

Farewell to St. Mary Star of the Sea

May 25, 2019

My heart is overwhelmed with the deepest emotions and feelings of gratitude for the many blessings I have received. Thank you, Father Michael, for the opportunity to celebrate Eucharist with you and to express my sincere appreciation to you the parishioners of St. Mary Star of the Sea.

For the past 17 years I have had the privilege and joy of being your pastor. I have been the recipient of your very great affection, your undying support and your prayerful intercessions, especially for my full recovery.

One parishioner said to me, "Father, you look so well. You don't even have any wrinkles." I said, "Well, that may be so, but I do have rolls." There is a little line in the Book of Lamentations that says, "The favours of the Lord are not all exhausted. Every morning they are renewed." When I wake up in the morning, the first thing I do is give thanks to God for the gift of a new day. I know not what lies ahead for me, but I do know that God is eternally faithful. He has been wonderfully good to me. As Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote long ago, "God knows what he is about, so I shall trust in him."

In a few days, on May 30th, I shall undergo surgery for a hip replacement. It is not coming too soon. So please keep up your prayers for me. I look forward to doing some priestly ministry in the future. I may no longer be a pastor, but I am still a priest, a priest forever they say, a servant of the Lord, and always ready to say, "Here am I, Lord. Send me." I have made the prayer of St. Alphonsus Liguori my own: "Lord, grant that I may love you always, and then do with me what you will."

While packing my belongings and getting ready to leave St. Mary's I came across a prayer card from my ordination with a little quotation from the Book of the Prophet Micah: "This is all that the Lord asks of us: to act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" [Micah 6, 8]. These words of the prophet have never lost their appeal to me. I have always tried to implement

them in my life. To have the heart of a servant of the Lord, to be an agent of mercy, to act justly has been my desire from the very beginning.

To you, Father Michael, I extend my heartfelt congratulations and best wishes for a long, happy and fruitful ministry. You bring lots of youthful energy and priestly devotion, as well as, I imagine, lots of new ideas about what you would like to test and implement here. I wish you every success. “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you” [Numbers 6, 24ff].

Priestly ministry is about relationships. Over the years I have come to appreciate that ministry is more about listening than it is about providing answers. As a young priest I saw myself as a problem solver. I wanted to solve all the problems of the world. All the young priests want to do that! I had an answer for everything. Someone actually said that to me recently, so I am not completely free from the tendency to give answers. The Psalmist tells us, “The Lord hears the cry of the poor.” So should we if we desire to imitate the Lord Jesus. Jesus gives us his presence in the Eucharist so that we may be present to one another in love. The willingness to listen, to be present to a brother or sister in need is one of the most precious acts of service and love that we can provide.

During one of the early Christian persecutions, St. Lawrence, the deacon of the Church of Rome, was commanded by agents of the Roman emperor to gather together all the treasures of the Church. So what did Lawrence do? Did he collect things of material worth, things made of gold and silver, the kinds of things that the world considers valuable and delights in? No! He gathered together all those who had been broken by life, but who now had been healed, those who had been poor and abandoned, but who now were embraced and loved as brothers and sisters of Jesus. Such are the treasures that Christians delight in. The emperor was not impressed. So Lawrence was put to death.

Father Michael, here before you today are the treasures of the Church. They are yours to love and care for, and they are willing and eager to help and support you in your ministry. You have two very dedicated and capable deacons, Stephen and Mark, who have served this parish with great zeal and generosity. You have

two very competent and kind-hearted staff in the parish office, Marilyn and Lan. You have dedicated parishioners who serve on pastoral and finance councils, in the Catholic Women's League and the Knights of Columbus, Vincentians who visit and care for the poor, Eucharistic ministers and visitors, catechetical leaders, musicians, lectors and altar servers and so many others. And many of them have been doing this for a long time, longer than I have been around St. Mary's.

Father Michael, these are the treasures of the Church, that is to say, together with the Word of God and the Sacraments, these are the treasures of the Church. These are what I treasure and love. They have helped and supported me and now they are ready to help and support you in your pastoral ministry.

To you the parishioners of St. Mary Star of the Sea I offer my most sincere gratitude for all your support, friendship and kindness over many years. In today's gospel Jesus speaks to us of his deep desire that we love him. My deepest desire and all I ask of you now is that you love Father Michael as much as you have loved me. God bless you all. And let us keep each other in our hearts and prayers.

Father Neil