

Father Albert Shamon

A Word for Sunday



A chosen race

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 14:1-12; (R1) Acts 6:1-7; (R2) 1 Peter 2:4-9.

In the context of turmoil created by Jesus' announcement of His coming departure and betrayal by His own people, Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." As further balm, He then talked about His relationship to His Father and God's relationship to the people through His only Son.

When a child is afraid or sick or in danger, it wants above all things its mother. So Jesus at the moment before His death, and for the consolation of His apostles, repeatedly called upon His Father. Forty times He spoke of His Father in His Last Supper discourse, and even in the small part of that discourse which makes up this Sunday's gospel, the word "father" occurs 12 times.

A first-grader was drawing a picture. "Nell, what are you drawing?" her teacher asked.

"Oh, just a picture of God," Nell answered.

"But, Nell," said the teacher, "nobody knows what God looks like."

Without looking up from her drawing, Nell replied, "They will when I'm finished."

In Sunday's gospel, Philip said to Jesus, "Show us the Father."

"Philip . . . whoever has seen me has seen the Father," answered Jesus, who is the definitive manifestation of God. In Him we discover what the Father is like.

Jesus loved sinners; the Father loves sinners. Jesus showed concern for the poor; the Father is concerned about the poor.

Jesus died for us; the Father is the one who sent the Son to us. Jesus loved His followers; the Father loves the followers of Jesus.

Thus Jesus could say, "I am the way" — the way to life with the Father through the avenue of truth.

What Jesus was, we are meant to be. He revealed the Father to His disciples; we must reveal the Father to the world in which we move.

We are called to be a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. We are chosen;

therefore, we are called to be different. We are royal; therefore, we are called to serve. We are holy; therefore, we are called to love what is good — not sporadically, but steadfastly.

Of course, that is a big bill to fill. How can we do it?

The first reading shows us how the early Christians translated high ideas and ideals into everyday language and life. When they were confronted with the same economic problems that are always with us — such as taking care of the needy — they did not just talk, they took action.

The Palestinian Jewish Christians discriminated against Hellenistic Jewish Christians in the distribution of goods. The apostles were asked to intervene. They did, but they did not make the mistake of assuming this responsibility themselves; instead, they created a new office in the Church to meet the crisis. They acted by establishing the permanent diaconate.

This is a good thing to remember in the post-Vatican II Church, for with the re-establishment of the lay ministries in the Church, there is danger of confusion of roles between clergy and laity.

I enjoyed the remark Pope John Paul II made regarding lay ministries. "These are wonderful for the Church; the only trouble is that the laity are heading in the wrong direction: they are going into the sanctuary, when they should be going into the world." The proper sphere of action for the laity is the temporal. The eighth Worldwide Synod of Bishops in Rome this fall will address the specific question of the role of the laity in the Church.

As for the apostles themselves, they let neither economics nor dissension distract them for their essential vocation: to pray and to be ministers of word and sacrament. Ministering to the people of God is their proper sphere of activity, not the world.

I am sure that the eighth synod will clear up this confusion.

Only if the clergy does its work for the sanctification of the people of God — and only if the laity does its work to sanctify the world — will all of us fulfill our calling to be a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

understanding of sacraments as celebrations with three specific purposes — sanctification of individuals, building up of the Church and worship of God.

Current disparities, he said, occur as a result of this historical shift. "We are, as a community, going through a crisis of self-definition. We are moving from an indisputable ark of salvation to the acknowledgement that people can be saved outside the Church," he explained. "Consequently, we're asking, 'Where are the boundaries anymore?'"

Instead of searching for a single, bottom-line criterion to determine readiness in all cases, Searle suggested that priests look for signs in each sacramental candidate that he or she has a vocation to the Christian life.

"Simply being a Christian does not mean, for instance, that you have a vocation to Christian marriage," he observed.

Keynote speaker Bishop Howard Hubbard also emphasized the importance of historical perspective. He asserted that priests have been "shell-shocked" by the internal and external pressures of ministry in the 1980s, a decade he termed "unpredictable and unprecedented in the history of priesthood."

