus comes down to Peter's level.

Jesus knows all things. He knows that Peter is not yet able to honestly say, "Lord, I am capable now of loving You as fully and as totally as You love me." So, for the time being, Jesus receives what Peter is able to give.

He accommodates Himself to Peter's current limited ability and capacity to love, as Jesus does with the same with you and me, and our limited capacities to love. Jesus stoops down to us to raise us up with Him to a higher level of love.

Peter eventually will come to love Jesus as Jesus loves Peter. He will suffer the same cruel death that Jesus Christ did. He is crucified. But in his last act of humility, Peter asks to be crucified upside down. He does not think he is worthy to be crucified in the same way as his Lord.

Let the words of this morning's Gospel inform us and unsettle us, Because Jesus is telling this to you and to me: "When you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." He said this signifying by what kind of death Peter would glorify God. And when Jesus had said this, He said to Peter, "Follow me."

Jesus asks you today: Do you love me? Do you love me with the love God has for you? Do you love me as a brother? Will YOU follow me?

At this time in my life and ministry, I am entering a new chapter with growing health concerns and the Families of Parishes process. For what has been, Lord, I say "thanks." For what will be, I say "yes."

During the Elevation of the Host at Mass, I silently pray: "For all who have asked my prayers. For all who I have promised my prayers, for all in need of my prayers, and the prayers of the whole Church, especially the people of St. Mary Queen of Creation Parish and St. Martin de Porres Parish." When I elevate the chalice with the Precious Blood, I silently pray, "How can I make a return to the Lord, for all the good He has given me? The cup of salvation I will raise, and I will call upon the name of the Lord." After I receive Holy Communion, I say in Polish: "I am with you, I remember and I stand vigilant. Jesus, I trust in you."

It's a wonderful life! And it's all yours O priest of God! ALLELUIA. AMEN!