On the one hand, he said, headlines in both secular and Catholic media have attacked the priesthood, focusing on priests stricken with AIDS, suffering from pedophilia or struggling with homosexuality. Television's depictions of priests, meanwhile, range from "clerical Alfred E. Neumanns" to "collared Casanovas," Bishop Hubbard observed.

As parishes grow ever larger and the number of priests grows ever smaller, priests are suffering from a loss of intimacy from within their own ranks, he suggested.

"Most of us are not fully in touch with another's pain, with another's struggles, with another's demons," he said. "I am convinced that it is the wounds that we as priests inflict on one another that hurt the most."

Despite these stresses, Bishop Hubbard asserted that "we are living in one of the greatest periods of renaissance in the history of the Church. As priests, we have the golden opportunity of being at the heart of this experience"

Cindy Bassett

The Bible Corner



The empty tomb

The courtyard of the Temple in Jerusalem was crowded with pious Hebrews whose lofty thoughts hovered far above the private chambers of the high priest. Within these chambers, Caiaphas, the high priest, and his father-in-law, Annas, observed the scene below.

"Do you see, Caiaphas?" Annas commented. "It's business as usual. Soon Jerusalem will be crowded with even more Hebrews who come to make their offerings for Pentecost."

"And how many of these Hebrews will be led astray by these followers of Jesus who still persist in their stubborn beliefs?" Caiaphas retorted. "Every day I hear of more that join their ranks."

"This too will die out soon," Annas replied calmly, still gazing below. "Their leader, Jesus, is gone, and these followers must be given time to lick their wounds. First they gave Him a proper burial, and now they continue to preach His doctrines out of respect."

"A proper burial, to be sure," Caiaphas sneered. "One of our own Sanhedrin members was most sympathetic to their cause."

"What do you mean?" Annas inquired, his interest diverted from the window.

"Joseph of Arimathea, one of the wealthiest members of our supreme court, went to Pilate and requested the body of Jesus. He donated a tomb — one he had prepared for his own eventual death." Caiaphas paused, his nose wrinkled in contempt. "Perhaps he will need yet another tomb if he continues this unseemly behavior."

"Caiaphas, these are harsh words for a high priest," Annas chided. "It was you who said, 'Let this one man, Jesus, die for the people — why should the whole nation perish?' Do you intend to start eliminating everyone who still believes in Jesus?"

"These idiots must be stopped from preaching their lies!" Caiaphas cried, his face reddening. "The truth must prevail!" But how do you explain the empty tomb?" Annas persisted.

"Another trick of his followers," Caiaphas said firmly.

Meanwhile, even as Caiaphas and Annas continued to debate these circumstances, Joseph of Arimathea stood at the entrance to the empty tomb. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, a teacher of the law, who had aided Joseph with the Hebrew customs

of burial when Joseph had brought the body of Jesus to this tomb.

"I should have done more," Joseph said with regret.

"Joseph, you did much more than I would have had the courage to do," Nicodemus admitted. "You may have damaged your own position in the Sanhedrin by not voting with the others for the death of Jesus."

"And how did you vote, Nicodemus?"

"I didn't," he replied, somewhat embarrassed. "I just wasn't sure if Jesus was the Messiah. I know that He was a great teacher, and I saw Him perform miracles."

"We stand here together before an empty tomb. How do you feel now?" Joseph asked pointedly.

"I'm still not certain," Nicodemus replied. "Jesus is so difficult to understand. I read some strange words this morning in scripture, written by the prophet Isaiah."

"I, too, know what the prophets foretold about the Messiah," Joseph said.

"Have you ever read, 'He was buried like a criminal in a rich man's grave; but he had done no wrong and had never spoken an evil word?'" queried Nicodemus.

"Then what shall we say of the empty tomb?" Joseph asked a second time.

"If Jesus was the Messiah, the truth will prevail," Nicodemus offered.

There was an uncomfortable silence between them for a few minutes. "A mistake in judgment has been made by the Sanhedrin concerning Jesus. Will you go with me to Caiaphas and offer your testimony?" Joseph asked, coming right to the point.

"I'm not ready for that," Nicodemus stammered. "I'll support you in any way I can, but . . ."

"But," Joseph interrupted, "you are not willing to jeopardize your own position as a teacher of the law. I'm disappointed, Nicodemus. Testimony from you would hold great authority."

"I'm sorry, Joseph. Perhaps in time, they will understand," Nicodemus said.

"I cannot remain silent now that I know the truth about Jesus," Joseph resolved. "I am going to help the followers any way I can. But first, I will go to Caiaphas and state my position."

Legend has it that the founding of the first Christian settlement was made possible by Joseph of Arimathea. Scripture references: John 11:47-53; 19:38-42; Isaiah 53:9.

Convocation '87

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lack of objective criteria for gauging an individual's readiness to receive a sacrament. This question has become especially troubling in recent years, as individual celebration has replaced the "assembly-line" method of administering the sacraments to "practicing Catholics" and some priests said they are unsure what that term means today.

Some clerics hold to the traditional criterion of regular attendance at Mass and support of the parish. Others question whether, by means of baptism, all Catholics have a right to receive certain sacraments.

Inconsistencies in the pastoral practice of administering the sacraments have also made some priests appear to be "the heavy," observed Father Thomas Mull, a panelist and director of the diocesan Office of Liturgy, Other priests, he added, are accused of being overly lenient.

Most priests appeared to agree that people should be challenged when they seek the sacraments for superficial or inappropriate reasons. Others cautioned, however, that a priest should issue such a challenge carefully and should avoid assuming a judgmental role.

"I see us torn between a great respect for canon law and something in the gospel that calls for living faith," said Father William Lum. "There's something about the sacraments that should be an invitation to that living faith."

In his two presentations, Dr. Mark Searle, an associate professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame, considered the theological context of the sacraments throughout history and demonstrated that the evolution in this theology is a principal source of sacramental inconsistencies.

In his first presentation, Searle offered an overview of the Church's understanding of sacraments both before and following Vatican Council II. He noted that the pre-conciliar view of sacraments as a remedy for human sinfulness has been replaced by the contemporary

Class of '79

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illustrate the transition. Prior to 1965, the Diocese of Rochester focused most of the resources available for priestly formation on its major and minor seminaries. From 1965 onward, the emphasis gradually shifted to a college-seminary residence community known as Becket Hall.

In 1984, Becket Hall became a house of discernment for college- and post-college-aged men. Last year, its programs were opened to women and lay ministers as well.

St. Bernard's Institute has likewise evolved from a major seminary to a graduate school of theology, offering formation for all types of ministry.

When the Class of '79 came along, St. Bernard's was still in the early throes of its growing pains.

"We were fairly far from any sort of pattern," Father Huerter explained. "I don't think the seminary ever really adjusted to us or we ever adjusted to the seminary."

Both still bear the marks of trying.

For St. Bernard's, the 1960s and 1970s were an era of unprecedented changes in both academic and formational programs, according to Father Joseph Brennan, who served as seminary rector from 1966 to 1977.

"We just couldn't expect older students who had a couple of degrees, a lot of experience or who had had a good job to fit into the traditional seminary," he said. "We had an increasing number of students who hadn't gone through the minor seminary, but who came from a different sort of background"

As a result, requirements for such subjects as scholastic philosophy, Latin and Greek were dropped. Greater emphasis was placed on individual choice, spiritual directions, psychological counseling, clinical pastoral education and field work.

"It was an attempt not to fit a student into a mold, but to take that student where he was and to take account of his talents and gifts," Father Brennan said. "These were self-motivating, self-directive people who'd made sometimes agonizing decisions about their careers and lives. The formation program had to take that into account."

As people who were accustomed to independence, members of the Class of 1979 appreciated the less restrictive atmosphere of the seminary in such areas as clothing and curfews.

"We were pretty free to do our own thing and be ourselves," Father Werth recalled.

But they also suffered the confusion of change and curricular experimentation.

Variable visions of priesthood split faculty members as well as students, Father Horan recalled. New fieldwork requirements in addition to the academic curriculum placed greater demands on seminarians.

Consequently, each member of the Class of 1979 emerged from the same generation and the same system of formation with very different visions of priestly ministry. Those visions range from a leader of people and causes to a sacramental representative of Christ; from consciousness-raiser to proclaimer of the Word.

"Our diversity tends to make it difficult for our class to be as close to one another as other (seminary) classes," Father Huerter observed. "But that diversity is a very positive thing for the Diocese of Rochester"